

When it comes to social programs, many European Union countries, as compared to the United States, are egalitarian-minded. Higher education is essentially free of charge and available to everyone who qualifies; there, the American system of impoverishing their young with student loans the size of modest mortgages would be considered outrageous. Health coverage is state-sponsored and universal; no Catholic bishop, much less Catholic churchgoers, would dream of opposing state-issued contraceptives. Meanwhile in the United States, the assault on women's reproductive rights continues via lobbying by the American Conference of Catholic Bishops. The group inveigles individuals as well as Congress against family planning, yet it pays no taxes and does not identify its activities as lobbying.

In Germany, sex education as well as religious training begins in elementary schools. Sex education begins in third grade, with a female physician arriving in class bearing illustrations of male and female reproductive tracts and speaking in the presence of the teacher who might later address students' follow-up questions. The result is that relations between the sexes are much more relaxed than what we have in the U.S. Not only at the French Riviera but also on the banks of rivers within cities topless sunbathing is common.

Religious education also begins in third grade: Churches, like universal health care and higher education, are state-sponsored. This approach may seem contrary to the American concept of personal liberty with its (nominal) separation of church and state; on the other hand, it avoids the double-speak Writer Charles Haynes decried in his April 23 WTE column, "Freedom or monkey business?" Generally speaking, though they might attend church on Sundays and celebrate religious holidays, Germans remain secular in their approach to religion.

To Europeans, American preoccupation with religious obsession and sexual prudery can appear medieval, ill-conceived, even pig-headed. Frans de Waal, born and educated in the Netherlands, on accepting the directorship of the Primate Research Center in Atlanta, Georgia, expressed consternation over finding a newspaper account of a woman arrested in a shopping mall for breast-feeding. "It puzzled me that this could be seen as offensive," he writes in *Our Inner Ape*, the latest of his books on primate behavior. "My local paper described her arrest in moral terms, something having to do with public decency [b]ut . . . natural maternal behavior cannot conceivably hurt anybody." In Europe, he states, "no one blinks an eye at naked breasts, which can be seen at every beach, but if I were to say I had a gun at home, everyone would be terribly upset and wonder what had become of me. One culture fears guns more than breasts, while another fears breasts more than guns." He points out that human social conventions are often couched in "the solemn language of morality" when in fact they fall outside of it.

Europeans pay high taxes to permit a kind of state-sponsored, moderate socialism. Taxation makes for individual grievances yet it avoids the deplorable discrepancies between the ultra-rich and the poor we find within American society. When European friends or family members visit here, they are first dumbfounded then disgusted with American policy that allows homeless people to subsist under bridges and in doorways, dragging their meager belongings with them in sacks or shopping carts. In Germany, housing is subsidized for those who can't afford it. Mentally ill people do not live in the streets but are cared for—humanely or otherwise, I cannot say—in appropriate institutions. The social thinking is the legacy of Erich Fromm and the Frankfurt School, that group of Jewish and German intellectuals who, like theologian Paul Tillich, had to escape the Nazis via immigration to the U.S.

Today the European countries, at each other's throats in earlier times, help out one another. Greece, for example, a country visibly and on a vast scale bearing the cost of global warming, is in desperate financial straits. Fires have destroyed orchards and olive groves, impoverishing not only individuals but the entire nation. Thus far wildfires have devastated more than ten percent of Greek territory, states a report published in July 2011 by the Greek Institute of Agricultural Research (Ethiage) and the Greek office of WWF. In this country of eleven million inhabitants, one of these serious national calamities occurred in 2007, as 77 people died and 250,000 hectares were ravaged by fire.

When Bill McKibben recently made an articulate and well-reasoned plea to "End fossil fuels subsidies" (WTE April 30, 2012), he forgot to mention one thing: American overindulgence in fossil-fuel consumption carries in its wake a terrible cost: Impoverishment on a global scale. It's high time some socially-aware consciousness materialized in this country of ours, so rich in resources yet so irresponsible in its management of wealth. Egalitarian thinking patterned after one or the other of Europe's programs might be a place to start.