

REVIEW ESSAY

*The United States of Europe: The New
Superpower and the End of American Supremacy*

by T.R. Reid

Penguin Press (2004). 320 pp. \$25.95

*The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future Is
Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*

by Jeremy Rifkin

Jeremy P. Tarcher (2004). 434 pp. \$25.95

REVIEWED BY ALEX MARTINOS

Americans have been complaining about the old continent for centuries. The recent burst of outrage that accompanied Europe's partial "non" to the Iraq war was nothing new. Traces of old prejudices linger in the widespread tendency among today's right-wing American commentators to decry Europe's perceived unholy cocktail of economic sclerosis, military weakness, and moral righteousness. The most influential work of recent years to analyze transatlantic relations, Robert Kagan's *Of Paradise and Power*, argues for American unilateralism on the grounds of Europe's effeminate weakness. It is a thesis which appears to have found an enthusiastic audience in the White House.

All this makes it surprising to see the near-simultaneous publication of two books by American authors which, taken together, make striking claims for the present power and future prospects of Europe. According to T.R. Reid's breezily readable survey, the European Union is "The New Superpower." Europe qualifies for the role, ahead of such pretenders as China, primarily because of the sheer size of the newly-enlarged EU's economy: the EU's twenty-five states now match U.S. GDP and surpass its trade figures. Jeremy Rifkin's far more ambitious study also notes Europe's economic clout, and proceeds to argue that a new "European Dream" is emerging, challenging the individualism and materialism of the traditional U.S. model.

Alex Martinos is a graduate student in History at Yale University.

ALEX MARTINOS

Though the two books focus on Europe, the United States looms large in both. Reid devotes space to a brief history of European integration, and sets out the bare bones of the “European social model,” but these are not his main concerns. The United States remains the constant point of reference throughout the book, however overextended the comparisons: the Eurovision song contest becomes, implausibly, “to Europe what Oscar night is to the United States.”

For Reid, the EU is of most interest because of how it affects the U.S. way of life—and that means business and finance. Illustrated with a blow-by-blow account of the failure of GE’s merger with Honeywell, Reid emphasizes the ability of Europe’s antitrust regulators to interfere in American mergers. Pages are devoted to the litany of traditional American brands now in European ownership and to the business success stories of Nokia and Airbus. Finally, Reid notes the successful launch of the euro and its potential to rival the dollar as the international reserve currency of choice. For Reid, European integration is a “revolution” Americans need to wake up to, if for no other reason than because U.S. companies cannot succeed in international business while continuing to ignore it.

Reid offers no grandiose theories. In fact, *The United States of Europe* is a largely descriptive work, revealing to uninformed readers in the United States the global economic consequences of European integration. The book’s light-hearted, readable tone is also its weakness. Statements such as, “In the years following the Schuman Declaration, the European Movement took the continent by storm,” and, “The first postwar venture in economic cooperation, the European Coal and Steel Community, turned into a runaway success,” sit uneasily with the historical record. Factual accuracy, both serious and frivolous, also suffers: the Marshall Plan set up the Organization for European Economic Cooperation, not the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (the former was only transformed into the latter in 1961); David Beckham’s haircuts are emulated by men, not women.

By contrast, *The European Dream* is awash with ideas and analysis; at times it risks drowning in them. As with Reid’s book, the United States is central to Rifkin’s account. His concept of the “European Dream” is constructed with repeated reference to, and, moreover, in direct opposition to, the “American Dream.” Lengthy sections of his book are dedicated to detailing the failings of contemporary U.S. society,

from the incarceration rate of African-American youths to the damaging effects of suburban sprawl. Europe is hardly mentioned. Seemingly endless digressions into the history of time, space, and nearly every other aspect of the emergence of Western society further muddle his argument. Lengthy discussions of such matters as medieval table manners and “The Protestant Reformation of Property” burden Rifkin’s work with a grand ambition which the substance of his argument struggles to support. When *The European Dream* finally reaches the discussion of EU integration—after pages of digression and abstraction—it risks undermining its case with the extravagance of its claims. Rifkin’s contention that “Europe has become a giant freewheeling experimental laboratory for rethinking the human condition,” is, frankly, ludicrous. Nonetheless, the central claim that there is a “European Dream” eclipsing the U.S. equivalent, based on sustainability, quality of life, and peaceful community existence, at least merits further examination.

A charitable reader might be tempted to allow that, as de Tocqueville managed in an earlier age, these two American authors use their outsider’s perspective to understand better the dramatic nature of Europe’s transformation. Where Europeans are caught up in the everyday political details of the integration process, Rifkin, and, to a lesser extent, Reid, present bold overviews of the “revolution” and its consequences for mankind.

Unfortunately, as outsiders, both authors have also overlooked many of the political realities of the EU. Viewed from afar it has gained an improbable degree of solidity. Reid is impressed by the EU’s 22,000 bureaucrats, even though the Pentagon alone counts more employees. Rifkin lavishes praise on the EU’s “polycentric governance” and its “chameleon-like ability to reinvent itself,” but fails to address the fact that so many European policies are simply lowest-common-denominator solutions resulting from compromises between member governments. Both authors praise Europe’s commitment to international development aid; neither mentions the deleterious impact of the seemingly un-reformable Common Agricultural Policy on agriculture in the developing world. It is not just the EU but Europe itself that receives this superficial treatment. Like many American authors, Reid and Rifkin refer casually to “Europeans” without ever seriously examining the differences within and, above all, among the EU’s twenty-five member states. Without addressing the diversity of historical experience and political tradition within Europe, it is im-

ALEX MARTINOS

possible to understand the intergovernmental barter and compromise that underpins the EU's constitutional machinery.

Furthermore, in neglecting certain key challenges facing the EU, both books present a rose-tinted view of the union. To his credit, Rifkin does devote a chapter to discussing the tensions surrounding immigration in Europe and the demographic crisis which casts the shadow of an aging population over the continent. Neither author, however, deals satisfactorily with the question of Europe's "democratic deficit"—the lack of directly representative institutions at the heart of Brussels's decision-making machinery. The gradual decline in popular support for European integration and the likely rejection of the proposed European constitution, drafted by bureaucrats and haggled over by diplomats, in several member states is similarly underemphasized. And, while European education is broadly praised, no mention is made of the funding crisis facing Europe's universities.

Rifkin's "European Dream" is built on the slim foundations of an often superficial and partial view of European integration. Rather than providing a useful and insightful analysis of the important developments in Europe, Rifkin focuses instead on the failings of U.S. society and imposes a fantasy "anti-America" on an idealized Europe. The result is predictably flawed. After all, many of the social problems he observes in America, from obesity to racism, violent crime, and suburban sprawl, are also on the rise in much of Europe. (Moreover, the reality TV shows cited as part of the U.S. culture of "instant gratification" actually originated in Britain and the Netherlands.)

These flaws in *The European Dream* are regrettable; all the more so because there are some important points which risk being lost altogether. According to many measures, Europeans enjoy, on average, a higher quality of life than Americans. Healthcare in Europe varies in quality; the praise lavished by Reid on the National Health Service would surprise many Britons. Nevertheless, the 45 million Americans who have no health coverage would fare much better in the EU, where healthcare is, generally speaking, universally available and free. Europeans, again, on average, benefit from more leisure time, less violent crime, and less poverty; European governments are doing more to protect the environment and promote sustainable development. Most of these policies have been introduced at the national level over decades. Where the EU has contributed is in the creation of a single internal market and, more recently, a single currency. It is Europe's

economic integration that has lent it some elements of superpower status, with the consequences for U.S. business noted by Reid.

Despite its flaws, *The United States of Europe* succeeds in introducing this important consequence of European integration to American readers, although it does not tell the whole story. If the EU's members can successfully maintain the economic successes portrayed by Reid and the quality of life benefits depicted by Rifkin, who observes that people in Europe "still have time to stroll," then it could serve as a useful reminder that the "American Dream" is certainly not the only, and possibly not the best, model for human advancement. It is a pity then that, instead of highlighting useful public policy lessons from Europe's recent experience, Rifkin's overly ambitious book lurches off-target to conclude with an abstract discussion of "The Third Stage of Human Consciousness." These two books are only a start, however. Plenty more work is needed both to improve understanding of European integration, and to explain it to a wider audience in Europe, the United States, and beyond. ■