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April in Paris

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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.

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