

Sleepwalking through the European Dream (Part 1)

It is not very often, one imagines, that an eminent lecturer quotes George Carlin, as witty and wise as Carlin can be, and yet that is exactly what Jeremy Rifkin, author of seventeen books on science and technology, and their impact on matters such as the economy, society and the environment, did at his recent lecture in Amsterdam hosted by the John Adams Society. Those lucky few hundred who were able to get tickets to the sold-out lecture were treated to an exciting, intriguing, and thought-provoking talk from this fascinating man. In town following the recent publication of his latest best seller, *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*, before he departed the city, this paper was very pleased to interview the author about his latest book, policies, politics and more.

By Kim Chandler

Rifkin grew up in what he terms 'the heartland of America,' born in Colorado and raised on the South-West side of Chicago, in a working class community. "My father was born in 1908 in Denver, fifteen years after the official closing of the American frontier." His father taught his children a simple dream: "America is a tough place, but it is the land of opportunity. You get a good public education, you work hard, and you can make a success out of your life. We did it. All kinds of immigrants came to America and made sacrifices and made themselves a better life. Our dream was real, it was robust."

As Rifkin makes clear in his latest book, it was not that long ago, 1960 in fact, that America was the most middle-class, egalitarian country of all the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. America now ranks 24th in that list. "Only Mexico and Russia have greater disparities of wealth." This may be a bit shocking to some American readers, but perhaps they saw something even more shocking watching the television broadcasts of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. "This is not just in the Gulf Coast, it is probably happening all over America." Is this why only 51% of Americans still believe in the American dream? If so, it still does not mean that they are clamouring for the European Dream.

"We never think about you. We don't even have you on our television screens, we are Ameri-centric. The only time we do think of you when we take vacations." This is important in the view of Rifkin in that the average American is only given five to ten days off annually. "And when we want to rejuvenate our spirits we come to Europe. We sense you have something to give us, we're not sure what it is but we want it." However, this alters drastically when the average American takes a rare moment to think of institutional Europe. "Then you tend to get this kind of view: Anti-market bias, inflexible labour policies, pampered workers, aging population, welfare system ready to collapse, everyone dependent on the state, a museum."

Rifkin asserts in *The European Dream* that though there may be some truth to this, what is being missed is that in the last three generations 455 million people across 25 member countries have come to create the first trans-national governing space in the world. He goes further in his contention that it is not just Americans who are oblivious to this fact; he states that many in Europe, including some alleged experts here on the continent, are also asleep to the facts.

He wrote the book to wake us all. The founder and President of the Foundation on Economic Trends, Rifkin has worked for more than twenty years in Europe advising politicians, political parties, world leaders as well as consulting with Europe's leading companies and working with grass-roots, environmental, and social justice



campaigns. This man has walked his talk on both sides of the Atlantic.

"Generally, people think of America as a great super power and Europe as falling apart, a museum; and yet here's the reality on the ground. The European Union's GDP exceeded the US GDP in 2003. We're about even this year. The EU is the largest exporting power in the world, not the US and not China. The EU is the largest internal trading market in the world; 61 of the 140 largest Fortune 500 companies are in Europe, only 50 are in the US. You lead in key industries, 14 of the largest 20 banks are in Europe, you lead across the board in the insurance industry, you lead in aerospace, engineering, chemicals and construction. There are two economic superpowers; there may be only one military superpower, but there are two economic superpowers."

As he explains it, part of the problem is Geography; we're still comparing Germany, France and the UK to the US. "Since Maastricht you are a political union, you have been since 1992, whether or not you ever vote for the constitution. The companies I work with in Europe are regulated from Brussels, they don't think of themselves as Dutch or French or German companies." He asserts that we have to change our concept of geography. We have to compare Germany to California. "Germany is the largest state in this union; California is the largest state in the American union. Germany has a bigger population, but its economy trumps California. Then we have to compare the UK, the 2nd largest state, to New York and the UK trumps New York. Then the big problem, France, you have to compare France to Texas and France trumps Texas. If you go state by state you begin to see the magnitude and scope of Europe. There's another player on the scene; not another competitor for America, another partner. Maybe we can come together and make this a better world."

It is clear that if you measure a good economy by pay cheques then Americans are 28% richer than Europeans.

"We have bigger homes, faster TVs and SUVs. We have more. It's more unequally divided, but we have more stuff, as George Carlin would say. In Europe if you measure your economy by quality of life, which is the EU signature, you get a whole other different reading on the strength of your economy." At the elementary and secondary school level, students in 18 European countries out-perform American students in maths. There are over 40 million Americans without healthcare insurance. "The only other country that hasn't socialised medicine, of the industrialised nations, is South Africa. The EU 15 has more doctors per population and you live a year longer than we do, which astounds me as you still smoke so much."

We also have a lower infant mortality rate. "America ranks 27th in infant death, the reason why, poverty. You have poverty all over Europe, it's terrible, I've seen it, but American poverty is even worse. One out of every five kids in the States lives in absolute poverty. When you saw those pictures from New Orleans, well that was just New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Now I'm not suggesting that this is all of America, but it's not just New Orleans. That doesn't mean we don't have a thriving middle class in a lot of beautiful suburbs, but we have a lot of bad poverty as well."

According to Rifkin, the European Dream focuses on quality of life; the American dream focuses on religion. "We're the most religious, most Protestant, most Christian nation of any industrial country. A majority of us pray every day and go to religious services every week. A slim majority of us believe in the literal translation of the bible word for word and about 50% believe in the creation story. A slim majority believe in the final battle of Armageddon as laid out in the Book of Revelations."



Coupled with that, he notes that America is the most patriotic of the industrialised nations in the world, "Our kids will die for our country, sometimes in wars we shouldn't be in. Europe was right. We should have had a UN mandate; we should have made sure there were weapons of mass destruction there. I'm not saying Hussein was a good guy, but it's pretty obvious why we're there. They had the map of the oil fields out fast." So does that mean that you have to go to war to be patriotic?

"In Europe you're patriotic, just go to a soccer game, the Dutch are patriotic. But when we start talking about patriotism in relation to politics, you start to get nervous; it sounds like the bad old days of the 1930s or there and animosity. When you hear the phrase 'axis of evil' you think it's a slick metaphor; it is not, a little over 50% of Americans believe that the devil actually exists and thus they feel that a powerful and just military is necessary when that evil rears its head. If it wasn't for American troops, Bosnia and Kosovo may still be a war zone. On the other hand, Europe does walk the walk for peace. You do put more money into reconstruction assistance without strings attached; foreign aid, humanitarian assistance and policing powers in post conflict situations. Maybe we need to learn from each other."

It is his belief that Europeans think differently from Americans. "When an American thinks of core concepts like freedom, he thinks of autonomy and mobility; he a

man and take charge of your life is what parents teach their children. In Europe, you teach your children that freedom is directly related to the quality of your life, the quality of your relationships and the quality of the community you're a part of. Ask an American what the dream is and they'll say the personal opportunity to succeed if whatever I choose. Ask a European what their dream is that I should have a good quality of life for myself and my children."

Another difference, in his opinion, is the European attachment to sustainable development. "Why did you sign the global warming treaty and we didn't; you signed the biodiversity treaty and we didn't; you signed technical legislation to regulate chemicals, we won't? You tax gasoline, we don't; you save energy, we don't; why? Is it because you're better people? No."

Rifkin is not naive about Europe. "I'm mindful every time I step on European soil that more blood is in this soil than anywhere else in the world. You're the warriors of the world, 2000 years of bloodshed, hatred and animosity and you finally said, we're done and we're going to find a new way to govern each other. We're not sure what it's going to look like, but it's going to be based on reciprocity and trust and building bridges of peace and co-operation."

It is due to this that he feels we can be forgiven for being confused about the European Union, there is no precedent; it is a work in progress. "Every other nation has been born of violence or coercion. Even the American democracy had the genocide of the aboriginal population; we brought the African slaves over to improve our commerce; we had a revolution. So we must be patient with the Union and with ourselves."

"You're doing okay. You have open borders. You have a young generation that celebrates each other's cultures. Today, 1/3 of all European youngsters between the ages of 18 & 31 say they feel European first. That doesn't mean they're not still Dutch, for instance, but they have another loyalty; they're European and people of the world. It's a more cosmopolitan outlook." And of course our belief in quality of life; the right to work to live rather than live to work is ever important to Europeans.

"The American dream focuses on the work ethic. We work more hours than any other nation in the world; we work longer than the Koreans; 1900 hours a year. We say 'Idle hands are the devils work shop,' so when we hear the word idle, we think it's a sin. When Europeans hear the word idle you think, 'Time to go to the café, time to take a walk.' Instead of property rights, in Europe you focus on social rights, the right to health care, the right to retirement benefits, the right to maternity leave, and the right to a paid vacation."

Rifkin is adamant that across Europe the baby boomers and e-generation believe in inclusivity, that we should never abandon someone totally to the market on their own and that we have some obligation to take care of those who need some social net. "There is a belief in multicultural diversity; you respect pluralism and see culture as a gift to share; a belief in a quality of life; sustainable development; a balance of work and play; promotion of human rights and building peace. We're an interconnected world and we have to figure out how to live together. You're not there yet, it's a mess, but so is every political nation in the world." What interests Rifkin is not the evident shortfalls, but the fact that this is the first time in history, where a collective part of the human race, "has dared to dream a dream that attempts a global consciousness. It may prove to thin, I'm not sure if the young people have the strength and the courage and the conviction, but this is re-globalisation from the bottom up."

Part two of this interview will be published in next week's edition of this paper.

For more information on Jeremy Rifkin or the Foundation on Economic Trends visit www.foet.org. *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream* [ISBN: 1-58542-435-8] is published by Jeremy P. Tarcher / Penguin, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. www.penguin.com John Adams Society: www.john-adams.nl

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