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Europe is the new role model for the world

It is tempting to dismiss Jeremy Rifkin as yet another practitioner of "futuresology". As president of the Washington-based Foundation on Economic Trends, he has recently proclaimed the promise of hydrogen power, the disappearance of work, the sanctity of animal rights and the advent of a global network society. Now comes the European Dream.

But sometimes even futurologists get it right. Just when Europe is being dismissed as a power in terminal decline, Rifkin advances a compelling case for its ascendancy. "While the American Spirit is tiring and languishing in the past," Rifkin proclaims, "a new European Dream is being born." Against America, Europe "emphasises community relationships over individual autonomy, cultural diversity over assimilation, quality of life over the accumulation of wealth, sustainable development over unlimited material growth, deep play over unrelenting toil, and universal human rights".

In other words, Europe is at once more egalitarian, more communitarian, and more cosmopolitan than America and Rifkin argues persuasively that this makes Europe the more attractive global model for the coming century.

European egalitarianism manifests itself most clearly in the social welfare state. Each European is guaranteed a minimum standard of living, not just in cash but through daycare, unemployment insurance, pensions and healthcare - all far from universal in

America. Greater social redistribution and infrastructure permit poorer Europeans to lead a more balanced life. Rifkin rightly notes that Europeans' broad conception of human rights, encompassing socio-economic, cultural and environmental entitlements, is far more attractive than the narrower American conception of human rights as political liberties.

Europeans are also more fiercely committed than Americans to the defence of rich and distinctive communal traditions. They are less mobile geographically and spend more time maintaining national languages, high culture, regional cuisine and distinctive political cultures. Whereas "Americans define freedom as autonomy and mobility, which requires amassing wealth", Rifkin observes, "Europeans define freedom in community - in belonging, not belongings." Europeans make time for culture. Americans, who view "idleness to be almost a sin, like sloth", now work on average 10 weeks more per year than Germans, five weeks more than Britons - more even than the famously workaholic Japanese. This European concern for cultural diversity is likely to resonate across the developing world.

Rifkin argues that Europeans have crafted cosmopolitan political institutions that promote peace and cooperation among culturally diverse yet economically integrated nations. Americans respond to globalisation (paradoxically) by reasserting international legal autonomy; Europeans respond by seeking to manage its evolution transnationally. Europeans also favour conflict resolution through "civilian power", such as diplomacy, trade and legitimate international law. Europeans remain the strongest proponents of universal human rights and the European Union is a multilateral model for the globe, making Europe more attractive to a generation "anxious to be globally connected and at the same time locally embedded".

It is easy to take pot shots at this sort of futuresology. Libertarians may object that the European economies lack dynamism. Yet most of the disparity between US and European per head

income reflects Europeans' preference for leisure, rather than divergent economic efficiency. Neo-conservatives will criticise Europeans for free-riding on US military might. Yet Europeans station 100,000 troops abroad and spend comparable funds to provide the bulk of the world's "civilian power". To Eurosceptics, Rifkin responds that, even if the EU's constitution were unratified, the successes of the past half century have already established the Union as a viable alternative model. The task now is to improve it.

The European Dream should be required reading on both sides of the Atlantic. To Americans it sounds the alarm. At the height of the supposed unipolar dominance of the US, fewer and fewer foreigners view it as an attractive model for constitutions, companies or communities. To Europeans, Rifkin issues the challenge of global leadership.

If Europe is really "best positioned between the extreme individualism of America and the extreme collectivism of Asia to lead the way into the new age", why did it take an American to point it out? For Europe to become the global "City on a Hill", it must reform and reinvigorate itself to realise fully the dream Rifkin so passionately proclaims.

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THE EUROPEAN DREAM

How Europe's vision of the future is quietly eclipsing the American dream

By Jeremy Rifkin

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