

Europe's Commitment Anxiety

By Jeremy Rifkin

Jeremy Rifkin argues that the French left, in part, rejected the European constitution not because they oppose the European Union but because they reject the prospect of an American style unfettered capitalism, which they worried would go hand in hand with the new constitution.



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The French left said "non" to American style, winner takes it all capitalism and rejected the European Constitution.

Editor's Note: This is the second installment in a series on the European Union. You can read the introduction and first part [here](#).

I was in France for the vote on the constitutional referendum and it was very complicated. The right-wing response was predictable -- the xenophobia, the loss-of-sovereignty arguments, etc. But the left-wing vote was complicated because many who voted "no" in the socialist camp did so because they wanted a more deeply integrated Europe based on a social market economy model, not a weaker Europe that had tilted more to an American competitive economic model. So they weren't saying no to Europe. The surveys all show that only about 14 percent of Europeans would rather not have a European Union. The vast majority support a united Europe. There

was a lot of domestic politics going on there -- if Chirac had said, "If you vote 'yes' I'll resign," there's no doubt in my mind they would have done so.

The constitution is now on hold, but one of the underlying issues here was the question of the future of capitalism. What's happening now is the beginning of a polarizing debate: Is Europe going to head toward the American unfettered market model or do we want to pursue a more streamlined, but at its core still a social market economy model? The crisis may be an opportunity to have a very big conversation across Europe. The good news about what happened in France and the Netherlands was that people began talking about European politics for the first time. It became a pastime. They were out in cafes, in homes and on the street debating about Europe. The bad news is that I think they voted the wrong way.

Now the question is how to move forward. Tony Blair has asked for a "period of reflection," but who is going to do the reflecting? The worst thing that could happen would be if European elites, because they didn't like the way that people voted, just shut off the discussion. That would say to people that we really don't care about your views if they disagree with those of Europe's political elite. And unless there's a spirited, structured conversation across Europe that engages the public now, there will be increasing intransigence. And without such a discussion, European leaders won't know which new initiatives to take, for fear of further alienating the European public.

Europe needs the kind of great "teach-ins" you saw during the Vietnam War



About Jeremy Rifkin

Jeremy Rifkin is the author of ["The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream"](#) (Tarcher/Penguin: August 2004). His book has also been published in [German](#) by Campus Verlag (August 2004). Rifkin heads the Foundation on Economic Trends in Washington, DC, and is the author of the best-selling books "The End of Work"



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There needs to be a great discussion, and it could be modeled after the "teach-ins" that were so integral in the United States in the late 1960s in informing people about the Vietnam War. The government, non-governmental organizations, professors and citizens could come together across Europe and discuss the EU's most-pressing questions:

- Which system do we want to follow? The European social economy model, the American market economy or some combination of the two?
- What are the dimensions of Europe? How big should it be? How do we want to handle immigration? What are the outer limits of Europe?
- How do we create sustainable development? And how do we do it in a way which produces jobs?

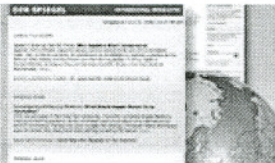
If they hold these teach-ins, I do think people would turn up for them.

Europe's great responsibility

However, when it comes to the question of whether Europe will have the mettle to continue with its experiment of integration, I'm pretty guarded. The EU is going through a period right now that's much like a relationship right when you decide to get married, but then get commitment-phobic just before the nuptials. Europe has had 50 years of gestation as the first trans-national political space based on peace -- an idea that is just now becoming articulate. I wrote "The European Dream" because I started to see the euroskeptics and neoconservatives coming on saying that such a dream would be impossible. I wrote the book specifically for Europeans so as to say don't get cold feet at this critical point where you can make history -- look at what you've accomplished. Because if you lose the momentum and stop this process of integration, you'll not only do a disservice to future generations in Europe, but also the whole world.

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I travel quite a bit, and in other parts of the world, they are beginning to look to Europe as a model in the same way they looked to the United States as a model many years ago. If you go to Asia, to the Tiger 10 and South Korea and Japan, they are moving toward a free trade-zone and they're looking toward a union that could use the EU as its model and the European Dream as an ideal. If you go to the Mercosur countries -- Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Chile -- you can hear the same discussion. If you go to Africa, A similar discussion is taking place within the Organization of African States. And Israeli Vice Prime Minister Shimon Peres recently wrote: How about a European Dream for the Middle East? He said if Europeans could hate each other and kill each other for 2,000 years and now actually cooperate and join to become an extended community, why couldn't we do that in the Middle East?

If Europe were to lose its momentum, other parts of the world that are looking to the EU as they develop their own partnerships would have second thoughts. There's a very heavy responsibility on Europeans right now, and I'm not sure they're up to it. I mean, when I saw the debate in France and the Netherlands, I questioned whether they understand the responsibility they bear.

(This article has been adapted from conversations between Jeremy Rifkin and Spiegel Online editor Daryl Lindsey)