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Europe's lessons for Philly

By SUSAN SCHAEFER

IN A COLUMN last year, Phil Goldsmith invited Philadelphians to dream big, particularly about what it takes to have a great city. He mentioned that it's good to leave home every so often to see what others are doing.

I'm a Philly girl, born in the Cradle of Liberty of the New World who's been curious to learn why the Old World seems to be outpacing us. And I actually left home to do it I came to Maastricht, the Netherlands, like some Alexis de Tocqueville in reverse, to study and learn as Europe forges its new democratic experiment called the European Union.

A while back, I caught up with author and economist Jeremy Rifkin, who literally wrote the book about Europe and dreaming big, "The European Dream."

Rifkin, who teaches at Penn when he's not trotting around the globe advising European movers and shakers, was the keynote speaker last year on Europe's Independence Day (May 9) at a conference celebrating the 15th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht, the document credited with launching the current EU.

I asked him what Americans, specifically Philadelphia leaders, could learn from European examples and why he believes the old American Dream is failing us.

The U.S. now ranks 24th among industrialized nations in income inequality, a crucial measure of a country's ability to deliver on the promise of prosperity. America is at rock bottom of the list with more poor people than 18 of the most-developed European nations. The U.S. homicide rate is four times higher than the EU's. Most disturbing, the rates of childhood homicides, suicides and gun-related deaths exceed those of the other 25 wealthiest nations!

Nowhere is the death of the American Dream more evident than in Philadelphia, which had 406 homicides last year, the highest number in nine years. This isn't the Philly of my youth.

What happened?

"The American Dream worked for two centuries," Rifkin suggested, but unraveled quickly after the '60s, when the civil-rights and anti-war movements divided the country. Neo-conservative, then neo-liberal, economics resulted in shareholders' needs trumping those of employees and the community.

"If one wants to understand how to make things right, one has to have a frame of reference, or a dream, that's based on good criteria," Rifkin said. What made America a great country for 200 years was the bond between citizens, government and the market. Somewhere along the line, Americans soured on this

belief in a sense of solidarity with their fellow human beings, opting for the rugged individualism of: "Yo, I take care of me and mine."

These days, services that foster a healthy, safe society, like education and health care, are expected to turn make a profit. But it would be smart to check out just who's profiting. Statistics say it ain't the guy on the street.

If Americans define freedom as autonomy and mobility, Europeans concentrate on inclusivity. They feel free only when they see that others in their communities are free, too.

What's the message? Although they complain, most EU citizens fork out huge percentages of their income in high taxes that fund a social safety net sometimes jointly administered by government agencies and not-for-profits to protect Europe's most vulnerable citizens. Sure, things in Europe are galloping toward a market economy, but most of my European friends wouldn't trade this expensively financed social contract for what they see as the busted up, mean streets of America. They want and expect all citizens to have access to good childcare, education and social services. They want a safe, nonviolent society.

Rifkin riffs: "Your dreams become your reality. If everyone thinks, 'I'm an island unto myself, I'm not responsible for my fellow human being, I'm only responsible for my own well-being,' then why do we get surprised when we don't have communities functioning with solidarity to people?"

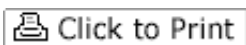
Oh, yeah, Eurozone economic growth and productivity have lately outpaced that of the U.S. Seems "solidarity to people" may not just provide a safe, non-violent society, but even a healthy return on investment. So I agree with Phil Goldsmith, sometimes bigger dreams really do pay off. *

Susan Schaefer is a former editor of Philly's late South Street Star. A video featuring a portion of the Rifkin interview can be seen on her blog:

schafermillennium3.blogspot.com.

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