

# “It is Only About your Dream”

Jeremy Rifkin, the US economist, political consultant and author of the book “The European Dream: How Europe’s Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream” talks about the problems, the hopes and the opportunity of taking Europe towards a future political model.

The USA is not what it used to be; there is general agreement on this point in Europe – and now even in the “country of unlimited possibilities” itself. But what about Europe? In the midst of the crisis, Jeremy Rifkin arrives with a euphoric prologue for our continent – and, incidentally, a critical sideswipe at the USA. Does Rifkin see beyond the crisis or does he just overlook it? At any rate, even he is not completely without scepticism. Without the younger generation and a strong civil society, says Rifkin, the “European Dream” can never become reality.

Manuela Hötzl in conversation with Jeremy Rifkin

**Manuela Hötzl: A lot has happened in Europe since you published your book “The European Dream” – and not all of it has been positive. How would you advise politicians like Romano Prodi to deal with the crisis in Europe?**

Jeremy Rifkin: Wake up! Don't be pessimistic, but feel a bit better because of what is happening in Europe.

**But what problems have to be solved?**

Europe is certainly in a difficult phase of transition. But European crises are also global crises: the oil crisis, that is, the end of the energy era, global warming and the natural disasters it brings, terrorism: this is all now affecting central Europe as well. Then there is the disappearance of work, which is due to the intelligent technologies. That was only a selection of issues that have to be solved in the future, something which a nation-state can not do so well alone. We are in an increasingly complicated world. The irony of the technological revolution is that it is directly connected with the nervous system of the entire planet. We are compressing time and space more and more. We are living in a complex world that makes us not only dependent, but also vulnerable in a psychological sense. The general situation is one of vulnerability.

**You call that “unity in diversity”.**

We feel that way because, although we are more connected with one another, we are also more dependent upon one another. The issue of efficiency is no longer a future issue, but an issue of dependency.

The quality of the European Dream is that it starts a change in temporal, spatial orientation.

An intensifying of the density of exchange to produce a qualitative turning point. That means cooperation and the reinvention of its identity. These are great historical moments, like the invention of the printing press. We suddenly have to think in terms of universal human rights and collective responsibility.

**Can Europe achieve that?**

Europe is dreaming a half-baked dream that has developed only over three generations: the post-war generation, then the baby boomers and finally the “e-generation”. It is the first dream in human history that attempts to create a global awareness.

**How can this dream be realised?**

Europe has particular characteristics and concerns that would make it possible: inclusiveness and cultural diversity, the European standard of life and the interest in other cultures. If you asked people in the USA about their dream, everyone would say: my dream is of personal success. Social responsibility and humanism are important values in Europe, and are reflected in social services like health care and the pension. In Europe, peace, not war, has priority. All of this bears witness to a social, and thus basically global, awareness. Europeans do not live to work, but work to live.

**Do we need a Mr. Europe, as Erhard Busek demands, for example?**

No, I don't think so. Europe rather needs a young generation that perceives its responsibility to turn Europe into a social and global place, that is, to develop worldwide standards that are

strong enough for everyone to live together on the earth. Nonetheless, the American Dream also has some points that would benefit the European Dream. Just five years ago, the USA was the biggest middle-class society in the world and gave everyone the possibility of personal success. That was good. Now we have lost all feeling of social responsibility, and the state of our society is shameful.

**The welfare state seems to be on the way out. Many areas, such as social housing, are already being cut back as part of free market policies. What can we still expect in this regard?**

Even from a market-economy point of view, Europe still possesses some very sensible social services. Let us take education policies, for example: Europeans have a better standard of education, live for longer, can go on holiday for longer – six weeks instead of the usual ten days in the USA. As far as pay cheques are concerned, things admittedly look better in the USA on the surface: we drive bigger cars, live in bigger houses, and have bigger television sets, but Europeans have a higher quality of life altogether.

**However, in Europe there obviously seems to be a trend towards new neo-liberal economic politics.**

I think that is a myth. The American economy has grown in the past 15 years because we exploit at the cost of our next generation. The Europeans don't do that at all; on the contrary, they act with a sense of responsibility.

**Do you really still think that Europe sees the USA as a model?**

Europe no longer just looks over the herring pond, but sees what is working and what is not working over the entire world. Only the older generation is still attached to the US model. The younger generation looks towards Denmark or Finland.

**How could the East-West divide in Europe be evened out in future?**

I've only just started travelling to these countries. Recently I was in the Czech Republic to visit the prime minister, then in Estonia. Very interesting. The young people there are full of energy, although these countries have such a long and difficult period behind them. The young people are on their marks, ready to go. They move somewhere between the American Dream and the European Dream: they want personal opportunities, but quality of life as well. I think that they will bring in a new liveliness. If anyone thinks "European", it is these young people.

**Do you think that economic solidarity can really be created?**

The economic situation is at present very hard, but European culture supports a sort of economic solidarity in a way that should not be underestimated. The cultural diversity, which is particularly reflected in the many different languages, is thus also a bonus in an economic and political regard.

**The conflict about stricter immigration policies everywhere would seem to indicate something different. Solidarity obviously has its limits too. Okay, everyone is scared of the Moslems. But this does not have to do with the problem of im-**

migration, but with the fear that Moslems would not respect the diversity of Europe. There are even more prejudices – but then we are back in the year 1932. In this point, one can learn from America's history.

Cultural diversity is Europe's big potential and at the same time a difficult problem to solve. In principle, the immigration figures are at present even too low. Europe has 50 million immigrants, but needs at least double that. The birth rate is not high enough either.

**You place so much hope in young people. Haven't they long given up being socially and politically engaged?**

For the young generation, Europe is what the USA used to be for young people: open, big, with lots of opportunities and a big dose of optimism. The generation of the baby boomers is caught between the old post-war generation and its own children. But the "e-generation" is completely European.

I don't know whether you young people are tough enough. You need to be tough to take up these challenges. You live at a great time, with lots of privileges. If I was between 20 and 30, I would want to live in Europe. It is a laboratory. Perhaps the young eastern Europeans are tough enough.

**Why do you, as an American, place such great hopes in Europe?**

I explain that at the end of my book. Many people have kept sneaking looks at America – for years. Maybe they are still doing it. But now, a new generation wants to be European. Asia is also thinking of the same principle of a politi-

cal amalgamation. Even if France and the Netherlands have taken a brief pause to ask themselves: Is this an experiment that is really worth it? In the final analysis, I think they know there is no alternative. Anything else would be a big step backwards. That is why I have written my book – it is only about your dream.

Jeremy Rifkin, born in Colorado (USA) in 1943, is the founder and president of the Foundation on Economic Trends in Washington D.C. and is internationally active as a consultant to various political bodies, including, recently, the European Commission. He has already published 17 books, such as "The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where All of Life is a Paid-For Experience" and "The Hydrogen Revolution. The Creation of the Worldwide Energy Web and the Redistribution of Power on Earth." His most recent book, "The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future Is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream", is presently appearing in Croatia and Bulgaria.

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