

Published on *Psychology Today* (<http://www.psychologytoday.com>)

Penn & Teller: More Bullshit!

By Massimo Pigliucci

Created Oct 14 2009 - 9:49am

All right, I promise to leave Penn & Teller alone for a while after this post, though I'm beginning to think that their show has run out of gas, and that they need a couple years of rest. Catching up with season 6, I just finished watching the episode on "world peace." It has now become a very predictable pattern: P&T are effective and at the peak of their game when they take on the paranormal and other forms of pseudoscience. But, when they veer into politics, they are full of bullshit.

This is no coincidence: creationism, astrology, ghosts, alternative medicine, ufos, clairvoyance, magnetic therapy and so on *are* unquestionably reality-challenged beliefs. That's the proper domain of the skeptic, that intelligent, science-informed, philosophy-savvy member of the human race exemplified by the likes of David Hume and Carl Sagan. And that's where P&T make us laugh and think at the same time — no minor feat — and it's something for which I will always appreciate them.

But public policies and economics, though surely marked by their own examples of nonsense, are not in the same category at all. When P&T talk about global warming, recycling programs, or, as in the case at hand, world peace, they are out of their league. And they are neither thoughtful nor funny.

Before I started watching the world peace episode I made some empirically testable predictions: a) they will make fun of some dim-witted, though probably well intentioned, peace-nick; b) they will attack the United Nations as the worst idea since the Inquisition; and c) they will ask the enlightened opinion of an anonymous member of some libertarian think tank, most likely the CATO Institute (of which Penn is a proud Fellow, whatever that means). Check, check, and check; that's exactly what happened. Maybe I should reconsider my skepticism of psychic powers!

Sure enough, P&T went on to interview some silly peace-loving but not exactly bright people of the "Code Pink" organization, who apparently thought that praying with lit candles in Nancy Pelosi's office really advances the cause of world peace. No, it doesn't, though the group at least came across as compassionate, unlike that asshole P&T featured as spokeswoman for Move Forward America, a group which maintains that a permanent state of war is necessary for our prosperity. (To their credit, P&T did make merciless fun of her.)

Next, of course, came the United Nations. It is admittedly a flawed organization, beginning with the inane idea of having a Security Council, formed by the five nations who won WWII, granted absolute veto power on any and all resolutions. But the UN does a world of good, both by providing the primary forum for peaceful international dialogue, and by its far reaching field humanitarian work. P&T couldn't find anything better than to attack the latter by focusing exclusively on the occasional scandals that arise in *anysufficiently* large organization. I mean, if

we are talking about bribery and rape, shall we not start at home, with our own government and military respectively? Would that be an argument to abolish the US Government and to get rid of the Army?

And finally we have P&T's own solution to the problem of world peace, courtesy of the infinite (lack of) wisdom of the CATO Institute and of a questionable personal anecdote. Did you guess? But of course: the only road to world peace is a planetary free market! It would work because nations would be increasingly inter-dependent economically, which would set up a powerful disincentive toward war. Indeed, P&T tell us that their own professional and personal relationship has worked well over so many years for similar reasons: you see, when they disagree and yell at each other, they don't resort to violence, because otherwise there wouldn't be a Penn & Teller show, and Penn's kids couldn't have "fancy birthday parties."

Really? I don't know P&T personally, but I hope (and strongly suspect) that they are better than that. They are probably friends, and the reason they don't assault each other violently when they disagree has a lot more to do with the fact that they care for each other and that they are decent human beings. The fact that they also work well together and make a nice living from it is just pleasant icing on the cake.

So, is free market capitalism the key to world peace? Interestingly, as you will find out by reading 1919, the remarkable book by Margaret MacMillan on the making of the peace treaty that ended WWI, people thought exactly the same thing at the beginning of the 20th century. They were proven wrong by not just one, but two world wars.

Of course interconnectedness helps, though it better be cultural as well as economic. But one cannot pretend to be a thoughtful analyst of the problem of world peace and ignore the issue that capitalism itself has motivated some recent conflicts, at least in part, in a quest to control ever larger shares of valuable resources (think both Iraq I and II). And of course capitalist nations don't have a much better track record of non-aggression than non-capitalist ones (think US history, since its inception, not just recently).

No, if there is an answer to the problem — or at least a way to ameliorate things — it is precisely through something like the United Nations. The current incarnation of the organization is really its version 2.0. Version 1.0 was the League of Nations that was set up after WWI, and which failed in great part because the Americans insisted in inviting only democracies to the high table. Version 2.0, which began after WWII, is better, because everyone has a seat, yet still some seats are better than others. Much better, in fact. So what we need (hopefully without having to go through WWIII to get there!) is a United Nations 3.0, without a Security Council and where each nation gets an equal vote. You know, it's called democracy, and we've made a business of spreading it to the world for the simple reason that it is a great idea. Greater even than capitalism, you can bet your tv show on it.

Source URL: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/node/33765>

Links:

[1] <http://www.codepink4peace.org/>

[2] <http://www.moveamericaforward.org/>

[3] http://www.amazon.com/Paris-1919-Months-Changed-World/dp/0375760520/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1254677716&sr=8-1

[4] http://www.psychologytoday.com/files/teaser/2009/10/massimo-garden2-small_0.jpg

[5] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/rationally-speaking>