

Thank God America Isn't Like Europe – Yet

By Charles Murray

Washington Post, March 22, 2009

Do we want the United States to be like Europe?

The European model has worked in many ways. I am delighted whenever I get a chance to go to Stockholm or Amsterdam, not to mention Rome or Paris. There's a lot to like -- a lot to love -- about day-to-day life in Europe. But I argue that the answer to this question is "no." Not for economic reasons. I want to focus on another problem with the European model: namely, that it drains too much of the life from life.

The stuff of life -- the elemental events surrounding birth, death, raising children, fulfilling one's personal potential, dealing with adversity, intimate relationships -- occurs within just four institutions: family, community, vocation and faith. Seen in this light, the goal of social policy is to ensure that those institutions are robust and vital. The European model doesn't do that. It enfeebles every single one of them.

Drive through rural Sweden, as I did a few years ago. In every town was a beautiful Lutheran church, freshly painted, on meticulously tended grounds, all subsidized by the Swedish government. And the churches are empty. Including on Sundays. The nations of Scandinavia and Western Europe pride themselves on their "child-friendly" policies, providing generous child allowances, free day-care centers and long maternity leaves. Those same countries have fertility rates far below replacement and plunging marriage rates. They are countries where jobs are most carefully protected by government regulation and mandated benefits are most lavish. And with only a few exceptions, they are countries where work is most often seen as a necessary evil, and where the proportions of people who say they love their jobs are the lowest.

Call it the Europe Syndrome. Last April I had occasion to speak in Zurich, where I made some of these same points. Afterward, a few of the 20-something members of the audience came up and said plainly that the phrase "a life well-lived" did not have meaning for them. They were having a great time with their current sex partner and new BMW and the vacation home in Majorca, and they saw no voids in their lives that needed filling.

It was fascinating to hear it said to my face, but not surprising. It conformed to both journalistic and scholarly accounts of a spreading European mentality that goes something like this: Human beings are a collection of chemicals that activate and, after a period of time, deactivate. The purpose of life is to while away the intervening time as pleasantly as possible.

If that's the purpose of life, then work is not a vocation, but something that interferes with the higher good of leisure. If that's the purpose of life, why have a child, when children are so much trouble? If that's the purpose of life, why spend it worrying about neighbors? If that's the purpose of life, what could possibly be the attraction of a religion that says otherwise?

I stand in awe of Europe's past. Which makes Europe's present all the more dispiriting. And should make it something that concentrates our minds wonderfully, for every element of the Europe Syndrome is infiltrating American life as well. The European model provides the intellectual framework for the social policies of the Democratic Party, and it faces no credible opposition from Republican politicians.

Yet not only is the European model inimical to human flourishing, I predict that 21st-century science is going to explain why. A tidal change in our scientific understanding of what makes humans tick is coming, and it will spill over into every crevice of political and cultural life. As Harvard's Edward O. Wilson argues in his book "Consilience," the social sciences are increasingly

going to be shaped by the findings of science. It's already happening. Whether it's psychologists discovering how fetal testosterone affects sex differences in children's behavior or geneticists using haplotypes to differentiate the Dutch from the Italians, the hard sciences are encroaching on questions of race, class and gender that have been at the center of modern social science. And the tendency of the findings lets us predict with some confidence the broad outlines of what the future will bring.

Two premises about human beings are at the heart of the social democratic agenda: what I label "the equality premise" and "the New Man premise." The equality premise says that, in a fair society, different groups of people -- men and women, blacks and whites, straights and gays -- will naturally have the same distributions of outcomes in life -- the same mean income, the same mean educational attainment, the same proportions who become janitors and who become CEOs. When that doesn't happen, it is because of bad human behavior and an unfair society. Much of the Democratic Party's proposed domestic legislation assumes that this is true.

I'm confident that within a decade, the weight of the new scientific findings will force the left to abandon the equality premise. But if social policy cannot be built on the premise that group differences must be eliminated, what can it be built upon? It can be built upon the premise that used to be part of the warp and woof of American idealism: People must be treated as individuals. The success of social policy is to be measured not by equality of outcomes for groups, but by the freedom of individuals, acting upon their personal abilities, aspirations and values, to seek the kind of life that best suits them.

The second tendency of the new findings of biology will be to show that the New Man premise -- which says that human beings are malleable through the right government interventions -- is nonsense. Human nature tightly constrains what is politically or culturally possible. More than that, the new findings will confirm that human beings are pretty much the way that wise observers have thought for thousands of years.

The effects on the policy debate will be sweeping. Let me give you a specific example. For many years, I have been among those who argue that the growth in births to unmarried women has been a social catastrophe -- the single most important force behind the growth of the underclass. But while other scholars and I have been able to prove that other family structures *have not* worked as well as the traditional family, I cannot prove that alternatives *could not* work as well, and so the social democrats keep coming up with the next new program that will compensate for the absence of fathers.

Over the next few decades, advances in evolutionary psychology are going to be conjoined with advances in genetic understanding, and I predict that they will lead to a scientific consensus that goes something like this: There are genetic reasons why boys who grow up in neighborhoods without married fathers tend to reach adolescence unsocialized to norms of behavior that they will need to stay out of prison and hold jobs. We will still be able to acknowledge that many single women do a wonderful job of raising their children. But social democrats will have to acknowledge that the traditional family plays a special, indispensable role in human flourishing and that social policy must be based on that truth.

For some years a metaphor has been stuck in my mind: The 20th century was the adolescence of Homo sapiens. Nineteenth-century science, from Darwin to Freud, offered a series of body blows to ways of thinking about human life that had prevailed since the dawn of civilization. Humans, just like adolescents, were deprived of some of the comforting simplicities of childhood and exposed to more complex knowledge about the world. And 20th-century intellectuals reacted precisely the way adolescents react when they think they have discovered that Mom and Dad are hopelessly out of date. It was as if they thought that if Darwin was right about evolution, then Aquinas was no longer worth reading; that if Freud was right about the unconscious mind, then the Nicomachean Ethics had nothing to teach us.

The nice thing about adolescence is that it is temporary, and when it passes, people discover that their parents were smarter than they thought. I think that may be happening with the advent of the new century. All of us who deal in social policy will be thinking less like adolescents, entranced with the most titillating new idea, and more like grown-ups. But that will not stop America's slide toward the European model. For that, there must be a kind of political Great Awakening among America's elites. They will have to ask themselves how much they value what has made America exceptional, and what they are willing to do to preserve it.

The trouble is that American elites of all political stripes have increasingly withdrawn to gated communities -- literally or figuratively -- where they never interact at an intimate level with people not of their own socioeconomic class. Over the last half-century, the new generation of elites have increasingly spent their entire lives in the upper-middle-class bubble, never having seen a factory floor, let alone worked on one, never having gone to a grocery store and bought the cheap ketchup instead of the expensive ketchup to meet a budget, and never having had a close friend who hadn't gotten at least 600 on her verbal SAT.

America's elites must once again fall in love with what makes America different. The drift toward the European model can be stopped only when we are all talking again about why America is exceptional, and why it is so important that America remain exceptional. That requires once again seeing the American project for what it is: a different way for people to live together, unique among the nations of the earth, and immeasurably precious.

Charles Murray is the W. H. Brady Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. This essay is adapted from his 2009 Irving Kristol Lecture.