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The European Dream ☒ America's nightmare?

Panel discussion with the US-author Jeremy Rifkin scrutinizes the big visions

by Michael Earle and Cosima Möller - 16 February 2005

Dany Cohn-Bendit, on behalf of the Greens/EFA in the European Parliament, hosted a debate in the European Parliament on 15 February that brought together an interesting selection of thinkers from both sides of the Atlantic to debate the existence of a European Dream. The panel consisted of **Jeremy Rifkin**, well-known American author on the impact of scientific and technological changes on the economy, the workforce, society, and the environment; **Pascal Lamy**, former European Commissioner for Trade and currently Europe's candidate for the post of the president of the World Trade Organization; **Maria João Rodrigues**, one of the architects of the Lisbon strategy and **Martine Aubry**, "mother" of the French 35-hour working week and mayor of Lille.

Mr. Rifkin began by sketching out the American Dream that he was brought up to believe in. If you got a good education and worked hard, you could be a success in the land of opportunity. That was the dream for centuries, but in the past few decades it has begun to unravel, to the point that now, fully a third of Americans no longer believe in the Dream. It is being lost, and needs to be re-thought. Here in Europe, 450 million people are forging the strangest political union in history - whereas other countries, states, empires or whatever were created by war and conquest, the European Union emerged out of two world wars and a holocaust with a desire to wage peace.

Americans and Europeans think differently. For Americans, freedom means self-reliance and independence, for there is nobody else to help. For Europeans, freedom derives from the quality of their relationships, from the degree to which they are embedded in society. They talk about quality of life and they want a better one for their children - the idea is not even discussed in the US. Americans live to work, whereas Europeans work to live. Americans want property rights and civil rights as an extension and expression of their individual rights. Europeans promote social rights and human rights. Americans are very patriotic, and since 80% of them believe that evil actually exists, they are very military. Europeans have been down that road for far too long, and now militarism makes them nervous.

What is emerging as the European Dream has multiple characteristics: it is inclusive, multi-cultural and based on the idea of quality of life and social rights; it tries to balance work and play, provide for a sustainable world and is dedicated to waging peace. That dream is not fully lived up to, of course, but it marks the first attempt to create a global consciousness.

Europeans have an inferiority complex, contrary to the Americans. But in many ways, Europe is a more powerful entity - to appreciate that, the appropriate comparison is not the US and Germany, France or the UK, it is the US and the EU. And there, the EU economy is stronger on many levels. The right comparison

for Germany is with California, both the largest economies in their relative unions. And the correct comparison with France is, ironically, with Texas, and France is more powerful, even if the Texans beg to differ! Europeans live longer, even if they smoke more, and have lower infant mortality than Americans. Americans have two weeks of holiday, which they often don't take, while Europeans have four to six weeks. Two percent of the US adult male population is in prison!

Many claim that the EU can no longer afford all of this, though, that they must adopt an American sink-or-swim economic model. But the only way that the US economy has grown after the recession in the early 1990s was through debt - credit card and consumer debt, mortgage debt, national debt. The official US unemployment rate at 4% is lower than the European level, but if people in prison are included, along with those who have fallen off the unemployment lists and those who are under-employed, the true rate is closer to 9%, not much different from the EU.

For **Mr. Rifkin**, the key to "Eurosclerosis" lies in integrating the enormous EU internal market. A seamless grid must be developed for energy, for transportation, for communication. If the economies of the EU were integrated to the same extent as the economy of the US, there would be an amazing future. To accomplish this, the best parts of the American and European Dreams must be combined. The European solidarity needs to be mixed with an American sense of personal accountability and the penchant for risk-taking.

It used to be said that the American Dream was worth dying for. Now, though, the European Dream is worth living for.

Maria João Rodrigues agreed that there is a European Dream, based upon freedom, equality and solidarity, but there are problems with competitiveness. Europe needs to learn a sense of initiative from the US, to strike a balance between the present and the future, between economics and the environment. The Lisbon initiative is not an attempt to copy the US, it is an attempt to create a knowledge-based society based upon people's skills and abilities. After five years, some progress has been made but implementation must shift from the EU level to the national and local levels. Some say it involves too many trade-offs, such as employment and productivity, or employment and the environment. But Lisbon is based on creating synergies, on a different way of thinking, for instance by using innovation to create jobs by developing environmental conservation technologies.

Pascal Lamy noted that Mr. Rifkin was living proof that grass is always greener on the other side! He agreed with his version of the American Dream, but thinks it more a story that was necessary during the early years of the country in order to increase immigration to make the economy and society function. The reason for the differences between the two dreams is not that Europeans have an inferiority complex, it is more fundamental than that. European culture is basically pessimistic, conscious of suffering, suspicious of hegemony. The European sense of utopia is marked by a sense of tragedy that doesn't touch the US. Yet Kyoto demonstrates that European utopian ideals are capable of transforming the world.

For **Martine Aubry** the difference between the American and European Dreams is that Europeans are capable of dreaming of changing society as a whole, of transforming it. Europeans only believe they are free if they have a roof over their heads, food, education. They know that no market can ever distribute these riches equitably, that pursuit of short-term profits can never lead to full development of society. She admitted to having made a mistake after the terrorist attacks in 2001 - she had thought that they would lead to a redistribution of wealth and goods, but she sees now that that was a naive hope, but it remains part of the European Dream.

Then three Green MEPs made brief interventions. **Rebecca Harms** saw a risk in trying to copy what others are trying to do. She wondered if we are not in danger of continuing dreaming while on the other side of the Atlantic realists act concretely. But what has been accomplished in Europe since 1989

demonstrates that it is closer to being reality than a mere dream. Europe needs its dream, though, just as it needs its sense of melancholy.

Pierre Jonckheer sees the Lisbon strategy as a real attempt by European social democracy to create an alternative to raw market capitalism. The difficulty is that the people who are in charge of implementing Lisbon are, in fact, dismantling it. Europe wants to develop jobs and competitiveness but not at the expense of society and the environment. He worries, though, that if the American Dream dies, will Europe die with it or will its own Dream be affirmed?

According to **Alain Lipietz** the European Union opts for multilateralism, because Europe has a universal culture. The main element of the Lisbon strategy is to become competitive by concentrating on growth and sustainable development. However nobody explains exactly how to define sustainability.

In his conclusions, **Jeremy Rifkin** observed that the big challenge to Europe is not Lisbon - that is a step on the way, a means to the end. The big challenge is actually to create a global public square while keeping both unity and diversity. The new universal condition is that we are all vulnerable - the world is so densely connected that everybody is affected by everybody else. The Dream is a global consciousness and the glue to hold it together must be empathy. That can be embedded by the Charter of Rights in the draft constitution, for it bypasses geography. The Charter's impact does not stop at national borders, it transcends national borders. The world looked to the United States for 200 years, with justification. Now, the world is looking to the European Union, to see if it can live up to its Dream. If Europe let's to world down, what else is there to look forward to?

Pascal Lamy recognised that for the EU it is quite difficult to speak up on an international level. However on issues such as the arms embargo on China, and how to deal with Iran and Cuba Europe has made some progress. Moreover he considers melancholy as a part of European culture and sees in a shared European responsibility the glue for the European project. According to Lamy Europe is a dream, but it has great potential.

Maria João Rodriguez and **Martin Aubry** concluded by pointing out that the Lisbon agenda is not the most difficult challenge we have to face today, but that we must be capable of making progress in the regulation of globalisation.

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