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New order, yes, but not Europe v. the U.S.

The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream

By Jeremy Rifkin

Tarcher/Penguin, 448 pages, \$38

Jeremy Rifkin is one of the most prolific public intellectuals writing today and his talents are on full display in *The European Dream*. Author of the bestsellers *The End of Work* and *The Hydrogen Economy*, Rifkin's method is to draw on history, theory and research from several different fields, then synthesize the results into a thesis that is both understandable to the non-specialist reader and relevant to public-policy debates. Rifkin is not always right -- far from enduring the "end of work" as he prophesied in 1996, North Americans are working faster and longer than ever -- but he is always stimulating. In *The European Dream*, for instance, Rifkin ranges from the Benedictine inventors of the mechanical clock in the 13th century, to Descartes's philosophy from the 17th century, to the Gaia hypothesis of Earth functioning like a self-regulating living organism in the 20th century, to this year's debates over the future of the European Union.

Reading Rifkin is like having a symposium of Lewis Mumford discussing the myth of the machine, Jacques Barzun on the evolution of Western civilization, John Ralston Saul on rampant rationalism, Amory Lovins on ecology, and Don Tapscott on networking.

The European Dream has echoes of Rifkin's earlier work on the impact of technology on lifestyle and the necessity of preparing for a new energy future. But the real subject of the book is the need for a new global ethic. After diagnosing the creation and evolution of, and growing disillusionment with, the Western paradigm of rationalism and market systems, Rifkin declares: "The question, then, boils down to this: How do we create a new moral bridge between 'the self' and 'the other' that is expansive enough and encompassing enough to be global in scale and universal in outlook? Can we establish a systemic approach to ethics that allows us to identify cold evil in all of its various guises? Equally important, can we learn to exercise the Golden Rule on a much broader playing field that includes not only our immediate relations with our neighbours but also the totality of relationships that make up the larger planetary community in which we are all embedded? . . . A tall order, but that's why we call it global consciousness." Rifkin's call for a new order is not simply a value preference. He believes that the truly great revolutions in history occur when new communication technologies fuse with new energy regimes to make existing paradigms obsolete and to create the climate for new ideas. He believes we are in such a historical divide today, with digital technology creating virtual communities or global networks, at the same time that we are running out of the fossil fuels that power today's economy. A new age of renewable energy will require a new ethic of sharing, community and non-material fulfilment.

Traditional economists will snort at Rifkin's projections, but he marshals a powerful argument that the planet cannot sustain existing consumption patterns without suffering the fate forecast in *The Day After Tomorrow*. He is not alone in worrying. As eminent a scientist as Sir Martin Rees, Britain's Astronomer Royal, recently warned in *Our Final Hour*, "The odds are no better than fifty-fifty that our present civilization on Earth will survive to the end of the present century." Rifkin both makes the case for why we must change and offers detailed suggestions on how we should change. It is an impressive achievement.

But if the substance of Rifkin's thesis commands support, I am less enamoured with the conceptual bottle in which he has poured his public-policy mix. Rifkin, an American, organizes his book around a Manichaean contrast between the American Dream and its European counterpart. The American Dream, he writes, "emphasizes the unbridled opportunity of each individual to pursue success, which in the American vernacular has generally meant financial success. The American Dream is far too centred on personal material advancement and too little concerned with the broader human welfare."

The European Dream is the exact opposite, emphasizing "community relationships over individual autonomy, cultural diversity over assimilation, quality of life over the accumulation of wealth, sustained development over unlimited material growth, deep play over unrelenting toil, universal human rights and the rights of nature over property rights, and global co-operation over the unilateral exercise of power."

There is a certain counterintuitive logic in Rifkin's choice of America and Europe as his counterpoints. With the Iraq war, Europe has not been the favourite of many American conservative commentators: Robert Kagan in *Of Paradise and Power*, for instance, writes, "It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world, or even that they occupy the same world." Rifkin would agree with Kagan, except he would add the codicil, "And the Europeans are right."

If Rifkin's goal is to get his fellow citizens' attention, perhaps his bipolar division of the world makes at least marketing sense. But it does not make conceptual sense. One of Rifkin's basic points is that the new digital age is linking individuals across the old barriers of geography and nation-state ideologies, but then he casts his work in a framework of Europe versus America, a familiar geographic division.

It would be more accurate to state that within every country there is a values debate between ecologically minded cosmopolitans versus nation-state traditionalists. Many voters in Oregon dispute the value preferences of their fellow citizens in Texas. Similarly, Rifkin praises the "social market economy" of Europe, especially the 35-hour work week in France, but a great many Europeans favour, instead, a more neo-liberal approach. Siemens in Germany has just won a 40-hour work week and workers for Daimler Chrysler in Germany recently agreed to lower pay with longer working hours in return for job security. Europeans, too, invented every single concept that Rifkin posits as central to the American Dream -- individual rights, the market system, the primacy of reason etc.

Finally, I have been regularly visiting Europe for more than 30 years, ever since graduate school at Oxford, and not once have I ever heard a European extolling "the European Dream." What I have heard from every European acquaintance is grumbling about the bureaucracy in Brussels. For many, the European Union is a nightmare, not a dream.

Rifkin has written an important book. His argument for a new ethic should be taken seriously. Many in Europe will support his call, but so, too, will many Canadians and Americans. His cause is global awareness, and trumpeting false dichotomies is not the way to attain it.

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