

Editorial: Europe strikes back

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In 1831, a French administrative official of the name Alexis de Tocqueville went to the United States to study the American prison system as a model for the planned penitentiary reform in France. He came back with a book that brought him fame and lasting position as a classic of political science and sociology: *La démocratie en Amérique* (1835–1840). America at that time was seen as far ahead of Europe in the development of its institutions and quintessential principles of Western modernity: democratic government, capitalist market and free thought. Tocqueville became fascinated with America, but did not limit his story to the description of American institutions and ways of life. He dug deeper, toward hidden axiological, mental and cultural premises which he labelled ‘habits of the heart’, and which later came to be known as the ‘American Dream’. This he believed to be the secret of American success and the emerging American hegemony in the world. His view was vindicated by the history of the 20th century. But times change.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the American social critic Jeremy Rifkin came to Europe to serve as an adviser to the head of European Commission, Romano Prodi. And he came back with a book that may easily become a bestseller, if not necessary a classic, entitled *The European Dream: How Europe’s Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream* (New York 2004: Penguin Group, USA). This comes as a follow up to a series of books in which American writers indulge in self-flagellation, drawing doomsday scenarios of the ‘decline’, ‘decay’ and ‘collapse’ of American greatness, with Noam Chomsky’s *Hegemony or Survival* (New York 2003: Henry Holt) as a prime example. This climate settled in earlier than the excesses of Bush administration, and has only been spreading wider in the intellectual community as a reaction to current policies. At a recent convention of the American Sociological Association (ASA) in San Francisco in August 2004, I was absolutely amazed by the intensiveness of anti-American feelings among my American colleagues. Presenting a paper provocatively titled ‘American Hegemony as Seen from Eastern Europe: Twenty Reasons why we Still Admire America’, I was feeling a complete deviant, evoking paternalistic

reprimands for my short-sightedness and naivety, which can only be excused by an outsider's perspective. Well, I believe that self-criticism, or what sociologists now call 'reflexiveness' is a great asset in every society, but American intellectuals seem to me to go a bit too far.

The commendable uniqueness of Rifkin's diagnosis is twofold. First, he is not viciously against the American Dream, but he puts it into a historical perspective and claims that it has simply outlived its time, becoming obsolete in the conditions of post-industrial, post-modern, globalized, and politically integrating society of the 21st century. The secret of America's greatness at the time of Tocqueville and the century after, is now an obstacle to continuing America's greatness at the time of Rifkin. And second, even more significantly, he does not limit himself to a critique, but seeks an alternative cultural syndrome, more fitting to the social, economic and political realities of the present and the future. He finds it in Europe, or more precisely in the core countries of the European Union. This is the new 'European Dream', which holds promise for the future, and provides a model that should be emulated by other countries, America included.

The opposition between the obsolete 'American Dream' and the rising 'European Dream' that he describes, may be reconstructed by means of two polar types along ten dimensions. Thus:

- (1) Whereas the American Dream emphasizes individual autonomy, the European Dream is more concerned with the embeddedness of an individual in the community, and the network of meaningful relations with others.
- (2) Whereas the American Dream defines freedom in negative terms, as independence ('freedom from' to use Isaiah Berlin's phrase), the European Dream sees it in positive terms, as empowerment, and an agential ability to influence the fate of society ('freedom to').
- (3) Whereas the American Dream expects of the members of society full assimilation into an 'American nation', and consequent cultural unification, the European Dream recognizes and cherishes cultural and national diversity of languages, life-styles, tastes, customs, beliefs.
- (4) Whereas for the American Dream the measure of individual success is the accumulation of wealth, the European Dream puts more emphasis on a multidimensional quality of life and self-fulfilment in areas other than consumption.
- (5) Whereas in America the progress of society is synonymous with unlimited material growth, in Europe more emphasis is put on sustainable development.

- (6) Whereas in the American Dream we still find the 19th century belief that nature must be conquered and subjected to technical and civilizational transformation, in the European Dream the ecological sensitiveness, the idea of the harmony with nature and rights of nature, is gaining growing support.
- (7) Whereas the American Dream demands from the people unrelenting and disciplined toil, the European Dream leaves more space for leisure, free time, and the enjoyment of what the author calls 'deep play'.
- (8) Whereas the American Dream puts faith in the social Darwinism of the free market as the best regulative mechanism of society, in Europe the ideas of social market economy, a social support net, and a welfare state are very much alive.
- (9) Whereas the American Dream focuses on property rights, it is from Europe that the idea of human rights originated, and spread throughout the world, as one of the central values of the 21st century.
- (10) Whereas the American Dream is pervaded with the belief in American hegemony backed by the unilateral exercise of power, the European Dream focuses on global cooperation in the conditions of peace.

This picture is very flattering to us, Europeans. A bit too flattering; perhaps in similar way as Tocqueville's picture of America might have been a bit idealized for Americans of the time. What are the other similarities? In the same way in which Tocqueville was fascinated with the American Constitution and American laws, Rifkin bases his reconstruction of the European Dream on the dominant themes of the European Constitution and the *Acqui Communitaire*. Both are guilty of normative bias, neglecting the ways in which realities may depart from principles and rules. If we remind ourselves of heated concerns in Europe about ungovernability, decay of the welfare state, unemployment, recession, intolerance, corruption, organized crime etc, the European Dream will look precisely like a dream, rather than a depiction of real life. There is one difference between Rifkin and Tocqueville though: whereas Tocqueville recognized the diversity of America and discussed the various manifestations of American 'habits of the heart' in various states of the union, Rifkin is rash enough to generalize on the basis of his acquaintance with very selected, core countries of the European Union, forgetting about their differences from other countries, especially the recently accepted ones, as well as those that remain outside of the Union, and yet cannot be denied a European status. Europe is not just Paris, or Brussels, which the author seems to know best. If we accept that Europe ends on the Urals, there are huge parts of Europe for which European Dream is not even a dream yet.

In this connection, it is interesting to notice that, in Eastern Europe, it was the American Dream, rather than the European Dream which for a long time has been treated as the epitome of Western freedom and prosperity, and an anchor of dominant pro-Western aspirations and dreams. It is no surprise therefore that it has also become the value syndrome to be emulated, imitated and institutionally established in the period of post-communist transformation. Paradoxically, joining the political structures of Western Europe with the act of accession, in the cultural domain, the Eastern Europeans try to build another America in Europe and in this effort are perhaps more American than the Americans.

But with all these reservations Rifkin provides us with exciting reading, and also by his omissions and biases inspires reflection and opens new horizons. An important and timely book.