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It Might Be Time to Rebrand It the South American Dream

By Arianna Huffington, Tribune Media Services

I recently returned from a trip to South America, where I was struck by the ways in which Chile and Brazil, the two countries I visited, have, on key issues like defeating poverty, transcended the tired division between left and right the United States seems hopelessly mired in.

After my time in Chile, I flew to Brazil, which is in the midst of an economic expansion -- the Brazilian Boom. It's a boom made all the more remarkable because Brazil's problems were long thought to be intractable: high inflation, high crime rate, high income inequality, high birth rate. As the old joke went, "Brazil is the country of the future -- and it always will be." Well, the future has finally arrived.

The turnaround started with the 2002 election of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a left-wing, former union activist. When he assumed office, the country's elite feared a Brazilian version of Hugo Chavez. But he showed himself to be less of an ideologue and more of a pragmatist. "I'm not left or right," he said. "I'm a metal worker." When he left office last month, he departed with a popularity rating above 80 percent.

During his time in office, the number of Brazilians living in poverty fell from 49 million to just under 29 million. And although Brazil still has one of the world's greatest income disparities, the country is on the verge of reaching its lowest income inequality level on record.

According to a study coordinated by Marcelo Neri, who heads the Center for Social Policies at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, between 2001 and 2009, the per capita income of the richest 10 percent of Brazilians grew 1.5 percent per year while the income of the poorest 10 percent grew 6.8 percent. "The most surprising aspect of the data," Neri told me when we had dinner together, "is that the historically most deprived groups, including blacks and those living in the northern parts of Brazil, have experienced the highest income growth."

Among the other greatest hits presided over by Lula: Wages went up more than 5 percent during his two terms; unemployment was cut in half; young people are staying in school longer; the inflation rate went from 12.5 percent a year to 5.6 percent; exports more than tripled; and Brazil now has the eighth-largest economy in the world.

As in Chile, much of Brazil's economic improvement is attributable to the government creating conditions that make it possible for the private sector to thrive. As Marcelo Neri told me: "We have maintained a balance -- combining an aggressive public commitment to addressing social issues with financial responsibility and a respect for what the private sector can do."

Franklin Martins, the outgoing minister for social communication, reiterated this. "One of Lula's major successes," he told me, "was to make certain issues, like poverty fighting, part of a shared national agenda -- accepted as such by both major political parties. These included a commitment to a sound currency, and a commitment to the kind of economic growth that would enable us to fulfill our goal of increasing social inclusion. This obligation to helping our poor is no longer limited to one particular party."

Among all the changes in Brazil, the most transformative is the number of people entering the middle class. Between 2003 and 2009, 29 million people took that step up the socioeconomic ladder, and more than half of the population is now considered middle class. As a study entitled "The New Brazilian Middle Class" puts it: "Brazil is becoming a nation of consumers, buying cars, computers, and houses with cash or on credit." Indeed, there are 1,000 new cars

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Author Bio:

Arianna Huffington, formerly a Republican, credits her shift in political views to colleagues Al Franken and Robert Scheer. Before her change in ...

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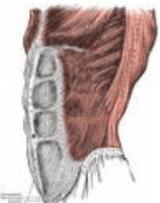


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boom). As a result of the economic good times, Brazilians have an exceptionally optimistic outlook on their future.

Indeed, in many ways Brazil has become like a photo negative of America. Brazilians are increasingly living the American Dream of upward mobility, while nearly two-thirds of Americans no longer believe their children will live better lives than they did. "You talk to families here," Arminio Fraga, the former governor of Brazil's central bank, told me, "and there is a real sense of pride about how much better their children are doing than they are. You hear things like, 'I don't have a computer, but my daughter does.'"

Maybe we need to rebrand it the South American Dream.

So even as the U.S. remains mired in its stale left vs. right battle, countries like Chile and Brazil are recognizing that they cannot achieve economic growth and political stability without helping move millions from poverty into the middle class.

My South American journey added a global dimension to my long-held belief that left vs. right is a hopelessly 20th-century framing. The 21st-century divide is shaping up to be North vs. South -- with our side digging in on the wrong side of history.

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MJB wrote: 02-04-2011 06:38

Wow. She just stated in the article that the problem is the Hatfield and McCoy syndrome (GOP vs. Dems) style of government, and the first comment is (surprise, surprise) a Republican pointing the finger at Democrats. THIS is why this country fails. Never learning from the childish bickering and finger-pointing.

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jay wrote: 02-04-2011 01:55

No its been going on for a while. You must have forgot about 8 years of Bush

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Ed wrote: 02-03-2011 14:41

Has it occurred to you that the reason we seem to be moving backward is traceable to Obama's policies and the policies of the liberals?

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