

Progressives Have a Powerful Narrative That Beats Neoliberalism – We Just Don't Know It

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It's become a cliché to say that progressives need a powerful economic narrative to combat neoliberalism. But the problem isn't that we don't have a commensurate economic narrative, one that actually beats neoliberalism. The problem is that progressives don't understand what narrative is.

The power of the core neoliberal narrative is that it's a very simple story which explains how the economy works and the role of government in creating prosperity: free-markets drive economic growth and government should not get in their way.

The rest of the neoliberal narrative follows easily from these two related ideas: businesses and the entrepreneurs behind them are the free-market heroes, the job creators. Government should not regulate or tax those heroes or impinge on their freedom. By celebrating the individual as hero, the core narrative also creates space for racism, sexism and more generally placing the onus on individuals for their success.

What the core neoliberal narrative is *not* about is complicated theories of how the economy works or battles over which neoliberal set of policies is most important. Of course, among neoliberal economists, politicians and advocates those debates go on, but they all are under the umbrella of free-market and limited government.

I was reminded of this in reading [Beyond Neoliberalism: A Narrative Approach](#), a paper by Richard Healey and Judith Barish, commissioned by [The Narrative Initiative](#). The paper does a good job both describing the power of narrative in shaping society and of the crisis that neoliberalism faces today: tepid economic growth and astronomical levels of economic inequality. But from there, *Beyond Neoliberalism* gets very complicated. We read about three major alternative ways of organizing the economy, about a set of possible (competing?) progressive values, about the need to be positive and to use clear metaphors. And about eight different critiques of neoliberalism, each emphasized by different thinkers. The authors do a fine job surveying the terrain, but if we're talking about *narrative*, it misses the forest for the trees.

As long as progressives insist on our economic narrative being complex, or focus on which competing critique of neoliberalism is the most important, or confuse economic theory with overarching narrative, we'll continue to lose the narrative war. Just like the core neoliberal narrative, the progressive core narrative should also be a simple story about how the economy works and the role of government, a story that people can understand and remember. It should be an umbrella narrative that all the policy and system debates and variations can fit under.

And yes we have that story: *Our prosperity comes from fully including people in the economy and society. Government's role is to make that possible.*

Our heroes are people who do the work, who care for their families and their communities and government's role is to stand up for them, not just the wealthy few and powerful corporations.

If the simplicity of that story makes you uncomfortable, if you start thinking “yes, but...” or “that’s not the best way to say that...” then you’re suffering from the same misunderstanding that most progressives have about the power and purpose of narrative. Of course, the simple story doesn’t take account of all the complexities. And yes, there are multiple ways of telling this story, some of which I share below. But as I explain below, this simple story is:

- True – it’s how we believe we create prosperity;
- It’s easy to communicate and understand;
 - And is preferred by people to the neoliberal narrative;
- It encompasses a wide range of progressive economic theories and policies.

It’s true: As Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz [explains](#):

Inequality leads to lower growth and less efficiency. Lack of opportunity means that its most valuable asset – its people – is not being fully used. Many at the bottom, or even in the middle, are not living up to their potential, because the rich, needing few public services and worried that a strong government might redistribute income, use their political influence to cut taxes and curtail government spending. This leads to underinvestment in infrastructure, education and technology, impeding the engines of growth.

Increasingly, progressive think tanks are emphasizing that policies based on inclusion are both moral and promote growth. The Washington Center for Equitable Growth [frames](#) its work around how inequality impedes economic growth and how progressive policies can “reduce economic inequality and support economic growth.” It’s President and CEO, Heather Boushey, has just published a [book](#) making the case titled, “Unbound – How Inequality Constricts Our Economy and What We Can Do about It.” The Roosevelt Institute frames many of its economic papers around the goal of [economic inclusion](#).

Tech-entrepreneur [Nick Hanauer](#) is working with [Eric Beinhocker](#) of Oxford University’s [Institute for New Economic Thinking](#), on a book which will review the emerging science, theory and models behind this economics. In a recent TED talk titled “The Dirty Little Secret of Capitalism and a New Way Forward,” Hanauer argued that “The more people we fully and fairly include in our economy as innovators, entrepreneurs, workers, and as well-paid consumers, the faster and more prosperous our economy will grow.”

It’s easy to understand and communicate: This core narrative has another key virtue: it’s very simple for people to understand, particularly if we paint a picture that relates to people’s lives. Below is one such description (in bold) which we tested in a public opinion [survey in Colorado](#) against the neoliberal description of how to create prosperity. People surveyed were asked: “Which statement comes closest to your own opinion?”

	<p>+13 with all voters <i>+28 with drop-off voters (more of color and youth)</i> <i>+17 with economically distressed voters (half Republicans and half Democrats)</i></p>
<p>41%: Businesses and entrepreneurs are the engines of the economy. When we reduce barriers to starting a business or make it easier for them to invest and hire, it helps workers and communities thrive.</p>	<p>54%: Working families and the middle class are the engines of the economy. When we have good jobs so we can care for and support our families, educate our children, afford our health care, shop in our neighborhoods, and retire in security, we drive the economy forward and build thriving communities.</p>

Note that the neoliberal message uses values language (communities thrive) and invokes American heroes (businesses and entrepreneurs). It repeats the trickle-down argument, in popular language, that people have been hearing for years. Despite all that, it loses to a progressive message that concludes with the same value (thriving communities), invokes different heroes (working families and the middle class) and makes the progressive argument about how the economy works. Even though the progressive story is not nearly as familiar to people as the neoliberal story, it comes out well ahead. Imagine if we were to repeat that argument as often and loudly as neoliberals have trumpeted theirs for decades!

We can also easily tell this story so as to explicitly take on racism, sexism and other forms of “othering.” As in:

- Working families and the middle class are the engines of the economy. When each of us – **regardless of our race, our gender or where we are from** – have good jobs so we can care for and support our families, educate our children, afford our health care, shop in our neighborhoods, and retire in security, we drive the economy forward and build thriving communities.
- The more people who have the opportunity to fully participate in our economy – **regardless of the circumstances we were born in, of our race or gender** – the better we all do and the better our country does.

In my work as Director of [Our Story – The Hub for American Narratives](#), I’ve had the opportunity to work with a wide variety of progressive leaders and activists around the country on developing a core economic narrative. I ask people to tell me in their own words what their vision is for the economy and society they would like to see, why we don’t have that now and who’s responsible and what we can do about it broadly, not just in specific policies. What I find is virtual unanimity on the core idea encompassed in the last bullet above: *The more people who have the opportunity to fully participate in our economy – regardless of the circumstances we were born in, of our race or gender – the better we all do, the better our communities do and the better our country does.*

This core idea and values is also at the heart of the economic theory and narrative of a new organization, The [Groundworks Collaborative](#), which works at “developing and advancing a progressive economic worldview.” Under the tag line “we are the economy,” their vision begins: “When all of us— white, Black and brown—work together, we build a thriving economy that delivers meaningful opportunity and prosperity for everyone.”

There are many other ways to communicate this core idea, some of which I’ve compiled in a document on the Our Story website titled [How to Talk About Inclusive Economics](#). The [Our Story](#) website also has multiple, short issue narratives that incorporate versions of the core narrative.

It’s a lot more appealing to people than the neoliberal story: One of the advantages that the progressive story has over the neoliberal story is that it describes how policies that benefit people in tangible ways, that people perceive as fair, also boost the economy. Most progressive communication is based on one cognitive frame, which we usually summarize as being fair. For example: It’s fair that people get paid enough to support their families. It’s fair that people get paid sick time or paid time off to care of a newborn. It’s wrong that companies pollute. These arguments have strong appeal to most people, but they falter when neoliberals argue that the policies would hurt the people they are meant to benefit: raising wages kills jobs; regulating businesses kills jobs; raising taxes to pay for services kills jobs.

To successfully combat the neoliberal narrative, the core progressive narrative combines two frames: fairness and economic prosperity. In doing so it gains the emotional and moral appeal of equitable policies and shows that those policies actually benefit not just the individual, but in doing so they benefit society at large as they boost the economy.

For example, in a [study](#) for Our Story Topos found that to refute the neoliberal message about how raising the minimum wage will kill jobs, a message in support of raising the minimum wage that combined both the fairness and economic boosting frames was by far more effective than either a message just about fairness or a message just about the positive economic impact of raising the minimum wage. That message was: “People who are for the proposal say what ails families and our economy is the same thing – low wages. The cost of groceries, housing and other basics have gone up for years but wages haven't come close to keeping up, and that hurts both workers and the economy. Full time jobs should at least pay enough for people to afford the basics, because when people have more money to spend it will boost Main Street, create jobs, and help our communities thrive.”

Here are three other examples of how to combine the two frames. You will note that in addition to combining the frames of fairness and economy boosting, each message includes values language around thriving communities:

- When we put a stop to predatory loans, working people can put their paychecks to work caring for and supporting their families and helping our communities to thrive.
- When women get paid the same as men for the same work, they are better able to care for and support their families, and their increased earnings boosts jobs on Main Street and helps communities to thrive.
- When all children in our state get a great public education so they can succeed in college, career and life, their success will boost our economy and help our communities to thrive.

What about government? The second part of the core progressive narrative describes the role of government as working to include everyone fully in the economy. Here again, we should begin our narrative with what we believe to be true. Sometimes, particularly under the onslaught of neoliberal attacks on government, progressives think that it’s our job to stand up for government per se. But that’s not actually our view of government. After all, today our government is locking up children, inviting more global warming, ... and on and on. Of course, that’s not just true today; throughout history fighters for justice have most often fought governments.

What we do believe is that we judge government by who it stands up for and what values its policies forward. Our work is to fight for a government that makes it possible for everyone to thrive, regardless of the circumstances they were born into.

We also tested this story against the neoliberal story in the [poll](#) we conducted in Colorado. Note that both messages are values-and-heroes-based, making them more powerful. The survey asked *Which statement comes closest to your own opinion?*

	+11 with all voters +36 with drop-off voters (more of color and youth) +14 with economically distressed voters (half Republicans and half Democrats)
42%: Prosperity and opportunity come from the ingenuity and hard work of individuals and	53%: The question is not whether government is big or small, it’s who government serves. In Colorado, we

entrepreneurs, not from government. In Colorado, we must ensure government does not expand its reach into functions more appropriately left to the private sector.

want a government that works for working families and the middle class, not just the very wealthy and big corporations.

Encompasses a wide range of progressive economic theories and policies: An effective core narrative must be able to serve as an umbrella under which a wide range of aligned economic systems and policies can fit.

As an umbrella narrative anchored in “inclusivity,” our story encompasses numerous progressive policies. Across the agenda—on immigration, on education, on civil rights, reproductive rights, marriage equality, health care, pay equity, the minimum wage, and a host of other issues—the one thing that our policies all have in common is that they are fundamentally inclusive. For decades, we have promoted this agenda largely as a matter of fairness; but inclusive economics explains why our policies are also inherently pro-growth.

The core narrative easily encompasses the two progressive economic systems identified in *Beyond Neoliberalism*: economic democracy and social democracy. In their paper, Healey and Barish ground both these systems on “more power for workers, voters and consumers,” who are the heroes of our inclusive economics. Both systems aim, using different economic levers, to include people more fully in the economy.

Healey and Barish point out that one of the key roles of narrative is to hold together a center-left coalition. The core narrative that our prosperity comes from fully including people in the economy does that, leaving plenty of room for emphasizing a wide range of policies. At the same time, it serves as a foundation to contrast with neoliberal policies that exclude or discriminate against people or that drive economic rewards to the wealthy rather than distribute them throughout society.

What is this so hard for progressives? The best advice my father gave me was “don’t overcomplicate things.” That’s very hard advice for progressives to follow, who believe that facts and reasoning are central to communications. But that’s wrong: facts and reasoning are not how people make sense of the world. Instead, people understand the world through values and story. *Values* are how we morally make sense of the world. *Story* is how we organize our understanding of the world: what’s wrong and who’s responsible (villains); what we (heroes) do about it. Facts and reasoning are subservient to both. People by and large reject facts and reasoning that doesn’t comport with their values and core story.

My definition of narrative is a “*values-based story* about our *core beliefs*.” Effective narrative uses values and story to communicate our core belief, in this case about how the economy works to create broad-based prosperity. The essence of powerful communications is to repeat our core story over and over again, whenever we communicate about the economy, whether in our issue and policy work, press, social media, etc. That is how we will move beyond neoliberalism to make inclusive economics the dominant paradigm and create the space to empower a broad variety of progressive policies.