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Conference P1 – Opening Session – Part 1: Jeremy Rifkin's lecture summary

The Third Industrial Revolution:

how lateral power is transforming energy, the economy, and the world

After a short introduction by Philippe Vasseur, Jeremy Rifkin begins with a quite dark description of the world. The crisis is deep, up to the point that the human species is at risk. He refers first to the limitation of fossil fuels, on which our civilization is built. Oil prices rose sharply in 2007, and the crisis was followed by the collapse of financial markets, as an aftermath of the energy earthquake.

We are at the end of an era: oil production per capita in the world has declined, and the production of what remains will be more expensive. In addition, the effect of fossil fuels on climate change is much worse than what we hear usually. In short, the survival of the human species is in danger.

We must rethink our lifestyles radically and invent new energy and new forms of communication. Rifkin recalls how the first and second industrial revolution involved these two dimensions. Even if the situation is worrying, Rifkin rejects despair and proposes a strategy which is based on five pillars: (1) end of fossil fuels, change based on renewable energy, (2) radical changes in the way we construct buildings, (3) solve the problem of energy storage with the focus on hydrogen, (4) review the distribution of energy as an 'internet' of energy, and (5) change radically transportation systems. All these pillars must be linked in a revolution of the infrastructure that will be the platform to change the world. Rifkin also highlights an element that is sometimes overlooked: productivity changes are only in small part due to capital and labor, they are above all related to effective thermodynamics (i.e. the use of energy).

The next stage of globalization will be a 'continentalisation'. In Europe we should not sacrifice our social roots. The problem is primarily a change at the level of consciousness, and there are several elements that should make us optimistic. First, the younger generations are increasingly aware of the problem. More fundamentally, we are not predators, but equipped with the gift of empathy. We will move from a geopolitical approach to conceive our collective identity to a biospheric one and learn to think as a species.

Reactions differ, but all commentators adhere to Rifkin's vision. Daniel Percheron emphasizes the role of the precautionary 'social' principle in these changes to come, and business leaders as Vianney Mulliez defend a pragmatic, step by step, approach and consider the way we construct buildings as the first pillar which already seems feasible.

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