

## The new American dream? Northern Europe

‘Recent polls shows most Democrats and young Americans now believe in “socialism”’

SIMON KUPER

The northern European dream looks something like this: get home from work in time for dinner with the kids; no stress about paying for their education or healthcare; safe streets in a safe region; an affordable home near your extended family; frequent holidays and a long life. You won't get rich, but you won't need to either. This vision of the good life has rarely been articulated (except in Jeremy Rifkin's 2004 book *The European Dream*) but it animates the region bounded by Iceland in the west, Germany in the east, and France in the south. Now the northern European dream is displacing the much better-known American dream — even, remarkably, inside the US itself.

The American dream of “chewing gum, liberation and democracy” was imported into war-ruined Europe by occupying GIs, said German historian Paul Nolte at a debate organised by the Swiss newspaper NZZ in Berlin last week. Postwar, the core component of the dream became individual economic ascent, writes Sarah Churchwell in her new book *Behold, America*: anyone could make it if they wanted it enough (and read enough self-help books). I grew up in 1980s northern Europe imbibing this dream from soap operas such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, from the lives of celebrities such as Madonna and, above all, from adverts.

But that dream has faded. After Donald Trump descended the golden escalator in Trump Tower in 2015 to launch his presidential run, he intoned the new commonplace: “Sadly, the American dream is dead.” He himself is living proof of that: though he pretends to embody the dream, he is in fact an heir leading a society dominated by heirs, the predictable result of 80 years of national wealth accumulation and low to non-existent inheritance taxes. **The US has less social mobility than northern Europe**, according to Pew Charitable Trusts, the Brookings Institution and others. Being an average American now is like running a struggling small business: you're always on the brink.

**Trump promised to revive the American dream, but many Americans don't even want it any more.** According to polling by Gallup this summer, most Democrats and young Americans now believe in “socialism”. By that, they seem to mean **a more equal society with decent social services — in short, something like northern Europe.**

The northern European dream probably won't triumph in the US, but it has gone mainstream. The self-proclaimed “socialist” politician Bernie Sanders sees himself not as a radical outlier but as the spokesman of America's silent majority. He told me last year: “If you were to tell Americans that if you are 70 and the doctor diagnoses you with cancer, there should not be a

healthcare programme to protect you, 90 per cent of people say, ‘You’re out of your mind, you want to get rid of Medicare? You want to get rid of federal aid to education? That’s nonsense.’”

Indeed, Democratic talk of “Medicare for all” is polling well. Healthcare was the leading issue for voters in the recent US midterm elections, according to NBC’s exit poll. In 2020, the Democratic presidential candidate will probably sell some version of the northern European dream, albeit wrapped in American colours. That might even win back some of the white working-class.

True, the northern European dream has shortcomings. It tends to produce low growth and few innovative companies. For 200 years, Britain and then the US have invented the economic future, while continental Europe merely reacts, said French demographer Emmanuel Todd at the recent debate in Berlin. Europeans rely on American companies such as Facebook, Amazon and Uber to create their modernity, said Nolte.

Yet these companies scarcely spread wealth to average Americans. Amazon, for instance, pays almost no federal tax, and wheedles out tax breaks from regions (including up to \$3bn from New York for opening its second headquarters there). Europe looks better placed than the US to meet the next big governmental challenge: regulating and taxing Big Tech. Northern Europe’s high taxes probably discourage striving, but then less striving makes life more relaxing — and many northern Europeans take quiet pleasure in paying tax.

Their slow-growing region offers the best quality of life in human history, still decades ahead of China, India or Russia. Mockers will say that only the elite benefit but, in fact, northern Europe excels at sharing around its goodies: 22 of the world’s 23 most equal countries (as measured by their Gini coefficients) are European, according to the CIA. Eight of the 11 highest-ranked countries in the UN’s human development index are northern European. And the region does all this on less than half the US’s carbon emissions.

Soon, the northern European dream will finally acquire its own propaganda machine. Many northern Europeans now have the linguistic skills to compete in the Anglophone global public sphere; witness Dutch internet newspaper *De Correspondent*’s plans to launch in the US. Within five years, at the click of an internet translation machine, any northern European website could be turned into decent English. Imagine the seductive power of the northern European dream once it can advertise itself alongside the American one.