

Book Review:

The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*

William E. Halal
George Washington University
USA

Jeremy Rifkin has been delighting audiences for years with a series of fine books on major issues of the day, and this latest book of his is outstanding in many ways. It is erudite yet easy to read, and it addresses big problems, such as global warming, energy, and climate change. Rifkin's theme is the rise of *empathy* in a world struggling to avoid the chaos of runaway *entropy*, one of his favorite concepts.

The scope of the book is vast, charting the evolution of human consciousness from the rise of "mythological consciousness" in primitive tribal societies, to "theological" or "faith-based consciousness" in the agrarian Dark Ages, and "ideological consciousness" introduced by the Age of Reason. Rifkin argues that "The evidence shows that we are witnessing the greatest surge in empathic extension in all of human history." (p.452).

This claim is supported by a wealth of data and examples running through the ages. The author explains how the theories of Freud, Hobbes, Darwin, Descartes, Kant, Locke, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, and other philosophers travelled this long journey to better understand "human nature." The historic background behind all these developments is also described in loving detail – the ancient agrarian civilizations of Summer and Egypt, the rise and fall of Rome, Christianity and the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Industrialization. Rifkin focuses on tracing how major breakthroughs advanced this uncharted frontier of the mind – the rise of the conscious individual, love in marriage, invention of the printing press, electricity and the telegraph, impressionist art, and today's information technology (IT) revolution.

Although *The Empathic Civilization* dazzles with facts and insights, it often leaves one wondering how much of the central argument is really true. It would be salvation to believe that people will shed their innate selfishness and combativeness, but is it realistic to think that empathy alone will do the trick?

Rifkin describes powerful forces moving us toward greater empathy, like the influence of a knowledge society, the imperative for collaboration to govern a complex world, the inclusive values of a Millennial generation, and the sobering threat of global warming and climate change. These

* Jeremy, Rifkin. (2009). *The empathic civilization: The race to global consciousness in a world in crisis*. New York: Penguin.

trends are hopeful, but they seem to be having little influence on enduring conflicts between Israel and Palestine, radical Islamic terrorism and the West, and even Democrats and Republicans in the U.S., where enmity has never been more ferocious.

Like another of Rifkin's books, I sense that the thesis is defined too narrowly. His book, *Entropy* (Rifkin, 1980), for instance, argued that humanity was doomed because of the scientific principle that entropy constantly increases, creating an inevitable tendency toward disorder. Entropy is a valid concept, but the long rise of civilization to ever more complex global systems seems to refute the assumption that disorder is inevitable.

Something similar seems to limit the belief that empathy will prevail. Rifkin does a superb job of showing how empathy is crucial. Evolution has built it into our brains with mirror neurons that allow us to understand others. It helps us learn to collaborate. It is necessary for resolving conflict. Empathy is foundational to society in many ways. While this may be true, I can't help but wonder about all of the other pressing needs?

Rifkin talks of a "distributed capitalism" dispersed into small business units by IT. As a scholar of management, I'm pretty sure it is going to take a lot more than this to stem the systemic self-interest that caused the 2008 near-collapse of global finances in 2008 and which continues to focus on money rather than solving complex global problems. Although this is a controversial topic, I think the world has to move beyond "Capitalism" altogether and embrace an emerging "collaborative" or "democratic" form of free enterprise (Halal, 2008). Similar changes are underway in government, education, and other social institutions.

There is little mention of the need for vastly more powerful collective intelligence systems, global institutions, diplomatic breakthroughs, and other challenges that are badly needed to make sense of a world that is changing rapidly. Or the need for a newly invigorated global awareness that we are all in this together, and that we need a new set of global values emphasizing community, wisdom, sharing. Even if all this were possible, there will always be a need to confront aggression in a strong existential manner, and to engage in hard geo-political bargaining. Crime and war are perennial, so some form government always has to enforce legal behavior, possibly by force.

A large body of thought is emerging to address what Michael Marien and I defined as the Global MegaCrisis (Friedman, 2008; Glenn, 2009; Halal & Marien, 2010; Hamilton, 2010; Petersen, 2009; Taylor, 2008). This work varies widely, but there is a general consensus we are facing an avalanche of change in all fields of technology, the spreading of industrialization around the globe, concomitant loads on the environment, the threat of climate change, energy shortages, more Weapons of Mass Destruction, and other historic challenges.

Preliminary results of a survey conducted at www.TechCast.org/hot show that 22% of respondents think the situation could become "catastrophic" and another 60% think it could be "severe." Phrased differently, people estimate there is a 25% probability the world will suffer the loss of civilization in major parts of the globe, and a 35% probability of climate change, severe energy shortages, ecological collapse, nuclear exchange, and other likely disasters.

Empathy is a crucial foundation for true collaboration, so it may prove pivotal, as the Rifkin thinks. Unfortunately, I suspect this isn't the main story in the emergence of a new global order. *The Empathic Civilization* seems limited by somewhat unrealistic assumptions about human behavior, but it is an important book that contributes to understanding the global transformation that is imminent.

Correspondence

William E. Halal
George Washington University
TechCast LLC
E-mail: halal@gwu.edu
www.TechCast.org
www.BillHalal.com

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