

Daring to dream

Europe is no utopia but, using Britain as a bridge, it can share its global vision with the US

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In a deeply polarised America, where virtually every value has become fair game for criticism, there is one that remains sacrosanct: the American dream - the idea that anyone, regardless of the circumstances to which they're born, can make of their lives as they choose, by dint of diligence, determination, and hard work. The problem is that one-third of all Americans, according to a recent national survey, no longer even believe in it. Some have lost faith because they worked hard all their lives only to find hardship and despair. Others question the very dream itself, arguing that its underlying tenets have become less relevant in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. For the first time, the American dream no longer serves as the rallying point for everyone in America.

Meanwhile, a new European dream is beginning to capture the world's imagination. That dream has now been codified in the form of a draft constitution and Europeans are currently debating whether or not to ratify its contents and accept its underlying values as the core of a new Europe.

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 political entity has its own empowering myth. Although 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.

Americans are used to thinking of their country as the most successful on earth. That's no longer the case: the EU has grown to become the third largest governing institution in the world. Though its land mass is half the size of the continental US, its \$10.5 trillion GDP now eclipses the US GDP, making it the world's largest economy. The EU is already the world's leading exporter and largest internal trading market. The comparisons are even more revealing when it comes to the quality of life. For example, in the EU, there are approximately 322 physicians per 100,000 people; in the US there are only 279 physicians per 100,000 people. The average life-span in the 15 most developed EU countries is now 78.2 years compared to 76.9 years in the US. When it comes to wealth distribution - a crucial measure of a country's ability to deliver on the promise of prosperity - the US ranks 24th among the industrial nations. All 18 of the most developed European countries have less income inequality between rich and poor.

Europeans often remark that Americans "live to work", while they "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. When one considers what makes a people great and what constitutes a better way of life, Europe is beginning to surpass America.

Nowhere is the contrast between the European dream and the American dream sharper than when it comes to the definition of personal freedom. For Americans, freedom has long been associated with autonomy; 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. For Europeans, freedom is not found in autonomy but in community. It's about belonging, not belongings.

Americans are more willing to employ military force to protect perceived vital self-interests. Europeans favour diplomacy, economic aid and peacekeeping operations to maintain order. The American dream is deeply personal and little concerned with the rest of humanity. The European dream is more systemic, bound to the welfare of the planet.

That isn't to say that Europe is a utopia. Europeans have become increasingly hostile towards asylum seekers. Anti-semitism is on the rise, as is discrimination against Muslims and other religious minorities. While Europeans berate America for having a trigger-happy foreign policy, they are willing, on occasion, to let the US armed forces safeguard European security interests. And even its supporters say that the EU's governing machinery, based in Brussels, is aloof from the citizens it supposedly serves.

The point, however, is not whether the Europeans are living up to their dream. We Americans have never fully lived up to our own dream. What's important is that a new generation of Europeans is creating a radical new vision for the future.

The UK is uniquely positioned to play a bridge role between the older American dream and the newly emerging European dream. Were it to cast its fate with the EU, while maintaining its special relationship with America, the UK could help create an ideological synergy between the two great superpowers of the 21st century. The UK could champion the entrepreneurial sensibilities and sense of individualism that is so characteristic of the US way of life, within the corridors of Europe. At the same time, the UK could help Americans better understand the need to expand their dream beyond individual self-interests to include the general welfare of the larger community and a global consciousness more befitting a globalising world.

But the UK will never fully enjoy the advantages that come with being part of a shared political space if it continues to straddle the fence. The US and the EU are going to increasingly realise that their own prosperity and security depends on their cooperation, if for no other reason than the fact that they each represent the two largest markets in the world. What can the UK offer either of these megapowers that they can't better secure by dealing directly with each other?

Instead of seeing full membership in the European Union in purely negative terms, as something being forced on them by the flow of global events, the UK ought to consider Europeanisation as a historic opportunity, with vast potential benefits for the British people. By being a critical part of a larger European agenda, the UK can play a leadership role in helping shape the European dream and laying the groundwork for a truly global consciousness in the coming century. Equally importantly, the UK's ability to draw America and Europe closer together depends on it being squarely in the EU fold.

The human race is becoming connected. Nation-state boundaries, once a source of security in an unpredictable world, are increasingly seen as too restrictive to accommodate the many new identities, affiliations and loyalties that make up a network way of life. The question for the British people, and peoples everywhere, is whether to be constrained inside old political containers, or to reach out and establish new political arrangements more suitable to an era of ever greater interdependence.

The real lesson in a globally connected world is that no people can any longer exist as an island unto themselves. The UK, too, will have to choose to be part of a larger political affiliation. The only question is whether it will make its home with America or Europe.

•This is an edited extract from [Jeremy Rifkin](#)'s new book, *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*, published by Polity Press.