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Evaporative Economics: A Truth-Telling Metaphor to Displace the Trickle-Down Lie that Just Won't Die

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Abstract

Trickle-down economics is a fallacious metaphor that hurts working people and the civic commons. In this paper, we discuss the role and impact metaphors have in economics education. We explore the stickiness of "truthy" but ultimately false metaphors and offer economics educators alternative metaphors to displace this problematic metaphorical language. In its place, we propose a restorying of this fiction to tell a more truthful story in economics classrooms using the dual metaphors of *evaporative economics* and *economic desertification*. We end by identifying the limitations of metaphorical language in teaching complex economic concepts, even while we recognize the power of these tools to elicit engagement in and with economics content that has real and lasting impacts on individuals and communities.

Keywords: *Critical Economics education, metaphor, economic language, trickle-down economics, supply-side economics.*

Introduction

The use of metaphor in economics is ubiquitous (Adams, 2021; Adams & Koch, 2020; Goatly, 2007; McCloskey, 1983, 1990, 1998). Some of these metaphorical uses may be innocuous or insidious—like referring to the economy as a machine, whether well-oiled or otherwise (e.g., Borders, 2011); others can be beneficial for illustrating how economic ideas work, such as the doughnut metaphor of sustainable development (see Raworth, 2017), and some thought-provoking, like Neil Shanks' (2022) use of the term *crash.* Still, metaphors can also be deleterious to our understanding of economic principles, actively insulating the powerful from making concessions that would contribute to the making of a more just economy. Commonly, we hear metaphorical language like the rising tide lifts all boats, pull yourself up by the bootstraps, and wealth trickles down. Each of these metaphors evokes imagery that justifies the use of economic

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policy to shelter the rich from those that would target help toward those who are otherwise just expected to pull themselves up regardless of whatever privations they may be experiencing.

These metaphors, ubiquitous in American life, are meaning-making tools in the service of the powerful (Goatly, 2007). They serve as rhetorical devices used to convince their audience of a particular economic narrative (Adams, 2021), especially construing the rich and powerful as job creators and engineers of healthy economies while often underpaid, exploited, and underemployed workers are viewed as takers, as drags against the same economy. The problem is not the use of metaphor, per se, but rather that these metaphors paint a compelling picture of economic life that is empirically false (see Hope & Limberg, 2020; Krugman, 1994; Picketty, 2018; Saez, 2018; Stiglitz, 2015a). This is to say, such metaphorical language, used in the service of the powerful, often resembles the peddling of snake oil for self-interested ends (McCloskey, 1990).

Truthiness and the Use of Economic Language

The metaphors described above make up just some of the metaphorical language used to justify supply-side economics—more colloquially known as trickle-down economics. Adversaries derisively gave supply-side economics this name because its proponents suggested that tax cuts for "job creators" would create prosperity that trickles down to others in the form of economic growth. This claim, once a point of debate among economists, is now known to be empirically false (Hope & Limberg, 2020). Yet, trickle-down economics remains widely embraced by policymakers and economists to the right of the political center. The earnest belief of some advocates in trickle-down tax policy has ignored current and historical evidence in favor of what is referred to colloquially as *truthiness.* Truthiness is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "the quality of seeming or being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true;" it is the lexicographic creation of Stephen Colbert during his tenure on the *Colbert Report* (see OUPblog, 2010). This term has come to describe axiomatic ideas, those that seem true on their face or even make intuitive sense but are neither required to be true nor are they necessarily subject to public scrutiny or skepticism (e.g., tax cuts for the wealthy leading to job creation). Because of its truthy nature, ideologues continue to breathe life into trickle-down ideology. Or, as Paul Krugman (2017) put it, "Supply-side economics is a classic example of a zombie doctrine: a view that should have been killed by the evidence long ago, but just keeps shambling along, eating politicians' brains" (para.

12). In the next section we contradict the critique that supply-side policies are expanding economic freedom.

What about Economic Freedom?

Supply-side economics often uses the framing of economic freedom to justify the implementation of trickle-down policies. We do not take issue with the concept of economic freedom, per se, although we acknowledge that critics may construe our work this way. Indeed, economic freedom is associated with a range of socially beneficial impacts that contribute to the life satisfaction of individuals (Graafland, 2020). We should not, however, be content to believe that unfettered capitalism has brought about these benefits; research into global economic history and extreme poverty reveals quite a different story (Sullivan & Hickel, 2023).

On the contrary, in economically unequal societies, whether those belonging to the period of colonial subjugation or in an era governed by supply-side economics, these benefits are inequitably enjoyed and scarce for most people living within them (Stiglitz, 2015b; Piketty, 2021). Further, they have led to slowing overall growth rates with more frequent fits of economic instability—which disproportionately hurt working people—in contrast to more equitable periods[4] (Onaran, 2016; Piketty, 2018). Thus, it is essential to call into question the framing of economic freedom, specifically naming who is freed or constrained within the systems of inequality. This is an essential distinction insofar as we contend that supply-side economics prioritizes the freedom of those who already maintain access to the instruments of economic power—the wealthy—while further burdening communities and individuals who lack such access. In the following section, we use economic data to illustrate the extent to which supply-side economic policies have unevenly distributed economic growth and economic freedom.

The Trickle-Down Tragedy of Supply-Side Economics

The implementation of supply-side economic policies has had an outsized impact on the economic well-being of working people. Although overall economic growth has continued apace, the wealthy, not working people have benefited disproportionately. Between 1989-2019 U.S. households observed negligible increases in real wages and wealth (Reich, 2022). Between 1980

[4] Although the variegated forms of discrimination in different societies including race, sex, gender, etc. that have systematically blocked the advancement of people, and have thus made economic fairness a fictitious and disingenuous aim in practice.

and 2014, the wealthiest 1% saw their average real income increase by 169% compared to only 11% for the median household, with lower socioeconomic households experiencing real declines that continue today (Stiglitz, 2015a). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the bottom 10% of households were experiencing significant declines in income relative to the rest of the American public. In 2021 alone, they suffered a 4.4% decline in real income (Semega & Koller, 2022).

Most working people's income growth from 1980 to the present occurred during the 1980s before many supply-side policies began to impact real incomes (Stiglitz, 2015a). According to the Congressional Budget Office's 2022 report,

> The growth of real wealth over the past three decades was not uniform: Family wealth increased more in the top half of the distribution than in the bottom half. Families in the top 10 percent and the top 1 percent of the distribution, in particular, saw their share of total wealth rise over the period. In 2019, families in the top 10 percent of the distribution held 72 percent of total wealth, and families in the top 1 percent of the distribution held more than one-third; families in the bottom half of the distribution held only 2 percent of total wealth (Karamcheva, 2022, para. 3).

By the time the Covid-19 pandemic arrived, income inequality had reached its highest level in 50 years (U.S. Census, 2019). One measure of inequality is called the Gini Index. This coefficient, which scales income inequality between scores of 0 (perfect equality) and 1 (perfect inequality), grew from 0.430-0.494 between 1989-2021 (Statistica, n.d.). Remarkably, before the implementation of supply-side policies in the early 1980s, inequality had declined consistently since the late 1920s (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2016).

Even if we ignore the moral justifications advocating for greater economic equity, it is impossible to ignore that supply-side economics erodes the economic foundations the nation depends upon to grow the economy. In addition to the widening of economic inequality, the results of trickle-down tax policies include but are not limited to, the slowing of economic growth, underinvestment in public goods, asset bubbles, and economic instability (see Onaran, 2016; Piketty, 2018; Stiglitz, 2015a). Although Thomas Piketty's (2018) work provides a clear picture of the impact economic inequality has on hastening a nation's economic decline, Mehmet Destek and Bilge Koksel (2019) found a predictive link between high-income inequality and boom-bust crises—including the 1929 and 2007 market implosions in the United States—in countries whose policies facilitate "minimum income-redistribution and regulatory policies in the labor market" (p. 23). These boom-bust cycles further exacerbate wealth inequality (see Chancellor, 2018; Sharma, 2021) and thus further destabilize the economies in which they happen.

In many ways, these impacts are not news; they have been well documented. However, efforts to talk back to the dominant economic metaphor of our time have yet to successfully counter the trickle-down narrative. In the next section, we discuss how others have attempted to push back against trickle-down economics through metaphor and the limits of their effectiveness.

Talking Back to Trickle-Down

The metaphorical language of supply-side economics is not without its sources of resistance. Recently, Bridgitte Nerlich (2022) documented social media critiques of the policy recommendations of the short-lived Truss government in the UK. In her post, she refers to John Kenneth Galbraith's use of metaphor to describe trickle-down economics as akin to overfeeding a horse so that there would be oats enough left in its droppings to feed the sparrows. Alternatively, India Stronach (2017) used the wine glass pyramid as a metaphor: "The wine glass on top fills, and fills, and fills, and only when the rich have had their absolute fill—so much that they can't take another drop, do the poor get a splash of success" (para. 5). Humorously, some metaphorical rejoinders have emerged on social media, such as the viral Dungeons & Dragons-themed tweet:

> DM [Dungeon Master]: "The dragon rests on a hoard of gold."
>
> PC [Player Character]: "We gather the town's wealth and add it in. The dragon will surely create jobs now." (Ehlers, 2017).

Although these are effective critiques, they do not offer a compelling metaphorical replacement that might displace trickle-down as the predominant metaphor. Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer (2022), however, attempted to offer a more robust alternative—a gardening metaphor—to the trickle-down metaphor:

> A well-designed tax system — in which everyone contributes and benefits — ensures that nutrients are circulated widely to fertilize and foster growth. Reducing taxes on the very wealthiest on the idea that they are "job creators" is folly. Jobs are the consequence of an organic feedback loop between consumers and businesses, and it's the demand from a thriving middle class that truly creates jobs. The problem with today's severe concentration of wealth, then, isn't that it's unfair, though it might be; it's that it kills middle-class demand. Lasting growth doesn't trickle down; it emerges from the middle out (para. 10).

Their effort to offer a different metaphorical stance to trickle-down economics is compelling. However, we view the replacement as having two fatal weaknesses. First, it is primarily a metaphor for a healthy, functioning economy and only secondarily about the mechanisms of wealth distribution. Their garden metaphor contradicts a metaphor in which the economy is viewed as a machine. Additionally, their metaphor attempts to address the trickle-down metaphor by proxy, moving it to another playing field (the economy as a garden vs. machine) rather than undermining the quality of the original metaphor within the same domain (the distribution of wealth as part of a water cycle). In this paper, we propose a metaphor that focuses on the (un)natural course of wealth distribution, which does so within the same metaphorical domain.

Economic Language and the Shaping of Public Discourse

The role of truthiness should not be underestimated in teaching economics, particularly given the use of metaphorical language throughout the discipline to make complex ideas simpler to understand. The public has limited economic knowledge, which hinders their ability to participate meaningfully in policy discussions that impact them (Rogers & Westheimer, 2017). Because of their limited understanding of economic issues, citizens rely on those who communicate economic ideas in simplified, and unfortunately often jingoistic, ways. (Earle, Moran, & Ward-Perkins, 2016). It does not help that the economic education students receive rarely provides them with opportunities to think critically about how economic concepts are communicated (de Muijnck & Tieleman, 2022). Economic educators have pointed out that economics is taught in ways that emphasize “technical neoclassical, and positivist approach[es]” (Sober, 2017, p. 81; see also Shanks, 2018; Adams, 2022), and to “think about economists and economics as a value-neutral, non-rhetorical discipline,” (Adams, 2021, p. 216), a notion reinforced by economics curricula and textbooks (see Delgado, 2022). Such thinking and teaching continue to promote learning about economics that negates the intersectional experiences of economic dispossession in favor of the status quo that disproportionately benefits rich White men (de Muijnck & Tieleman, 2022; Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

This typical approach to economics education is the ideological and mythological milieu into which students and teachers are thrust. This approach profoundly influences how adults in society consider—or fail to consider—economic issues. Economist Paul Samuelson (1990) famously wrote: “I don’t care who writes a nation’s laws – or crafts its advanced treaties – if I can write its economics textbooks" (p. ix). Schools are institutions devised to prepare children for their role as productive members of a capitalist society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976/2011). Thus, the teaching of economics centered on a dominant ideology that emphasizes a narrow bandwidth of human concern in which "the economic market is that natural state of affairs for human life" (Nichols, 2017, p. 25) is troublesome; it shapes our "notions of how best to be a human being" (Donald, 2019, p. 113), which is today governed by the concerns of the rich and powerful.

Economically literate citizens prepared to understand economics critically would be better positioned to recognize the differences between policies and sloganeering. Many social studies teachers, however, are not sufficiently prepared nor appropriately armed with a rich understanding of economics to either teach diverse economics viewpoints or challenge the official—and exclusively neoclassical—economics curriculum (Adams, 2019, 2021; Ayers, 2016). Suffice it to say that teachers are susceptible to uncritically passing these highly problematic and erroneous precepts on to their students (Miller, 1993). Thus, changing the ideological landscape, the economics training of preservice and in-service teachers, and revising the official curricula are all monumental albeit worthy challenges; it may be helpful for economics educators to make more modest changes by reimagining the metaphors we use in the meantime.

Here we begin by offering that we can displace *trickle-down economics* with a more truthful metaphor: *evaporative economics*. We argue that by utilizing this new metaphor, teachers offer a more truthful account/reckoning/narrative about how an economic policy maintains power and economically dispossesses communities and citizens. This is not a passive pedagogical act because economics is not a passive endeavor.

The Role of Metaphors in Economics Communication

The common-sense perspective regarding metaphors is that they are literary devices used to add contours to the imaginative consumption of literature in ways that both engage readers and solidify their comprehension of the author's intended meanings. On the contrary, scholars point out that metaphorical language is ubiquitous in the construction of meaning across all domains of communication (Goatly, 1997). Economics is no exception (McCloskey, 1998). Erin Adams and Kelly Koch (2020) drew upon Deirdre McCloskey's (1983, 1998) works on economic metaphors to point out that "economists rely heavily on metaphors to make their arguments," so much so that they may not even recognize their uses are metaphorical; and because "they are repeated so often, they become real" (para. 7).

McCloskey (1990) argued that because economists tend to think of themselves as mathematicians and social scientists, they discount how much of the explication of their ideas is rooted in storytelling, making heavy use of metaphor and story in addition to fact and logic. Unfortunately, so much of this storytelling is viewed by economists as simply a telling of facts and logic that eschews a story or metaphor. Because "they do not know they are telling stories and therefore cannot distinguish good stories from bad" they may end up perpetuating "economic snake oil" that can be harmful even while they may make the recipients of the story feel better (p. 3).

Social studies teachers, like economists, utilize storytelling to engage their students (see Shuyi, 2017). These stories range from moral, personal, provocative, and analytical and are meant to promote empathy, ethics, analysis, and critical thinking (Shuyi, 2017). Shanks (2017) demonstrated the power of storytelling to humanize economics in K-12 spaces by using personal narrative experiences to critique structural systems of power. Thus, we must rethink our stories to provide a more accurate depiction of what happens when policies work only to benefit a small few. Metaphors serve as an organizing narrative structure through which we construct our economic realities. In the following section, we reveal the provenance of the trickle-down economics narrative.

The Evolution of a Bad Idea

The tenets of supply-side economics were incorporated to reduce taxation and promote free trade and deregulation. Proponents of this theory believed that its implementation would reduce inflation and increase investment by wealthy individuals and corporations, thus driving economic growth that would trickle down to middle- and working-class people (Stevens, 1980). The trickle-down moniker, however, was born of a literal joke. Legendary satirist, Will Rogers (1932), wrote critically of President Herbert Hoover's economic policies following Franklin Delano Roosevelt's first election victory. He opined that:

> This election was lost four and six years ago, not this year. They [Republicans] didn't start thinking of the old common fellow…. 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 trickles down. Put it uphill and let it go and it will reach the driest little spot. But he didn't know that money trickled up (p. 4).

Sadly, the punchline seems lost on modern proponents of trickle-down economics who have implemented the policies associated with this theory based on their conviction—earnest or otherwise—that cutting taxes for wealthy individuals and corporations would create a trickling down of wealth that would result in an economic tide to lift all boats.

Trickle-down ideology gained popularity in the 1970s, largely thanks to economist Arthur Laffer's erroneous conjecture that cutting taxes would result in no net loss in tax revenue (see Rattner, 2019). Championed by George Gilder (Crittenden, 1981), supply-side economics was embraced and incorporated into policy in the United States, Britain, and Canada in the 1980s by the Regan, Thatcher, and Mulroney administrations, respectively, and in other nations subsequently. Increasingly viewed by economists as the economic equivalent of snake oil, these policies have led to explosive inequality and declining public investment, social immobility, and economic bubbles that disproportionately benefit the rich and burden the poor and middle classes when they pop (see Krugman 1994; Piketty, 2018; Saez, 2018; Stiglitz, 2015). In his book Capital and Ideology, Thomas Piketty (2021) described how the reforms of the Reagan administration, meant to boost growth and economic productivity, have led to no meaningful growth in income for the bottom fifty percent of Americans—more than 165 million people—in the nearly 40 years since they were implemented. In short, supply-side ideology has been devastating for most people under regimes who have adopted its policies; the focus on cutting taxes for the rich and corporations is not only inequitable but is demonstrably destabilizing for society (Piketty, 2018). Nevertheless, despite its repeated empirical repudiations, this destructive policy prescription remains a popular doctrine among most right-of-center politicians and many of their supporters (see Lichtblau, 2019).

Why do these policies continue to be popular among a significant segment of the population? Philosopher Carl Schmitt (1932) articulated that the same arrangement of American capitalism disparaged by Rogers (1932) could be described as a demagogic plutocracy. A governing principle that benefited the wealthy while appealing to the worst instincts of those hoping wealth would come their way. The notional ideal of the American dream, in which any hardworking person can make it, and its counterpart that poverty results from a lack of effort on the part of the economically disadvantaged—and therefore deserved—is but one such example. The gospels of wealth have reinforced this belief—whether Carnegie's (1906) or those propounded by modern Evangelist

Christianity (see Dubisch, 1987)—that wealth is accrued to those who are worthy, whether by the qualities of their hard work and ingenuity (McNamee & Miller, 2009) or their piety and cultivation God's favor (Gutterman, 2010).

That people in capitalist societies worship the rich and fantasize about becoming one of them is neither new nor uniquely American. Adam Smith (2010 [1759]) discussed this tendency explicitly in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* at the very dawn of the capitalist age. Conveniently, any economic insights drawn from Smith's works tend to ignore his strikingly communitarian—and if it were not anachronistic to say so—even socialist—tendencies to advocate for the development of institutions and laws to helped to ensure the moral imperatives of society were upheld (see Wight, 2007). Nevertheless, the ideologically ingrained tendency among Americans to laud the rich and spurn the poor has enabled supporters of supply-side economics and its bedfellow neoliberalism—an ideology that holds that the primacy of economic liberty and free market logic is an unalloyed good in all domains of life—to capitalize on this division of interests which uphold anti-taxation policies that benefit the wealthy at the expense of the rest of society (Lichtblau, 2019). Why, after all, would you want the rich and powerful to be taxed more heavily if you aspire to be one of them?

An Alternative Set of Metaphors

In this section, we play with the metaphor of water to offer a series of metaphors that more helpfully and truthfully illustrate how supply-side—or trickle-down economics—undermines the economic well-being of the commons.

Evaporative Economics

Some observers have discussed how the actual impacts of supply-side economics more accurately resemble a trickling-up of economic wealth in which the rich slowly (or not so slowly) accrue ever greater wealth upon the backs of increasingly squeezed middle and working classes (e.g., Putland, n.d.; Seip & Harper, 2016). This description is fitting insofar as this moniker calls back to Rogers' (1932) commentary: "But [Hoover] didn't know that money trickled up" (p. 4). At the same time, it fails to accurately describe an exploitative system in which wealth moves both upwards from below, away from individuals as well as the public coffers and into the hands of wealthy individuals and corporations, and away from the communities and countries in which the wealth was created.

Within a supply-side economy—which has reduced the tax rates of wealthy individuals and corporations sizeably—once wealth has been created within and across geographies and demographies, it ceases to be available for redistribution to the working and middle classes or commons. On the contrary, wealth is carried away to be showered onto offshore tax havens or economies sited either on far distant shores or into communities with no connection to the one in which the wealth originated. Regardless, that wealth ends far removed from those who helped to create it and who might hope to benefit from its creation. To add insult to injury, localities must compensate for the diminution of tax revenue by reducing social services, education, health care, transportation, and other public goods, thereby further burdening the working and middle classes, who are increasingly asked to pay more for fewer services. This process cannot but lay economic waste to local, state, and federal jurisdictions where people live and work.

Thus, wealth does not trickle up so much as it evaporates. The term *evaporative economics* more accurately describes how personal and social wealth moves upwards away from lower socioeconomic classes and the commons. In other words, the money we are told will trickle down through the redistributed wealth at the top never makes back down. Wealth appears to evaporate to those at the bottom of the economic strata, as if into thin air, never (seeming) to have existed in the first place. In the lived experiences of those who reside in these communities, the wealth does, in effect, disappear from the local commons in a henceforth inaccessible way.

Economic Desertification

Once evaporated and moved offshore or into other communities or countries, the evaporated wealth is unlikely to return. The effect of this ongoing process is nothing less than a process of *economic desertification* of the commons from which its riches have been evaporated. To live in these desert commons is to suffer many other burdens. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) found in their extensive analysis of international data that unequal societies were much more likely to share the following problems, all of which intensified as inequality increased:

- Worsening health outcomes (leading to higher healthcare costs), including higher infant mortality, higher incidences of mental illness, higher rates of obesity, and lower overall life-expectancy

- Decreased child well-being
- Increased rates of imprisonment
- Lower levels of trust in social institutions
- Higher rates of drug use (and subsequent drug-related deaths)
- Higher rates of teen pregnancy
- Higher rates of murder and other social violence
- Higher rates of childhood conflict (i.e., bullying, fighting, etc.)
- Lower educational test scores

These afflictions are disproportionately suffered by those least equipped to avoid or escape them. Wilkinson and Pickett's (2010) analysis further revealed that these ills are at once individual and social. Damningly, they are all likely preventable by economic policy interventions. It is essential to recognize that they found it did not matter what the average wealth of a country was but rather how pronounced the inequality was within any single country. You are better off (concerning these measures) being poor in a poor but more equal society than being poor in a prosperous and unequal society because of the near-universal phenomenon of social comparison to those we view as peers, other citizens of your country (Gugushvili, 2021).

A community drained of its economic wealth over time is much like an aquifer that has been drawn too heavily from. It becomes more difficult and costly to draw from its reserves until it can no longer support the community that depends upon it. We do not believe it to be hyperbolic to suggest that when the wells run dry, whether literally or metaphorically, communities begin to fall apart as city councils are forced to cut funding for education, social programs, transportation, parks, as well as basic infrastructure like water treatment, refuse, and roads—those who can afford to leave these communities often do so and avoid moving into crumbling metros and suburbs. Without pouring wealth back into these communities, their prognoses for being or becoming thriving communities are bleak. An economic model predicated upon evaporating wealth away from working communities will not turn them around.

The reality is that trickle-down economics is a lie in the service of the rich and powerful whose interests are elided. Indeed, they are often the same people. So long as politicians are permitted to sell this lie as the "cure for what ails you," our societies will continue to permit the rich and powerful to suck our communities dry (McCloskey, 1990, p.3).

Limitations

We recognize there are limits to the evaporative and desertification metaphors to describe discourse about economics. Evaporation and desertification are natural processes. Undisturbed, both processes result in a cyclical *renewal* of an environment. We assert that within historically marginalized communities, these processes that would otherwise result in cyclical renewal are instead depleted of resources by intentional economic policies. Intentional economic actors divert those resources and prevent them from being rained back down upon the communities from which they were evaporated.

Given the limitations that metaphorical language poses for revealing or obfuscating the truth, we wish to be clear that our use of evaporation and desertification metaphors represent more accurate descriptions of the *outcomes* of bad faith economic actions. So, we offer again here a truth-telling metaphor that seeks to move us forward in the conversation about how we discuss the plunder of economically marginalized communities and the process by which economically vibrant communities come under threat from intentional policies coupled with metaphorical misdirection. Using these metaphors as a two-dimensional entry point toward an engagement with a three-dimensional problem so that we can move away from distortion and closer to reality. Critical economics scholars and practitioners must continue to unpack the language we and others use to describe and depict complex economic phenomena. We must continue to see it, walk around it, and engage with it.

Conclusion

Three decades ago, Raymond C. Miller (1993) wrote, “We need to stop teaching economics in its present form! We need to recognize that the world has never worked as the pure market model says, nor should it” (p. 46). Nevertheless, until we recognize the stickiness of truthy economic metaphors, we will likely struggle to change how students, teachers, and the broader public think about economic policies and their impacts on people’s daily lives. The challenge remains that some teachers may struggle to believe they can confront trickle-down economics, as we have articulated here, because it has become a sacrosanct policy of the political right. Doing so could appear to them to be expressly biased. Although we sympathize with the impulse to remain politically neutral, neutrality, in this case, means embracing an established lie. Instead, we would encourage economics educators to follow the data and to use it with their students to test and critique these metaphors, trickle-down, evaporative, and economic desertification alike.

Utilizing evaporative economics and economic desertification as metaphors offers a reorienting visualization that can help teachers to dismantle the false narrative created using metaphors like trickle-down economics and enables teachers to reveal the true nature of extractive economic policies. Once this analytical metaphor is offered to students, teachers can more reasonably ask students to examine how trickle-down economics paints a mythical picture of the effects of supply-side economic policies. Displacing this false metaphorical language with a more truthful one using evaporative economics and economic desertification may enable students to engage with a conceptual framing that allows them to evaluate the intersecting consequences of supply-side policies more effectively as they are made manifest in the lived realities of people and communities. Further, students may be better able to speak back to truthy, but ultimately false, economic constructs in a visually evocative manner that sticks.

To be sure, rebranding a metaphor is unlikely to fundamentally alter the landscape of economic ideology in the absence of other changes. Nevertheless, words matter. They matter in communicating about and advocating for policies that can reshape that landscape. We hope that by offering this metaphor, even with its limitations, economics educators may be encouraged to engage bravely in truth-telling in economic teaching and learning spaces, will recognize the role language plays in telling this economic story, and help their students to navigate beyond the economic talking points that justify the worst impulses of a certain kind of capitalism toward a more fulsome and honest economic discourse. To that end, we have that economic metaphors are common and that they can occlude or reveal the truth. It is time to kill trickle-down once and for all. It is time to replace a truthy claim with a more truthful illustration of the realities of an outmoded and dishonest economic ideology.

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