



THE PRESIDENT OF URUGUAY... A Role Model for America?

The United States really isn't doing well these days. You may not know it, listening to American news. You'll still hear from the mouthpieces of every public personality that America remains the best country on earth. That, despite our current setbacks, we are still the "shining beacon" of freedom and whatnot. Of course, they offer nothing to back up this claim. No studies, or rankings, to show that living in America makes a person happier, healthier or more fulfilled than he or she would be living anywhere else. To our minds, it's self-evident. All Americans are created better. And, of course, a corollary to the belief that we're the best at everything is the belief that we have nothing to learn from anyone else. And we'll continue believing it, so long as we still excel in the two arts of seduction: finance, which convinces us that money is born out of thin air and then disappears it before our eyes, and pop culture, which intoxicates us with our own vision—only prettier, happier and with greater worldly belongings.

Meanwhile, in the real world, more evidence stacks up against us. The most recent, the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean's Statistical Yearbook, which ranked the U.S. 11th out of 19 American countries for income inequality. Some of the countries with greater income equality than ours: Venezuela, Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador. These Latin American countries, which were notorious through the 80s and 90s for their ill treatment of the poor and the lavish lifestyles of their wealthy, spent the last fifteen years or so lifting millions of their poor into the middle class. At the same time, in the U.S., millions of the middle class fell into poverty while we continued to reward the rich.

So who is the true "shining beacon" of the Americas? That would be Uruguay, which boasts a rating of 8.0 on the income inequality scale and a president who lives on the



same income as his average citizen.

Jose Mujica is certainly an anomaly among world leaders. His daily life, working with his wife to tend her family's farm, caring for flowers and chickens, is not what we'd term "presidential." His take-home pay, under \$800 a month, is enough to make him happy. The other 90% of his income he donates to charity. But even more impressive are his words. At the recent RIO +20 conference, he spoke poetically to other world leaders in a language they had likely never heard before: the language of a person more concerned with human life than with economic gain. The language of happiness, not of consumption.

Here are some excerpts from that speech, translation courtesy of a Uruguayan blogger at thewanderlife.com:

"I ask this question: what would happen to this planet if the people

of India had the same number of cars per family as the Germans? How much oxygen would there be left for us to breathe? More clearly: Does the world today have the material elements to enable 7 or 8 billion people to enjoy the same level of consumption and squandering as the most affluent Western societies? Will that ever be possible? Or will we have to start a different type of discussion one day? Because we have created this civilization in which we live: the progeny of the market, of the competition, which has begotten prodigious and explosive material progress. But the market economy has created market societies. And it has given us this globalization, which means being aware of the whole planet.

Are we ruling over globalization or is globalization ruling over us? Is it possible to speak of solidarity and of "being all together" in an economy based on ruthless competition? How far does our fraternity go?"

"Because we do not come into this planet simply to develop, just like that, indiscriminately. We come into this planet to be happy. Because life is short and it slips away from us. And no material belonging is worth as much as life, and this is fundamental. But if life is going to slip through my fingers, working and over-working in order to be able to consume more, and the consumer society is the engine—because ultimately, if consump-

tion is paralyzed, the economy stops, and if you stop economy, the ghost of stagnation appears for each one of us, but it is this hyper-consumption that is harming the planet. And this hyper-consumption needs to be generated, making things that have a short useful life, in order to sell a lot. Thus, a light bulb cannot last longer than 1000 hours. But there are light bulbs that last 100,000 hours! But these cannot be manufactured, because the problem is the market, because we have to work and we have to sustain a civilization of 'use and discard', and so, we are trapped in a vicious cycle. These are problems of a political nature, which are showing us that it's time to start fighting for a different culture."

Listening to Mujica, one could almost imagine a world governed by his ideals—a culture which promotes the quality of living and not the ceaseless accumulation of goods. Our culture has progressed so far in the pursuit of materialism that it's become our only export, but I like to imagine that if individual Americans could hear his words, they would be forced to acknowledge his wisdom, and perhaps something could be changed. For such a thing to happen, though, we would have to cease for a moment in proclaiming ourselves the best on earth. We would have to acknowledge that there is something to be learned from our neighbors. That, to our South, someone may hold an answer to the question, "What could make America truly great?" And that someone might be the poorest president-farmer, Jose Mujica.

Further reading:

<http://billmoyers.com/2013/01/29/the-u-s-is-now-more-unequal-than-much-of-latin-america/>

<http://www.economist.com/node/21564411>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20243493>

<http://thewanderlife.com/human-happiness-and-the-environment-address-by-uruguayan-president-jose-mujica-at-rio-20-summit/>

DIGGING OUT FROM GLOBAL WARMING

Little did I know, as I wrote my article in January about the desire for snow, that winter hadn't truly passed us over this year. It was just delayed. And, two weeks after the last Zephyr went up, down came the snow. Over two feet fell around our house over the course of a week. Frigid temperatures kept us inside for another week; then came the rain. And more cold temperatures. Just a week or so ago, I was beginning to think perhaps Spring was arriving. The forsythia in the backyard had sprouted buds and looked ready to bloom. Temperatures finally warmed up. And then, out of nowhere, more freezing cold. More snow. As I write this month, one week before the start of April, the high temperature is 36 degrees.

So much for global warming, right?



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Or that's the joke I keep hearing lately. I laugh along, because it does seem funny how weather never quite fits our expectations, but there's a dangerous core inside that joke. Already suspicious of scientists and academics, Midwesterners love any excuse to show that the city-folk don't know what they're talking about, and, to a skeptic, this sudden sweeping cold seems like a blatant refutation of climate change.

Which is why human beings will never truly do anything to stop the climate from changing. We operate, day to day, on our experience. Anecdotal evidence trumps statistics every time. To see what I mean, just try to convince someone that welfare fraud is

actually extremely rare. Every person has met, or heard of, one lazy person who received unnecessary benefits, and so, to the human mind, those statistics can't be right. The phrase "Global Warming" sounds to us like every day should be warmer than average. So when we experience days that are colder than average, that seems like a good enough reason to doubt global warming exists. The fact that, statistically, last year was the warmest year on record just isn't enough to convince someone that global warming is real—not if they're shoveling piles of snow off their car today.

One argument I've heard a few times from climate change deniers: scientists always believe they are absolutely right until they are absolutely proven wrong. For example, before the advent of "germ theory," or the knowledge that small organisms can transmit diseases from person to person, most scientists believed that disease spread through poisonous air, or miasma. This belief was held as strongly then as the belief in germs is held now. So who's to say that climate change isn't this generation's miasma?

It's absolutely possible that future generations will look back on climate change theory and conclude that we were idiots. If history can teach us one lesson, it is that we are often wrong. Humans are always operating on limited information. But, if we are proved wrong, it will likely be as to the causes or else the precise effects of a changing climate. I doubt that we will be proven wrong as to the existence of climate change altogether. Just as earlier scientists were wrong about the precise cause of epidemic diseases, but correct in attributing disease to the environment around them and not to, say, a vengeful God. The change in terminology alone, from "Global Warming" to the more correct "Climate Change" suggests a continuing evolution of thought, as our knowledge of our environment grows.

And, from what I know of the current scientific thinking, these record snows fit the model just as well as last summer's record heat. Every year more evidence stacks up in favor of the position that our world is changing, and that it's our negative influence that has changed it. So I can laugh along with my neighbors. "Global warming, right?" As I push snow off my car. It's very tempting to blame divine retribution for such a wet, muddy mess. But the record-breaking snowstorms and the longer tornado seasons and the blistering summers are enough to frighten me about what the future is bringing; so, until I'm proven wrong, I'll look to the culprit closer to home.



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