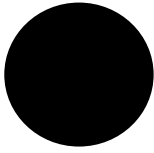


## REPORTAGE

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### April in Paris

Mira Kamdar

As in the famous lyrics “April in Paris, chestnuts in blossom,” penned by E. Y. Harburg in 1932 to distract Depression-era New Yorkers from their misery, the regimentally groomed chestnut trees did finally begin to bloom in Paris this past April. Slowly at first, then gloriously, they unfurled their delicate cones of cassis and cream flowers. But the velvet blooms could neither dispel the lingering gloom of an exceptionally long, chill winter, nor a pervasive sense of foreboding about what the month of May might bring.

On May 29, the French people were to vote in a referendum on the new European constitution. By mid-April, with merely a few weeks to go before the fateful vote, it began to look as if the French were going to deliver, against the once smug assumptions of their leaders, a shocking “*non*,” potentially endangering, if this were the result, the entire project of the European Union. It became increasingly clear that, whatever the final outcome, the ratification of the European constitution had become the focus of a constellation of deep French fears and anxieties. With little other opportunity to express their dissent from the tyranny of elites who had rarely bothered to consult them on the project of the European Union from its very beginnings, the French people seized upon the constitutional referendum as a chance to express the ultimate form of rebellion available even to the disempowered: the ability simply to say No.

As an American, I had gone to Paris not only in search of my annual dose of “the charm of spring” and a perhaps a *kir* sipped

slowly at one of the “holiday tables under the trees” Harburg wrote about in his song, but also in the hope of finding an alternative universe to the one so alarmingly under construction by neoconservatives in my own country. Alas, the Paris I found this past April more resembled the gray metropolis Algerian-born French author Albert Camus found so dreadful that he, or at least his protagonist, felt a stranger in his “own” country. And, having neither the boundless energy nor the dancing ability of a Gene Kelly, intoxicated enough with the pleasures of the city in *An American in Paris* to tap-dance in a downpour along the cobblestones, I found myself in danger of succumbing to the general awful mood. This in and of itself was disconcerting: if Europe fails to provide an alternative model for the social and political order to that proposed by the current administration in the United States, who will? And if American optimism about Europe’s future can’t lift Europe out of its self-doubts, what can?

On my own wanderings around the city, I took note of the outsized portraits on the Place de la République and in front of the Hôtel de Ville of Florence Aubenas, a journalist with the French daily *Libération*, and her guide, Hussein Hanoun, both kidnapped and still incommunicado in Iraq. The posters were grim reminders of the dangerous world beyond the *hexagone*, a world France has an increasingly limited ability to influence. On April 15, French citizens somberly marked the one-hundredth day of the journalist’s ever more worrisome disappearance. Florence Aubenas’s mother re-

leased a hundred balloons into the gray skies, their upward flight intended to carry aloft the hopes of an entire nation. As of this writing, there is still no news of the fate of the journalist and her guide.

On the evening of April 19, I was with friends for a small birthday celebration at Chez Omar, a charming North African bistro on the rue de Bretagne in the third arrondissement where on any given evening one can find *le tout Paris*. A friend in the provinces who couldn't join us for the party reached us via cell phone to jest: "Hey, while you guys are stuffing yourself with couscous, they've chosen the new pope. I don't find your behavior terribly Christian!" ("Alors que vous êtes en train de vous gaver de couscous, ils ont choisi le nouveau pape. Je ne trouve pas cela très chrétien!") This provoked peals of laughter. While it really doesn't matter to most French citizens who the pope is and even devout Catholics can enjoy couscous, the pleasantry worked against the background of a growing Muslim population that has made the cozy notion that the French can all still agree on what it is to be French—witness the headscarf issue—an uncomfortable conceit. Also in the background was the issue of Turkey, a secular Muslim country, joining the European Union—something vigorously opposed by the French right, the new pope and, one suspects, a "silent majority" of ordinary French people—and one of the issues at the forefront of the debate on the referendum on the European constitution. Despite their laughter, my "culturally Catholic" French friends were disconcerted to learn that the choice of new pope had fallen on the German cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. They interpreted this as yet another bad sign for the future of Europe.

Cardinal Ratzinger made his reputation while a close advisor to John Paul II as a force for the most reactionary elements in the Catholic Church. The cardinal set the tone of his new papacy by selecting the name "Benedict XVI." Meaning "blessed,"

Benedict just happens to be the name of the patron saint of Europe. Benedict XVI announced that one of his priorities as pope will be the re-Christianization of Europe. The new pope has long denounced the "dictatorship of relativism" bequeathed by the French Enlightenment, dangerously extended during the hedonistic and anarchic student revolutions of the late 1960s and misguidedly allowed to penetrate Catholic doctrine by Pope Paul VI, and the Vatican II reforms. The new pope believes that the Catholic Church must return—and return Europe—to a more ancient version of church doctrine if both the church and Europe are to be saved. He calls the "dictatorship of relativism" a form of totalitarianism no less evil than communism and national socialism. "Relativism" confers dangerous legitimacy on religions other than Catholicism, which to Ratzinger is the one true faith. Worse, "relativism" places the authority of the state and other secular institutions and beliefs above that of the church. Ratzinger set out his views on "relativism" and its dangers most clearly in his 2000 text *Dominus Iesus*, which amounts to a refutation of the tolerant leanings of Vatican II and sent shock waves throughout the liberal Catholic world.<sup>1</sup> For liberation theology types, or even for average lay Catholics interested in bending the rules on contraception, divorce, or marriage for priests, the only consolation in the selection of Ratzinger was that, at 78 years of age, his papacy would probably be a short one.

Given his ideological leanings, it is no surprise that the new pope strongly opposes Turkey's bid to join the European Union. Since for Benedict XVI a shared civilizational legacy based on Christianity is what makes Europe European, Turkey, a Muslim country, is by definition alien to Europe. In this, he has the full support of Jean-Marie Le Pen and France's right-wing National Front party. Le Pen waged a vigorous campaign against the European constitution, with opposition to Turkey's inclu-

sion in the European Union one of his main planks.

### *France First*

Le Pen precipitated something of a political earthquake in France three years ago when his candidacy garnered a surprising 16.86 percent of the vote during the first round of France's national elections in March 2002, beating incumbent Socialist president Lionel Jospin's 16.18 percent and earning Le Pen a chance to run against Jacques Chirac, who won 19.88 percent of the vote, for the presidency.<sup>2</sup> It was the first time since 1969 that the French left was not represented in the second round of voting in a presidential contest. Jospin resigned from politics in disgrace and thousands of French Socialists held their noses and voted for Chirac to avoid the sensational scandal of the Republic electing a fascist to the presidency. However, the whole debacle set off a crisis of confidence in France's political leadership that continued to haunt the debate over Europe's constitution. President Chirac is reviled by many French voters, especially those who voted for him *à contre coeur*. These voters, most of them Socialists and many of these from the left wing of the Socialist Party, are as much filled with self-loathing as with disgust with Chirac. One explanation for the unexpected strength of the No vote is that these voters see the European constitutional referendum as an opportunity to say no to the Chirac they were forced to say yes to three years ago.

The Socialists, meanwhile, are a party in disarray. They have lost credibility among their traditional supporters, many of whom have fled to the left or to the right, even as far to the right as Le Pen's National Front, which has strong support among the unemployed, especially the young. Other former Socialist voters have become disillusioned and apathetic, not bothering to vote at all. Long gone are the glory days of former Socialist president François Mitterrand. The party is unable to articulate an attractive al-

ternative vision to Chirac's center-right politics, and is paralyzed by sibling rivalry between Mitterrand's two most favored heirs, Laurent Fabius and Lionel Jospin. With Fabius having taken the side of the No voters on the constitutional referendum and Jospin campaigning furiously on the Yes side, the feud between the *fabiusiens* and the *jospinistes* remained in the shadow of the party's dead father, with each side claiming that it has the correct answer to the question: How would Mitterrand vote?

This question became much muddied in mid-May by the public declaration by Mitterrand's widow Danielle Mitterrand that she intended to vote No. She said that the proposed European constitution would never have been drafted, let alone approved, by Mitterrand. During an interview broadcast on France's TF2 channel on May 11, she declared that the European constitution being presented to French voters "institutionalizes the dictatorship" of the market. She was not against the European Union. She was against the direction the European Union was taking. This is the argument of most center-left No voters, and it is a very different reason for voting No than that given by the far right, whose strong nationalism pits them against the European Union on principle.

Though he lost the presidential election of 2002, Le Pen did not go away. He had waged his surprisingly successful campaign almost exclusively on the issues of security, which to the French means "law and order," and unemployment, both of which he linked to immigration and globalization. For Le Pen, in much the same vein as for American ultraconservative Pat Buchanan, immigration and globalization are Janus heads on two sides of the same coin: both undermine France's Frenchness. Le Pen's current campaign against ratification of the European constitution is based on these same two core issues, with a new focus on Turkey. For Le Pen, Turkey's admission into the European Union would be like letting the fox into the henhouse. Le Pen and his

party have vigorously campaigned for the No vote. Their twin slogan is “No to the European Constitution” and “No to Turkey in Europe.”<sup>3</sup>

On the French left, the “*altermondialistes*,” people who want to wrest the management of globalization away from the World Trade Organization and international capital, and trade unionists worried about new threats to French employment and social benefits also campaigned against the European constitution. These constituencies view the constitution as the final expression of the accumulated rules, regulations, treaties, and directives that preceded it and that have conferred upon the European Union vast powers to regulate nearly all aspects of the lives of French citizens. They complain, along the lines of Danielle Mitterrand, that the process that has culminated in the new constitution has been anything but democratic, and that the European Union, which in principle they support, has been hijacked by the interests of international capital, whose aim is to destroy France’s commitment to social welfare and undo the fruits—six weeks’ guaranteed paid vacation, nearly free medical care, free public education (including higher education), guaranteed pensions, to name only a few—of more than a half-century of democratic struggle by the people. Why, they ask, should the “race for the bottom” that free-market globalization imposes on a planetary basis be allowed to happen within the European Union? Why should the French lower their wages, environmental protections, workers’ rights, and social benefits to the levels of Slovenia or Slovakia or Lithuania or Poland? Why should the European Union not aim to raise standards in these countries to those enjoyed by the French? And if it can’t, what advantage is there in the European Union for the French people?

Given France’s leadership role in the creation of the European Union and the writing of the new constitution, a resounding Yes had long been assumed by the country’s

elite. It is clear that Chirac has never doubted that a strong, united European Union, with enhanced political clout on the global stage, is good for France. The European Constitutional Treaty was approved in Brussels on June 18, 2004, and signed in Rome on October 24, 2004. All 25 member states must approve it for it to be ratified. The Chirac government was so confident of a positive outcome that it chose a popular referendum as the means of delivering France’s vote even though the European Union did not require one of member states. In fact, of the 25 member states, only 10 chose, like France, to subject ratification to a referendum, including the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom; the rest chose to subject ratification to parliamentary approval. As of this writing, Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain had approved the constitution, the last by an overwhelming 76.73 percent in a nonbinding referendum.<sup>4</sup> During the month of April 2005, the French Yes vote, which had enjoyed a solid lead for months, began to erode precipitously. By the middle of April, the Chirac government realized that it was facing a crisis. Heads would roll at the highest level if the French voted No, though not, Chirac insisted, his own.

#### *Chirac’s Town Hall Meeting*

With defeat of the constitutional referendum looking more and more likely in mid-April, Chirac could hardly stand idly by while Brussels wrung its hands and Eurosceptics in Washington (and some in London) began to gloat. On April 14, President Chirac conducted an American-style “town hall” meeting on national television. It was a desperate effort to enlighten French voters and turn public opinion around. Chirac couldn’t quite achieve the Texas-casual demeanor of the American president. He did not remove his jacket or his tie, or roll

up his sleeves. Despite the chosen format, Chirac comported himself more like a philosopher-king than as a “man of the people.” Still, the mood was meant to be casual, with the president of the Republic chatting comfortably with a handpicked audience of 83 young people between the ages of 18 and 30. The youth of the audience was intended to show how much President Chirac cares about France’s future. The idea was that Chirac would explain to these inexperienced youth—along with millions of *télespectateurs*—what the constitution was all about, why it was so important for their future and the future of France, why it was in fact their duty—to France, to Europe, and as an example for the world—to vote for it. The president would answer their questions, clarify their misunderstandings, dispell their doubts.

Chirac was clearly operating on the theory that, discounting extremes on the right and left of the political spectrum, approval of the constitution was in danger not because the document was in any way deficient but because French voters just didn’t get it. During his televised appearance, Chirac attempted to address the many possible explanations of why the No vote was on the rise. The first was that the French people actually loved the European constitution but, perversely, in the absence of any other upcoming election, found the opportunity to humiliate the widely unloved Chirac government irresistible. Chirac entreated them to separate domestic politics from “a fundamental decision for the future of our country, for the future of Europe.”<sup>5</sup> To inoculate ordinary citizens against the anti-globalization arguments of the left, Chirac assured the French people that the best way to counter the dreaded “*néolibéralisme anglo-saxon*”—as free-market principles are known in France—was in fact the new constitution, which guarantees social rights. In order to defend the accusation by pro-constitution constituencies that a French No vote could only mean Jacques Chirac and his govern-

ment had failed miserably to educate the electorate, the president made it his prime mission to explain that it was not his own future that was at stake but the future of France. Without the European Union and without French ratification of the European constitution, France would have no mechanism by which to stand up to the United States and its Anglo-Saxon model of savage global capitalism backed up by overwhelming military force. This was basically the “Europe as amplifier of French power” argument. It failed to fly with the young audience.

One could forgive President Chirac for assuming ordinary French citizens might find it difficult to comprehend the constitution.<sup>6</sup> At 474 pages in the English version, it is a hefty tome. Much of it reads like a commercial legal document that would put all but the most inveterate international business law experts to sleep. According to one analysis, the word “banker” appears 176 times in the 202 main pages of the document, and many of the details appear as if they were simply cut and pasted from World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund rules.<sup>7</sup> It is easy to understand upon reading the actual text of this document why many in France are beginning to suspect that the bankers and the lawyers have sacrificed the hard-won rights of ordinary European citizens to the profits of their cronies and employers. Once past the lofty first part of the constitution, which lays out in a series of articles the establishment of the European Union and its objectives, and the second part, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which lays out the rights to be enjoyed by European citizens, the constitution does indeed tend to get bogged down in jargon-ridden, complicated economic regulations.

It is safe to say that few voters have ventured to slog through the final section. Still, Article 3 of the new constitution was seized upon by the partisans of the No vote as expressing perfectly the contradictions inher-

ent in the project of the European Union. Article 3, section 2 reads: "The Union shall offer its citizens an area of freedom, security and justice without internal frontiers, and a single market where competition is free and undistorted." The last clause of this sentence, "a single market where competition is free and undistorted" means to many French voters that their government will not be allowed to protect them from corporate greed, and that the interests of workers, the environment, the weak, and the poor will recede before the imperatives of profit.

Chirac was caught in a difficult position. His main argument for ratification was that the European Union (a sort of "greater France," one has the impression, in Chirac's imagination) offers France the only chance it has to continue to play a leading role in world affairs. Only the constitution can translate the economic weight of the 450 million citizens of the European Union into political clout sufficient to counteract that of the United States. Only Europe can offer an alternative to Anglo-American neoliberalism and protect the French people from the dreaded American lifestyle of 24-hour television, obesity from overconsumption of fast food, extremes of wealth and poverty, uninsured people turned away at hospital emergency room doors, an 80-hour work week with no guaranteed vacations, Protestant fundamentalism, gun violence, the death penalty, and war mongering.

What Chirac could not escape was the irony of his argument. The more he dangled the Anglo-Saxon neo-liberal threat before French voters as a rationale for ratifying the constitution, the more he only reminded voters of their sense that the document was a Trojan horse hiding a host of measures precisely designed to subject France to this neo-liberal threat. It seemed to many French voters that while the Europe mandated by the new constitution might well succeed in saving the *nation* of France, in the process, it would destroy the Republic. *La République* is the France of the people—the *res publica*, the

public thing—the France of 1789 and of the barricades of 1848, the France of national public education, the secular France of *laïcité* where citizens are free of the yoke of religion (whether they want to be or not), and the radically democratic France of *égalité* and *fraternité*. Faced with this threat to their republic, the No vote became a way for the French people to revolt.

During the town hall broadcast, Chirac was caught in an embarrassing moment when one earnest young man complained that he had to work to support himself while pursuing his university education (in a country where free education, even higher education, is a right). "What kind of work do you do?" asked Chirac, to which the youth replied, "Well, actually, I'm doing some work off the books," something that is rampant in France, where employers bear a heavy tax burden for each declared employee. A surprised but amused Chirac laughingly countered with a bit of a wink to the audience: "Let's not ask him for any details." Amidst the general guffaws, the grim-faced young man soldiered on: "You laugh. You find this very amusing, but for me this is a very serious situation."

The televised town hall meeting was a disaster for Chirac. Polls conducted shortly after the broadcast indicated that 51 percent of viewers did not think the president's performance convincing enough to persuade them to vote for the constitution. Worse, the number of voters indicating they would vote No actually increased the day after the broadcast, rising to a solid 55 percent.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the form of President Chirac's appeal may have contributed to its failure. The televised town hall meeting, *de rigueur* in the United States, is a shocking new technique of mediatized political manipulation to the French, and was widely condemned as American-style "marketing." No-vote partisans complained that here at last was proof of the depths to which French politics had sunk under a government so eager to embrace—no matter what

it said—the “*néolibéral*” model that it was even prepared to indulge in American-style infomercials.

### *French Fears*

Chirac was widely quoted in the press the day after the televised meeting lamenting the fear the French people clearly felt about the European constitution. Chirac said he was taken by surprise by this fear and that it caused him personal pain.<sup>9</sup> “*N’ayez pas peur*,” he had told the audience of young people—“Don’t be afraid”—assuring them he had confidence in the future of France and of Europe. There are many sources of French fear. Above all, as already noted, there is a growing sense of widening social divisions and the belief that the social welfare comforts and the equalizing protections provided by the state are under grave threat. Specific sources of this general fear include a grave crisis in France’s public education system, high unemployment (especially among the young), an influx of cheap labor from Central and Eastern Europe, and a growing, predominantly Muslim, immigrant population.

Most French people think that French schools are not doing as good a job as they once did of preparing French youth for their future. Thousands of high school students poured into the streets to protest their lot this past March. Classes are overcrowded, textbooks are outdated and in scarce supply, information technology has been slow to penetrate the schools, foreign-language instruction and mastery remain woefully inadequate, and the entire system is designed to winnow out all but a few high achievers who go on to the handful of *grandes écoles* and from there into the highest echelons of business and government. It used to be, as recently as when my contemporaries, now in their forties, were in school, that only children who could not succeed in public school went to private school. Public schools were great social equalizers and social homogenizers, and everyone in the country had a stake

in them. Now, increasingly, those who can afford it send their children to private school.

I spoke recently with a French academic who spent last year teaching in Heidelberg, Germany. He told me that so far as he was concerned, France was not educating its young people to cope with life in the European Union, much less in the global economy. He told me an anecdote to illustrate his point. He had observed one of his students, a star French graduate from one of the top schools, struggling to speak English with another student from Poland. “The Polish student spoke fluent German, English, and Russian. That means she spoke four languages altogether. The French student, a Parisian who clearly believed herself the superior of the Polish student—after all she had come out of the cream of the French educational establishment—really only spoke French. Her arrogance stunned me. That is our problem. We cling to our superiority even as the countries in Eastern Europe are poised to surpass us. I know that French student will go back to France, and she will make her career in France. The Polish student can go anywhere in Europe.”<sup>10</sup>

Unemployment is another source of French anxiety. According to France’s National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), unemployment among French citizens aged 15 to 24 is now running at 22.7 percent, or over twice the national average of 9.9 percent.<sup>11</sup> Outsourcing to India and other countries with cheap labor is something that French companies are embracing, though not with the same degree of success as English-language American companies. According to Christophe Jaffrelot, director of the Center for International Studies and Research (CERI) in Paris, India’s Pondicherry (the old French *comptoir* near Chennai which maintains strong links to France) “is completely saturated at this point with call centers.”<sup>12</sup> Parisian friends who’ve recently visited India tell me that Indians are lining up outside Alliance

Française offices in major Indian cities to learn French in order to secure call-center jobs with French companies.

Of more immediate concern to French workers, both geographically and politically, is the “Bolkestein Directive,” named after Fritz Bolkestein, the conservative former Dutch legislator and now European commissioner who proposed on January 13, 2004, a directive clearing all “obstacles” to commercial exploitation of services, including such traditionally public services as medical care, education, culture, and the management of public spaces. Under the Bolkestein Directive, and on the model of the General Agreement on Trade in Services, services are to be treated as merchandise. Further, the directive contains a “country of origin” section allowing services to be purchased or sold according to the rates current in the country of origin of the person providing the service. The specter of workers from Poland or Lithuania being imported to work in France at Polish wages and under Polish benefit levels alarms French workers. “*Le dumping*” of cheap labor became another rallying cry against the European constitution.

The Bolkestein Directive was mentioned over and over again in the many conversations I had with French people from various walks of life who told me they intended to vote No on the constitution as a way of protesting the direction the European Union was taking (putting profits above people) and their fear that, if the constitution were approved, there would be no stopping this tendency. The French government and even the French Socialist Party have gone to some lengths to attempt to dissociate the referendum on the constitution from the directive, but without much success.<sup>13</sup> An analysis by *Le Monde* of the impact of different stories in the media on poll results for the Yes and the No votes showed that the Yes vote took its biggest hit when controversy surrounding the Bolkestein Directive became a big media story in mid-March. This was the deci-

sive moment when the No vote surged dramatically ahead.<sup>14</sup>

In the early morning hours of Friday, April 15, a little more than 24 hours after Chirac’s town hall meeting, a fire swept through a hotel near the Galeries Lafayette department store killing 22 people (more died later of their injuries), including 11 children. One of the worst fires in Paris in 20 years, it could not have occurred at a worse time for the beleaguered president. The hotel was being used by French social services to house homeless asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are given a pretty fair hearing in France. While it can take years to resolve their cases, the French government provides them with free shelter, food, medical care, and education for their children while they wait. However, there is a severe shortage of housing, especially for families. The number of asylum seekers in France has risen dramatically in recent years, from 27,500 in 1998 to more than 90,000 in 2003.<sup>15</sup> Though housing for new immigrants and asylum seekers has been a problem for decades, there seems to be a reluctance on the part of the government to admit that these people are in France to stay.

The specter of hotels in central Paris crammed with entire families, most from Africa or from Eastern Europe, living in small rooms for indefinite periods of time and often in insalubrious conditions reminds the French both of the influx of foreigners into France and of the inability of the French government to provide these people with the basic necessities to which they have a clear right under French law. The April Paris hotel fire brought into tragic focus the serious conundrum being faced not only by France but by all of Europe with regard to immigration and related problems of social and economic integration. The sense of France, and by extension Europe, besieged by desperate immigrants from poorer countries whose religion, language, food, and culture may be completely foreign to those of Western Europe reinforces the French



backlash against the European Union in particular and globalization in general.

### *Threats to the Terroir*

Nothing expresses the feeling the French have for who they are as a people than the sense of *terroir*, or home region. The landscape, dialect, music, and especially the food that varies not only from region to region but even from town to town constitutes an important part of French core identity—even for individuals one or two generations removed from rural life. The *terroir* is under siege from the forces of globalization, and the French are truly afraid they are losing something essentially, well, French in the process. Entire villages are dying or being recycled into holiday camps for new British, Dutch, or even North American owners. A friend from Lyon told me about a farmhouse he and some friends were renting this summer in Narbonne. “Imagine,” he said still surprised, “the owner is a Canadian.” Farmers have little hope their children will continue in their footsteps. Food production is increasingly becoming the domain, as it has long been in the United States, of large agribusiness concerns. Traditional local markets are disappearing or continue only as pale imitations of their former selves with local, seasonal produce replaced by commercially grown, imported food with little variety and nothing local about it. Another aspect of the European Union that has panicked many French voters is the issue of GMOs, or genetically modified organisms. Along with fears over the safety of genetically modified foods, there is a larger sense among many that European policy with regard to GMOs and other biotechnology issues is being dictated by large chemical and pharmaceutical companies at the expense of not only the health of citizens but of a distinctly European quality of life.

For many French voters, preserving traditional, small-scale, organic farming has become as much about preserving the very character of France as it is about fears of

American-origin “Frankenfood.” Politically, these voters see EU policies favoring agribusiness and genetically modified foods as one more symptom of policies dictated by capital rather than people; one more symptom of globalization that is more threat than opportunity so far as the French are concerned. A majority of French voters perceive the vote on the European constitution as a referendum on the subjection of France to European norms dictated by the elites of international capital who want to advance globalization’s assault on French values and the French way of life. Chirac’s argument that the European constitution, and the European Union it ratifies, is France’s only hope in a hostile world only added to French citizens’ sense of siege.

### *An American in Paris*

Jeremy Rifkin, whose book *The European Dream* had just come out in French translation,<sup>16</sup> was called upon in interviews during the gloomy month of April to reassure the French with a dose of American optimism about Europe’s future.<sup>17</sup> Rifkin said in an interview published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* that the French had no choice but to vote Yes on May 29. Perfectly conscious of the motivations behind the French No vote and how such a vote would be interpreted on the other side of the Atlantic, Rifkin insisted that “Americans see the No to the constitution as a No to Europe, whereas the partisans of this No refuse a model which, according to them, would be the fruit of a compromise between partisans of American neoconservatives and zealous supporters of an omnipotent market.”<sup>18</sup>

Rifkin admitted the No partisans made a legitimate point but argued that all was not gloom and doom, that the European Union represents real progress for humanity as the first transnational entity based on human rights and democratic principles. He also pointed out that the constitution could be modified after it was approved. In fact, Eurocrats have already backed away from

the worst aspects of the Bolkestein Directive on services, with widespread support for exempting health care and educational services. While this is not enough for some on the French left who are allergic to privatization or free-market initiatives of almost any kind, it is reassuring to the French and to many Europeans who value the high-quality, low-cost educational and health care benefits they currently enjoy.

Hunkered down under the low April skies, battered by bad news, French commentators were taken aback by Jeremy Rifkin's very American optimism about Europe. It was "a surprising point of view" said *Le Monde Diplomatique*, in a brief introduction to an article by Rifkin published on the theme of his book against the backdrop of the European constitutional referendum.<sup>19</sup> Rifkin warned Europeans that unmitigated European pessimism is as dangerous and as illusory as unbounded American optimism. Dreams cannot be turned into reality in an environment of cynicism and pessimism.<sup>20</sup> Rifkin is right: the European dream is no less important for being imperfect. When dreams are allowed to become delusions of utopia, as Europeans know only too well after the debacles of national socialism and Stalinism, they tend to morph into nightmares.

#### *The Morning after May 29*

It is not clear how severely a French No vote on May 29 would affect the future of Europe. Even if the constitution were to be ratified by all 25 member states, it would not replace the Treaty of Nice until November 2009. There would be time for European leaders to clean up some of the more egregious "free-market" aspects of a document largely drafted by bankers, such as the excesses of the Bolkestein Directive, in order to make the constitution more palatable to wary anti-neoliberal French and other European voters. However, it is unlikely Chirac would again put ratification before the French people. There is a risk that, taking

his cue from his electorate, he would pull back on French involvement in the European Union. Some have floated the idea of a "core" group of perhaps France, Germany, Italy, and a couple of other West European countries with a greater commitment to social safety nets than a "peripheral" group of more economically liberal Central and East European countries. While this might provide a temporary solution to some of French voters' fears, it would hardly create a European superpower on a par with the United States, and it would nip in the bud the notion of Europe as a sort of "greater France." French exceptionalism would, in that scenario, end up being France's Achilles' heel. As economist Charles Wyplosz put it sternly to the French in a pre-referendum editorial: "It is going to become necessary to bury the old idea that Europe's purpose is above all to give more weight to France so that it will be able to address the United States as an equal (*tutoyer les États-Unis*)."<sup>21</sup>

As for the impact of a No vote on the United States, an inward-focused, weak, fractured Europe will not be to Washington's advantage as it tries to cope with the rapid rise of India and China.<sup>22</sup> These two emerging giants have yet to fully realize their social, geopolitical, and economic potential. While no one knows exactly how the two countries will evolve to meet greater demands by their citizens both for a better standard of living and for increased political participation during the coming decade or so, one suspects, given current trends, that democratic India will offer a more attractive model than China. India has remained ambivalent about embracing a radical liberalization of its economy, much to the frustration of U.S. capital interests, even as it has steadily moved toward integration with the global economy. Certainly, the European model, with its emphasis on social welfare, offers a country such as India, with its extreme social inequities and at least 400 million people still living in ab-

solite poverty, an attractive alternative to the one being marketed by the United States. My own view is that a No vote by the French on May 29 will not spell the end of Europe. In fact, it may be, as many No-vote proponents argue, the best and only way to wrest Europe away from its hijacking by multinational capital and put its destiny back into the hands of those who ought to decide the fate of any democracy: the people. ●

—May 12, 2005

#### *Postscript—*

On May 29, French voters rejected ratification of the European constitution, with a resounding 55 percent opposed and only 45 percent in favor. The Netherlands followed suit a few days later, with over 60 percent voting against ratification. In the wake of these two resounding defeats, Britain announced it was canceling its own scheduled vote. The European constitution in its current form appears to be dead. On this assessment, the dollar has surged in recent weeks against the euro. The Turkish press glumly assessed the defeat of the constitution as having been motivated by fears of Turkey joining the EU, while right-wing commentator Pat Buchanan chortled that European anti-immigrant patriots had defeated the European Union.

I believe predictions of the European Union's doom are premature and exaggerated. As I have argued above, the French No vote was motivated by a host of frustrations and insecurities. Many who voted against ratification are strong supporters of Europe. I believe that a revised constitution can pass at a later date. After all, the European Union is the only mechanism Europeans have of protecting themselves from the scourges of hypernationalism and the threatened encroachments of globalization. Still, if Brussels does not take firm and immediate action to scrap the constitution in its current form and quickly put before European voters a new version reflecting the concerns

of the French, the Dutch, and many other European citizens who were not offered the opportunity to vote in a referendum, there will be a risk of lost momentum. The nationalist far right and the anti-globalist far left are sure to leap into this breach, exacerbating divisions at a time when Europeans need, more than ever, to be united. The No votes in France and the Netherlands can be read as one more indication of a global democratic revolution, in which people are voicing their opposition to decisions made by elites bent on maximizing profits at any social cost.

#### Notes

1. The full text of Cardinal Ratzinger's *Dominus Iesus* is on the Vatican's website at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html).
2. "L'extrême surprise Le Pen," Election présidentielle 2002, 1<sup>er</sup> Tour, <http://www.rtl.fr/RtlInfo/Presidentielles/article.asp?dclid=72588>.
3. See the online magazine of Jean-Marie Le Pen, *Français d'abord* ("French First") at <http://www.francaisdabord.info/editobild.php>.
4. For referendum results by country, see [http://www.unizar.es/euroconstitucion/Treaties/Treaty\\_Const\\_Rat.htm](http://www.unizar.es/euroconstitucion/Treaties/Treaty_Const_Rat.htm).
5. "Chirac Shores Up Support for Constitution," *Deutsche Welle*, April 15, 2005. [http://www.dw-world.de/dwelle/cda/detail/dwelle.cda.detail.artikel\\_drucken/0,3820,1433](http://www.dw-world.de/dwelle/cda/detail/dwelle.cda.detail.artikel_drucken/0,3820,1433); see also "France: le non reste majoritaire dans les sondages, Chirac et Raffarin baisse," Agence France Presse, April 22, 2005, at [http://www.marianne-en-ligne.fr/info\\_en\\_temps\\_reel/afp/francais/jurnal/une/0504220649](http://www.marianne-en-ligne.fr/info_en_temps_reel/afp/francais/jurnal/une/0504220649).
6. The text of the European constitution is available on the European Union's official website, at [http://europa.eu.int/constitution/futurmu/constitution/part1/ttle1/index\\_eu.htm](http://europa.eu.int/constitution/futurmu/constitution/part1/ttle1/index_eu.htm).
7. "No to 'We the People,'" *New York Times*, April 24, 2005, *Week in Review*, p. 5.
8. "Chirac Loses Support for Constitution after TV Debate" Bloomberg.com, April 22, 2005, at <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=71000001&refer=europe&sid=aPJGo9dRGABI>.

9. "Cette peur, je ne la comprends pas et elle me peine: Chirac face au réel," *Le Monde*, April 20, 2005, p. 13.
10. This anecdote was related to me by Julien Cantagrel in New York City on May 13, 2005.
11. "Nombre de chômeurs et taux de chômage," Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques, 2004, at [http://insee.fr/fr/ffc/chifcle\\_fiche.asp?ref\\_id=NATFPS03306&tab\\_id=312](http://insee.fr/fr/ffc/chifcle_fiche.asp?ref_id=NATFPS03306&tab_id=312).
12. Personal conversation, Paris, April 18, 2005.
13. "C'est l'adoption du traité qui peut nous protéger de la directive Bolkestein, et non le contraire," Harlem Désir, European deputy, posted on the French Socialist Party's official "Yes" on the Constitution website, at [http://www.ouisocialiste.net/article.php3?id\\_article=451](http://www.ouisocialiste.net/article.php3?id_article=451).
14. See the annotated graph available at "L'abondance de sujets sur la directive Bolkestein a fait décoller le non," March 18, 2005, at <http://www.lemonde.fr/web/vi/0,47-0@2-3236,54-651357@51-642225,0.html>.
15. "L'hébergement d'urgence est démunie face à l'afflux d'étrangers," *Le Monde*, April 16, 2005, at <http://www.lemonde.fr/web/article/0,1@2-3226,36-639891@51-627577,0.html>.
16. *Le Rêve européen* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).
17. See Mark Gilbert, "Europe: Paradise Found?" *World Policy Journal*, vol. 21 (winter 2004/05), pp. 8–12.
18. "Que vive le rêve européen," interview by Jean-Gabriel Fredet of Jeremy Rifkin, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, April 14–20, 2005, pp. 96–97.
19. "En quête d'utopies: Rêve américain, rêve européen," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 2005, p. 6.
20. "Il n'en demeure pas moins qu'aucun rêve, aussi attrayant soit-il, ne peut s'imposer dans une atmosphère assombrie par le pessimisme et le cynisme," *Le Monde Diplomatique*.
21. "Le non: un drame pour la France, pas pour l'Europe," Charles Wyplosz, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 22, 2005, [http://www.lemonde.fr/web/imprimer\\_element/0,40-0@2-3232,50-641869,0.htm](http://www.lemonde.fr/web/imprimer_element/0,40-0@2-3232,50-641869,0.htm)
22. For the potential negative effects of a French No vote on U.S. interests, see Philip Gordon, "America Has a Big Stake in Europe's Constitution," *Financial Times*, May 17, 2005.