

System Cynicism in Twenty Contemporary Nations

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Measuring Cynicism and Idealism

Two definitions of "idealist" in the Random House Dictionary of the English Language capture a nice polarity. An idealist is defined there as 1) "one who cherishes or pursues high or noble principles, goals, etc." and 3. "one who represents things as they might or should be rather than as they are." The opposite will do as a working definition of "cynic", sometimes know as realist.

The ISSP (International Social Survey Programme), a confederation of some two dozen survey centers who carry out annual probability samplings of their nations using a common questionnaire, put these issues to some 41000 respondents in 1987 and 1992 with the following question:

"To begin we have some questions about opportunities for getting ahead...Please tick one box for each of these to show how important it is for getting ahead in life... (Essential, Very Important, Fairly Important, Not important at all)

- *a) coming from a wealthy family (7, 2.78)
- b) having well-educated parents (6, 3.01)
- #c) having a good education yourself (3, 3.86)
- #d) having ambition (1, 3.93)
- #e) natural ability (4, 3.71)
- #f) hard work (2, 3.89)
- *g) knowing the right people (5, 3.46)
- *h) having political connections (8, 2.51)
 - i) a person's race (10, 2.25)
 - j) a person's religion (13, 1.89)
 - k) the part of the country a person comes from (12, 2.05)
 - l) being born a man or a woman (9, 2.31)
 - m) a person's political beliefs (11, 2.21)

Responses marked with * I consider to be "cynical", those marked with # I consider to be "idealistic". Unmarked items are either ambiguous (b) or have very low marginals (i-m) as shown by the figures in parentheses which give the rank and the overall 1992 mean on a scale in which 5=Essential and 1=Not important at all.

Table 1 summarizes the available data.

Table 1
Participants in the 1987 and 1992 ISSP Surveys

(Cell entry is number of respondents
with answers on cynicism/idealism)

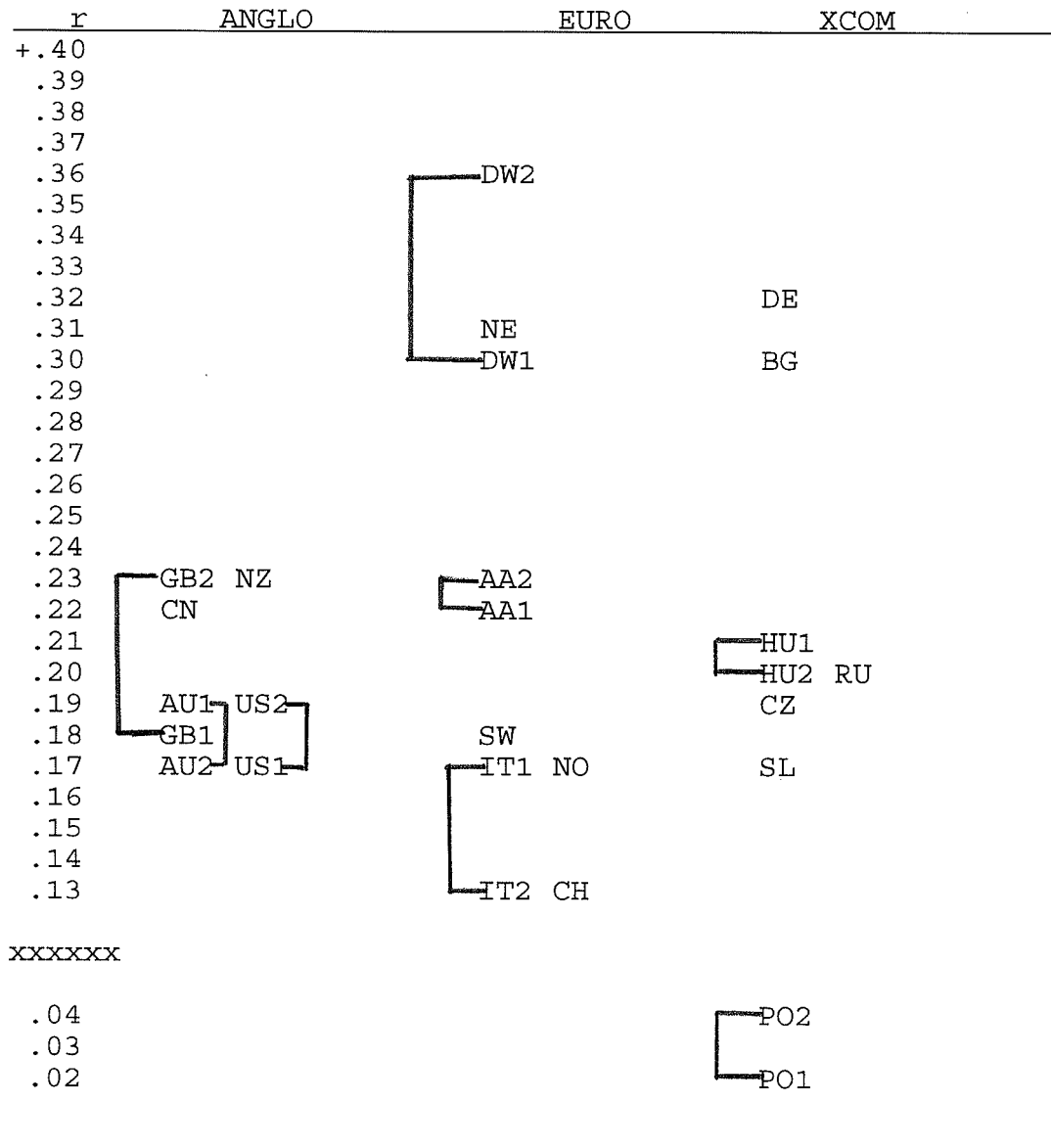
Region	Nation	Abbreviation	1987	1992
ANGLO				
	Australia	AU1 AU2	1625	2080
	Canada	CN		943
	Great Britain	GB1 GB2	1211	1003
	United States	US1 US2	1548	1165
	New Zealand	NZ		1179
EUROPE				
	Austria	AA1 AA2	972	965
	Italy	IT1 IT2	1026	961
	Netherlands	NE	1624	
	Norway	NO		1380
	Sweden	SW		639
	Switzerland	CH	977	
	West Germany	DW1 DW2	1386	2093
POSTCOMMUNIST				
	Bulgaria	BG		875
	Czech Republic	CZ		979
	East Germany	DE		979
	Hungary	HU1 HU2	2554	1138
	Poland	PO1 PO2	1948	1302
	Russia	RU		1149
	Slovenia	SL		904
<u>Phillipines</u>				
		RP		<u>1191</u>
Total			17009	23903

Twenty nations are represented, eight of which have data from both 1987 and 1992. I divided them into three common sense groups: ANGLO=5 English speaking nations, EUROPE=7 European nations never behind the iron curtain, and POSTCOMMUNIST=7 recently Communist nations. The Phillipines, the only non-Western nation doesn't fit into any of the three. At the time of the surveys all 20 nations were representative democracies.

After reversing scores on all the items so 1 equals low importance and 5 equals high, I constructed a cynicism index by averaging the three cynical items and an idealism index by averaging the four idealistic items. It turns out that Random House to the contrary notwithstanding, cynicism and idealism are **positively** correlated. For the pooled 92 data $r=+.195$ ($N=20,848$)

Figure 1 shows the sample by sample values of the correlation and also illustrates the analysis strategy.

Figure 1
Correlation between Idealism and
Cynicism Indices (r) by Survey



Although the technical quality of these surveys are well above the average for cross-national research (samples of entire nations, full probability designs with only one or two exceptions, no telephone samples, etc.), these data will be noisy. In most cases we will be seeing small relationships, "house effects", and the vicissitudes of translation on top of the usual sampling variation. The latter should not be a major problem since the vast majority of analyses have Ns of 1000 or more.

I decided that the best way to proceed was akin to meta-analysis, that is to lay out the complete range of results and look for patterns.

Figure 1, which displays the idealism/cynicism correlations, illustrates the strategy, without revealing anything particularly interesting. It tells us:

- 1) All the correlations are positive and, save for Poland, lie between +.13 and +.36
- 2) The eight replications (connected by lines) show stability across the five year period.
- 3) There are no consistent differences among the three regions.
- 4) There is a hint of a language effect. The eight English speaking correlations cluster together and the five German ones (DW2, DW1, DE, AA1, AA2) are all on the high side.

To give a sharper focus I constructed a third index, NetCynicism. For each respondent it is Cynicism minus Idealism, that is, the difference in the average importance given to the three cynicism items and the average for the four idealism items. This should correct for personal propensities to give generally high or low ratings. Table 2 shows the distribution for the 1992 samples:

Table 2.

Distribution of NetCynicism Scores (1992 samples)

Min	QU	Median	Mean	QU	Max	Std. Dev.	N
-4.00	-1.58	-1.00	-0.95	-0.33	3.25	.94	20848

Taken at face value the contemporary citizens are more idealistic than cynical, with minus signs dominating. Overall 14 per cent were cynical (positive scores), 3 per cent had zero scores and 83 per cent had negative scores (higher cynicism than idealism.)

National Differences

The obvious next question is national variation. Table 3 gives the results. Since the metric for NetCynicism index is arbitrary, I transformed individual scores to Z's, subtracting the mean (-.95) and dividing by the 1992 standard deviation (.94). The adjusted scores tell us how many standard deviations above or below the 1992 pooled mean a case is. Note that 1987 scores are standardized on 1992 values.

Table 3 displays the national results.

Table 3
National Levels on Key Variables
(See text for explanations)

Nat	Year	IDEAL	CYNIC	NETCYN	ZIDL	ZCYNIC	ZNET	POSITION
AU	92	4.00	2.91	-1.10	.23	-.00	-.16	4.9
	87	4.02	2.68	-1.36	.30	-.27	-.44	4.9
CN	92	3.99	2.67	-1.32	.22	-.28	-.40	4.8
GB	92	3.95	2.56	-1.39	.14	-.42	-.47	4.3
	87	3.97	2.67	-1.30	.19	-.28	-.38	4.2
US	92	4.01	2.81	-1.27	.36	-.12	-.35	4.5
	87	4.10	2.88	-1.22	.41	-.04	-.29	4.8
NZ	92	4.03	2.46	-1.57	.28	-.53	-.66	5.0
AA	92	4.08	3.30	-0.79	.36	.45	.17	4.8
	87	4.02	3.33	-0.69	.27	.49	.28	4.4
CH	87	3.85	2.94	-0.91	-.01	.03	.04	4.6
DW	92	3.74	2.86	-0.88	-.19	-.06	.07	4.7
	87	3.84	3.01	-0.84	-.03	.11	.12	4.6
IT	92	3.77	3.38	-0.38	-.16	.55	.60	3.9
	87	3.71	3.46	-0.25	-.26	.64	.75	4.7
NE	87	3.72	2.53	-1.19	-.22	-.44	-.26	NA*
NO	92	3.83	2.57	-1.26	-.06	-.40	-.33	4.8
SW	92	3.76	2.65	-1.11	-.17	-.31	-.17	4.7
BG	92	3.90	3.09	-0.84	.07	.21	.12	2.8
CZ	92	3.59	2.85	-0.74	-.45	-.08	.22	3.7
DE	92	3.86	2.87	-0.98	-.01	-.04	-.03	3.7
HU	92	3.50	3.00	-0.51	-.60	.10	.47	2.9
	87	3.68	3.05	-0.06	-.29	.16	.34	3.7
PO	92	3.97	3.28	-0.68	.17	.44	.29	3.3
	87	3.64	3.13	-0.52	-.37	.25	.46	3.6
RU	92	3.57	3.12	-0.44	-.48	.25	.54	3.4
SL	92	3.66	2.86	-0.79	-.33	-.06	.17	3.8
RP	92	4.14	3.22	-0.92	.47	.36	.03	3.4

* see discussion in text.

Figure 2
NETCYNICISM (Z) 1987 AND 1992

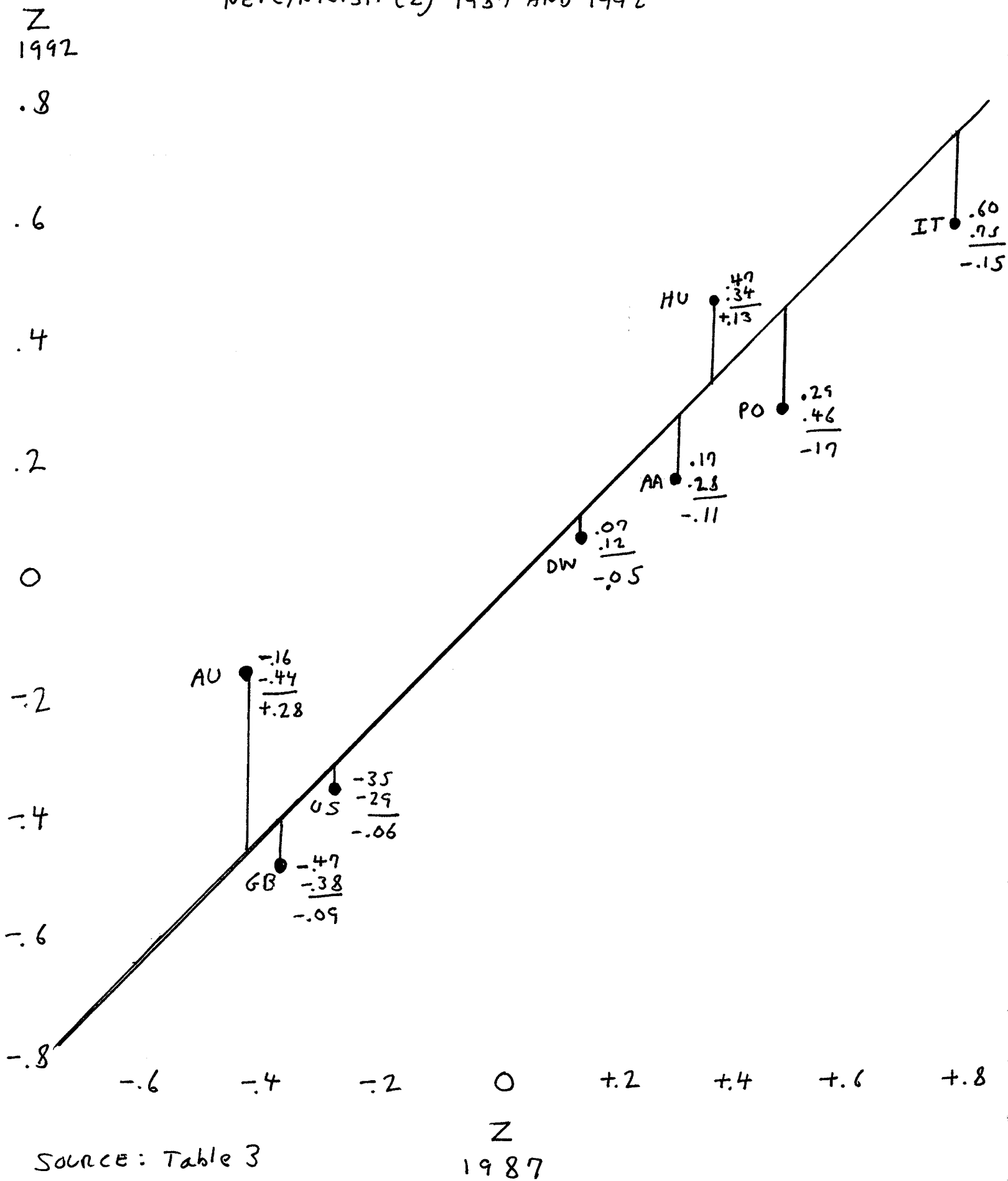


Table 3 may be read as follows, using the top line as an example: In their 1992 sample Australians averaged:

4.00 on Idealism
 2.91 on Cynicism
 -1.10 on NetCynicism
 +.23 std. deviations on Idealism
 .00 std. deviations on Cynicism
 -.16 std. deviations on NetCynicism

(The right hand column will come up later.)

The national differences are strong and persistent. Figure 2 shows the 1987 1992 correlation for the eight nations with replications.

(Figure 2 here)

While Hungary and Australia increased Cynicism from 1987 to 1992, Britain, the United States, West Germany, Poland, and Italy showed decreases. Despite these changes the product moment correlation over the five years is +.914, suggesting relatively fixed levels of national cynicism rather than values that fluctuate with short term economic or political trends.

Figure 3 shows the cross-sectional patterns:

Figure 3.

NetCynicism by Nation, Year, and Region

Z	to	Anglo	Euro	XCOM
.80	.89			
.70	.79		IT1	
.60	.69		IT2	
.50	.59			RU
.40	.49			HU2 PO1
.30	.39			HU1
.20	.29		AA1	CZ PO2
.10	.19		AA2 DW1	BG SL
.00	.09		CH DW2	
-.00	-.10			DE
-.10	-.19	AU2	SW	
-.20	-.29	US1	NE	
-.30	-.39	US2 GB1	NO	
-.40	-.49	CN GB2 AU1		
-.50	-.59			
-.60	-.69	NZ		
-.70	-.79			

Unlike Figure 1, Figure 3 shows a definite pattern. The English speaking nations are clustered toward the bottom, the ExCommunists toward the top and the Europeans range up and down. Thus:

- 1) There is no overlap between the Anglos and ExComs. All the Anglo nations are less cynical than any ExCom.
- 2) While the United States is among the least cynical, it is in no way outstanding within the Anglo group.
- 3) The EURO nations appear to fall in the increasing familiar North-South gradient, with "Anglo" levels of cynicism among Norwegians, Swedes and Dutch, XCOM levels among the German Speakers and Swiss, and strikingly high levels among the Italians - the latter validating the sociological aphorism that "social stereotypes are really true."

The pattern is clear, but its origins are not. The Anglo cluster suggests a translation factor as do the similar results among the German versions, but language and society are so confounded I am reluctant to draw a conclusion. Consideration of the extremes leads to a somewhat ethnocentric hypothesis about the deleterious effects of communism - until one notes that Germany and Switzerland (For Gosh sakes) have about the same levels of cynicism as Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Poland.

One of the few rules of comparative research is "when in doubt try GNP." To do so, I took 1990 GNP per capita data from the Statistical Abstract (no data for East Germany, Russia, and Slovenia) and handled Region as a trinomial variable with values of +1 for XCOM, 0 for EURO, and -1 for ANGLO. Applying these to the results in Table 3, I got the following Betas for NetCynicism (the cases are nation/samples, N=23):

<u>Predictor</u>	<u>Bivariate</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>Prob</u>
Region	.76	.81	.0001
GNP	-.38	.08	.644

Region certainly isn't acting as a stalking horse for GNP. While Richer countries are less cynical ($r = -.38$), in multiple regression the GNP effect vanishes while the Region effect remain a strong .81.

So far, the points seem to be this: (1) There are clear cut persistent national differences in cynicism about the mobility system and (2) American cynicism while low by comparison with the total pool is about at the same level as other English speaking or Northern European nations.

Internal Differences

Within nations there is no shortage of variability. Intra-national standard deviations for NetCynicism usually run between .80 and 1.0. Even in Italy and Russia about sixty per cent have negative (more idealist than cynical) scores and the Anglo nations usually have five or six percent with positive (more cynical than idealistic) scores.

Nor is there a shortage of plausible hypotheses (hunches). I considered the following:

- 1) AGE/COHORT: The common view is that the younger generation is more cynical, although it could be that we become more cynical (realistic) with age and experience.
- 2) EDUCATION: Schooling might well indoctrinate one with pro regime attitudes or it might make one more aware of "things as they are". The ISSP reports years of schooling or national equivalents.
- 3) SEX: I trust it would not be viewed as too old fashioned to consider whether females are more idealistic (less realistic).
- 4) MARITAL STATUS and CHURCH ATTENDANCE: It could be that people with traditional conventional statuses (Married, Frequent attenders) are less cynical.
- 5) STRATIFICATION: A cynic might allege that the better one has done, the less cynical one becomes about how one does well.

Age, Sex, Education (in years), Marital Status, and Frequency of Church Attendance are available in the conventional forms. SEX was treated as a dummy variable with Female=1. MARITAL STATUS was treated as a dummy variable with Married=1. Church attendance was measured on a 6 point scale from 1=Weekly to 6=Never. I reversed the scale to make frequent attendance the high end.

For stratification these ISSP samples have two relevant measures:

POSITION: Self-rating on a 1 to 10 scale in answer to..
 "In our society there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups that tend to be towards the bottom. Where would you put yourself in this scale?"

