

An empathetic civilization – now



It has long been evident that mankind is destroying his life-sustaining resources – yet actions to counter this development are slow to come or lacking entirely. The American economic writer Jeremy Rifkin is nevertheless optimistic and convinced of a new trend. Because mankind can count on a characteristic that he has always had: empathy.

“Humans are a relatively young species that makes up just half a percent of the biomass on the earth – yet we consume about 24 percent of the products of photosynthesis of our planet.” With these sobering and striking numbers Jeremy Rifkin opened his fiery speech.

“It is a monstrosity,” Rifkin called out into the hall, “we are devouring this planet!” We are pulling ourselves into the abyss through our own actions. Considering this state of affairs, Rifkin finds it incomprehensible that the representatives from 192 countries at the Climate Summit held in Copenhagen in 2009 could not agree on effective actions. “What is wrong with us?” he asked – and immediately answered: “I believe we are living by obsolete notions from the 18th and 19th century. With this mindset we will never succeed in mastering the challenges we face today.”

“It’s that existential sense of the unrepeatability and the fragility of life that allows one to empathize with others.”

In early times, man looked to the heavens, and in the age of industrialization, to the nearby surroundings, where factories stood. “Today,” said Rifkin, “our view must become more comprehensive.” The internet has already caused individuals to perceive mankind as their extended family. As examples of this, Rifkin cited the global responses to the earthquake in Haiti and the student protests in Iran. “In such an age as ours, it must be possible to establish a worldwide civilization based on empathy.”

Jeremy Rifkin, a speaker who seeks direct contact with his audience – and finds it.



Empathy is the ability to feel along with others and to place oneself in their situation. There are indications that empathy is part of our genetic code. Studies of so-called mirror neurons show that, for instance, whether a monkey watches a human try to open a nut or opens the nut itself, the same neurons are activated in the monkey's brain.

“If we want a sustainable society, we have to cultivate an empathic civilization.”

For advanced species there is apparently no way to ignore empathy. If it is suppressed, aggression, violence, narcissism, and other forms of harmful behavior gain the upper hand, said Rifkin. In the age of hunters and gatherers, empathy was limited mainly to the clan sharing a

“When one species devours a quarter of the products of photosynthesis of a planet, we must ask the question: Can this planet hold us? Either we’re gonna go, or other species are gonna go, or we’re gonna learn to live with each other. It’s as simple as that.”



domain. As mankind spread out and clans became allied, the “we feeling” expanded to cover a larger group defined by religious or national ties. Now that “we feeling” must be expanded once again – to the entirety of mankind.

Jeremy Rifkin asked: “Can we imagine a new form of energy or communication that in less than two generations could take us from psychological or ideological consciousness to biosphere consciousness?” He believes that the last great communication revolution, the internet, could help us achieve biosphere consciousness, a sort of global comprehensive empathy.

“As we begin to completely reconceive buildings to serve dual purposes – both a dwelling and a power plant – we will jump-start the European economy.”

Regarding a third Industrial Revolution, the European Union is committed to a four-pillar strategy. Jeremy Rifkin played a significant role in the development of this “economic action plan.” Pillar 1 is renewable energy, which by 2020 the EU member states aim to use for a third of their needs. Rifkin sees decentralization as the way: “If renewable energy is available on every square centimeter of the earth’s surface, why collect it at just a few central points?” That question leads to Pillar 2: “Buildings, buildings, buildings!” Every building must become its own power plant, believes Jeremy Rifkin. “We should rethink our notion of what a building is. A house must be at once a residence and a power plant.” Micro power plants however carry a certain risk. For instance, what would happen if summer 2020 in Europe were to be very hot, continuously cloudy, and windless? Rifkin presented this scenario to Romano Prodi, former president of the EU Commission. At first Prodi was perplexed, and later he approved a budget for researching energy storage – Pillar 3. “I am strongly in favor of storing all forms of energy,” says Rifkin.

“When the energy revolution converges with the communication revolution it will create a fundamental change in human consciousness. It will set up a whole new frame of reference for how people live together.”

In Pillar 4 the communication revolution meets the energy revolution. Rifkin put it in a striking way: “This results in distributed capitalism – because everybody becomes their own entrepreneur and, we hope, develops biosphere consciousness.” Rifkin told of a technology that has been in development for seven years. Millions of micro power plants

“If we can learn that lesson, if we can create biosphere consciousness, if we can create an empathic civilization, we will have a sustainable future and we will have a legacy worthy of our time. It’s up to the folks in this room who are at the cutting edge of their fields to help us get there, very quickly.”

will be linked, as computers are linked by the internet. Whoever has surplus energy sells it to the network, and whoever needs energy buys it from the network. Thus empathy, the “we feeling,” becomes a fundamental part of energy management.

A team is currently developing such a concept for Rome. “We want to make the first large city in Western civilization into a biosphere city,” said Rifkin. One day even the Colosseum will produce its own energy. At first the large network will link Romans among themselves, but Jeremy Rifkin is convinced that eventually it will link all of mankind: “When we become a single family of man, unified in empathy, we will have a sustainable future.”



Jeremy Rifkin is President of the Foundation on Economic Trends (FOET) in Washington, D.C., USA, a nonprofit organization that examines emerging trends in science and technology and the associated impact on the environment, economy, culture, and society. Rifkin was an advisor to French, German, Portuguese, and Slovenian political leaders during their respective European Council presidencies on issues related to the economy, climate change, and energy security. He currently advises the European Commission, the European Parliament, and several EU heads of state, and has been influential in shaping public policy in the US and around the world. Jeremy Rifkin is the author of numerous books on the impact of scientific and technological changes on the economy, workforce, society, and environment.