



The European Dream

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By Jeremy Rifkin,
The European Dream

The new Europe has its own cultural vision -- and it may be better than ours

The set of beliefs we call the American Dream underlies one of history's great success stories, an unbroken cultural ascent lasting more than 200 years. But how well are we doing today? In this selection from his provocative new book, social thinker Jeremy Rifkin argues that the American Dream has turned into a liability that has us clinging to an outmoded past. Meanwhile, a different vision of life that's now emerg-ing from Europe could be the world's best hope for negotiating its shared global future. -- The Editors

What really separates America from all earlier political experiments is the unbounded hope and enthusiasm, the optimism that is so thick at times it can bowl you over. This is a land dedicated to possibilities, a place where constant improvement is the only meaningful compass and economic progress is regarded to be as certain as the rising sun. We are a people who threw off the yoke of tyranny and vowed never to be ruled by arbitrary elites of any kind. We eschew class distinctions and the hereditary transmission of status, embrace the democratic spirit, and believe that everyone should be judged solely on merit.

Americans have long been aware of our special circumstance. We think of America as a refuge for every human being who has ever dreamed of a better life and been willing to risk his or her own to come here and start over.

That's why it saddens me to say that America is no longer a great country. Yes, it's still the most powerful economy in the world, with a military presence unmatched in all of history. But to be a great country, it is necessary to be a good country. It is true that people everywhere enjoy American cultural forms and consumer goods. America is even envied, but it is no longer admired as it once was. The American Dream, once so coveted, has increasingly become an object of derision. Our way of life no longer inspires; rather, it is now looked on as outmoded and, worse yet, as something to fear, or abhor.

Stripped to its bare essentials, the American Dream offers everyone a fair shot at prosperity if they're willing to work hard and cultivate self-reliance. But fulfillment of the dream is becoming more elusive. For Americans who have made every effort to succeed, only to be pulled down over and over again by a market economy and a society weighted against them, the dream can feel like a cruel hoax, a myth without substance. There may still be opportunity for both the native-born and newcomers, but the unfettered upward mobility that defined American life up until the early 1970s no longer exists. As the gap between rich and poor has widened, the sons and daughters of wealthier Americans have come to feel entitled to happiness and are less willing to work hard and make something of themselves. On all social levels, the dream is losing its cachet, casting many of its former believers adrift. One-third of all Americans say they no longer even believe in the American Dream.

While the American spirit languishes in the past, a compelling new dream is coming of age, driven by the rise of the world's other great superpower, the European Union (EU). Twenty-five nations, representing 455 million people, have joined together to create a "United States" of Europe. Like the United States of America, this vast cultural entity has its own founding documents and hopes for the future. It also has its own empowering myth. Although it is still in its adolescence, the European Dream is the first transnational vision, one far better suited to the next stage in the human journey. Europeans are beginning to adopt a new global consciousness that extends beyond, and below, the borders of their nation-states, deeply embedding them in an increasingly interconnected world.

Comparing Quality of Life

Americans are so used to thinking of our country as the most successful on earth, they might be surprised to learn that, by many measures, this is no longer the case. In just a few decades, the European Union has grown to become the third-largest governing institution in the world. Though its landmass is half the size of the continental United States, its \$10.5 trillion gross domestic product now eclipses the U.S. GDP, making it the world's largest economy. The European Union is already the world's leading

exporter and largest internal trading market. Sixty-one of the 140 biggest companies on the Global Fortune 500 rankings are European, while only 50 are U.S. companies.

The comparisons between the world's two great superpowers are even more revealing when it comes to the quality of life. For example, in the European Union, there are approximately 322 physicians per 100,000 people, whereas in the United States there are only 279. The United States ranks 26th among the industrial nations in infant mortality, well below the EU average. The average life span in the 15 most developed EU countries is now 78.01 years, compared to 76.9 years in the United States.

Children in 12 European nations now rank higher in mathematics literacy than their American peers, and in 8 European countries children outscore Americans in scientific literacy. When it comes to wealth distribution -- a crucial measure of a country's ability to deliver on the promise of prosperity -- the United States ranks 24th among the industrial nations. All 18 of the most developed European countries have less income inequality between rich and poor. There are now more poor people living in America than in the 16 European nations for which data are available. America is also a more dangerous place to live. The U.S. homicide rate is four times higher than the European Union's. Even more disturbing, the rates of childhood homicides, suicides, and firearm-related deaths in the United States exceed those of the other 25 wealthiest nations, including the 14 wealthiest European countries. Although the United States is only 4 percent of the world's population, it now contains one-quarter of the world's entire prison population. While the EU member states average 87 prisoners per 100,000 people, the U.S. averages an incredible 685 prisoners per 100,000 people.

Europeans often remark that Americans "live to work," while Europeans "work to live." The average paid vacation time in Europe is now six weeks a year. By contrast, Americans, on average, receive only two weeks. Most Americans would also be shocked to learn that the average commute to work in Europe is less than 19 minutes. When one considers what makes a people great and what constitutes a better way of life, Europe is beginning to surpass America.

Two Dreams, One Past

Though historians seldom allude to it, the American Dream is largely a European creation transported to American soil and frozen in time. The American Dream was born in the early modern era -- a period that saw the flowering of the individual, the development of a sophisticated private property regime, the invention of market capitalism, and the creation of the nation-state. The Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment idea of science as the relentless pursuit and exploitation of nature's secrets had begun to take hold in Europe. While much of Europe eventually tempered its religious fervor, its scientific zeal, and its enthusiasm for unbridled market capitalism, preferring a compromise in the form of democratic socialism, America did not. Instead, successive generations chose to live out those older traditions in their purest forms, making us the most devoutly Protestant people on Earth and the most committed to scientific pursuits, private property, capitalism, and the nation-state.

That difference is reflected in the American and European Dreams, which at their core are about two diametrically opposed ideas about freedom and security. For Americans, freedom has long been associated with autonomy. An autonomous person is not dependent on others or vulnerable to circumstances beyond his or her control. To be autonomous one needs to be propertied. The more wealth one amasses, the more independent one is in the world. One is free by becoming self-reliant and an island unto oneself. With wealth comes exclusivity, and with exclusivity comes security.

The new European Dream is based on different assumptions about what constitutes freedom and security. For Europeans, freedom is found not in autonomy but in embeddedness. To be free is to have access to many interdependent relationships. The more communities one has access to, the more options one has for living a full and meaningful life. It is *inclusivity* that brings security -- belonging, not belongings.

The American Dream emphasizes economic growth, personal wealth, and independence. The new European Dream focuses more on sustainable development, quality of life, and interdependence. The American Dream pays homage to the work ethic. The European Dream is more attuned to leisure and "deep play." The American Dream is inseparable from the country's religious heritage and deep spiritual faith. The European Dream is secular to the core. The American Dream depends on assimilation: We associate success with shedding our former ethnic ties and becoming free agents in the great American melting pot. The European Dream, by contrast, is based on preserving one's cultural identity and living in a multicultural world. The American Dream is wedded to love of country and patriotism. The European Dream is more cosmopolitan and less territorial.

Americans are more willing to employ military force to protect what we perceive to be our vital self-interests. Europeans are more reluctant to use military force and instead favor diplomacy, economic assistance, and aid to avert conflict and favor peacekeeping operations to maintain order. Americans tend to think locally while Europeans' loyalties are more divided and stretch from the local to the global. The American Dream is deeply personal and little concerned with the rest of humanity. The European Dream is more expansive and systemic, and therefore more bound to the welfare of the planet.

That isn't to say that Europe has suddenly become a utopia. For all of its talk about preserving cultural identity, Europeans have become increasingly hostile toward newly arrived immigrants and asylum seekers. Ethnic strife and religious intolerance continue to flare up in pockets across Europe. Anti-Semitism is on the rise again, as is discrimination against Muslims and other religious minorities. While Europe's people and countries berate American military hegemony and what they regard as a trigger-happy foreign policy, they are more than willing, on occasion, to let the U.S. armed forces safeguard European security interests. Meanwhile, both supporters and critics say that the European Union's governing machinery, based in Brussels, is a maze of bureaucratic red tape. Its officials are often accused of being aloof and unresponsive to the needs of the European citizens they supposedly serve.

The point, however, is not whether the Europeans are living up to their dream. We Americans have never fully lived up to ours. Rather, what's important is that Europe has articulated a new vision for the future that differs from our own in fundamental ways. These basic differences are crucial to understanding the dynamic that has begun to unfold between the early 21st century's two great superpowers.

Forging a Union

Unlike past states and empires whose origins are embedded in the myth of heroic victories on the battle-field, the European Union is novel in being the first mega governing institution in history to be born out of the ashes of defeat. Rather than commemorate a noble past, it sought to ensure that the past would never again be repeated. After a thousand years of unremitting conflict, war, and bloodshed, the nations of Europe emerged from two world wars with their population maimed and killed, their ancient monuments and cities lying in ruins, their worldly treasures depleted, and their way of life destroyed. Determined that they would never again take up arms against each other, the nations searched for a political mechanism that could move them beyond their ancient rivalries.

In a series of treaties following World War II, Europe's political elites began the painstaking process of creating a united Europe, all the while attempting to define the limits of power of the emerging European Community. The federalists argued for ceding more power to the European central authority. The confederalists, by contrast, tried to keep power in the hands of the member states, viewing the new governing structure as a means to strengthen and coordinate their national objectives. Every compromise along the way reflected the tensions and strains between these two divergent visions.

While the powers that be continue to jostle back and forth between federalism and confederalism, the very technological, economic, and social realities that gave rise to the European Community, and that continue to push it along its journey to union, have created a political dynamic of a different sort. Rather than becoming a super-state or a mechanism to represent the enlightened national self-interests, the European Union has metamorphosed into a third form. It has become a discursive forum whose function is to referee relationships and help coordinate activity among a range of players, of which the nation-state is only one. The European Union's primary role has become orchestral. It facilitates the coming together of networks of engagement that include nation-states, but also extend outward to transnational organizations and inward to municipal and regional governments, as well as civil society organizations.

The European Union, then, is less a place than a process. Its genius is its indeterminacy. Unlike the traditional nation-state, whose purpose is to integrate, assimilate, and unify the diverse interests inside its borders, the European Union has no such mission. To the contrary, its role is just the opposite of what nation-states do. Its political cachet is bound up in facilitating and regulating a competing flow of divergent activities and interests.

There has never been a governing institution like the European Union. True, the European Union maintains many of the trappings of a state. Its laws supersede those of its 25 nations. It has a currency (the euro), a flag, and a headquarters. It regulates commerce and trade and coordinates energy, transportation, communications, and, increasingly, education across its many national borders. Its citizens enjoy a common EU passport. It has a European Parliament, which makes laws, and a European Court, whose judicial decisions are binding on member countries and their citizens. It also has a president and a military force.

But though the European Union qualifies as a state in many important particulars, it isn't one. It cannot tax its citizens, and its member countries still enjoy a veto on any decision that would deploy their troops. Most important, the European Union is an extraterritorial governing institution. Although it regulates activity within its member states, it has no claim to territory. Its legitimacy is based exclusively on the continued trust and goodwill of its members and the treaties and directives -- and soon a new constitution -- they have pledged to uphold.

Today, two-thirds of the people living across the European Union say they feel "European." Six out of ten EU citizens say they feel "very attached" or "fairly attached" to Europe, while one-third of Europeans between the ages of 21 and 35 say they "now regard themselves as more European than as nationals of their home country." Although it is difficult to fathom, this extraordinary change in how Europe's people perceive themselves has occurred in less than 50 years.

A New Constitution

Europeans are in the midst of a historic debate over whether to ratify a proposed constitution. Much of that 265-page document probably would not be acceptable to most Americans. Although many passages are cribbed largely from our own Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights, there are other ideas and notions that are so alien to the contemporary American psyche that they might be considered with suspicion or even thought of as somewhat bizarre.

To begin with, there is not a single reference to God and only a veiled reference to Europe's "religious inheritance." Strange, on a continent where great cathedrals grace the central plazas of most cities and small churches and chapels appear around every corner. Many Europeans no longer believe in God. While 82 percent of Americans say that God is very important to them, less than 20 percent of Europeans express similar religious convictions. God is not the only consideration to be given short shift. There is only one reference to private property tucked deep inside the document, and barely a passing mention of free markets and trade.

Just as striking is what the constitution does emphasize. The EU objectives include a clear commitment to "sustainable development . . . based on balanced economic growth," a "social market economy," and "protection and improvement of the quality of the environment." The constitution would also "promote peace . . . combat social exclusion and discrimination . . . promote social justice and protection, equality between men and women, solidarity between generations, and protection of children's rights."

The constitution's Charter of Fundamental Rights goes far beyond our own Bill of Rights and subsequent constitutional amendments. For example, it promises everyone preventive health care, daily and weekly rest periods, an annual period of paid leave, maternity and parental leave, social and housing assistance, and environmental protection.

The EU Constitution is something new in human history. Though it is not as eloquent as the French and U.S. constitutions, it is the first governing document of its kind to expand the human franchise to the level of global consciousness. The language throughout the draft constitution speaks of universalism, making it clear that its focus is not a people, or a territory, or a nation, but rather the human race and the planet we inhabit.

By decoupling human rights from territoriality, the European Union has ventured into a new political frontier, with far-reaching consequences for the future of the human race. Citizenship, heretofore, has always been attached exclusively to a nation-state. What happens, then, to the very idea of the state when the political rights of its members are conferred and guaranteed by an extraterritorial body? EU citizens have become the first people in the world whose rights are no longer dependent on the nation-state, but, rather, are universal and enforceable by law.

The gist of the new constitution is a commitment to respect human diversity, promote inclusivity, champion human rights and the rights of nature, foster quality of life, pursue sustainable development, free the human spirit for deep play, build a perpetual peace, and nurture a global consciousness. Together, these values and goals represent the woof and warp of a fledgling European Dream.

Europe's newly emerging dream is already threatening to create a schism with the United States in a number of areas. For example, the European Union forbids capital punishment. Even a person who commits the most heinous of crimes against fellow human beings, including terrorism or genocide, enjoys, in the official words of the European Union, "an inherent and inalienable dignity." The Europeans see their position on the death penalty as going to the very heart of their new dream, and they hope to convince the world of the righteousness of their cause.

The growing divisiveness between the American and European dreams manifests itself in other ways. For instance, the U.S. government gave the green light to genetically modified foods in the mid-1990s, and by the end of the decade over half of America's agricultural land was given over to GM crops. No new laws were enacted to govern the potential harmful effects. With its commitment to the precautionary principle and reining in high-risk scientific enterprise, in the name of sustainable development and environmental protection, Europe responded quite differently. Massive opposition to GM crops led to a de facto moratorium and tough new EU protections covering this technology.

Although it's too early to tell exactly how successful the "United States" of Europe will ultimately prove to be, in an era when our identities (and problems) extend beyond borders, no nation will be able to go it alone 25 years from now. The European states are the first to understand and act upon the emerging realities of a globally interdependent world. Others will follow.

The Future of a Dream

While I am an enthusiastic supporter of Europe's new experiment, my one real reservation is that I'm not sure how thick the European Dream is. Is Europe's commitment to cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence substantial enough to withstand the kind of terrorist attacks that we experienced on 9/11 or that Spain experienced on 3/11? Would Europeans remain committed to the principles of inclusivity and sustainable development were the world economy to plunge into a deep and prolonged downturn, maybe even a global depression?

These are the kinds of challenges that test the mettle of a people and the vitality and viability of their dream. Regardless of what others might think about America, the American Dream has stood the test, in good times and bad. We never lost hope in our dream, until very recently, even in the darkest hours. Will Europeans be able to say the same about their own nascent dream?

Having spent nearly 20 years of my life working in both Europe and America, I wonder whether the Europeans' sense of hope is sufficient to the task of sustaining a new vision for the future. Dreams require optimism, a sense that one's hopes can be fulfilled. Americans are flushed with hope and optimism; Europeans, as a people, are less so. Still, they are guardedly hopeful about their new union. And public opinion surveys show that a younger generation is measured in its optimism. Perhaps that's all we can or should expect. The unexamined optimism that has been so characteristic of the American spirit has not always served us well. In a world of increasing global threats, tempered enthusiasm balanced against a realistic assessment of risks might be more appropriate.

But there's also a deep pessimistic edge ingrained in the European persona -- understandable, perhaps, after so many misbegotten political and social experiments, and so much carnage over the centuries. Failures can dash hopes. But they can also make a people stronger, more resilient, and wiser. Overcoming cynicism is going to be as difficult and challenging for Europeans as overcoming naive optimism is for Americans.

These are tumultuous times. The European Dream is a beacon of light in a troubled world. It beckons us to a new age of inclusivity, diversity, quality of life, sustainability, universal human rights, the rights of nature, and peace on earth. We Americans used to say that the American Dream is worth dying for. The new European Dream is worth living for.

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