

AMERICA AND EUROPE...

Two worlds... Two cultures... Two dreams...

Petr Mach, Czech “Eurosceptic” and presidential adviser writes to Jeremy Rifkin, US author of “**The European Dream**”

Dear Jeremy,

You are an **American liberal thinker** (“liberal” in the American sense of the word) who admires European society for its support of Kyoto agreements, its love of high taxes, its determination to push through the International Criminal Court, and its passion for subsidising “alternative” sources of energy.

You are not alone.

American liberal intellectuals often consider Europe a sort of **liberal paradise**, or at least a model of what other societies might become. They eulogise Europe as a socialist sister of the conservative America.

But do you really believe that the policies of European governments fairly reflect the wishes of ordinary people? **The wishes of ordinary Europeans are very similar to those of ordinary Americans.** Everybody wants to pay lower taxes and to be subject to fewer regulations. But European governments do not enact their citizens’ will. There is less freedom in Europe than in the United States – and ordinary Europeans are not happy about it!

You may object that, like America, European countries are democracies, and **that government policy always reflects the attitudes of the public.** In fact, ordinary Europeans have less influence on government policies than ordinary Americans exercise on theirs. Come to think of it, maybe that is precisely what many American intellectuals admire about Europe!

European governments influence public opinion with state-run television, and use taxpayers’ money to influence the outcome of elections. Most national legislation is decreed by **the European Union bureaucracy**, instead of being subject to the votes of democratically elected parliaments. In short, the admired European “welfare state” relies on government interference with media and a stronger role for bureaucracy in **the legislative process.**

As an American, you may find these assertions exaggerated. So let me explain in more detail.

On television: European governments run the major national media. The main TV stations are owned by the state (“public service” or “public law” broadcasting in European newspeak). The European model is supported by a lobby of left-wing intellectuals **on the boards of these stations. Imagine a public TV channel in America,** financed by taxpayers’ money, in which people like **Michael Moore** have the main say; if the average American watched such a channel for one hour a day, maybe then Americans would favour high taxes, the Kyoto protocol, the International Criminal Court, and oppose the Iraq war.

European intellectuals **make self-interested** claims that their television must not be privatised and that fair competition must not be allowed. Without public broadcasting, they say, people would

watch tabloid “commercial” news, biased commentaries and silly “commercial” and “American” movies. You may wish that America had such a powerful public TV channel. Your opinion might **then be more influential, but undoubtedly at the expense of American freedom.**

On elections: European governments **influence elections by campaigning** for their own parties. When France held a referendum on whether to keep the franc or replace it with the euro, both the French government and the European Commission spent public money to persuade voters to choose the new currency; opponents of the euro had to rely on limited private funds only.

When the European Union wanted to enlarge eastward – to try to create a “counterbalance” to America, to spread its European **“welfare model”**, and to prevent “harmful” tax competition and “social dumping” – the applicant states held national referenda on EU membership. **Governments spent huge sums of taxpayers’ money on campaigns in favour of joining**, and used public as well as private television stations to convince voters to vote “yes”. Would you wish to limit democracy in this way in an effort to make the United States closer to the European model?

On parliaments and laws: the parliaments of European states work differently from the American Congress, where legislation requires majority support. In Europe, most legislation, from environment regulations to tax rates, is passed in the form of **“directives”**; that is, decrees issued by the institutions of the European Union. These directives **prevail over national legislation**, so voting on them in national parliaments is just a formality.

Moreover, a country whose parliament fails to pass a directive is likely to face a cut in the subsidies redistributed to it by Brussels, the capital of European bureaucracy. If European countries implement the Kyoto protocol, for instance, it is not because their voters are wiser; **it is because they are not consulted.** Would you wish the Kyoto accords or high taxes to be legislated in this way in America, too – without the consent of Congress or the state assemblies? American laws would then be more like European ones, but this would certainly be **at the expense of American democracy.**

In short, the “European model” that European socialist politicians proclaim and liberal Americans admire is not necessarily a model appreciated by ordinary Europeans.

What you admire about Europe are policies influenced by intellectuals and bureaucrats rather than ordinary citizens. **As a consequence, what you admire about Europe is its lack of freedom.**

Yours sincerely,

Dear Petr,

I have spent more than one-third of my time in Europe over the past two decades, so I am well aware **of the many shortcomings of the European Union** that you have outlined in your letter – including the inordinate exercise of top-down power both by governing elites and commercial interests.

But what’s particularly interesting is that, these failures notwithstanding, a new generation of Europeans is creating **a radical new dream** – one that may be better suited than the American dream **to meet the challenges of an increasingly interconnected and globalised world in the 21st century.** Perhaps our friends in Europe have something to teach us.

Americans love to vacation in Europe. But when we think of institutional Europe, what comes to mind is an old and creaky set of governing machinery riding precariously astride **a moribund economy plagued by anti-market bias**, inflexible labour policies, bloated welfare bureaucracies, and an aging and pampered population. American policy leaders and economists call it **“Eurosclerosis”**.

But while many Americans dismiss Europe as outdated and out of touch, **the reality on the ground** – in neighbourhoods and communities, in corporate boardrooms, and in the corridors of power – suggests a far different state of affairs. If the American way of life is over-hyped, Europe’s cache has been woefully undervalued and undersold. America is unaware of **and unprepared for the vast changes** that are quickly transforming Europe from a collection of disparate (and in the past, warring) nations into a United States of Europe.

First, some facts. Most people likely believe that the United States is the world’s largest economy. Not true: the European Union’s **\$10.5 trillion GDP eclipses the US by \$100 billion**. **The trade statistics too are revealing: Europe, with 455 million consumers**, is now the largest internal market in the world. It’s also the largest exporting power. And the euro is now stronger than the dollar – **a reality few American economists would have thought conceivable just four years ago**.

Americans are so used to thinking of our country as the most successful on earth, **they might be surprised to learn** that this is far from the case on quality-of-life issues. In the European Union, **there are approximately 322 physicians per 100,000 people, compared to 279 in the United States**. The average life span in the fifteen most developed EU countries is now **78.2 years, compared to 76.9 years** in the United States. The US ranks twenty-sixth among industrial nations in infant mortality, well below the EU average.

Children in twelve European nations now rank **higher in mathematics** literacy than their American peers, and in eight 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 eighteen 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 sixteen European nations** for which data is available.

America is also **a more dangerous place to live**. The US murder rate is **four times higher** than that of the European Union. Even more disturbing, **the rates of child murder, suicides, and firearms-related deaths in the United States exceed those** of the other twenty-five wealthiest nations, including the fourteen wealthiest European countries. Although the United States has only **4%** of the world’s population, it now contains **25% of the world’s entire prison population**. While the EU member-states average **85 prisoners** per 100,000 people, the US averages an incredible **685 prisoners** per 100,000 people.

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 receive on average only **two weeks**. Most Americans would also be shocked to learn that the average commute to work in Europe is less than **nineteen minutes**. By the standard of what constitutes **a better way of life, Europe is beginning to surpass America**.

Europe's renaissance is inspired by a new **"European Dream"**, which contrasts in many respects with the older **"American Dream"**. Nowhere is this clearer than over the question of **defining the meaning of personal freedom**. For Americans, freedom has long been associated with **autonomy**. If one is autonomous, he or she 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.

For Europeans, however, freedom is not found in autonomy but **in embeddedness**. To be free is to have access to many **interdependent relationships**. The more communities one can access, the more options one has for living **a full and meaningful life**. It's *inclusivity* that brings security – belonging, not belongings.

The American dream puts an emphasis *on 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.

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**.

The American dream **emphasises property rights and civil rights**; the European dream concentrates **more on social rights and universal human rights**.

The American dream encourages willingness **to employ military force** to protect what we perceive to be our vital self-interests; the European dream entails **reluctance to use military force** and instead favours diplomacy, economic assistance, and aid to avert conflict, and peacekeeping operations to maintain order.

All this is not to say that Europe has suddenly become a utopia. The point, however, is not whether the Europeans are living up to their dream. We Americans, after all, have never fully lived up to our dream. 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 21st century's two great superpowers.**

Regards,

Jeremy Rifkin