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Jeremy Rifkin The European Dream is breaking out of the confines of national territory

This is the first attempt to create a global consciousness

Jose Manuel Barroso, president of the European commission, will this week once again try to get the European parliament to back a new line-up of commissioners. Last month, Barroso ran into a wall of opposition to his first slate of appointees because of the inclusion of the Italian Rocco Buttiglione ("homosexuality is a sin") as commissioner of justice and home affairs.

MEPs charged that Buttiglione was insensitive to gays and women and therefore the wrong man for the job. They have had their way and Buttiglione has now stood aside. But Barroso's real challenge is yet to come.

Just two weeks ago, the heads of state and foreign ministers of the 25 nations of the European Union formally signed a constitution to bind all of Europe together in a single governing body, signalling a momentous event in European and world history. The constitution is now being sent to the member states for review and ratification. If we Americans thought that the recent presidential contest was contentious, consider the passions that are likely to be unleashed as 455 million Europeans debate whether to commit themselves to a constitution that binds them together, for the first time, as a European people.

All in all, the EU is a remarkable feat, especially given that even its architects are unsure of exactly what it represents. The problem is that there has never been any governing institution like the EU. It is not a state, even though it acts like one.

Its laws supersede the laws of its 25 nations and are binding. It has a single currency that is used by many of its members. It regulates trade and coordinates energy, transportation, communications, and, increasingly, education. Its citizens all enjoy a common EU passport. It has a parliament, which makes laws, and a court, whose judicial decisions are binding on member countries and citizens. And it has a president and a military force. In many of the most important particulars that make up a state, the EU qualifies. Yet, it cannot tax its citizens, and its member states still enjoy a veto on any decision that might commit their troops to be employed.

Most important of all, the EU is not a territory-bound entity. Although it coordinates and regulates activity that takes place within the territorial boundaries of its nation-state members, it has no claim to territory and is, in fact, an extra-territorial governing institution. This is what makes the EU unique.

Nation-states are geographically defined governing institutions that control specific territory. Even dynasties and empires claimed ultimate control over the territory of their subject kingdoms. The only faint historical parallel to the EU is the Holy Roman Empire of the eighth to the early 19th centuries. In that period, the Vatican claimed ultimate sovereignty over the principalities, city-states, and kingdoms of much of western and northern Europe. In reality, the Holy See's actual influence over territory-related

matters was more moral and ethereal than enforceable.

After a thousand years of conflict and war, the nations of Europe emerged from the shadows of two world wars decimated: their populations maimed and killed, their ancient monuments and infrastructure lying in ruins and their way of life destroyed. Determined that they would never again take up arms against one another, the nations of Europe searched for a political mechanism that could bring them together.

In 1948, at the Congress of Europe, Winston Churchill pondered the future of a continent racked by centuries of war and offered his own vision of a European Dream. "We hope to see a Europe where men of every country will think of being a European as of belonging to their native land, and ... wherever they go in this wide domain ... will truly feel, 'Here I am at home,'" he said.

Today, less than a half century after its founders began to dream of a united Europe, 60% of EU citizens say they feel very or fairly attached to Europe, while a third of Europeans between the ages of 21 and 35 say they "regard themselves as more European than as nationals of their home country". The World

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Economic Forum's survey of European leaders found that 92% see their "future identification as mainly or partly European, not national". This extraordinary change in how people perceive themselves has occurred in less than half a century.

The EU exists, in large part, because the challenges and threats facing a globalising world are too vast and complex to be addressed inside traditional nation-state containers. The EU is the first effort to create a transnational governing space.

Addressing global concerns requires more than a new expansive governing arrangement. It is also necessary to establish a new covenant that extends commitment and allegiances beyond the narrow confines of national territory, and the more limited protection afforded by property rights and civil rights to include the whole of humanity and the biosphere with protections encoded in universal human rights.

The EU constitution, which was formally signed last month in Rome and will be taken up for review and ratification by the member states over the next two years, is the first governing document in all of history to attempt to create a global consciousness. The constitution emphasises a clear commitment to "sustainable development ... based on balanced economic growth", a "social market economy", and "protection and improvement of the quality of the environment". The constitution would also "pro-

mote peace ... combat social exclusion ... promote social justice and protection, equality between men and women, solidarity between generations, and protection of children's rights".

If I were to sum up the gist of the new European constitution, it would be a commitment to respect human diversity, promote inclusivity, foster quality of life, pursue sustainable development, and build a perpetual peace. Together, these values and goals, embedded in the EU constitution's charter of fundamental rights, represent the wof and warp of a fledgling European Dream and the beginnings of a global consciousness.

Clearly, in many day-to-day particulars, European actions fall far short of their aspirations. Rather, what's important is that the European Dream is the first fully articulated vision of global consciousness, and, in this respect, represents a watershed in human thought.

Global consciousness is compelling but, I admit, seems somewhat utopian and out of reach. It's hard to imagine hundreds of millions of people coalescing around such a grand vision. But, then, the idea that people might come together around democratic values and nation-state ideology would probably have seemed equally fanciful and far-fetched in the late medieval era.

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