

# Class Structure and the Movement of Capital: The Rhetoric of Supply Side Economics

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*On December 2, 2017, President Donald Trump signed into law the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which delivered \$1.5 trillion in tax breaks to individuals and companies. While the law was noteworthy for the scale of its payouts to the wealthiest Americans and business interests, the rhetoric surrounding the bill was consistent with a durable discourse typically known as supply-side or “trickle down” economics. I argue that, despite their frequent failure in the real world, policy solutions based on the discourse of supply-side economics consistently earn public approval because they appeal to a complex of hegemonic ideological metaphors, which converge to help make a self-defeating choice seem the right one.*

**Keywords:** rhetoric of economics, metaphor, ideology, tropes, hegemony

In 1964, Senator Barry Goldwater ran for President as a staunch anti-Communist and a devoted fiscal conservative opposed to unions, taxes, and the growing reach of the federal government. In an incredible collapse, he won only six states. His fervent militarism and opposition to the welfare state had moved the party so far to the fringes of American politics, observers warned, that Goldwater would cost the Republican Party the presidency for the foreseeable future.<sup>1</sup> While those predictions proved overstated, the party was consigned to continual minority status for years.

The “Reagan Revolution” that finally swept the Republican Party back to power after two decades of political subordination signaled a major realignment of the party around an amalgamation of hard right supply-side economic policy, down-home populism, and “family values” social conservatism. The feat was all the more impressive for the fact that Reagan had largely sold the American public the very same economics it had so roundly rejected in 1964. “Reaganomics” consisted of four major initiatives intended to end the stagflation and malaise that had marked the 1970s: slashing government spending; lowering marginal tax rates; reducing business regulation; and stopping inflation.<sup>2</sup> Broadly, these policies aimed to stimulate economic growth by pumping up supply—to do everything to encourage the wealthy to hire more laborers.

This agenda continues to steer a great deal of economic policy today. Nationally, Republicans are fighting to lower corporate tax rates and eliminate the estate tax.<sup>3</sup> None of the candidates for the 2016 Republican primary advocated for raising or even retaining current levels of taxation.

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of American Consensus* (New York: Nation Books, 2001): 513; Scott Farris, *Almost President: The Men Who Lost the Race but Changed the Nation* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2013): 125.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Niskanen, *Reaganomics: An Insider's Account of the Policies and the People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> For 2017, the US estate tax applied to wealth transferred upon in death when that sum exceeded \$5,490,000. Thus, for the vast majority of Americans, it will have no bearing upon their lives or those of their heirs.

Early favorites Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio both advocated for massive tax cuts to upper income brackets in order to stimulate economic growth. But no one embraced supply side economics like the eventual President. Best estimates indicated that Trump's proposed tax cut would cost the government about \$6.2 trillion in revenue in the first decade, and would disproportionately favor the wealthy.<sup>4</sup> The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget concluded the cuts would "increase debt to 111 percent of Gross Domestic Product ... and no achievable amount of economic growth could finance it."<sup>5</sup>

At the state level, Republicans are leading a charge to cut regulations and slash income taxes. Kansas Governor Sam Brownback presided over a conservative "experiment" to slash state income tax rates, especially for the highest earners, and set it on a "glide path" to zero percent.<sup>6</sup> Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal vetoed 4-cent increases on taxes for cigarettes and advocated the total elimination of state income taxes.<sup>7</sup> And Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker presided over more than \$4.7 billion in tax cuts.<sup>8</sup> If today's conservatives lack Reagan's sunny optimism and humor, they certainly have his economics.

This essay foregrounds the language permeating public discourse about these activities. I argue that, despite their frequent failure in the real world, policy solutions based on supply-side economics appeal to a complex of hegemonic metaphors that both reflect and perpetuate much of our thinking about class and capital. First, I detail the logic of supply-side economics as it has been enacted in the United States. I then situate this project in relation to the body of literature attending to the rhetoric of economics. Next, I foreground metaphor as a particularly salient area of analysis for this project. Finally, I offer a critique that highlights the powerful, intuitive perspective offered by dominant metaphors about economic activity—particularly class-as-strata, money-as-liquid, and rich folks-as-job-creators—which converge to help make a self-defeating choice seem the right one.

## The Logic of Supply Side Economics

In 1952, the top tax rate<sup>9</sup> stood at 92%. It reflected the consensus view that those most benefited by our economic system ought to pull their weight in paying the costs of educating, feeding, and protecting the nation that made their prosperity possible. In 1981, Ronald Reagan signed into law the Economic Recovery Tax Act, which slashed the top income tax rate from 70% to 50%. In 1986, he lowered the top rate from 50% to 28%. These cuts were legitimated by the logic of supply-side economics. Supply-side advocates argue that taxes suck up revenues companies could use to

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<sup>4</sup> James R. Nunns, Leonard E. Burman, Jeffrey Rohaly, and Joseph Rosenberg, "An Analysis of Donald Trump's Revised Tax Plan," *Tax Policy Center*, October 18, 2016, <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/publications/analysis-donald-trumps-revised-tax-plan> (accessed August 4, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> *Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget*, "How Much Will Donald Trump's Tax Plan Cost?," April 26, 2017, <http://www.crfb.org/blogs/how-much-will-trumps-tax-plan-cost> (accessed August 4, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> *National Public Radio*, "In Kansas, a 'Glide Path' to No Income Taxes. Will It Work?," February 15, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/02/15/171822472/in-kansas-a-glide-path-to-no-income-taxes-will-it-work> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Rachael Bade, "Jindal's Tax Problem," *Politico*, March 16, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/03/bobby-jindal-spars-with-republicans-over-vow-to-grover-norquist-116122> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Lucas Daprile, "Scott Walker Touts \$4.7 Billion in Tax Cuts. Is He Right?" *Politifact*, August 28, 2015, <http://www.politifact.com/wisconsin/statements/2015/aug/28/scott-walker/scott-walker-touts-47-billion-tax-cuts-he-right/> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> The "top tax rate" is the tax levied on income beyond a pre-defined income threshold. In 1953, one was taxed at 92% for income beyond \$300,000. In 2016, one was taxed at 39.6% for income beyond \$415,051.

hire employees. Tax cuts are, thus, upheld as a form of economic resuscitation that pumps capital back into the economy, allowing companies to invest in new businesses and hire more employees. Supply-side advocates claim they are enabling those wealthy people (real and corporate) to purchase more commodities and labor, which will stimulate spending and economic growth and, ultimately, increase tax revenues.

Even at the height of Reagan's popularity, many were critical of Reaganomics. George H. W. Bush called "voodoo economics" the notion that the government could lower taxes without sacrificing services or borrowing more.<sup>10</sup> The "voodoo" was based on a tax revenue model famously associated with economist Arthur Laffer, who explained its workings to members of the Ford administration on a cocktail napkin.<sup>11</sup> Laffer theorized a parabolic relationship between tax rates and revenues, suggesting that at the low and high ends of taxation, revenue would be sub-optimal: at a low rate, taxpayers are paying less than they can spare; at rate near 100%, taxpayers have no incentive to work. Between these two extremes, he theorized a point where a maximum of revenues can be generated without discouraging economic activity.

Critics argued that the administration had taken an intellectually seductive idea too far and without due forbearance. Laffer's curve was not intended as a policy solution but an illustrative model. Worse, no one knew where that optimal tax rate might lie. Indeed, many have found that tax rates have long been below that optimal point. Pecorino estimated that 1980 tax rates were already too low to produce maximum revenues.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Hsing theorized that, between 1959 and 1991, the average tax rate had been around 10% below the optimal point on the Laffer curve.<sup>13</sup> More recently, Trabandt and Uhlig argued that that optimal rates for the US and most European economies are around 70%—precisely where the top tax rate had been prior to 1981.<sup>14</sup>

Reaganomics and the supply-side policies that followed contributed to an unprecedented increase in economic inequality that has continued largely unabated to the present day.<sup>15</sup> Massive tax cuts for top earners put more money back in the pockets of those Americans with the deepest

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Mufson, "Before Trump's Tax Plan, There Was 'Voodoo Economics' and 'Hyperbole,'" *Washington Post*, December 23, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/before-trumps-tax-plan-there-was-voodoo-economics-hyperbole/2016/12/21/c37c97ea-c3d2-11e6-8422-eac61c0ef74d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.7f719523e448](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/before-trumps-tax-plan-there-was-voodoo-economics-hyperbole/2016/12/21/c37c97ea-c3d2-11e6-8422-eac61c0ef74d_story.html?utm_term=.7f719523e448) (accessed August 4, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Moore, "The Laffer Curve Turns 40: The Legacy of a Controversial Idea," *The Washington Post*, December 26, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-laffer-curve-at-40-still-looks-good/2014/12/26/4cded164-853d-11e4-a702-fa31ff4ae98e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-laffer-curve-at-40-still-looks-good/2014/12/26/4cded164-853d-11e4-a702-fa31ff4ae98e_story.html) (accessed August 10, 2018); Jude Wanniski, "Taxes, Revenues, and the 'Laffer Curve,'" *Public Interest*, 1978, [http://www.nationalaffairs.com/public\\_interest/detail/taxes-revenues-and-the-laffer-curve](http://www.nationalaffairs.com/public_interest/detail/taxes-revenues-and-the-laffer-curve) (accessed August 4, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Pecorino, "Tax Rates and Tax Revenues in a Model of Growth through Human Capital Accumulation," *Journal of Monetary Economics* 36 no. 3 (1995): 527-539.

<sup>13</sup> Y. Hsing, "Estimating the Laffer Curve and Policy Implications," *Journal of Socio-Economics* 25 no. 3 (1996): 395-401.

<sup>14</sup> Matthias Trabandt and Harald Uhlig, "How Far Are We From the Slippery Slope? The Laffer Curve Revisted," *National Bureau of Economic Research*, 2009, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w15343> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Congressional Budget Office, *Trends in Distribution of Household Income Between 1979 and 2007*, October 25, 2011, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/42729> (accessed August 10, 2018); Thom Hartmann, "Reaganomics Killed America's Middle Class," *Salon*, April 19, 2014, [http://www.salon.com/2014/04/19/reaganomics\\_killed\\_america\\_middle\\_class\\_partner/](http://www.salon.com/2014/04/19/reaganomics_killed_america_middle_class_partner/) (accessed August 10, 2018); Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, "Income Inequality in the United States, 1913-1998," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118 no. 1 (2003): 1-39; Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

ones in the first place<sup>16</sup> while the deregulation and union-busting that helped grow GDP depressed real wages and encouraged the outsourcing of middle-class and working class jobs.<sup>17</sup>

At the state level, supply-side initiatives have had similar effects, deepening inequality and eviscerating budgets for public services. After three years of supply-side reforms, Kansas lagged behind its Midwestern neighbors and the nation in job growth, income growth, and business investment<sup>18</sup> and despite Brownback's claims that tax-cuts would be like "shooting adrenaline into the heart of the state's economy,"<sup>19</sup> official projections have the Sunflower State trailing the country through 2017.<sup>20</sup> Lower taxes produced lower revenues; and Kansans sustained massive cuts to vital services in order to resolve gaping \$300 million and \$400 million budget deficits in 2014 and 2015, respectively.<sup>21</sup> Louisiana faced a \$1.6 billion budget deficit after tapping nearly all of its emergency funds.<sup>22</sup> In Wisconsin where, despite projections that tax cuts would "trickle down" to the mass of people and create economic growth, a projected \$1 billion surplus turned out to be a \$2.2 billion shortfall.<sup>23</sup> And though the tax cuts were supposed to free the wealthy to hire more laborers, Wisconsin produced new jobs at only about half the rate of the rest of the country.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Congressional Budget Office, *Effective Tax Rates: 1979-2001*, April 3, 2004, [http://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/attachments/effective\\_tax\\_rates2004.pdf](http://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/attachments/effective_tax_rates2004.pdf) (accessed August 10, 2018); Robert K. Schaeffer, *Understanding Globalization: The Social Consequences of Political, Economic, and Environmental Change*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005: 107.

<sup>17</sup> David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010): 131; David Jacobs and Lindsey Myers, "Union Strength, Neoliberalism, and Inequality," *American Sociological Review* 79 no. 4 (2014): 752-774; Douglas S. Massey, *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007): 180-185.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Gutierrez, "Missouri and Kansas Economies are Two of the Unhealthiest in the Nation, Report Says," *The Kansas City Star*, August 10, 2015, <http://www.kansascity.com/news/business/article30614901.html> (accessed August 10, 2018); Megan Hart, "Projections: Kansas Economy May Contract in Coming Months," *The Topeka-Capital Journal*, June 22, 2015, <http://cjonline.com/news/business/2015-06-22/projections-kansas-economy-may-contract-coming-months> (accessed August 10, 2018); Dave Helling and Brad Cooper, "A Look at Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback's Economic Claims," *The Kansas City Star*, July 4, 2015, <http://www.kansascity.com/news/government-politics/article673701.html> (accessed August 10, 2018); Andy Kiersz, "Ranked: The Economies of All 50 US States and DC from Worst to Best," *Business Insider*, August 3, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/state-economy-ranking-july-2015-2015-7> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Sam Brownback, "Gov. Sam Brownback: Tax Cuts Needed to Grow Economy," *The Wichita Eagle*, July 29, 2012, <http://www.kansas.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/article1096336.html> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Michael Leachman, "Kansas Projections Show That Tax Cuts Not Causing Economic Boom," *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, May 21, 2015, <http://www.cbpp.org/blog/kansas-projections-show-tax-cuts-not-causing-economic-boom> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> John Eligon, "Gridlock over Deficit is Broken in Kansas," *New York Times*, June 12, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/us/gridlock-over-deficit-is-broken-in-kansas.html> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Bade, "Jindal's Tax Problem."

<sup>23</sup> Matthew DeFour, "State Faces \$2.2 Billion Deficit Heading into 2015-2017 Budget Cycle," *Wisconsin State Journal*, November 21, 2015, [http://host.madison.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/state-faces-billion-deficit-heading-into---budget-cycle/article\\_5a3d6933-5937-5b23-8cd7-3bc16bf07edb.html](http://host.madison.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/state-faces-billion-deficit-heading-into---budget-cycle/article_5a3d6933-5937-5b23-8cd7-3bc16bf07edb.html) (accessed August 10, 2018); Bob Selter, "Budget Woes Complicate Gov. Scott Walker's White House Ambitions," *Chicago Tribune*, June 29, 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-scott-walker-wisconsin-budget-met-20150626-story.html> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Martin Sullivan, "Walker in Wisconsin: A \$1 Sweater and \$2 Billion in Tax Cuts," *Forbes*, May 6, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/taxanalysts/2015/05/06/walker-in-wisconsin-a-1-sweater-and-2-billion-in-tax-cuts/> (accessed August 10, 2018).

Because it has a balanced-budget amendment, Wisconsin was forced to pay for that underperformance with massive cuts to education, labor protections, the state “living wage,” subsidies for recycling, and the Department of Natural Resources.<sup>25</sup>

Supply-side policies predict tax cuts will produce economic expansion on the basis of two assumptions. First, it is assumed that a lack of free capital is the primary reason that employers are hiring and producing at current levels. But capitalists hire not when they have extra money lying about, but when they expect to profit from the hiring of more labor.<sup>26</sup> And if hiring an additional laborer will not enable the capitalist to recoup the cost of that labor plus a profit, the capitalist has no incentive to hire, regardless of the size of their tax refund.

Second, supply-side solutions assume the rich will spend their tax refunds in ways that have multiplicative effects. But when the wealthy are fearful of economic hard times they often choose, instead, to hoard excess cash.<sup>27</sup> And tax rebates sitting in Swiss bank accounts or in trusts do little to grow the economy. As income and wealth inequality grows increasingly stark, those who receive the largest tax refunds are also the least likely to pump that money back into the economy.

So it cannot be said that supply-side economics has much of a track record. When employed at the federal and state levels, it has produced staggering inequality and alarming reductions in public services. One would be justified, then, in asking why such policies remain so durably attractive to voters. I contend that the rhetoric of supply-side economics—talk about trickle-down effects and about unleashing economic growth by giving money to job creators—draws from and reinforces conceptions of class and economic activity that, if accurate, would make such policies seem perfectly reasonable.

### **The Language of Supply-Side Economics**

The logic of supply-side economics has typically been packaged for the public in terms of two narratives: most commonly, as “trickle down” economics; and more recently as a means of “unleashing” the economy and “creating jobs.” Will Rogers may have been the first to coin “trickle down” when, in his remarks on the supply-side policies enacted by the Hoover administration in the 1930s, he wrote:

The money was all appropriated for the top in the hopes that it would trickle down to the needy. Mr. Hoover was an engineer. He knew that water trickled down. Put it uphill and let it go and it will reach the driest little spot.<sup>28</sup>

By 1977, supply-side economics began appearing as the “trickle-down theory of economics” in economics textbooks. Todaro, for example, explained “trickle-down” as the theory that “rapid gains from the overall growth of GNP and per-capita income would automatically bring benefits

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<sup>25</sup> Valerie Strauss, “Gov. Scott Walker Savages Wisconsin Public Education in New Budget,” *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2015/07/13/gov-scott-walker-savages-wisconsin-public-education-in-new-budget/> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Richard D. Wolff and Stephen A. Resnick, *Contending Economic Theories: Neoclassical, Keynesian, and Marxian* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012): 156-157.

<sup>27</sup> Congressional Budget Office, *Policies for Increasing Economic Growth and Employment in the Short Term*, February 23, 2010, [https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/111th-congress-2009-2010/reports/02-23-employment\\_testimony.pdf](https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/111th-congress-2009-2010/reports/02-23-employment_testimony.pdf) (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> As quoted in D. M. Giangreco and Kathryn Moore, *Dear Harry: Truman’s Mailroom 1945-1953* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1999): 6.

(i.e., ‘trickle down’) to the masses in the form of jobs and other economic opportunities.”<sup>29</sup> The story was much the same in 1997, when Aghion and Bolton wrote, “It is widely believed that the accumulation of wealth by the rich is good for the poor since some of the increased wealth of the rich trickles down to the poor.”<sup>30</sup> Detractors and supporters continue to talk about supply-side economics in such terms; as Rush Limbaugh did when he insisted that “if it weren’t for trickle-down, [Bill Clinton] would not have had a roaring economy in the 1990s.”<sup>31</sup>

More often today, conservatives shy away from explicitly referring to their tax schemes as “trickle down” economics, preferring to talk about “unleashing economic growth,” ushering in “prosperity,” and especially about easing burdens on “job creators.” One-time Republican candidate Mitt Romney argued that the only way out of our economic recession was to “foster economic opportunity” and hack away at taxes that “have suffocated economic growth.”<sup>32</sup> The early Republican favorite for the 2016 presidential race Jeb Bush, for example, advocated for a “Reagan-Inspired Tax Reform Plan” which would “unleash” economic growth and prosperity, “turbocharge our economy” and “make it possible for American businesses to provide higher wages to workers.”<sup>33</sup> Bush’s “Right to Rise” plan to “jump-start our economy” involved slashing income tax rates, cutting corporate tax rates, and cutting the tax on capital gains (i.e., income from investments) to the lowest levels in two decades.<sup>34</sup> Mr. Bush argued: “It’s Washington that’s holding us back. ... The way we bring jobs back to America is to take power out of Washington, give it back to the American people.”

Those most responsible for creating this new prosperity are the very wealthy—those who conservative politicians prefer to describe as “job creators.”<sup>35</sup> During his 2012 presidential bid, Mitt Romney warned that, in allowing the Bush tax cuts to expire for top income brackets, President Obama had “decided to attack success ... and [wage] war on job creators.”<sup>36</sup> In 2016, Trump’s most charismatic competition from the establishment came from Senator Marco Rubio, who also worried about those job creators. In his response to President Obama’s State of the Union address, Rubio lamented that the President did not understand the steps needed to advance our country into the 21<sup>st</sup> century: “The American people are long overdue to have a president stand before Congress and the nation and acknowledge reality: ... taxing successful people, over-regulating job creators

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<sup>29</sup> Michael P. Todaro, *Economic Development in the Third World* (London: Longman, 1977): 439.

<sup>30</sup> Philippe Aghion and Patrick Bolton, “A Theory of Trickle-Down Growth and Development,” *Review of Economic Studies* 64 no. 2 (1997): 151.

<sup>31</sup> Rush Limbaugh, “Hillary: ‘Don’t Let Anyone Tell You That It’s Corporations and Businesses That Create Jobs!’,” October 27, 2014, [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2014/10/27/hillary\\_don\\_t\\_let\\_anybody\\_tell\\_you\\_that\\_it\\_s\\_corporations\\_and\\_businesses\\_that\\_create\\_jobs](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2014/10/27/hillary_don_t_let_anybody_tell_you_that_it_s_corporations_and_businesses_that_create_jobs) (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Mitt Romney, “Mitt Romney: My Vision for America,” *CNN*, November 6, 2012, [http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/02/opinion/romney-vision-for-america/index.html?hpt=hp\\_c1](http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/02/opinion/romney-vision-for-america/index.html?hpt=hp_c1) (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Jeb Bush, “A Reagan-Inspired Tax Reform Plan,” *The Orange County Register*, September 14, 2015, <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/tax-682588-percent-reagan.html> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Jeb Bush, “Speech: Reform and Growth Plan,” September 9, 2015, <https://jeb2016.com/speech-reform-and-growth-plan/?lang=en> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Heesun Wee, “Don’t Tax the Job Creators: Romney,” *CNBC*, July 23, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/id/48290347> (accessed August 10, 2018); Marco Rubio, “Rubio Votes to Repeal Obamacare [press release],” March 22, 2013, <http://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=c7739114-62ce-4be4-a375-523cf51d972a> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Alexander Burns, “Romney: Obama Waging ‘War on Job Creators,’” *Politico*, May 23, 2012, <http://www.politico.com/blogs/burns-haberman/2012/05/romney-obama-waging-war-on-job-creators-124350> (accessed August 10, 2018).

and pouring money into outdated government programs doesn't actually help struggling people."<sup>37</sup> Rubio went to great pains to make it clear to donors that he was "proudly on the side of job creators,"<sup>38</sup> of "job-creating free trade agreements,"<sup>39</sup> and opposed to government regulations that get in the way of all that job creation.

Donald Trump campaigned on the basis of his identity as an employer: "I create jobs. They don't create jobs. They're politicians."<sup>40</sup> In a speech to the Detroit Economic Club, Trump provided a rare sustained description of his economic vision:

Taxes are one of the biggest differences in this race. Hillary Clinton ... plans another massive job-killing \$1.3 trillion-dollar tax increase. ... I am proposing an across-the-board income tax reduction, especially for middle-income Americans. This will lead to millions of new good-paying jobs. The rich will pay their fair share, but no one will pay so much that it destroys jobs, or undermines our ability to compete. ... These reforms will offer the biggest tax revolution since the Reagan Tax Reform, which unleashed years of continued economic growth and job creation.<sup>41</sup>

In his first press conference after his election, the President bragged: "We're going to create jobs. ... I will be the greatest jobs producer that God ever created."<sup>42</sup> Shortly after, the Trump administration proposed a tax plan to "grow the economy and create millions of jobs," almost entirely through "tax relief." Like Reagan, Trump claimed that the massive tax cut would "pay for itself with growth."<sup>43</sup> For Trump, the message is clear: business-owners must be refunded more of their taxes so that they can hire more workers and get the economy moving again. The remainder of this essay attempts to understand how these ways of thinking and talking about supply-side economics help make a questionable course of action seem the simplest thing in the world.

## The Rhetoric of Economics

In 1983, Deirdre McCloskey, a founding member of the Project on the Rhetoric of Inquiry, turned a critical eye on a field whose dry style and obtuse vocabulary have earned it the title "the dismal science." Although economists position themselves as careful scrutinizers of facts, McCloskey argued, they engage in a deeply rhetorical process shot through with metaphor, probabilistic and

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<sup>37</sup> Catalina Camia, "Rubio: Obama Speech Stuck in 20<sup>th</sup> Century," *USA Today*, January 21, 2015, <http://onpolitics.usatoday.com/2015/01/21/rubio-obama-sotu-reaction/> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Bloomberg Government, *Marco Rubio (R-FL)*, 2015, <http://www.asn-online.org/policy/webdocs/FL-Marco%20Rubio.pdf> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> Marco Rubio, *Reclaiming the American Dream*, 2015, [http://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/files/serve/?File\\_id=6f8ff279-671b-42fa-b60a-10402e35747b](http://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/files/serve/?File_id=6f8ff279-671b-42fa-b60a-10402e35747b) (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Sean Piccoli, "Donald Trump: No Job Creators in 2016 Field," *Newsmax*, April 20, 2015, <http://www.newsmax.com/Politics/Donald-Trump-2016-job-creators/2015/04/20/id/639610/> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> J. Brian Charles, "Transcript of Donald Trump's Economic Policy Speech to Detroit Economic Club," *The Hill*, August 8, 2016, <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/campaign/290777-transcript-of-donald-trumps-economic-policy-speech-to-detroit> (accessed August 4, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> *Washington Post*, "Trump: 'I Will Be the Greatest Jobs Producer God Ever Created'," January 11, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trump-i-will-be-the-greatest-jobs-creator-that-god-ever-created/2017/01/11/152b5bd6-d827-11e6-a0e6-d502d6751bc8\\_video.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trump-i-will-be-the-greatest-jobs-creator-that-god-ever-created/2017/01/11/152b5bd6-d827-11e6-a0e6-d502d6751bc8_video.html) (accessed August 4, 2018).

<sup>43</sup> Justin Miller, "Trump's Tax Cut is Unadulterated Trickle-Down Fundamentalism," *American Prospect*, April 26, 2017, <http://prospect.org/article/trump-big-tax-cut-unadulterated-trickle-down-fundamentalism> (accessed August 4, 2018).

doxastic argument, appeals to aesthetic beauty, and grounded in values and morality.<sup>44</sup> She regarded the discipline's adoption of modernist thought and the aesthetics of the hard sciences as a part of a prolonged attempt to carve out a kind of above-the-fray ethos for a field whose subject matter is, in fact, very human and, therefore, subjective. Expanding her original argument into a book by the same name, she observed in the field's embrace of words like "allocate" and "maximize," quantification, and deductive argument, the attempt to "evoke Scientific power, to claim precision without necessarily using it."<sup>45</sup> She critiqued the style of contemporary economic writing, which she termed *presented reality*: "the scientist says, It is not I who makes these assertions, but reality itself."<sup>46</sup> These rhetorical choices present economists as serious, rigorous, authoritative analysts of concrete reality. Impressive displays of "sometimes pointless" mathematics establish them as authorities; and appeals to other experts are common.<sup>47</sup> "Toy economies" and simple models serve as grist for arguments from analogy to the real economy. And economists trope so often that we fail to perceive the poetry in discussions about transaction "friction," price "elasticity," profit "spread," economic "depression," "human capital," or the point of "equilibrium."<sup>48</sup> Though her critics accused her of diminishing economics, McCloskey's aim has been to free it from the suffocating demands of the modernist scientism which fit it so poorly in the first place and, thereby, to embrace the aesthetic, affective, logical, and sociological appeals of economic thought.

Some communication scholars have continued to critique the rhetoric of economic theory, particularly that of Adam Smith.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps a greater number attend to economic rhetoric traversing wider publics. Often, they conceive of rhetoric as the means by which policymakers and opinion-leaders persuade the general public to think and talk about the economy in particular ways.<sup>50</sup> This seems an especially opportune point of entry for many scholars of public address, as economic theory and policy must be "sold" to the public via speeches, talking points, and advertisements that convert it into common sense.

As Hanan and Chaput pointed out, some works in this area proceed as if rhetoric operates among stable subjects who audience persuasive appeals about the economy; and as if the economy and economic behaviors were *a priori* entities, which are merely represented by discourse. They contend that rhetoric and the economy are inextricable: the economy is a rhetorical achievement,

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<sup>44</sup> Donald N. McCloskey, "The Rhetoric of Economics," *Journal of Economic Literature* 21 no. 2 (1983): 481-517.

<sup>45</sup> Deirdre N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-44.

<sup>49</sup> See A. M. Endres, "Adam Smith's Rhetoric of Economics: An Illustration Using 'Smithian' Compositional Rules," *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* 38 no 1 (1991): 76-95; Joshua S. Hanan, "The Moral Rhetoric of Political Economy: Justice and Modern Economic Thought," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 15 no 3 (2012): 549-552; William Rodney Herring and Mark Garrett Longaker, "Wishful, Rational, and Political Thinking: The Labor Theory of Value as Rhetoric," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 50 no 4 (2014): 193-209; Mark Garrett Longaker, "Adam Smith on Rhetoric and Phronesis, Law and Economics," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 47 no 1(2014): 25-47; Paul Turpin, *The Moral Rhetoric of Political Economy: Justice and Modern Economic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> James Arnt Aune, *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness*. (New York: Guilford Press, 1999); Megan Foley, "From Infantile Citizens to Infantile Institutions: The Metaphoric Transformation of Political Economy in the 2008 Housing Market Crisis," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98 no. 4 (2012): 386-410; Rebecca Gill, "The Evolution of Organizational Archetypes: From the American to the Entrepreneurial Dream," *Communication Monographs* 80 no. 3 (2013): 331-353; G. Thomas Goodnight and Sandy Green, "Rhetoric, Risk, and Markets: The Dot-Com Bubble," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96 no. 2 (2010): 115-140; Joshua S. Hanan and Catherine Chaput, "A Rhetoric of Economics beyond Civic Humanism: Exploring the Political Economy of Rhetoric in the Context of Late Neoliberalism," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 8 no 1 (2015): 16-24.



as are the subjects circulating within it. So while the field of communication has had studies of rhetoric about economic phenomena, it requires more works recognizing that speech about the economy is a part of the constitution of the economy. In this essay, I am interested in the metaphors and metonymies imbricated in the rhetoric of trickle down economics, which I take to be not just appealing ornaments, but crucial to the way that the public makes sense of and lives in relation to economic phenomena like wealth and class.

## Metaphor and Metonymy

Rhetoricians have long appreciated the power of metaphor to open minds. Aristotle advised readers that metaphor “gives perspicuity, pleasure, and a foreign air.”<sup>51</sup> But metaphor is far more than an adjunct to good style; it has generative potential. In addition to helping “set things ‘before the eyes’”<sup>52</sup> (i.e., to illustrate the abstract), metaphors serve a pedagogical function:

Easy learning is naturally pleasant to all, and [...] words which make us learn something are most pleasant. Now we do not know the meaning of strange words, and proper terms we know already. It is metaphor, therefore, that above all produces this effect; for when Homer calls old age stubble, he teaches and informs us through the genus; for both have lost their bloom.<sup>53</sup>

This view was given a fuller expression in the works of Giambattista Vico who held that human understandings emerge from “the capacity to perceive the analogies existing between matters lying far apart and, apparently, most dissimilar.”<sup>54</sup> By thinking tropologically, humans have come to understand new domains of knowledge: sound waves as the tide; the periodic elements as playing cards; the development of genetics as a great tree; the movement of electricity as water; and the fibers of the basilar membrane within the ear as the wires in harp.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps no one has been more successful in sensitizing readers to the importance of tropes than George Lakoff and Mark Johnson who demonstrated the power of metaphors to structure perception, thought, and action in the world.<sup>56</sup> Conceptual metaphors attain such widespread use that they become fundamental in our understanding of some phenomenon. We have so thoroughly embraced the metaphor that argument-is-war that we really can “win” or “lose” an argument in Western culture. Conceptual metaphors are typically systematic too: they furnish a whole network of related terms that can be transferred to the subject of the metaphor. If argument is war, we are invited to consider what might be the equivalent of an ambush, a battle of attrition, a final charge, a retreat, an atom bomb, or a flanking maneuver.

One especially powerful class of conceptual metaphors, which Lakoff & Johnson term “orientational metaphors,”<sup>57</sup> structures experience in terms of space, converting happy and sad into up and down; elite and subordinated into center and margin; winning and losing into front and back. We hear about “*lifted* spirits,” “*feeling down*,” or “*falling* into a *deep* depression.” Critical scholars

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<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, trans. J. H. Freese (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926): Book 3 2:8.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:2.

<sup>54</sup> As quoted in Alessandra Beasley Von Burg, “Caught Between History and Imagination: Vico’s Ingenium for a Rhetorical Renovation of Citizenship,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43 no 1: 28.

<sup>55</sup> Roy Dreistadt, “An Analysis of the Use of Analogies and Metaphors in Science,” *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied* 68 no 1: 97-116.

<sup>56</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

have displayed a fondness for the center-margin metaphor as a way to conceptualize the experiences of dominance and subordination, as “marginalized groups” and “marginalized identities” have replaced “minorities” in our journal articles and conference publications. The metaphor comports well with other established conceptual metaphors in scholarly discussions about public opinion and deliberation and with post-colonial and critical race theory discussions about boundaries, borderlands, frontiers, territories, and discursive fields.

Though they can help “create new meanings and to challenge previously established ways of understanding,” Billig and Macmillan wrote, metaphors can also “function as routine idioms in political discourse in ways that deaden political awareness.”<sup>58</sup> In fact, the phenomena are two sides of the same coin. Like other novelties, “what was once sharp and novel becomes through usage ordinary and indistinct.” And since, Duffy and Short explain, “such mappings are by nature only partial, such metaphorically defined models can function ideologically, biasing speakers towards particular interpretations of situations or events, even when such interpretations may contradict experience.”<sup>59</sup> Its ordinary, unremarkable status makes the enervated metaphor all the more significant. When we cease to recognize it as a trope, the metaphor begins to operate at the level of hegemony, mapping one domain in terms of another.<sup>60</sup>

Like metaphor, metonymy engenders perspective. The terms differ in terms of distance they exploit in their production of that perspective. Metaphor can place nearly any distance between tenor (the phenomenon to be described) and vehicle (the phenomenon whose attributes are imported). One can claim that love is a battlefield; that cats are geniuses; or that black holes are bulimics. When Vincent Van Gogh averred that conscience is a man’s [sic] compass, he invited his audience to understand the guiding role of conscience in affairs of the heart by way of our understanding of navigation through the physical world. Metaphors instruct the audience: “use B as a perspective upon A.”<sup>61</sup> Metonymies are far more domestic. They instruct us: understand A in terms of its closely related symptom or correlate B.

Often, metonymy grounds the ephemeral or abstract. To say that the pen is mightier than the sword, is to materialize intellectual advocacy and coercive physical domination, respectively. The heart stands in for the emotions; gut for instincts; spine for will. Even social scientists consort with metonymy: cortisol stands in for stress; popular support for the court for judicial legitimacy; student evaluations for pedagogy. These examples also hint at the sort of perspective that metonymy offers: reductionism. To the extent that metonymy reduces complexity and cuts to the heart of a matter, it is useful. But reduction also risks myopia, inaccuracy, and distortion. In the remainder of this essay, I argue that supply-side economic policies remain popular with voters because they appeal to a set of hegemonic conceptual metaphors and metonymies that resonate deeply with established ideological discourses of class and capital.

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Billig and Katie Macmillan, “Metaphor, Idiom and Ideology: The Search For ‘No Smoking Guns’ Across Time,” *Discourse & Society* 16 no 4: 459.

<sup>59</sup> William Duffy and William Michael Short, “Metaphor as Ideology: The Greek ‘Folk Model’ of the Epic Tradition,” in *Oral Poetics and Cognitive Science*, eds. Mihailo Antovic and Christóbal Cánovas (Berlin, Germany: DeGruyter, 2016): 52-53. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>.

<sup>60</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982).

<sup>61</sup> Kenneth Burke, “The Four Master Tropes,” *The Kenyon Review* 3 no. 4 (1941): 422.

## The Rhetoric of Supply Side Economics

*Class.* One of capitalism's early achievements, Marx and Engels observed, consisted in finally sweeping away the "mostly feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and ... left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.'"<sup>62</sup> Perhaps it is because the United States grew up with capitalism or because it was founded upon principles of moral and legal equality such that, as Werner Sombart noted "the bowing and scraping before the 'upper classes,' which produces such an unpleasant impression in Europe, is completely unknown [in the United States],"<sup>63</sup> we often act as if ours is a classless society.<sup>64</sup> President George H. W. Bush remarked that "class is for European democracies or something else—it isn't for the United States of America. We aren't going to be divided by class."<sup>65</sup> Many seem to feel our elites are not elite because they come from the best families or because they have won the favor of a religious figure; they simply earn and own more than the rest of us. And as Cloud has suggested, our media system offers us daily lessons in the form of rags-to-riches stories about luminaries like Oprah Winfrey, Steve Jobs, and Bill Gates.<sup>66</sup> In them, we see normal, even nerdy, people just like us who happened to hit a home run in the game of life. Indeed, economic mobility is the cornerstone of the American Dream—the notion that with enough hard work and moral fiber, any American can rise from poverty to a life of material and spiritual richness.

When US Americans do talk about class, they typically think of themselves as members of "the middle class"—promising, hard workers with a bright future if they play their cards right.<sup>67</sup> Respondents from the working poor all the way up to the top 5% of wage earners imagine themselves as middle class.<sup>68</sup> Pew Research Center found that only 7% of all Americans consider themselves members of the lower class and only 2% identified as upper class.<sup>69</sup> As such, politicians left and right fight to be perceived as champions of the middle class. As John Steinbeck opined, the

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<sup>62</sup> Karl Marx and Frederic Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore, (Chicago: Henry Regener, 1954): 18-19. (Original work published 1848)

<sup>63</sup> As quoted in Richard V. Reeves, "Classless America, Still?," *Brookings Institution*, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2014/08/27/classless-america-still/> (accessed August 4, 2018).

<sup>64</sup> Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking, 2016); Benjamin DeMott, *The Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Class* (New York: Benjamin Morrow, 1990).

<sup>65</sup> DeMott, *The Imperial Middle*, 9-10.

<sup>66</sup> Dana L. Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in 'Oprah' Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 no. 2 (1996): 115-137.

<sup>67</sup> Dana L. Cloud, "Rhetoric and Economics: Or, How Rhetoricians Can Get a Little Class," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 no. 3: 352; Anat Shenker-Osorio, *Don't Buy It: The Trouble with Talking Nonsense about the Economy*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012): 109.

<sup>68</sup> Catherine Rampell, "Everyone is 'Middle Class,' Right?" *The New York Times*, April 27, 2011, <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/27/everyone-is-middle-class-right/> (accessed August 10, 2018); Anat Shenker-Osorio, "Why Americans All Believe They are 'Middle Class,'" *The Atlantic*, August 1, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/08/why-americans-all-believe-they-are-middle-class/278240/> (accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>69</sup> Rich Morin and Seth Motel, "A Third of Americans Now Say They Are in the Lower Classes," *Pew Research Center*, September 10, 2012, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/09/10/a-third-of-americans-now-say-they-are-in-the-lower-classes/> (accessed August 10, 2018).

failure of the socialist movement to incite real structural change in the United States can be attributed to the fact that even the dirt poor conceive of themselves as momentarily inconvenienced future millionaires rather than proletarians consigned to a life of labor.<sup>70</sup>

What matters the most in the ways that we talk about class is the clear orientational metaphor that we, and so many others throughout history, have employed in conceiving of it. To speak of a middle class is to imply ends or tops and bottoms. In our case, class is almost always figured in terms of vertical distribution—we speak of class as if it were a stack of semi-permeable strata. A whole system of thought emanates from this orientational metaphor. We know about social *climbers*, *upward* mobility, *high* and *low* culture, *upscale* and *downscale* restaurants, *high-end* neighborhoods, *low-class* behavior, and we sometimes hear of *declining* neighborhoods. We believe we can *work our way up* to better positions, and we are well aware of the scandals and gaffes that can lead to a *fall* from grace. And conservatives assure their base that they are in favor of “hands up, not hand outs.”

Mapping class to vertical space is probably aided by our tendency to reduce class to money since, as Lakoff and Johnson pointed out, we also tend to conceive of numbers in terms of an up-down orientational metaphor—the stock market is *up* or *down*, we ask for a *raise*, boxers diet in order to *drop down* a weight class, we speed *up* in a sports car but slow *down* when we spy a state trooper ahead, and we bemoan the *high* cost of living in San Francisco. Insofar as the average American thinks of class as a simple reflection of one’s wealth, to make a *high* salary is to be in the *upper* class.

Critical scholars, too, further reify class-as-vertical-strata each time we write about *overlords*, the *underclass*, power-*up* and power-*down* positions, *grassroots* activism, *top* officials, *subordination* (literally, *lower* in rank), *oppression* and *suppression*. Conceiving of class in terms of vertical distribution simply makes sense for those grappling with domination—it makes abstract notions of class identity commensurate with the physical experience of being physically dominated by an aggressor who towers over or jumps atop a victim.

*The Wealthy*. When they talk about the *top* of our class system, supply-side advocates increasingly prefer to describe the ultra-wealthy as *job-creators*. To do so is to recast a narrow elite ordinarily regarded with suspicion or jealousy as a noble group who make life better for the rest of us. Wealthy-person-as-job-creator operates as a double-metonymy, substituting business owners for wealthy folks; and substituting one small part of business ownership for the complex and heterogeneous activities of business owners. For advocates, it is a useful reduction: the trope obscures those whose wealth is unrelated to the operation of some businesses and all who employ no one. Only about ten percent of all Americans are small business owners; and many of these individuals are sole proprietors who employ no one and are unlikely to be the beneficiaries of President Trump’s largesse.<sup>71</sup> To continue, the trope reduces business owners to one specific activity: the hiring of labor. Of course, business owners do not just hire people: they rent space, sell products and services, lobby for lower tax rates, extract resources from the environment, create pollution and waste, air advertisements, put other companies out of business, attempt to lower the prices of their raw materials, and strive to make as much money from the buying public as possible. In fact, hiring new workers likely occupies a very small portion of the average business-owner’s time. More importantly, referring to a business-owner as a job creator suggests that giving people jobs

<sup>70</sup> John Steinbeck, “A Primer of the 30’s. In *America and Americans and Selected Non-Fiction*, ed. Susan Shillinglaw and Jackson J. Benson (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), 17-31. (Original work published 1960)

<sup>71</sup> Robert W. Fairlie and Alicia M. Robb, *Race and Entrepreneurial Success: Black-, Asian-, and White-Owned Businesses in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2008).

is simply what a business owner does in order to be a business owner. And if business owners are not giving people jobs, some extrinsic factor (e.g., the government) must be stopping them.

*Money.* Talk about money is similarly suffused with metaphor, but, as Silaški and Kilyeni argue, perhaps the most important metaphor is money-is-liquid.<sup>72</sup> It makes sense to imagine money as a liquid—after all, it is that substance which is most readily convertible into any good or service. Like a liquid, cash can be converted into almost any shape. And cash is as crucial to economic survival as water is to the person walking through the desert. The money-is-liquid metaphor is so well established that *liquidity* is formally defined in many approaches to accounting. Once entrenched, the metaphor invokes another network of elaborations. Once we determine that capital is a liquid, we can begin to worry about capital *flows*, capital or income *leakage*, revenue *streams*, the *circulation* of capital, transaction *friction*, being *tapped out*, and we hope that the government never *freezes* our bank accounts. The metaphor also resonates with our lived experiences trying to accumulate money. To be deprived of money can feel like dying of thirst. And like a liquid, it often slips through our fingers or evaporates before our eyes despite our best attempts to preserve it.

Money-is-liquid is also a metaphor that comports well with other dominant metaphors for economic phenomena. We speak of the economy as if it were an organism when we say that the economy is flourishing, struggling, or in trouble. In these cases, it makes sense to speak of capital as if it were blood. We hear talk, for example, about new ownership providing a *transfusion* or *injection* of new capital into struggling businesses or “growing” the economy as if it were a crop. Governor Brownback’s promise that his Reaganesque tax cuts would work like a “shot of adrenaline” into the Kansas economy depend on such troping, as well. We also are fond of speaking as if the economy were a great machine. In these cases, it makes sense to describe capital as a lubricant; as such, we *grease* palms and wheels.

If my arguments in the preceding paragraphs are compelling, it should not require much more space to explain the common-sense appeal of supply-side economics policies. The rhetoric of “trickle-down” economics reflects and reinforces dominant conceptual metaphors about class and capital. To the extent that we imagine classes as vertically distributed strata and money as a liquid, it only makes sense that to shower the top of the class structure with money would be akin to watering a plant—the liquid would suffuse the top layer and then, inevitably, trickle down to each layer beneath. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of “job creation” replaces a diverse population of wealthy people with a rare but sympathetic figure (this is the reduction provided by the wealthy-are-business-owners metonymy) and, further, replaces a complicated set of decisions about staffing for a simple causal relationship between cash and jobs (i.e., the business-owners-are-job-creators metonymy). To the extent that we think of the rich as a noble group of people desperate to give us jobs, it only makes sense to hand them the money they would need to do it for us.

The success of attempts to recast business-owners as job-givers is facilitated by the same kind of incapacity evident in much of our everyday speech and thought about class. The tendency to think of a capitalist ruling class as simply wealthier than the rest of us, and to think of hiring as predicated simply on the availability of extra capital are evidence of failure to reckon honestly with the nature of class in a capitalist society. So long as we continue to speak in terms of these tropes, we help make these solutions seem appealing. Any way of speaking and thinking about class suggesting simple adjacency or continuity between those who must labor and those who reserve to themselves the right to appropriate and distribute the fruits of that labor is insufficient.

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<sup>72</sup> Nadežda Silaški and Annamaria Kilyeni, “The Money is Liquid Metaphor in Economic Terminology—A Contrastive Analysis of English, Siberian, and Romanian,” *Professional Communication and Translation Studies* 4 no. 1-2 (2011): 63-72.

Failure to recognize the importance of surplus value in the capitalist business owner's decision to purchase more labor prevents us from understanding the conditions under which that purchase actually happens.

It is not enough, however, to point out the limitations of our existing vocabulary for class and capital. As Luke Winslow pointed out, a rhetorical perspective also suggests that new symbols are necessary: these “misguided and ineffectual public policy solutions to massive economic stratification and stagnant mobility” continue to be deployed because they comport so nicely with the symbolic equipment we have established for talking and thinking about the economy.<sup>73</sup> And though the class-as-vertical-strata metaphor is closely associated with so many other orientational metaphors that conflate numbers, status, and success with height, Goatly points out that well-entrenched metaphors can, over time, be displaced by new ones.<sup>74</sup> Those who wish to see movement away from supply side policy ought to develop an alternative vocabulary to sensitize audiences to other dimensions of economic phenomena and engender consideration of alternative solutions. Rather than capitalists-as-job-givers, they could trope capitalists-as-hostage-takers. After all, jobs are not given out of a spirit of magnanimity; they are ransomed off by those who, through a series of legal and political achievements, have reserved for themselves the right to own the land and capital that such work requires. The landlord will make it available to those who need to farm on it, but only for a ransom that we call rent. And the owner of a fast food restaurant will allow individuals to make their living producing and selling food, but only in exchange for a ransom that we call profit. Should either of these figures find that they can extract a richer ransom for the job, one should expect that they will readily hand it over to someone else.

Advocates might also pull at the other end of the equation that produces jobs. By this, I mean that they ought to begin troping patrons as job creators. If a capitalist decides to employ someone, it is only because someone else appears ready to pay for their labor and then some. In this way, it is the person who shops at Wal-Mart, who dines at McDonalds, or uses Uber who “creates” a job stocking shelves, making sandwiches, or driving a car. One can barely imagine what it might look like to construct a tax policy that serves those everyday folks who co-create the jobs we value.

There are also options for troping capital. Rather than the money-as-liquid metaphor, critics might return to an older comparison: money-as-food. Like food, money sustains economic agents and is often hoarded by the most fortunate even as others lack the most basic sustenance. Speaking and thinking of money in this way can also prompt us to recognize how inefficient it is to distribute money to the poor *through* the rich. And there is precedent for troping in this way. Before “trickle down” was Reaganomics, it was Mellonomics—so named for Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon, who advocated for upward redistribution in the 1920s. But before that, it was known as the “horse and sparrow theory” of economics.<sup>75</sup> The logic goes that if one feeds the horse enough oats, the material pushed through the horse's back end will be sufficient for sparrows to survive on. Upon reflection, the older metaphor is perhaps most apt, for it comes closer to supply-side economics' real message to the working poor: eat shit.

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<sup>73</sup> Luke Winslow, *Economic Injustice and the Rhetoric of the American Dream* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 97.

<sup>74</sup> Andrew Goatly, “Metaphor and Ideology,” *Ilha do Desterro: A Journal of English Language, Literatures in English and Cultural Studies* 53 (2007): 63-93.

<sup>75</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, “Recession Economics,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 4, 1982, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1982/feb/04/recession-economics/> (accessed August 10, 2018).

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that a family of rather unsuccessful economic policies continues to gain assent because they draw from and perpetuate a complex of metaphors and metonymies that often structure the way we think and talk about the economy. “Trickle-down” economics promises handing tax refunds to the wealthiest Americans will stimulate job-creation and lead, eventually, to the generation of tax revenues equal to or beyond those realized at higher levels of taxation. The policy basically ignores the conditions that drive capitalists to hire more laborers; but it “makes sense” because it so nicely operates within the complex of dominant tropes that Americans use to talk and think about economic activity. It just makes sense that cash would flow or trickle down to “lower” classes. Likewise, the notion that “job-creators” are being handicapped by high taxation and government regulation runs at direct odds with the record profits realized by our corporations; but the rhetoric comports with durable ways of thinking and talking about class and economic activity. In Kenneth Burke’s terminology, these tropes have become trained incapacities,<sup>76</sup> which tend to blind us to other alternative ways of apprehending our experiences.

Trained incapacities can prove costly. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget estimates that the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act signed into law on December 22, 2017 will add at least \$1.5 trillion to the national debt.<sup>77</sup> The Tax Policy Center estimates that the law will have a very modest short-run effect on the economic output, but produce no measurable increase in Gross Domestic Product in the longer term.<sup>78</sup> It will produce important consequences: according to conservative economist and co-director of the Tax Policy Center, William Gale, the law “exacerbates preexisting and longstanding trends [towards economic inequality], rather than aiming to partially compensate for them.”<sup>79</sup> Obama administration economist Lily Batchelder described the bill as a measure to bolster a class of elites who are born and stay rich.<sup>80</sup> By 2027, the *New York Times* reported, “people making \$40,000 to \$50,000 would pay a combined \$5.3 billion more in taxes, while the group earning \$1 million or more would get a \$5.8 billion cut.”<sup>81</sup> The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget reports that, by 2028, the tax bill will “likely be enough to cause debt to exceed the size of the economy.”<sup>82</sup> And by then, many who passed this law may decide that they once again are deeply concerned about the growing size of the national debt and call for another round of cuts to public services and programs. These cuts, which also followed previous rounds of supply-side tax policy, represent the final installment in the price of supply-side policy. If we hope to resist its next iteration, scholars and activists must address our trained incapacity and deploy new vocabularies to prompt reflection upon the nature of class and employment in our economy.

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<sup>76</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>77</sup> Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, *Tax Cuts and Jobs Act Will Cost \$1.5 Trillion*, November 2, 2017, <http://www.crfb.org/blogs/tax-cut-and-jobs-act-will-cost-15-trillion> (accessed August 5, 2018).

<sup>78</sup> Nunns et. al, “An Analysis of Donald Trump’s Revised Tax Plan.”

<sup>79</sup> Dylan Scott and Alvin Chang, “The Republican Tax Bill Will Exacerbate Income Inequality in America,” *Vox*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/12/2/16720952/senate-tax-bill-inequality> (accessed August 5, 2018).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Peter S. Goodman and Patricia Cohen, “It Started as a Tax Cut. Now It Could Change American Life,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/29/business/republican-tax-cut.html> (accessed August 5, 2018).

<sup>82</sup> Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, *Tax Cuts and Jobs Act Will Cost \$1.5 Trillion*.