



Published on *One Country* (<http://onecountry.org>)

Source URL: <http://onecountry.org/story/what-fall-roman-empire-tells-us-about-humanitys-global-future>

Issue date:
April-July 2010

Volume number:
21

Issue number:
1

REVIEW

What the fall of the Roman empire tells us about humanity's global future

In Brief:

- Economist and thinker Jeremy Rifkin argues human beings have an innate ?empathic consciousness? that is proven by history and neurobiology
- Facing global crises such as climate change, humanity?s only hope is extend our empathic embrace to all of humanity
- Otherwise, there s little hope of overcoming the ?entropic debt? accumulated by the overuse of fossil fuels

The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Conciousness in a World in Crisis

By Jeremy Rifkin

Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, New York



inside that, if properly nurtured, could reliably counteract our seemingly innate tendency towards selfishness and aggression, instead pushing us towards ever greater cooperation and altruism.

In an age when most Western intellectuals have accepted wholesale the Darwinian, materialist view of human nature that says we are biologically primed to put self-interest first, such an idea might seem naive and utopian.

But in his latest book, economist and thinker Jeremy Rifkin argues that there is such a faculty which he calls "empathic consciousness" and its cultivation holds the key to humanity's long term survival.

The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis is set firmly in the context of the wide-ranging and interconnected crises facing humanity, from the threat of global warming to nuclear proliferation.

But its sweep extends far beyond the usual "global crisis" book, covering everything from the rise and fall of ancient civilizations to the latest discoveries in neurobiology and psychology.

Mr. Rifkin's goal is to show that our innate empathic identification with others is a far stronger trait than widely believed. Strong enough, he believes, to guide humanity into an age of cooperation if we work at it.

Human civilization, he writes, is on the verge of collapse, faced with a massive "entropic debt" that has been accumulated through the overuse of fossil fuels, short-sighted environmental policies, and the emphasis on material wealth over genuine human happiness. But empathy can provide a corrective.

One of Rifkin's themes is that humanity has been through this kind of a transition before. New technologies spur productivity and growth but also set the stage for collapse once a particular resource base is exhausted. However, each new phase also brings with it a higher level of empathic consciousness.

"Throughout history, new energy regimes have converged with new communications revolutions, creating ever more complex societies. More technologically advanced civilizations, in turn, have brought diverse people together, heightened the empathic sensitivity, and expanded human consciousness. But these increasingly more complicated milieus require more extensive energy use and speed us towards resource depletion."

Mr. Rifkin examines the rise and fall of great civilizations to show how each took humanity to a new stage of cosmopolitanism (or empathic consciousness) even as each also sowed the seeds for its own downfall.

The multi-ethnic Roman Empire, he writes, produced a surge in empathic consciousness as its inhabitants embraced Christianity.

"Cast adrift from their tribal bonds and thrown together with people of different cultures from around the empire, large numbers of individuals suddenly found themselves alone in dense urban environments and without a sense of identity," Mr. Rifkin writes.

"What was missing was a powerful new narrative that could put every single individual at the center of a compelling cosmic story of creation, tribulation, judgment, and redemption, and, by doing so, recast the very meaning of human existence....it would be a young sect calling itself Christians that would take Rome and the empire by storm with their story..."

Later, Mr. Rifkin traces what he calls the First, Second and Third Industrial Revolutions, each based on a successive energy/communications regime: coal/print; oil/radio-television; and, now, potentially, alternative

energy/the Internet.

This third revolution, he writes, will be marked by a "distributed" model of energy production (and use) that will rely on the new assumption that human nature is not inherently selfish, but rather that people "want to collaborate with others, often freely, for the sheer joy of contributing to the common good."

As such, Mr. Rifkin believes that the next stage of civilization is one where our "empathic predisposition" will offer "an opportunity to increasingly bond the human race into a single extended family." The alternative, he writes, is "planetary collapse" in the face of "a rapidly accelerating juggernaut" of climate change and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Bahá'ís will recognize and appreciate much in *The Empathic Civilization*. The idea that history has moved forward in a series of successive and ever greater civilizations, each marked by increasing cohesiveness and social complexity, outwardly describes the Bahá'í view of history, which is one of ever-enlarging and increasingly united social entities, moving under the guidance of the Creator, from tribe to city-state to nation-state and, soon, to an inevitable world commonwealth.

Mr. Rifkin's description of an innate faculty that promotes cooperation and compassion is also something Bahá'ís will recognize. But where Mr. Rifkin uses the word "empathic," Bahá'ís would substitute the word "spiritual."

Bahá'ís also believe that humans need not be captive to the animal instincts that evolutionary biologists have so well catalogued. Rather, if our spiritual side is nurtured (through prayer, reflection on the holy writings, and moral education — in other words by following the teachings of religion), new levels of love, compassion, and cooperation can indeed be reached.

However, where Rifkin believes "empathic consciousness" came about through evolution, as a "genetic predisposition," Bahá'ís believe any such empathic impulse stems from a Divine spark that resides in all of us, commonly known as the soul.

In this light, it is worth noting that much of the evidence offered by Mr. Rifkin to support his theory also supports the idea of a soul.

For example, Mr. Rifkin spends little time reviewing how evolutionary biologists explain altruism. Instead, he connects empathic consciousness with humanity's evolving religious beliefs, and traces its emergence through artistic expression, which some say is nurtured by the soul.

Likewise, his outline of the latest discoveries in brain science and psychology only deepen the mystery of empathy's origin, and so support the existence of a hidden soul as much as an unrealized biological predisposition.

One is reminded of the classic proof of God. If you see a watch, there must be a watchmaker. Mr. Rifkin has successfully described in some detail the effect of a largely unseen power on human societies, past, present and future. And while he stops short of identifying this as God or spirituality, many readers will surely do so.
