

Climate-Change Politics and Summits as Observed by Culture Change

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Culture Change's long-time correspondent and international editor Pincas Jawetz participated in the United Nations climate-change summit that ran from Dec. 1-12 in Poznan, Poland. Pincas had already renamed the U.N. arm that puts on these meetings: the "UN Climate Change Traveling Club (UNCCTC)." Culture Change readers are fortunate to have his independent viewpoint shared here exclusively.

Pincas has been an energy analyst since the 1970s and has participated in every major climate change meeting around the world in the last 18 years since "the road to Rio." Pincas' main outlet is his www.Sustainabilitank.info blog which has penetrating insights. The name refers to "think tanks" that are part of his past experience.

Jan Lundberg: You and I roomed together in Kyoto in 1997 for the U.N. meeting. What happened in Poznan at this meeting that built on the Kyoto Protocol breakthrough, if anything? What would you say is the main accomplishment of this meeting just concluded? (1)

Pincas Jawetz: The meeting did really accomplish nothing. It would have been much more reasonable had they decided to postpone this meeting. It is obvious that without the US on board there will be no deal on climate change. Without the US there will be also no China -- so what is there left to talk about?

Anybody could have known that with November elections in the US there will be no real representation in December. Even had McCain won the elections, his point of view was expected to be very different from the G.W. Bush Administration, but he could not go to Poznan, nor could he send "his" people. Obviously, that was the case also for Barack Obama. The fact that Al Gore showed up and gave a speech really meant nothing. The reality was that same old Paula Dobriansky and Harlan Watson were on the official US team -- and thank god -- they said nothing. This was better than had they said anything. And they are not to blame. It is the UN bureaucracy, that made all these years' big noise, but I doubt now that they really intended ever to achieve practical results. The trip was the message -- you remember my reporting about UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon traveling to a meeting to Valencia, Spain, via the Antarctica, so he could say he saw the ice melt? And what did he visit in the Antarctica? A group of Korean scientists off that Chilean military base.

JL: It has been widely reported that the U.S. presidential transition has hampered the process of finding agreement on how much greenhouse gas to cut, and how it would be implemented. Since the regime-change in the U.S. was long anticipated, clearly the U.N. players thought something could be accomplished anyway this month. Or was it foolish hope that the Bushies would by now be playing ball together with all world citizens to save us from climate extinction? (2)

PJ: Look, we said this all the time, there is only one US President at a time, I told this directly, in person, to the Prime Minister of Denmark, Mr. Fogh Rasmussen, at a meeting September 2008 at Columbia University.

A meeting in Poznan December 2008 meant a setback to Copenhagen and the danger that in December 2009 at the Copenhagen meeting we will have Poznan II rather than the planned Kyoto II, or the much more plausible, and the goal of the Danes, a Copenhagen I.

Now, the US presidential transition is a god-send. I strongly believe that Obama wants to provide jobs to US workers by doing things for the US economy. It is clear to all that after the serial explosion of the economy's "bubbles," there is no way of return to what has been -- so here comes in the word CHANGE. Luckily, it requires the introduction of new technologies, changes in life style and yes -- plain culture change -- and I believe that it can be done, and that Obama will do it. And watch out here - this does not mean a return to the Kyoto method by going for a Kyoto II. Yes, there will be a multinational/multilateral eventual treatment to the climate change malaise -- but it will come about via a series of bilateral agreements first. So what I think Obama will be doing when he finally gets to it -- it will be to send a delegation to China and to aim at a US-China bilateral agreement first. If this is good enough for the US economy, it will be good for climate change, and it will be the starting point for the new attempt at a multilateral agreement.

What this means is that I agree with Oilwatch and their claim that: "RADICAL NEW AGENDA NEEDED TO ACHIEVE CLIMATE JUSTICE" and I believe that this will be achieved by a first US-China agreement under the Obama leadership for change. I also believe that bright capitalists like George Soros feel the same way and see in the fight against climate change the potential of doing the right things for sustainable development.

JL: How serious is the climate threat now compared to when we were in Kyoto? Or, how would you describe the climate situation as it has become more clear in the last year? (3)

PJ: I trust Jim Hansen and we post on www.SustainabiliTank.info most of his material. He made it clear that as more time passes, the less there is a real possibility to do something about climate change.

JL: Consider the idea circulating that it is "Too late -- scientists say we should expect the worst." Please comment on the article we posted from The Guardian of December 9 2008, by David Adam. (4)

PJ: That article mentions Bob Watson, Chief Scientist at the UK Environment Department, formerly head of the IPCC, and Chief Scientist of the World Bank, who recently warned that the world needed to prepare for a 4 C rise. He said we should strive for 450ppm but should be prepared for 550ppm - Hitting the 450ppm would be "unbelievably difficult" he said. An Australian recent report further suggested that to attain the 450ppm goal is so ambitious that it could wreck attempts to agree a new global deal on global warming at Copenhagen next year.

I Know Dr. Robert Watson from his days as Chief scientist at the World Bank. We were all sorry when he got removed from the IPCC by the Bush Administration, and replaced with Dr. Pacchauri, but personally I accept rather the Jim Hansen point of view that achieving 350 ppm is still possible, if we will put our heads to it. And to put it mildly -- this is imperative.

I do not throw up my arms like it is done in the Guardian article that ways towards -- we are aiming at 650ppm and that our hopes for deviating from this are in vain.

Such an approach as David Adams describes makes our demise as predestined by the existing industries -- and this is the rub. We will have change because our governments will eventually accept their role to lead to change -- so all those dire predictions have no base in the reality of a world that will eventually defend itself from destruction. Sure, the industries want to perpetuate themselves and create the impression that hell is preordained.

I do not accept this.

"As ministers and officials gather in Poznan one year ahead of the Copenhagen summit on global warming, the second part of a major series looks at the crucial issue of targets," you suggested, but I reject this predetermination, and I expect that in 2009, both the US and China will reject that also.

JL: What is the extent of the damage, both politically and ecologically, caused by the Bush II regime since 2001? Do you think a continuation of Clinton/Gore, if the election in 2000 had turned out differently, would have made a significant difference? Is the latter day Gore of Nobel Prize stature any more helpful then he was with his book "Earth In The Balance", when he was in government?

PJ: I think Al Gore deserved that Nobel Prize as he became the great communicator of the climate change problem. Surely, he is not a spokesman for social issues, and when things start moving finally he will be in a position to make financial gains because of his incisive knowledge of the effective industries/technologies. So, his going to Poznan was of value in this respect. His importance in the process evolving as a fight against climate change should not be underestimated. Had he been President, I am sure we would have been on the road to Kyoto, but as I do not think that the Kyoto mechanisms had the best vision for dealing with the issues, and as the 8 Bush years were a waste anyway, so the total waste of 10 years, I think, makes it imperative to look now for other ways to jump start the process.

Further, let me remind you that both of us, in Kyoto, we did not like those mechanisms, later we got to like them because they were the only game in town, but as they did not yield real results by now, because of the US turn-around, there is no reason now to continue attempts at reviving a dead horse.

JL: Tell us what you expect from Barack Obama. Does your view differ from what the UN Climate Travel Club expects?

PJ: Now, that is the best question and my answer is Yes -- as they have really very little to show for -- I would say that I expect a very different start-up. As said, the US will take over the leadership position and come into the process by having made its own agreements with China, and possibly India and Brazil -- to mutual satisfaction of both partners in a bilateral agreements for trade and development.

The world cannot be left to haggle at the UNFCCC with Saudi Arabia about compensation for decreased oil markets. Nobody has the inalienable right to pollute or to spread human misery. The UNFCCC, as a UN offshoot, is really not equipped at dealing with anything more elaborate than the lowest common denominator. What will carry the day will be the agreement between the largest polluters themselves, then the rest will just have to react on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. The Small Island States, the Lowest Income States, most other fossil fuels poor States, all will come on board, and it really does not have to be 100% -- there will be ways to get the others to join in later. In toto -- it will still be multilateralism in the end.

JL: Is there any support for quickly slashing greenhouse gas emissions regardless of the short term effect on economic survival? Is economic survival completely linked to ongoing corporate profits? Do you believe the technofix is so firmly established as the only acceptable way -- i.e., green capitalism -- such that we will be engulfed by climate extinction as we go down in a drowning chorus of "Efficiency! Clean cars! Green jobs!" and the rest?

PJ: Your suggested list is uneven. First I strongly believe in changes of life style and culture change so we need less energy in our daily life, less energy in satisfying our needs. I think Obama knows that changes in transportation systems are more efficient than putting all our eggs in the higher mileage/gallon vehicles. But Obama must run an economy that keeps families satisfied, so he has to come up with Green Jobs and Clean Cars. But if the total demand of energy has been slowly decreased by having effective public transportation and means like bicycle networks and scooters, local production of food, better use of IT etc., then there is nothing wrong with running the systems via "green capitalism." The great thing that happened is that so many old-economy bubbles did burst, so we are now receptive to relearn lessons that seemingly were forgotten from what was learned from the Great Depression of 1929 and the thirties. The fiscal manipulations were plain greed, but hurricanes and diseases came on because of climate change and pollution. When insurance companies will not insure real estate in Florida and Louisiana, this calls for drastic changes and government capitalism is not the long term answer because the treasury cannot be replaced by a money printing press.

JL: How were you able as an independent energy analyst and climate journalist to participate fully at Poznan, when you were not with a national government? Were you able to accomplish more with a press

credential or with an NGO registration?

PJ: That is one more topic I must turn you to the UN reality. Those folks love NGO's because they do not carry any real power in the UN system (forget the noise -- it is not real), but are afraid of free speaking journalists because they are the only folks in the house that speak the truth. Because of www.SustainabiliTank.info outspokenness, even the head of the UNFCCC, who is well aware that we were fighting for him in his own meager standing versus the UN at large, even he did not feel he had the power to overrule the UN Department of Disinformation that believes a journalist is someone who is fed at the large UN trough and then regurgitates what he has been dished out, and calls this information. Now, we are not like this, so we did not get our UN accreditation as media. On the other hand, thanks to the intelligence of those involved in the specificity of climate change from outside the UN, the people who really count, we were fully supplied with information. If I did not write it all up yet, this is my own fault, because I found myself trapped with too much to handle during the month of December. I will get those articles out slowly -- but no rush -- reality is such that changes on the ground are very slow indeed.

JL: Is there any more hope now than eight years ago when we unveiled the Pledge for Climate Protection
http://culturechange.org/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=201&Itemid=52

PJ: The points of the pledge are still right on the money -- in effect you will see that many of those points will indeed become US policy under the Obama Administration, or in parallel, they will become common practice by US citizens and by many people around the globe. The way this can happen is by taxing carbon emission so there is the incentive to chain our behavior. This is what Jim Hansen proposes rather than chase after the Kyoto mechanisms per se. See his material in the two references under From Dr. James Hansen - Fwd: Tell Barack Obama the Truth — The Whole Truth - 8 pages of it.
He speaks openly of a carbon tax that will provide 100% benefit to the fight against climate change.

JL: With the thousands of delegates you ran into and that you may know, have you detected any lifestyle change in their behavior (apart from flying to conferences)? Or are the professional environmentalists in and out of government just making a living at this game and waiting for serious change to hit them?

PJ: I think I answered this by talking of the UNCCTC. Had they had any minimal honesty, all of the professionals -- UN employees and professional NGOs -- should have said "let us postpone this till April 2009."

I excuse from this the Renewable Energy Industry folks - those came to Poznan to spread the word: "look, we have it -- we know how to do it -- get your act together and hire us for doing the job" You can not fault them.

JL: What is your position on carbon trading? As you may know, the DC offices of Environmental Defense Fund were recently invaded by Rising Tide grassroots activists, including the daughter of an EDF founder, to oppose and expose carbon trading and corporate acquiescence. (story

I did is here: Climate Activists Invade DC Offices of Environmental Defense
)

PJ: Sure, I am rather for a carbon tax -- please see also my answer to your question on the Pledge for Climate Protection. As mentioned by me, recently Jim Hansen wrote about this to Barack and Michelle Obama and passed this along via the incoming Science Adviser to The President - Professor John Holdren.

JL: Too bad Hansen's letter was pro-nuclear power. I would advise, "Not on my planet!"
How would you view the overall efforts of Culture Change over the years, in the general field of fighting petroleum dependence and slashing greenhouse gases? What do you recommend to readers and supporters of Culture Change, whether reading or writing or participating in projects such as Sail Transport Network and fighting the Plastic Plague? How do you believe our message on petrocollapse has fit with the global awareness of climate change?

PJ: I always admired your push on Culture Change and rising awareness that we can indeed live well with less waste and by implication with less oil.

On the other hand, though clearly accepting the fact that fossil fuels, including oil, are finite, and the fact that this awareness could raise the price of oil and make the introduction of renewables possible, I was also worried that the cost of producing oil in the Arabian desert is covered with peanuts, so they can lower the price if the alternatives start hurting their business. All this in normal so-called free market terms.

I will not mention National security, outflow of money to the Gulf States, pay-out to Al Qaeda, ransom money in piracy of oil tankers etc. -- this sort of nightmares -- but I always trusted the good sense of Sheik Yamani who said that "The Stone Age Did Not End Because of The Lack Of Stones." So, I knew that climate change awareness will end our reliance on oil much before there will be a real shortage of oil. If this was not clear, here came the series of Bubbles' Burst, and we use less oil, and it fell from \$140/barrel to \$30-40. In these conditions we will have to tax the oil rather than wait for the complicated Kyoto mechanisms. We will have to take seriously the Jim Hansen suggestions -- and I expect that much of this will enter our National debate of the subject.

One more comment here, this because of Carlo Ponzi having become such a household name these days. I suggest that the increase of the oil market, the idea that we will need more and more oil for the growing global economy, was just one more Ponzi scheme intended to enrich the oil industry. The fall in oil price is just another bubble that did burst, after so many other bubbles did burst. Even with petrocollapse on the horizon, we are now retreating from that horizon, and by the time we have set in place our climate change answer, oil will have lost its great relevance.

JL: Were there any equivalent to the hot geisha women we saw in Kyoto, in Poznan? How was the night life, or was it all work work work? Should I have saved the day with my guitar and Have a Global Warming Day?

PJ: To that question, though running to events every evening, I must note that there were some very hot NGOs and country representatives present, pity I am by now too old -- the greatest event was the traditional Saturday night NGO party. I made acquaintance there with a very serious lady with great achievements, but will be discreet about this.

The city of Poznan itself -- I have further things I will write up eventually.

The Conference Center itself is built on the ground of the old Jewish cemetery - desecrated by Nazis and Poles alike. The City's large public swimming pool is inside the old Akiba Eiger Synagogue - just think of the Notre Dame Cathedral with an Olympic swimming pool in the middle.

I met very nice people, but I will never forget the young blonde at the swimming pool entrance counter whom I asked where is the Synagogue now (I had the address because that is where I wanted to go Friday evening) -- and she flatly told me that she is no tourist office. There is more to it -- but that for a different occasion. All what I will add here is that the UN should have known where they are holding this UN sponsored Conference. It just amounts to one more case of the UN discrediting itself.

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Web resources for answer #1:

The Ego-tour by the UN Secretary-General and The Climate Will Never Be The Same. What Will He Say In Valencia?

answer #2:

The Columbia University World Leaders Forum, September 26, 2008, Became The Podium For Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen of Denmark To Make Known A Roadmap To The December 2009 Climate Change Meeting in Copenhagen. The Prime Minister Is Keenly Interested That The Copenhagen Event Becomes The Turnaround Point From Our Present Descent Towards Global Environmental Disaster, and He Negotiated This Week A Roadmap With The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and The Two Candidates For The US Presidency. We Wished Him All The Luck He Needs; Nevertheless We Expressed Some Skepticism.

Postpone The Poznan Meeting - We Said So A Year Ago - Mary Robinson, Former Irish President, Now With The Club of Madrid, Says So. We Suggest Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen Take This Up Vigorously. EU Commission Vice President Margot Wallström and Former Norwegian Prime Minister and UN Special Envoy on Climate Change, Gro Harlem Brundtland Seem To Be Onboard Already.

answer #3:

From Dr. James Hansen - Fwd: Tell Barack Obama the Truth — The Whole Truth - 8 pages of it.

Let 2009 Start With A Show Of Good Minds At Work: A Letter From Jim Hansen To Michelle and Barack Obama via John Holdren and Our Readers.

Another Alarming Note From Dr. James Hansen - He Puts His Hope On The Rebelling Young People Because Even Some Of The Plans Put Forward By Advanced Countries Like Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Sweden, Still Lead The Planet - Global Climate - Beyond The Tipping Point.

answer #4:

Too late? Why scientists say we should expect the worst -- guardian.co.uk