



## Europe: Paradise Found?

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Last year, Europeans were from Venus, Americans were from Mars. Or so said the neoconservative commentator Robert Kagan, who published an influential pamphlet that depicted Europeans as lotus eaters in a Kantian paradise or, more accurately, an artificial Eden that only existed because eagle-eyed American sentries were manning the walls.<sup>1</sup> At a time when France and Germany were vocal in their condemnation of the war against Iraq, the book struck a chord. What right had Europeans to predict that Iraq would descend into postwar chaos? Had they no faith in America's can-do spirit? They should take off their philosophers' robes and put on combat fatigues if they want to criticize.

This year, everything is fine in paradise. Jeremy Rifkin, a prolific writer on contemporary social trends, argues in a recent book, *The European Dream*, that Europe's vision of the future is "quietly eclipsing" the American dream and that the European Union (EU) is the prototype of a new form of governance ideally suited for a world of complex interdependency in which states are no longer the principal actors.<sup>2</sup> Europe, not America, is the political model for the future. And besides, those guys *really* know how to live: "People still stroll in Europe."

Kagan and Rifkin's books are at bottom an argument about history. For Kagan, Europe has opted to stay aloof from history, leaving to the United States the dirty work of dealing with the rogue states and power-hungry dictators of the world. Future textbooks will have pages and pages on the war on terrorism; the slim chapter on the Euro-

pean Union will gently sneer at the time and the effort Europe dedicated to negotiating the cod quota.

For Rifkin, Europe is making history, may even be the end of history. The EU, he says, is the "first governing experiment in a world metamorphosing from geographic planes to planetary fields." The phrase is opaque, but read in context it is perfectly clear. The EU is the shape of things to come. According to Rifkin, Europe has become nothing other than a "giant freewheeling experimental laboratory for rethinking the human condition and reconfiguring human institutions in the global era."

The United States, by contrast, with its gas-guzzling trucks and irrational attachment to sovereign rights, especially its own, appears in Rifkin's book as one huge damaging hangover from the Enlightenment. The United States is a nation whose public mind is still conditioned by the property-obsessed doctrines of Hobbes and Locke. The American Dream is a dream of domination, and just as Americans have raped their natural environment in pursuit of material gain, so the United States imposes itself upon the international environment, with a foreign policy based upon the massive projection of brute force. The American Dream, nowadays, is "largely caught up in the death instinct." Rifkin means by this "the frantic desire to live and prosper by killing and consuming everything around us." One has to add, *sic*.

The "European Dream," Rifkin concludes, is "a beacon of hope in a troubled world." The dream is that Europe will usher

in a “second enlightenment,” based upon the values of ecological sustainability, community, social cohesion, and universal human rights. This, at any rate, is what the EU is inching toward, though, of course, even Europeans do not always live up to the values they espouse. The rest of the world is watching events in Europe closely to see if a postnational and “postmodern” community based upon these values will emerge. If Europe does succeed, Rifkin argues that the European Union will displace the United States as the world’s favored political and economic model and its influence will grow as a result. Its dream “will become an ideal for both West and East to aspire to.”

### *An Introspective Giant*

The weight of expectation placed upon the EU in Rifkin’s book verges on the ridiculous. If the EU is a beacon for humanity, it is a distinctly smoky one, not a burning flame. Far from being a new Athens, the EU, which is now enlarged to 25 states, with Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Turkey knocking at the door, is beset with organizational difficulties and with deep doubts over its scope and purpose. Reading Rifkin’s book one would never grasp either that the EU’s new constitution, which was finally signed on October 29, 2004, was very much a lowest-common-denominator deal that ensured the supremacy of the member states in the policymaking process, or that the constitution is extremely unpopular in a number of member states traditionally favorable to European integration. France, for instance, may fail to ratify the constitution; if so, the constitution will be dead in the water.

One would not grasp the current state of uncertainty over Europe’s institutional future because Rifkin attributes little importance to the role played by the member states, especially the big member states, in the EU’s decision-making process. Like many other commentators, Rifkin portrays the EU as an exemplar of “multi-level gov-

ernance.” What this means is that the EU is government by networks, not by the centralized top-down model common to traditional nation-states. EU policy is supposedly the result of a plethora of interactions between the European Commission and Parliament, civil society groups, business and corporate actors, government bodies at the regional and provincial as well as the national level, academic consultants, and so on. For an information-age guru like Rifkin, this “polycentric” approach to policymaking is simply more in tune with the changing dynamics of contemporary life, with the need to “cope with a continually changing present.”

Here, however, Rifkin simply ignores the fact that the strategic decisions affecting the EU’s future are taken, usually by unanimity, by the member states meeting in the European Council. While it is true that the implementation of much EU policy is characterized by the methods Rifkin eulogizes, his picture of the EU as a hive of participatory policymaking, with political elites and civil society action groups constantly finding new policy syntheses, is more than a little idealized. The EU remains in most important ways an organization of nation-states whose primary form of governance is traditional diplomacy. If anything, 2004 saw a shift toward more assertive leadership by the principal member states. Convinced that the EU’s decision-making structures are in fact hopelessly cumbersome, Britain, France, and Germany have begun to coordinate their positions during regular summit meetings of their leaders and chief ministers. But this move aroused outspoken opposition in Italy, Poland, and elsewhere, and it is unlikely to prove a recipe for long-term creative statesmanship.

At least the values of the EU correspond to Rifkin’s sketch? Well, maybe. Europeans do have more sense of community than Americans; they are also more methodical about sorting their trash. They do enjoy

what Rifkin calls “deep play,” a formulation that offends residual puritan sentiment less than the more beautiful Italian expression *dolce far niente*. And they often do walk or cycle to work. The EU, so far as it can, sensibly encourages all these good things. Certainly, it is true that the “Lisbon process” launched in 2000 with the purpose of making Europe the world’s most competitive economy by 2010 also insisted that Europe’s would-be growth spurt should be sustainable environmentally. Slash-and-burn economics are not on the EU agenda.

Even so, it is misleading to pretend that such socially motivated values are the main issues that the EU deals with. The EU is less concerned with the promotion of worthy social goals than with sharing out hard cash. Over the next decade or so, much of Europe’s leaders’ time will be dominated by budget issues. Enlargement to the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe promises to stress the EU’s finances. Almost all the countries joining the EU possess substantial farming sectors and inferior levels of infrastructure and hence will have first claim on the EU’s resources. Since almost nobody is talking of expanding the EU budget much beyond its current level of just over 1 percent of the European Union’s gross domestic product, transferring resources to the east can only come at the expense of the current beneficiaries. Already, the idea is circulating that Britain might give up the automatic “rebate” on budget contributions won by Margaret Thatcher in the historic 1984 Fontainebleau summit. Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Italy are going to have to get used to paying for more of their own infrastructure. French farmers may even have to adjust to a more market-based farm economy.

These developments have the potential to throw the EU back to the early 1980s, when the then European Community (EC) ground to a halt as a result of the conflict caused by out-of-control agriculture spending running into the Thatcher government’s

unwillingness to act as the EC’s paymaster. EU officials are fond of talking of the European “family” of nations, but like most families, the EU is at its worst when it talks about money. Over the coming decade, the family’s worst face is likely to be on regular display to the rest of the world.

The budget issues will be all the more acute because the high-cost welfare states of the EU will face gigantic demographic challenges over the next 20 years. Unlike the United States, the European Union has a rapidly aging population. Its median age will rise to over 50 by the middle of this century, unless something remarkable happens to the birthrate. Europe, as the *Financial Times* columnist Martin Wolf has put it, is in danger of becoming “a vast old people’s home.”

Immigration may do something to buck the trend, but in a continent where one French citizen in five voted for the right-wing extremist Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 2002 presidential elections and where far-right movements thrive in Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Italy, encouraging immigration, especially Muslim immigration, is fraught with political risk. In this regard, the reaction in Holland to the brutal killing by an Islamic fundamentalist of a controversial Dutch filmmaker, Theo van Gogh, in early November 2004 is instructive. Van Gogh’s death provoked numerous acts of vandalism and attempted arson against mosques throughout the Netherlands. That such cultural tensions should be emerging even in Europe’s most liberal and tolerant societies is an ominous sign for the continent’s future harmony.

Even Rifkin almost quails at the thought of the challenges posed to the EU by demography and right-wing populism. The “success or failure” of the European Dream, he says, depends upon “how the current generation of Europeans address the issues of fertility and immigration.” The ongoing debate over the entry of Turkey into the EU, which is saturated with often un-

spoken fears about a new surge in migration, seems to imply that Europeans will embrace enhanced levels of multiculturalism only with great reluctance.<sup>3</sup>

In all probability, Europe will address these massive problems by muddling through. Welfare states will be reformed gradually, but as the experiences of France, Germany, and Italy have shown over the last two years, the political costs of even relatively cosmetic reductions in cherished social programs are so dire that only leaders with a death wish will push for radical change. The share of Europe's wealth spent by the state will therefore remain high, as will, inevitably, taxes. Graying citizens, worried for their future and their children's, will save even more than they do already for their old age, thus depressing economic growth and limiting Europe's ability to act as an alternative engine for the world economy. So far as immigration goes, Europe doubtless will become browner, but the influx of immigrants will be a very gradual process, evoke a good deal of unpleasant rhetoric, and be subject to rigid controls.

Overall, far from being a beacon for the rest of the world, Europe is likely to present an altogether different face to would-be imitators. Europe is likely to seem introspective, obsessed with the *minutiae* of its super-complex structures of supranational governance and with sordid questions of who gets what from the budget process. While still wealthy, it may easily seem to outsiders to be economically sluggish, socially conservative, and culturally forbidding.

If this gloomy portrayal of the face the EU will project to the world is right, then the belief, widespread in Brussels and echoed by Rifkin, that the European Union will one day rival the United States and counterbalance American hegemony becomes dubious. This is because the notion of the EU as a superpower ultimately rests upon its capacity to project what the Harvard theorist Joseph Nye refers to as "soft power" rather than military clout. That is to say,

Europe may be able to get what it wants in world politics by virtue of setting an example that other states wish to emulate rather than by being a first-rank military power.

Certainly, Europe will not be a military power of significance in the foreseeable future. Although the EU has been active since the early 1990s in extending cooperation between its member states in the defense and foreign policy fields, and although the constitution includes the provision for an EU foreign minister, member states retain veto power over foreign and military policy decisions. Moreover, the armed forces at the EU's disposal are extremely limited. There is what Rifkin calls a "mind-numbing" difference in the American and the European capacity to wage war. EU forces are mostly less well-equipped and less expertly led. For the European Union, it is a very big deal that troops under the EU flag are about to substitute for NATO forces as peacekeepers in Bosnia.

Europe's opportunity to emerge as a superpower, therefore, largely relies upon its appeal as a successful experiment in supranationalism. In fairness, the EU does have an inspiring story to tell. Since 1950, proud European nations have learned to put the institutionalized process of discovering common solutions ahead of the practice of imposing national ones. But it is not obvious, despite Rifkin's paean for the EU's achievements and his confidence in its future prospects, that the EU can project itself as a model for the rest of the world. It has far too many problems of its own.

#### *The Interpretation of Dreams*

Rifkin's book is, quite intentionally, a counterblast to neoconservative theorists like Kagan who are convinced that the future belongs to the United States and that everybody else will have to "adjust to the American hegemon." Rifkin is saying, in substance, "Don't be too sure." Perhaps the United States will find itself superseded by a less heroic and martial, but more humane

and profound, set of values; a dream, he says in his peroration, that is not just worth dying for but living for. The United States will just have to adjust to losing its status as the land of the free.

The danger inherent in these exercises in pop historicism, however, is that they take on a life of their own. There is by now a widespread conviction—one that would have seemed absurd to all but a handful of campus radicals a dozen years ago—that post-Cold War Europe and the United States are inimical by nature or by calling rather than, simply and banally, in disagreement over important specific issues.

The truth is that the relationship between Europe (old or new) and the United States is not ultimately a question of values. We both adhere to the liberal norms of political and religious tolerance; to greater or lesser degrees we both favor a mixed economy in which the rights of private property are tempered by state-imposed social regulation; both societies are characterized, again to greater or lesser degrees, by hedonistic personal consumption. In recent years, Americans have stirred patriotic and religious values more deeply into the mix; Europeans have poured in a greater emphasis on the environment and sustainable living. But we remain two branches of a single civilization—ask al-Qaeda.

None of this is to say that Europe and the United States will not have serious disagreements over the coming decade. If the picture I have presented in this essay is right, they almost certainly will. A sluggish, slow-to-reform Europe will be accused

by the United States of holding back world growth and with being partly responsible for the perennial inability of America to balance its books. Europeans may easily be tempted into a kind of default isolationism in which they immerse themselves in the complexities of running a 30-nation, \$12 trillion economy and neglect the outside world—exasperating the United States in the process. Some of the newer members of the EU will create transatlantic tensions by being more pro-American than France or Germany or Spain might like. Both Europe and the United States are bound to fall out over foreign policy questions and trade issues.

The important thing, however, will be to ensure that we do not suffuse these disagreements with an air of historical inevitability by defining them as a fundamental clash of political identities. Rifkin says that he believes that the “growing divide” between Europe and America is more “visceral than pragmatic.” If we believe this, the divide will indeed become wider. ●

## Notes

1. Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Knopf, 2003).
2. Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future Is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2004).
3. Fears over Turkey's entry into the EU are emerging at a high political level. See Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, “A Better European Bridge to Turkey,” *Financial Times* (London), November 25, 2004.