

# J. Rifkin's "European Dream – Vision of a Soft Super Power" – a critical view

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# **Dream a little dream of Europe – Is this the end of the American Dream? Jeremy Rifkin's theory of Europe as a soft super power**

Is the American Dream slowly dying? Do less and less Americans believe in a satisfying future? At least this is what Mr. Rifkin claims. Can we believe this man? Is the European Dream gaining in importance? Is Europe becoming the new superpower?

First of all, who is Jeremy Rifkin? – He is an American economist who is internationally active as an advisor (for example for the EU) and has published several books about social, economical and ecological changes. Regularly, he writes articles and gives interviews for newspapers. He founded and now manages the Foundation on Economic Trends (foet). The non-profit organization is active in areas like public policies, education, and coalition building. Its purpose “is to examine emerging trends in science and technology and their likely impacts on the environment, the economy, culture and society.” (See <http://foet.org/about-foet.html>)

I think we can conclude that Mr. Rifkin is a reliable expert with a lot of knowledge in his domain.

But how does he explain that the EU is growing stronger and stronger while overrunning the US as the world's strongest economic power? The question has been answered in his book “The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future Is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream”, which was published in 2004. In this literature he examines the EU and the US carefully.

Since 2009, the US had been scaling a higher GDP than the EU. Then, in 2015, the EU overran the US' GDP. Does that make us the new superpower? – Not yet. But apart from the GDP, Rifkin also considers the size of both economies. The EU is the largest internal trading market internationally. It is *the* global export champion. The union claims a share of roughly 25 percent whereas the US only covers about 22 percent of exports world-wide. But there is also a big difference in the way the USA organizes its economy in comparison to most EU states. Especially in Western European countries like Germany, France, Austria and the Netherlands, the social

market economy is widely spread. This system differs greatly from the American free market economy.

In a welfare state, the society serves as a whole; it spans a net no one can fall through. Welfare payments for example in case of unemployment, disease or invalidity supply the unfortunate with money to live from. Social healthcare, social housing and public education - many things are paid by state funds to which every citizen contributes. It is a system of re-allocation. Tax rates take money from the rich and give it to the poor. Governments try to satisfy their population's basic needs, ensuring that nobody slips through the net. - A feeling of helpfulness, togetherness and hope evolves. What a nice perspective for the future: enough to eat at every time, children who will be educated for little money, a job or unemployment payment to pay the rent of a house that has been provided by the state. No need to worry. And here we come to Mr. Rifkin's second assumption: The European economical system provides the people with so much security and feelings of freedom and solidarity that the so called "European dream" becomes more real and concrete than the American Dream. "Barely 51 percent of Americans believe in the American Dream according to a Ford Foundation survey", he cites. 'From rags to riches' - Due to hard and committed work, social mobility and connections. "America is a tough country, but it's the land of opportunity. If you get a good education, and if you work hard, you can make a success out of your life", as Mr. Rifkin has put it.

The European project however, seems to work. If young Europeans are questioned about their national identity - no matter if Spanish, German or French - they might answer with their own nation first, but most certainly they will add shortly after: "I am European."

Freedom and security in the EU are based on embeddedness and interdependent relations. Solidarity and community provide security and a feeling of togetherness. The focus of the European dream lays on living quality, sustainability and peace. The American Dream on the contrary, focuses on individual wealth and possessions, economic growth (not as eco-friendly as in Europe) and independence. Americans are patriotic and love their country. The European Dream is less focused on a territory but rather concerns community and social cohesion. Is this why the European Dream is more concrete? More present?

It is a dream of "global consciousness", which is certainly a value of the European vision. In a world that is as closely connected globally as our contemporary one, we

have realized that every human's life matters. Developments around the globe can have impact on any society - economically, socially, culturally, politically. Especially in the last two years, we have had major political changes in our European societies after the waves of migration triggered by the Syrian civil war and the intimidating spread of ISIS.

The EU and its member states spend the highest share on humanitarian aid and civilian development assistance world-wide. They believe in cooperation rather than in military intervention. This is what makes a state a soft super power. "Wage peace", is the European course on international conflicts and problems.

A hard power on the contrary, uses its financial resources to demonstrate its power and tries to reach political aims with the help of military actions and economic tactics. The US does invest in humanitarian aid and development too. But it is rather respected as a "military hegemon" globally. Which according to Rifkin, should be assessed carefully. He points out that Europe has had the privilege to be protected by the US for the last decades, which is why it does not feel the need to protect itself. It is an European attitude which he views critically.

What Rifkin admires about the European Union, is what he calls "network politics". In a network, there is no one quite more powerful than the other. If anyone wants their agenda to pass the European process, they have to be willing to persuade a lot of other players - In this process, they will most certainly realize that there won't be a solution if they are not willing to compromise. Policy making in Brussels is a slow process. But it is a process that can ensure a commonly accepted and satisfying solution. Which is great if you want a political merge of many to work out.

Rifkin truly believes in the European way to enable long-term development for global peace. He truly believes in our economic models, that ensure safety and rely so much on cooperation. He believes in Brussel's "network politics".

He believes in our European values - that they can ensure a great amount of individual *and* joint happiness and satisfaction.

However, he points to two points in the European society, which he believes to be critical for the union's success.

One: Immigration. Americans fear to enlarge ISIS if they take in refugees.

Presidential Candidate Trump seems to have decent success when judging Muslims and suggesting the building of a huge frontier wall to the border of Mexico. But those fears are not unknown to our European population. Even though our rapidly ageing

population is just about to slow down economic growth and to break down our pension system, German conservative politicians have experienced great support after the proposal of an “Obergrenze” (maximum limit for refugees) to counteract immigration. Rifkin believes that immigration is a chance for Europe.

Two: Trust in one’s achievement. Rifkin says we Europeans can’t stop complaining about our problems. We keep pointing out the negative in everything. Europeans are so secular, they don’t even have faith in their own dreams and beliefs anymore. In fact, no European had raised the idea that there could be something like the “European Dream” before Rifkin wrote his book. Americans might be unrealistic about the future sometimes - “Yesterday was good, today was dynamite, tomorrow I’m gonna hit the ball right out of the park”, Rifkin caricatures.

The author asks for belief in European achievements and optimism for a European future.

And he puts *his* belief in the young European generation. The young generation has the ability to feel this dream. We all respect the values of Rifkin’s European dream. We see its logic. But we have to own it, we have to make it our dream.

It is obvious that Europe is struggling greatly at the moment. The Brexit send out shock-waves through the European Union. Many countries are still stuck deeply in the euro crisis. CETA, a pioneer trade-agreement between the EU and Canada, could possibly fail. No common solution for the immigration crisis can be found. Some aspects of Jeremy Rifkin’s idea might be outdated today - some problems have been solved, others have been added. What I feel is particularly interesting, was his prediction about Europe’s problem with immigration and integration of refugees and Muslims. Even in the last ten years, awareness about the demographic transition and our need for immigration has not become a well-known truth. The refugee crisis is one of the biggest contemporary strains on the cooperation of the EU member states. But we young European people, we should still burn for this dream. Today, our dedication is more important than ever.

Integration is a task that can only be tackled with success if a society works together. We young people can work for integration. Humans bond over emotions - shared love, shared fear, shared dreams.

We can make this dream work. If we want success, willing to do an effort, we might make this dream work.

We should realize that we are talking about a dream - A dream is not entirely accessible, it is not reality. That is what characterizes a dream.

Many Americans take a lifetime to reach their own, personal, individual dream. We Europeans have to realize that we are working for a far bigger, greater dream.

It includes not only an individual, not a single family, not a town, not an entire nation. It includes 27 nations and 510,056,011 individuals.

We Europeans might need a few generations, maybe many, to really live up to this dream. But we could, eventually. And we should, definitely. Because it is truly a great dream to be part of.

The American Dream has suffered perpetually during the last years. The Financial Crisis of 2008 has demanded a lot of strength from US citizens. Many of them have lost their jobs, their houses or other possessions. Obama was a political symbol of hope after a deep recession. After two terms in the Oval Office, the world assesses his achievements critically, many citizens are disappointed. He managed to lead the country out of the Financial Crisis effectively. But state debts have risen extremely, real wages have not achieved a pre-crisis level despite the government's efforts. According to a report published in "Süddeutsche Zeitung", "Obamacare" provides healthcare for 20 million Americans, 29 million however, still live without a health insurance. Income disparity is growing - Half of income increases have had their effect only on the incomes of the population's richest 1%. The long-term unemployed are not included in American statistics, which also influences the seemingly low unemployment rates of current figures. Donald Trump's shocking success in this Presidential Election can certainly be seen a sign of a desperate population believing in a person that represents the American Dream through his wealth and possession. - Sadly not through his actions, words or opinions. With these developments it seems quite legitimate to question a contemporary existence of the American Dream and the future of the US as a hegemonial power.

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