



CULTURAL STRATEGY PLAN

Moore + Associates

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Economics and culture landscape analysis

Section 1: An Introduction to Cultural Strategy

“Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.”

– Abraham Lincoln, 1858, First Debate with Douglas

Why culture?

Traditional policy advocacy calls for identifying a problem, constructing a policy solution that is feasible within the constraints of existing cultural beliefs and mores, and then mobilizing different social actors, gatekeepers, and power holders to enact the policy. Policy change often only engages a narrow segment of our culture and therefore often fails to motivate the majority. Much of economic theory, for example, is debated among academics, policy experts, and elected officials, while pitting union advocates against big business lobbyists. Cultural strategy upends this process and asks us to dream big. What is the world we want? What do people need to believe in order for that world to exist? What do people believe now? How do we change those beliefs? As demonstrated by recent advances in the fields of neuroscience and behavioral economics, emotions, not dry facts and figures, lead to behavior change or new ways of thinking. Culture has an unparalleled power to connect deeply with people’s emotions, opening them up to new ideas and new possibilities.

Cultural change involves both the process of utilizing cultural levers (like film, television, and music) to change people’s perspective on a particular issue or policy, and the shift in perspective itself. For example, sitcoms like *Will and Grace* and *Ellen* portrayed LGBTQ people as unthreatening, embracing widely shared values. At the same time, homophobia was ridiculed. As these shows found wide, diverse audiences, and in conjunction with education and advocacy efforts, America became a place whose institutions and individuals increasingly endorsed LGBTQ issues, supporting marriage equality and anti-discrimination laws. A community long defined by sexual acts was now, through a massive (and intentional) cultural shift, increasingly defined by its normalcy. Anti-gay bigotry may not have disappeared, but it is widely seen as “uncool,” laughably retrograde thinking.

We need similarly to shift the culture around tax policy, in particular trickle down: the idea that a good way to create an economy that works for everyone is to maximize income for those at the very top. To do this successfully, this plan provides a thorough analysis of the cultural playing field. What has our culture had to say about trickle down economics? What is shaping the competing narratives about contemporary economic theory? Given the prevalence of dystopian novels, films, and television shows, featuring massive wealth and income inequality, are there resonant threads we can build upon? What cultural content is reinforcing trickle down theory?

Defining Culture

In its 2013 publication *Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy*, The Culture Group talks about two important meanings of the word “culture”:

1. Culture: The prevailing beliefs, values, and customs of a group; a group’s way of life.
2. Culture: A set of practices that contain, transmit, or express ideas, values, habits, and behaviors between individuals and groups.

The first definition refers to culture as the shared space of group identity based on prevalent values and pastimes. It is important to note that culture is not fixed. It is always in flux, more like an ever-evolving ecosystem than a solid state, engineered structure. The second definition refers to creative activities and practices that shape, inform, influence, and change our shared space. It is through these practices that we exhibit what it is we want to be, where we manifest ourselves. Commonly — and importantly — innovation, creative expression, and the arts and entertainment are associated with this definition. Equally important are other streams of culture: sports, hobbies, food, and religion, for example.

Cultural Strategy: Theory of Change

Social change happens when people’s beliefs shift. People’s beliefs shift when the culture that defines and reflects their beliefs shift. Culture shifts following catalyzing cultural events such as 9/11 or a series of smaller events and moments that over time move our collective beliefs past a tipping point, leading to a cascading shift of laws and mores. Policy advocacy and traditional organizing must be a part of an overarching cultural strategy, but they cannot be the sole driver of change. Look at today’s rush of radical change in public opinion and policy with regards to marriage equality, the cumulative effect of decades of strategically fused advocacy and cultural organizing.

There are a number of vivid historical examples from the social justice and public health spheres that illustrate this kind of evolutionary-style transformation; civil rights, marriage equality, and cigarette smoking to name a few. Throughout the civil rights era, policy change followed cultural shifts, with the integration of Jackie Robinson into Major League Baseball, Ray Charles’ cancellation of a performance in protest of segregation, and Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech coinciding with U.S. Army and public school desegregation, and the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, respectively. As noted earlier, throughout the fight for marriage equality, we see support for same sex marriage double over the course of 20 years as more and pop culture icons rise to the LGBTQ platform, ultimately leading to the striking down of DOMA in 2013. From the 40s through the 70s, Gallup rates of smokers increased to almost 50% of the population as movie stars regularly

appeared in cigarette ads. They finally began to fall following the ban on TV and radio cigarette ads, calls for Hollywood to “deglamorize” smoking, and creative, youth-engaging ad campaigns; by 2013 only 18% of Americans were smokers.

The recent [PopJustice report series](#) discusses in depth the effects of and best practices for using pop culture as a social justice tool. [Volume One](#) of the report recommends several “lanes” of engagement: Training and Career Development; Organizing & Networking; Content Development and Production; Dissemination and Engagement; and Research, Monitoring and Evaluation. Content Development and Production, and Dissemination and Engagement are the two lanes most pertinent to our work with the Ridicule Project. The key points of each are outlined below:

1. Invest in web series and digital content. Web content is far cheaper and quicker to produce than traditional content. It can cheaply test out an idea for creative content that could be leveraged towards investment and adoption from pop culture industries. It can be used for various purposes—from entertainment, to educational, to generating earned media attention for a particular cause or issue. It can easily be paired directly with a call to action. *Halal in the Family* is a recent example of this strategy.
2. Invest in a pool of social justice resource people and institutions that can play an “expert” role in advising writers, show runners, producers, and actors, on various issues relevant to their productions. TV shows and movie productions regularly hire expert advisors—doctors on medical shows, detectives for police procedurals, fight choreographers and ordnance experts for action pictures. The partnership between National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and the MTV reality series *16 and Pregnant...* is one example.
3. The distribution and dissemination stage is a great opportunity for investment from philanthropy and social justice advocates. This lane primarily focuses on the use of pop culture trends and content to expand social justice audiences and engagement. As Matt Foreman, longtime LGBT activist and former executive director of The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, noted, “We have the pop culture zeitgeist churning out stuff. How do we hook that into stuff on the ground? That is still the big gap.” A good example of this approach is a campaign run by the National Domestic Workers Alliance, which used the release of the film *The Help* to lift up the challenges faced by contemporary domestic workers.

Because of the importance of creativity and innovation in cultural strategy, we believe that creatives (musicians, actors, playwrights, poets, animators, video game producers, fine artists, filmmakers, etc.) should be brought into strategy development and ideation from the beginning. They must be treated as a vital part of the process, not an appendage to a campaign. Our particular interest and expertise is in the use of humor, working with comic writers, actors, stand-up performers, cartoonists, improvisers, and more. Comedy is a critical to any cultural strategy because it causes people to lower the barriers that prevent them from being open to new or different perspectives. At the same time, ridicule can bring intimidating individuals and ideas down to earth, where, no longer invulnerable, they lose their power.

Section Two: Free Market Economics in the Cultural Sphere

Public opinion about free market economics in the United States has been shaped by myriad factors over generations. It is impossible to account for or properly weigh all of these factors. Instead, we can identify cultural trends and powerful individual pieces of cultural content that, taken together, have influenced both the general public and the elite behind our economic policy.

So, what is “free market” or “trickle-down” economics? We asked a lot of people what they thought, and read books and articles from noted economists. The most concise answer we received was from Nick Hanauer. He explained it as the belief that “if wages for the poor go up, employment goes down; if taxes on the rich go up, employment goes down.” This means a low (or no) minimum wage and low taxes on the wealthy (including income, capital gains, and corporate taxes). The third component, in addition to low wages and taxes, is a rejection of the regulatory state. Regulations are issued by agencies to direct how a law will be enforced. Without regulations, we would rely on the courts to decide which workers qualify for mandatory overtime or the limits on certain forms of greenhouse gas emissions.

Before the New Deal, both the courts and the legislature were reluctant to interfere with the employer / employee relationship. During the Great Depression, under the strong hand of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the modern welfare and regulatory state emerged, along with a progressive income tax whose top marginal rate exceeded ninety percent during World War II. Trickle down theory, which asserts that reductions in taxes on the wealthy will spur so much economic growth that tax revenue will increase, as shown in the Laffer Curve, was introduced in the late 70s and presented as an answer to high unemployment and inflation (known as stagflation).

Pro and anti free-market frameworks and tropes

The challenge faced by conservatives who embraced free-market economics was how to sell the public on an economic theory that appeared to be little more than burden shifting, from the wealthy and big business to the middle and working class. One of the rhetorical tools embraced by conservatives was to wrap free market economics in the cloak of liberty to advance an agenda that thwarted greater equality. Government was the enemy of liberty, with its taxes and regulations and social programs. So were unions, collectivism, and civil rights. And the ultimate villain, of course, was communism.

Over the past 84 years, the culture creators behind popular films and television shows, and to a lesser degree theater, music, books, and comics, brought forth heroes and villains and told incredible stories, often embracing either a liberty- or equality-centric narrative. Liberty-based narratives tend to feature a single hero, acting alone against an all powerful, evil government that has destroyed people’s way of life. Equality-based narratives tend to feature a team that, working together, overcomes an enemy characterized by greed and lust for power. Consider two contrasting examples of these narratives. Ayn Rand wrote best-selling novels, including *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, in which individualists (like architect Howard Roark) are worshiped, while collectivists are denigrated. *Guardians of the Galaxy*, first a comic (1969) and then a popular film (2014), concludes when the heroes join forces with a benevolent government (led by

Nova Prime, played by Glenn Close). They defeat a power-hungry villain (Ronan) by holding hands to absorb the power of an Infinity Stone, which would have destroyed any of them if held alone.

If liberty versus equality is the overarching thematic framework, each deeply rooted in the American tradition (think of it as *Don't Tread on Me* versus *E Pluribus Unum*), within that framework **specific tropes emerge**. The first tropes concern the portrayal of liberal democratic governance, including the regulatory and welfare state. The second tropes concern the portrayal of wealth and inequality. The final and least common tropes concern taxation.

As noted earlier, the portrayal of government is critical. Here we find two common representations. The first pits *good government against bad government*, the second *bad government against individual liberty*.

Stories that hold out good government as the ideal, which help undermine free-market theories that rely on distrust of government, tend to pit liberal or social democracy against fascism. Good examples of this are the incredibly popular *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* series, which show democratic governing bodies taken over by authoritarians (Voldemort and Emperor Palpatine, respectively). The heroes are a group of friends, working together for the common good. The bad guys have a single leader, driven by a lust for power. Dystopian novels and films often serve to take down undemocratic regimes, whether communist (*Animal Farm*) or, more often, simply authoritarian (*It Can't Happen Here*, *A Handmaiden's Tale*, *The Hunger Games*). But these stories increasingly do not suggest a good government alternative to their projected reality. Instead, they emphasize the danger of a utopian government that thinks it can fix all social problems, including racism and sexism, by sacrificing liberty for equality.

Free-market reinforcing narratives do not hold out hope for good government. Instead, individuals, allowed to operate without government interference, are celebrated. *Rambo* (the film series based on the book, *First Blood*), tells the story of a Vietnam veteran repeatedly betrayed by his government, even when he is sent to free soldiers left behind as POWs. He can rely on himself alone, and succeeds despite the opposition of governments, both democratic and communist. The *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish* series' from the 1970s, starring Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson, respectively, are both transparent calls for unshackling law enforcement from the limitations imposed by criminal-coddling civil libertarians, liberal judges and bureaucrats. Not only can't the government protect you, these narratives suggest, its rules and regulations are preventing you from protecting yourself. The protagonists in these narratives are almost always white men, while the criminals are typically Black or Latino. A related sub-genre is stories about strong teachers or principals in overwhelmingly Black or Latinx schools. *Lean On Me* (1989) and *Dangerous Minds* (1995) are good examples. Although technically government employees themselves, the heroes are iconoclasts seeking to buck a system (run by unaccountable bureaucrats) that doesn't approve of their unconventional, but ultimately effective methods to discipline unruly youth into productive citizens.

The strongest case for regulation is made in courtroom dramas, where trial lawyers sue big corporations on behalf of the little guy. *Erin Brockovich* (film) and *The Rainmaker* (book and film) are representative of this genre, which has flourished among legal thrillers. *The Pelican Brief* (book and film), in which a Supreme Court justice is assassinated to help a corporation avoid environmental regulation, is good example. Other popular stories include many John Grisham books (like *Runaway Jury*, also a film, about the gun lobby), the film *Michael Clayton* (by Tony Gilroy, about corporate toxic chemicals), and *A Civil Action* (the book and film, about corporate toxic chemicals), which for years has been read by first-year law students.

A third, but less common, portrayal of *government is as a well-intentioned, often effective force for good*. These are usually stories where the government is, essentially, one of the main characters. The television series *The West Wing* and *Parks and Recreation* and films like *Dave*, *Legally Blonde 2*, and *The American President* take this view of government, filled with likeable characters who take government jobs for all the right reasons. Historical dramas, like *Selma*, *Thirteen Days*, and *Milk*, which retain a level of idealism, humanize government by introducing you to the “faceless bureaucrats” demonized by free-market advocates. They are countered by more cynical depictions of government corruption or incompetence, in TV shows including *House of Cards*, *Veep*, and *Scandal* and films like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *All the Presidents Men* (based on the book by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein).

A **second series of tropes** we observed speaks to one of the pillars underlying free-market economics: the idea that income and wealth inequality is a virtue. The charming villain Gordon Gecko in the Oliver Stone film *Wall Street* articulated this belief most powerfully during his “greed is good” speech. Overwhelmingly, while pop culture loves a rags-to-riches story (*The Pursuit of Happyness*, *Les Miserable*, much of hip hop), and celebrates (or at least ogles) the lifestyles of the rich and famous (*Dallas*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*), it often portrays the wealthy as corrupt, uncaring, greedy, and unscrupulous (*Cruel Intentions*, *Wolf of Wall Street*). Sometimes the rich are redeemable, like Daddy Warbucks in *Annie* (musical premiered 1977, film release 1982) or Bruce Wayne in *Batman* (comic first published 1939, TV show 1966-68, films from 1989 to present), but more often they are a foil for a poor or working class hero (*School Days*, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*).

Great wealth is seen as inherently corrupting, as in *The Hobbit* (book published 1937; films released 2012-14), where the heroic king of the dwarfs, Thorin, is bewitched by a vast cache of gold and nearly betrays the common good. Yet despite a clear distaste for vast aggregations of wealth, with notable exceptions, the government or its stand-in is not necessary the preferred counterweight. In other words, **just because pop culture doesn’t always love the rich, doesn’t mean they love the government either. This seeming paradox serves the interest of the free-marketers, who benefit more from anti-government sentiment than they lose from anti-inequality sentiment.** Or to put it in pop culture terms, Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street* (1987) might convince people that stockbrokers are corrupt, but Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991) convinces them that government can’t be trusted to fix the problem.

Finally, taxation, not the sexiest of subjects, makes an occasional appearance in popular culture. When it does, it is usually as an instrument of punishment. Grandmas and gangsters are caught in the web of the IRS, victims of the dreaded audit. While we may sympathize more with Adam Sandler's grandma in *Happy Gilmore* than Al Capone in *The Untouchables*, in both we are meant to fear the IRS. The absence of many anti-tax narratives in popular culture reinforces our theory that public sentiment around free market economics is less about taxation than the broader question of whether or not people trust the government to protect their liberty and provide a measure of equality.

Landscape Analysis

To understand the cultural landscape around free market economics in 2017, we need to explore how we got here. To that end, we will focus on three eras, each initiated by a major political or socioeconomic event. In order, they are The New Deal Era (1933-1980), Reaganomics (1981-2011), and The Rise of the 99 Percent (2011-today).

Within each era, we examine the major cultural trends that likely had an effect, positive or negative, on how the public understood free market economics. In particular, we will explore how pop culture has portrayed democratic government; Wall Street and corporate America; individual vs collective action; social programs, taxes, and regulation. Within pop culture, we will focus on the most dynamic and popular storytelling mediums: mostly film and television, with some examples of books, comics, theater, and music.

The New Deal Era

Establishing A Foundation

"The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

--FDR, Second Inaugural address, 1937

In 1929, due largely to excessive speculation and borrowing, the stock market crashed, sending the world into the Great Depression. It would last ten years. Three years after it began, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president with a mandate to fix the US economy and help millions of Americans suffering from a 25% unemployment rate. FDR proposed a New Deal, which represented a rejection of laissez faire economic policies in favor of strong government intervention to raise wages, create jobs, provide a social safety net, regulate corporations, banks, and Wall Street, and increase taxes on the wealthy.

Much of the New Deal became law, while the courts, which had regularly sided with big business to overturn worker protections, eventually changed their tune. By the time the United States entered the Second World War in 1941, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, federal protections for workers and the poor had expanded dramatically. Social Security, minimum wage, 40 hour work week, the right to form a union, farm subsidies, price controls, insurance for bank deposits, jobs programs (include direct employment by the government); all were passed and implemented. To

rein in Wall Street, Congress created the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and passed the Glass-Steagall Act, which split commercial banks from securities firms to help reduce speculation.

During this decade, the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes entered the public debate. Unlike classical economists, Keynes called for deficit spending to stimulate an economy in recession, an approach that was embraced broadly in the U.S. (and most Western democracies) from 1939 through 1980. An aggressive, progressive income tax was implemented as well, reaching a peak marginal rate of 94 percent, while corporate taxes began to rise as well. An anti-fascist alliance with the Soviet Union during World War Two opened up space for the political left, which had grown in size and influence in response to the Great Depression and as a result of the labor movement's successful organizing efforts.

The dominant mediums for popular culture during these years were radio, film, books, comics, and music. Broadly speaking, the public was watching, listening to, and reading stories that showed empathy for the poor, antipathy for the rich (especially bankers), and held the government in high esteem. Collectively, this reinforced the message coming from Washington, including during FDR's "fireside chats" a few times a year, which were heard by around 20 percent of American radio listeners during peacetime and 60 percent during the war.

The Lone Ranger radio show debuted in 1933, and became one of the era's most popular. Inspired by true stories of Texas Rangers fighting crime in the Old West, and by fictional adventurers like *Zorro* and *Robin Hood*, the Lone Ranger and his sidekick, the Native American Tonto, fought to give pioneers a fair shake while settling the West. The protagonist lived by a code of morals, which featured a nod to Abraham Lincoln and an embrace of democratic governance. These included, "that 'this government of the people, by the people, and for the people' shall live always; that men should live by the rule of what is best for the greatest number; and that all men are created equal and that everyone has within himself the power to make this a better world."

Later in the decade, superheroes like Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman revitalized the comic book industry. Allies of national and local government, the first villains they took on were hijackers, embezzlers and bank robbers. In the first issue of Superman, this (immigrant) alien from another planet saves a woman from an abusive spouse and Lois Lane from kidnappers. He also fights government corruption, bringing a crooked lobbyist to the authorities in the U.S. Capitol building. When the U.S. entered World War Two, superheroes' attention shifted to the fight against Hitler and fascism. Patriotism meant support for FDR, and support for FDR provided ballast for the New Deal.

Because these heroes often acted alone and embraced the status quo, some have interpreted them as conservative. Yet what matters more for our purposes is whom they were fighting for and what they were fighting against. They are agents of the government, not corporate interests. The status quo they are fighting to maintain includes a massive expansion of social programs, and the victims they assist are those without private recourse. The people need government to provide law and order, broadly defined to include exploitation rather than just physical violence.

The Grapes of Wrath (book by John Steinbeck; film starring Henry Fonda and directed by John Ford) was the most popular novel on 1939 and an award-winning, successful film in 1940. It encapsulated the New Deal narrative. Farmers, evicted by the banks and forced to flee from Oklahoma, travel to California seeking work and a new beginning. Instead they find more exploitation by big corporate farmers. The only exception is a camp operated by the Resettlement Administration, an agency created by the New Deal. It provides the migrant workers protection from harassment and clean, utility supplied facilities. Another of the era's most popular films, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, was one of the few to focus exclusively on politics and government. Critics, including some who suggested it not be shown in Europe where it would damage America's reputation, decried a tale of a lone crusader standing up against corrupt politicians in the U.S. Senate. Yet despite its condemnation of government corruption, it holds out hope that the government can be a force for good.

Overwhelmingly popular culture showed the poor as victims of the rich. Charlie Chaplin, one of the era's biggest stars, brought back his beloved and big-hearted character "The Little Tramp." He appears in *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936), where he plays an assembly line worker forced to increase production beyond what is humanly possible. To the Tramp, jail seems preferable to life in the real world. *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) remade the well-known tale of a knight turned outlaw who steals from the rich (and from Prince John, who has usurped the throne from his brother) and gives to the poor. High taxes soak the poor, while many rich landowners who abuse those living and working on their lands. Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*, which has become an annual viewer tradition around Christmas, pits a community-minded small businessman against a greedy, unethical banker.

With a few exceptions, it is important to note that during this period the "deserving poor" in popular culture were white, as were the representatives of government providing the assistance. While there were some negative portrays of people of color in pop culture narratives, including the complicated mega-hit *Gone With The Wind*, erasure was more common. Almost no one making pop culture was interested in sympathetic portrayals of poor Blacks, Asians, or Latinxs. This whitewashing may have helped make racist consumers more likely to empathize with the downtrodden characters, but it would set up the backlash in the 60s and 70s, as narratives about people of color on government assistance were used to undermine white support for programs they had once supported.

The Glory Years

"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

President John F. Kennedy, Inaugural address, 1961

In the post-war period, under Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, public trust in government was high; over 70 percent from 1958-1964, when polling began. The economy was growing, with the benefits shared widely due to high rates of unionization, progressive taxation, and relatively generous wage floors and public benefits. Despite the onset of the Cold War and arms race with the Soviet Union and China, the political consensus around liberal Keynesianism that

emerged from the Second World War was established. If it wasn't broke, why fix it, seemed to be the majority viewpoint.

The post-war years were a period of tremendous optimism among most Americans. The U.S. had helped to win the Second World War and overcome the Great Depression. The economy, forced into overdrive during the war, was ready to supply a rebuilding world with modern consumer goods, food, and the latest technologies. Unions took advantage of their unprecedented strength to raise the wages and benefits of blue collar and government workers alike. Yet alongside this optimism was a level of paranoia about the communist threat. Leftists in government, schools and Hollywood in particular were attacked; many lost their jobs or were blacklisted. The second "red scare" peaked between 1947-1957, when the House Un-American Activities Committee and Senator Joseph McCarthy held hearings to name suspected communists. The debate over the merits of identifying possible communists played out on the big screen as well. *On the Waterfront* (1954), directed by the HUAC-testifying Elia Kazan, was in support. *High Noon* (1952), written by the blacklisted Carl Foreman, who had refused to name names, was against.

Infrastructure spending, begun under FDR, continued under Truman and Eisenhower. They established a national highway system, pioneered NASA, and completed rural electrification. Wall Street and the financial sectors grew at a steady pace, with little of the speculation that helped bring about the Great Depression. Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), conceived as part of the New Deal, was finally implemented in 1956. Banking was stable if not particularly sexy. The manufacturing sector built on its growth during the Second World War, while many returning from the war were able to attend college and buy homes due to the GI Bill, which stimulated growth in the STEM and professional sectors and dramatically increased home ownership. Federal farm programs, begun under FDR, generally kept the agricultural sector stable through a complicated series of direct payment, loans, and import tariffs. Union membership rates for wage earners reached an all-time high of 35% in 1954, while the purchasing power of the minimum wage peaked at \$8.68 (in 2016 dollars) in 1968.

Yet the prosperity was not shared evenly. Women, who had gone to work during the war, were expected to return to the home. African Americans, including those who served in the armed forces, did not receive the full benefits of the GI Bill. Jim Crow and other forms of discrimination kept most Blacks from attending college or buying their own homes. The promise of America, as articulated by its political leaders and through much of its cultural content, was unrealized in marginalized communities. This gap between rhetoric and reality help to motivate the movements for social change.

The election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 led to high hopes for a range of Americans, from the prosperous to the marginalized. Members of both parties claimed high levels of trust in the federal government. The Cold War had unified most Americans against a common Communist enemy, while the absence of a hot war (Bay of Pigs notwithstanding) meant peace and prosperity. When legal victories during the 1950s proved insufficient, civil right leaders forced the Johnson White House, in the wake of Kennedy's assassination, to champion and pass legislation protecting the right to vote and providing equal protection for African Americans and women. Students pushed

through a constitutional amendment lowering the voting age, under the logic that anyone old enough to fight in a war was old enough to vote.

The interventionist government introduced during the New Deal was expanded dramatically under President Johnson's Great Society agenda. Government health care for seniors, the poor and disabled became a reality in 1965 with the passage of Medicare and Medicaid. Eligibility for cash assistance to the poor was expanded, along with the arrival of food stamps. And while taxes were lowered under Johnson, the top marginal rate remained 70 percent. Immigration from Latin American and Asia, more or less frozen since the 1920s, was made possible through the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. The wealthiest nation in the history of the world was certain that the federal government could end poverty and discrimination, simultaneously.

A baby boom following the end of the Second World War created a huge demand for youth-oriented popular culture. Teens during the 1950s become college students in the 1960s, flooding campuses with middle class and lower-income strivers alike. Young fans of Dion or Chuck Berry in the 1950s shifted to The Beatles and Motown in the early 60s. Television rose to complement radio as a popular medium for family entertainment inside the home. By the early 1960s, 90% of Americans had a television in the home. Comic books came down from the height of their wartime popularity.

Interest in Westerns exploded during this period: in 1959, 26 primetime television shows were Westerns and half of all films released in the 50s were Westerns. From television shows like Bonanza and Gunsmoke to films like High Noon and The Searchers, the genre had stock characters and common narratives. Pioneers struggling to build a life in the Wild West would require the protection of a brave, gun-slinging sheriff or gun-for-hire. The antagonists might be wealthy landowners who "owned the town" and used intimidation to force "regular folk" to give up their stake in valuable land. Often the stories resembled The Lone Ranger; other times Robin Hood.

The Western genre depicted the American frontier, at this point 100 years in the past. The territories are often ungoverned, relying on codes of honor and so-called "frontier justice" to maintain social order. It took a certain kind of man (almost always a white man) to tame the west, which included skirmishes with Native Americans and survival under harsh conditions. The heroes in Westerns were self-sufficient tough guys in white hats with strong moral centers.

It is not surprising that some of the most prominent actors in Westerns were also members of Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPA), an organization created by conservatives in Hollywood. John Wayne, Gary Cooper, and Ronald Reagan were all members. According to the statement of principles, published in 1944, they understood the influence they had over the people who watched their films.

"As members of the motion-picture industry, we must face and accept an especial responsibility. Motion pictures are inescapably one of the world's greatest forces for influencing public thought and opinion, both at home and abroad. In this fact lies solemn obligation. We refuse to permit the effort of Communist, Fascist, and other totalitarian-minded groups to pervert this powerful medium into an instrument for the dissemination

of un-American ideas and beliefs. We pledge ourselves to fight, with every means at our organized command, any effort of any group or individual, to divert the loyalty of the screen from the free America that give it birth.”

Ayn Rand was also a member of the MPA. It commissioned her to write a report for film producers and studio executives to help them prevent communist, anti-free-market Collectivist propaganda from being inserted into their films. It is worth reading the report in its entirety. In it she lays out exactly how movies can shape public opinion. Much of what she suggests provides a roadmap for creating cultural content that makes the public more likely to embrace free-market economics, with one critical exception.¹

Note Rand’s final admonition: don’t smear American political institutions. During this period, cultural content that advanced narratives on the left and right largely accepted Rand’s admonition and refrained from attacking political institutions. This consensus is one of the reasons it was more difficult for business leaders and their allies to overturn New Deal era regulations and tax rates, much less stop the expansion of government social programs. At least during the 1940 and 50s, the battlefield was elsewhere.

If you weren’t looking backwards 100 years at the Old West, chances are you were looking 100 years into the future. The space race between the United States and Soviet Union kicked off in 1955 and shifted into high gear following the Soviet’s successful Sputnik launch in 1957. The competition was turbocharged in 1962 when JFK challenged Americans to be the first to land a man on the moon. Science fiction novels imagined what life might be like on other planets and galaxies. *Star Trek* premiered in 1966, featuring a multi-ethnic cast tasked with exploring the final frontier; deep

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- ¹ Don’t smear the free enterprise system (including individual rights, individual freedom, private action, private initiative, and private property);
 - Don’t smear industrialists (“you, as a motion picture producer, are an industrialist”);
 - Don’t smear wealth (“if the villain in your story happens to be rich – don’t permit lines of dialogue suggesting that he is the typical representative of a whole social class”);
 - Don’t smear the profit motive (“don’t give to your characters --- as a sign of villainy, as a damning characteristic – a desire to make money”);
 - Don’t smear success (“America is the land of the self-made man. Say so on the screen.”);
 - Don’t deify “The Common Man” (“American is the land of the uncommon man”);
 - Don’t glorify the collective (“Free cooperation is the free association of men who work together by voluntary agreement, each deriving from it his own personal benefit. Forced collectivism is the herding together of men into a group, with the individual having no choice about it, no personal motive, no personal reward, and subordinating himself blindly to the will of others”);
 - Don’t smear an independent man (“Remember that America is the country of the pioneer, the non-conformist, the inventor, the originator, the innovator. Remember that all great thinkers, artists, scientists were single, individual, independent men who stood alone, and discovered new directions of achievement – alone”);
 - Don’t smear American political institutions (“Don’t discredit the Congress of the United States by presenting it an ineffectual body, devoted to mere talk. If you do that – you imply that representative government is no good, and what we ought to have is a dictator. Don’t discredit our free elections. If you do that – you imply that elections should be abolished. Don’t discredit our courts by presenting them as corrupt. If you do that – you lead people to believe that they have no recourse except to violence, since peaceful justice cannot be obtained.”)

space. *2001: A Space Odyssey* was released in 1968, one year before Apollo 11, the first manned mission to the moon.

This period also saw the birth of rock and roll and the rise of folk music. Both fed a sense of defiance in the youth culture. While much of that early rebellion was focused on inter-social issues, like sex and drugs, folk music's more political content – including its class-consciousness – eventually pushed rock music to be more political as well. The folk music of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and even Paul Robeson, written and performed in support of labor unions and oppressed workers, begat musicians like Phil Ochs, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez.

During the New Deal, as part of the effort to put Americans back to work the government paying artists to create art. First the Public Works of Art Project and later the Works Progress Administration provided jobs for out-of-work artists. This generated a great deal of affection among artists for New Deal programs and the federal government. Private businesses and the wealthy were the enemies of choice. Yet the blacklisting in the late 40s and 50s weakened artists' support for their government, which paved the way for the outright vilification of government in the late 60s.

The Fall

"...people have got to know whether or not their president is a crook. Well, I am not a crook."

President Richard Nixon, 1973

If trust in government and a broad embrace of New Deal economics was the norm through the mid-60s, it would soon be disrupted. As U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War escalated, with more and more Americans subject to a military draft, open criticism of the government became increasingly widespread. The student anti-war movement was at the vanguard, but over time – and with revelations of government deception, such as the publication of the Pentagon Paper in 1971 showing how the Executive lied to Congress and the public – their disillusionment spread. Begun under Johnson, it reached its apogee under Nixon, who was forced from office by the Watergate scandal.

Yet while in office, Nixon continued the expansion of government begun under FDR. The creation of the Supplemental Security Income program in 1974 federalized state welfare programs for the elderly and disabled poor. In response to the growing clout of the environmental movement and the ongoing power of organized labor, Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 and the Occupational Health and Safety Administration in 1971. While the agencies would save lives on the job and reverse much of the pollution of our air and water, it also created new regulations for businesses of all sizes. The backlash would come quickly.

At the same time, the victories of the civil rights movement left few satisfied. The left, including African American communities, and later Latinos and women, felt the gains were insufficient and often illusory. They wanted more aggressive government intervention to make the promise of

equality real. At the same time, conservatives decried forced integration and “special privileges” accorded to so-called “minority” communities. As cities burned in the mid- to late-60s -- some of it to protest police violence, lack of public services, and other manifestations of white supremacy -- a “whitelash” ensued.

Conservatives rhetorically racialized government programs to create the impression that they largely served communities of color and encouraged dependency. Business interests and the wealthy argued that taxes were wasted on social programs that undermined recipients’ work ethic and thus were a double drag on the economy. The politics of racial resentment found a wider audience among many white workers, including union members, who were encouraged to identify with their (segregated) church or (white, male) boss or business owner, instead of working class Blacks and Latinos, or women. White flight to the suburbs, which began after World War Two and was not an option for most non-whites, separated communities. Disparate communities with divergent interests, conservatives asserted.

The resignation of Nixon in 1974 was followed by the stagflation of the late 1970s, along with high gas prices due to the oil boycott, a rise in street crime, municipal bankruptcies, and wage stagnation for lower and middle income Americans. At the same time, a coalition of big business, wealthy individuals, and conservative religious leaders found a common message. Government spending and regulation, unions, and high taxes were crippling American initiative and stifling American individualism. The answer was free-market economics, including a smaller, less active government and an end to the so-called “nanny state.”

Ronald Reagan, a Hollywood actor (and MPA member) who worked for years as a spokesperson for General Electric, began making the case for free-market economics in the 1950s and broke through into the national spotlight with “A Time for Choosing,” his 30 minute televised endorsement of Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater in 1964. The speech made the free-market case against government regulation and social welfare programs. Two years after President Johnson crushed Goldwater, Reagan was elected Governor of California. Reagan put a genial, movie star face on harsh free-market policies. A natural pitchman, Reagan more than any single figure helped to shift the cultural acceptance of conservative policies that hadn’t had a presidential-level advocate since Hoover lost to FDR in 1932.

In pop culture, vigilante films like *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish* blamed government bureaucrats and legal technicalities for preventing law enforcement from using the force necessary to stop violent criminals and drug dealers. In the 1960s, the movements for free speech, civil rights, and civil liberties had created legal protections for a more assertive populace. Suspected criminals now had to be read Miranda rights. Business had to serve people of all races equally. Dissenting views were less easy to silence. The characters played by Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson were understood to be standing up for the common (white) man.

Some vigilantes played against type. *Billy Jack* told the story of a Native American Green Beret and Vietnam veteran who protected young hippies from bullying locals. *Shaft*, an African American private investigator, is hired to keep the Italian mob from muscling out the Harlem mob; by any

means necessary. But neither found audiences comparable to the more conventional vigilante stories.

Danger lurked everywhere in the final decade of this era. Horror films had a resurgence, including some of the highest grossing like *Jaws* and *Jaws 2*, *The Amityville Horror*, *Halloween*, *Alien*, and *The Exorcist*. Collectively they reinforced the public impression that violence was ubiquitous.

Government corruption was explored as well, in the White House (*All the President's Men*), the police force (*Serpico*), and government agencies (*Chinatown*). Many of the stereotypes about African American women on welfare are explored and reinforced in the 1974 romantic dramedy *Claudine*, featuring an almost all black cast.

The first two films in *The Godfather* trilogy were released in 1972 and 1974, single-handedly reviving the gangster genre. Popular and critical successes, the films told the story of two generations in the Corleone family and were based on the novel of the same name (published in 1969). The protagonists are anti-heroes, immoral businessmen bound by a code that many viewers could respect. Government officials were all on the take, "owned" by the family and willing to look the other way to facilitate the mafia's illegal activities.

"It's not personal, Sonny. It's strictly business." Michael Corleone's assurance to his older brother, after volunteering to kill the men who had their father shot, is one of the iconic lines of the era. Business was necessarily impersonal, and might require you to take actions that were drastic, even immoral. The cynical perspective was a good fit for a period when the public was disillusioned and formerly respected institutions were in disrepute. Anti-heroes, including ends-justify-the-means businessmen, were on the rise.

A more hopefully story could be found in the emergence of *Star Wars*, in which a fresh-faced teenager with a special gift is the new hope of a plucky rebellion fighting an evil empire (*Star Wars* released in 1977, *The Empire Strikes Back* in 1980). With the empire's Storm Troopers an obvious allusion to the Nazi regime, this was democracy squaring off against fascism. The rebels lived simple lives, its leaders hiding in small shacks in a desert or swamp, while the authoritarians of the empire lived in opulence. The power of the initial trilogy led many to claim it for their cause. Reagan dubbed his space missile defense program "Star Wars" and referred to the Soviet Union as the evil empire, seeking to cast the film's conflict as one between democracy and communism.

While *Star Wars* operated on an allegorical level, *The China Syndrome* (1979) meant to be taken more literally. The film tells the story of a nuclear power plant disaster and the company's desire to avoid complying with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, a federal agency. When a real nuclear disaster occurred at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania only a few weeks after the film's release, it inspired a national conversation about the workplace safety and corporate disregard for the environment.

Meanwhile, television was entering its realist era. Producer Norman Lear was the dominant creative force on television, show running many of the decade's most popular shows. The

characters he created led messy, even gritty lives. The shows featured politically diverse casts, including single women and the poor and working class; all with strong points of view and personalities. The politics of race and gender predominated, but economic issues and the role of government were also discussed. Archie Bunker, the patriarch of *All in the Family*, manifested white urban working class conservatism. In addition to his forthright prejudices, Bunker also expressed anger over public assistance programs (“welfare incipients!”) and misspent tax dollars.

Working class protagonists proliferated. Lear was responsible for both *Good Times*, about an African American family living in public housing in Chicago, and *Sanford and Son*, about a junk shop owned by an African American father and son. *Welcome Back Kotter* followed a group of remedial public school kids in Brooklyn and their wisecracking teacher. *Taxi*, which premiered in 1978, was based at a taxi dispatch center and featured a motley crew of ethnic New Yorkers. *Laverne and Shirley*, starring Penny Marshall and Cindy Williams, chronicled the misadventures of two roommates who worked at a brewery in Milwaukee.

Finally, the music scene had turned angry and anti-establishment. The sweet pop tunes about dating and drive-thrus was now the soundtrack for the emerging social movements. *Ohio* by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, mourned the loss of four college students at the hands of federal troops at Kent State University.

Reaganomics

Government is the Enemy

“In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.”

President Ronald Reagan, First inaugural address, 1981

Our second era begins in 1981, when Reagan became president and began to implement a free market (aka: supply-side, aka: trickle down, aka: voodoo) economic regime. This included rollbacks of regulations, weakening of federal regulatory agencies, stagnation of the minimum wage, and massive tax cuts for big business and wealthy individuals. Public trust in the government had reached historic lows late in the Carter administration. Less than 30 percent of Americans trusted the government to do the right thing all or most of the time. The hostage standoff with Iran, along with a failed mission to save them, had coated Carter with a film of failure.

Despite his critique of the government, Reagan was also a booster for America. His belief in “American greatness” took some of the edge off of his anti-government rhetoric, particularly when he was in the White House. Under Reagan, Republicans whose anti-government sentiment was overwhelming under Carter, shifted a bit under Reagan. Along with more naturally pro-government Democrats, this led to an overall increase in public trust in government, holding steady at around 40 percent until crashing into the teens at the end of President George Herbert Walker Bush’s term and the beginning of President Bill Clinton’s first term.

The Reagan administration would provide the first real testing ground for the viability of free-market economic policy. In theory, low taxes on the wealthy and corporations would increase

investment, which would grow the economy. Low wages for workers and a minimal welfare state would increase employment. Finally, rollbacks on federal regulations (begun under Carter) would reduce costs to businesses while giving them the freedom to innovate and maximize wealth creation by more effectively exploiting natural and human resources. Collectively, this massive economic growth would increase tax revenue, while the gains at the top would trickle down to provide a boost to low wage workers and the middle class.

By Reagan's last year in office, the national debt (money borrowed by the federal government to pay its bills) had grown from \$900 billion to \$2.6 trillion. This happened for three reasons. First, Reagan's huge income and corporate tax cut in 1981 didn't pay for itself; instead it added to the debt. Second, Reagan increased government expenditures, much of it on the military. Third, Reagan's cuts to government programs were less significant than people assume.

The banking sector, which had been largely tamed during the New Deal era, was let loose once again. Restrictions on loan-to-value ratios for Savings and Loan banks were removed, which made the mortgage loans more likely to default, while cuts to relevant agency staff and rule changes reduced oversight. Ultimately this led to the Savings and Loan crisis in 1989, in which half of S&L's failed and it cost the US government \$125 billion to bail out the banks.

If Watergate had helped to increase mistrust of government, Reagan helped do the same by running the most scandal-filled administration since Nixon. The Wedtech bribery scandal forced the resignation of Attorney General Edwin Meese, among others. The Iran-Contra affair, in which the US sold weapons to Iran and used the profits to fund the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, consumed much of Reagan's senior national security leaders. Reagan's Chief of Staff, Michael Deaver, committed perjury. At the same time, Congress was discrediting the second branch of government with its own scandals. The Keating Five scandal implicated five U.S. Senators for improperly intervening to help a major donor and S&L executive avoid an investigation. House Speaker Jim Wright resigned following an ethics investigation that revealed he'd received more than \$100k in improper gifts.

If Norman Lear's working class comedies defined the 70s, Aaron Spelling's ritz and glitz defined the next era. The producer of megahits like *The Love Boat*, *Dynasty*, and, in the 90s, *Beverly Hills 90210*, Spelling brought viewers into the lives of the rich, beautiful, and powerful. Non-Spelling shows, including top-rated soaps like *Dallas*, *Knots Landing* and *Falcon Crest*, or the documentary series *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, were in much the same vein. Even many popular action shows, like *Magnum P.I.*, or comedies like *The Cosby Show*, focused on characters that lived comfortably. This continued into the 90s, with sitcoms like *Seinfeld* dominated by urban professionals living in nice apartments with few pressing financial concerns.

The glaring exception to this trend among popular TV shows was *Rosanne*. A top five show for its first six seasons ('88-'89 through '93-'94), the family comedy focused on the Connors, a white working-class family of five (later, six) led by outspoken working mother Rosanne (played by comedian Rosanne Barr). Money was tight, good jobs hard to find; both were a constant topic of conversation and source of conflict. A year after *Rosanne* premiered, America was introduced to

COPS. A reality show before reality shows, *COPS* showed Americans suffering from the worst crime rate in our history what life was like on “the front lines.” Much of the footage portrayed sympathetic police officers, usually white, and the dysfunctional poor, usually Black. One year later, the videotape of the Rodney King beating exposed what *COPS* covered up; routine, excessive force used against African American suspects.

The glamorous lives Americans saw nightly on their TV screens, and the almost complete absence of sympathetic characters that might benefit from government assistance, reinforced Reaganomics messaging. Our pop heroes are rich and powerful: they deserve the money they accumulate. Poor people are invisible: they don’t deserve to be thought of much at all.

Working class heroes were a bit more present in films. Among the era’s top grossing movies, we get a taste of working class life in *An Officer and a Gentleman*, about a street-smart kid trying to become a naval officer while dating a townie; *Flashdance*, about a welder who is also a stripper but dreams of getting into a prestigious dance program; *The Karate Kid* series, about the teen son of a single mom who learns karate to take on the rich neighborhood bullies. In all three the protagonist is paired with a wealthy friend or lover. Most John Hughes teen comedies, including *Pretty in Pink* and *The Breakfast Club*, similarly showcase class differences overcome by high school crushes. The awkward moment when the rich lover brings his or her new partner home to meet the family is repeated over (*Mystic Pizza*) and over (*Say Anything*) again. A more original take could be found in *Trading Places*, a comedy starring Eddie Murphy and Dan Ackroyd as disadvantaged and privileged men whose lives are effectively swapped to satisfy the curiosity of two wealthy Wall Street brothers.

True poverty and class conflict is limited to films about African Americans and Latinos, including hits like *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Malcolm X* (1992), period dramas from earlier in the 20th Century, and neighborhood-based dramas like *Boyz in the Hood* (1991, South Central in Los Angeles), *Stand and Deliver* (1988, East LA), and *Do the Right Thing* (1989, Bed-Stuy in NYC). These entered the mainstream as rap music started to appear on, and eventually dominate, popular music playlists. *Public Enemy* front man Chuck D once called rap music the “CNN of the ghetto” for providing the broader public with an uncomfortable but honest look at life in poor or working class African American communities.

The collective cultural impact of hip hop, across media, was enormous. The so-called “golden age” of hip hop, from approximately the mid-80s through the mid-90s, demonstrated the commercial viability across racial lines of an art form that had been largely dismissed as “too black” for mainstream white audiences. Police brutality, inner city violence, the crack epidemic, dangerous streets and schools, lack of jobs and opportunity; all of these were weaved into the stories told through hip hop.

Yet collectively this provided only marginal pushback to free-market economic policy. This may be because The Nation of Islam and its leader, Louis Farrakhan, were popular among a subset of the most politically radical hip hop stars, including Public Enemy, Ice Cube, and Mos Def. Farrakhan was a conservative revolutionary, who believed women should be subservient to men and gays should

be shunned or worse, yet railed against the white supremacy. In the mold of Booker T. Washington, Farrakhan preached a bootstraps philosophy intended to create black self-sufficiency. Government didn't hold the answers to the black community's problems.

At the same time, hip hop often glorified wealth and material goods ("life ain't nothin' but bitches and money"), while denigrating those left behind in the ghetto. Songs that mention welfare dependency, using and reinforcing an anti-welfare framework, were common. Big Daddy Kane's "Callin' Mr. Welfare" is fairly typical. The characters he describes make poor decisions, like having ten babies with a pimp, so they end up "callin' Mr. Welfare." Personal responsibility, traditionally the conservative rationale against the welfare state, is also popular among rappers. As far back as 1983, Curtis Blow was warning listeners to avoid cocaine on his hit single "White Lines": "If you get hooked, baby / It's nobody else's fault, so don't do it!"

The pre-crash 80s were a boom time for Wall Street, whose mythology was sealed with the release of Oliver Stone's drama in 1987. The film *Wall Street* did for stock traders what *The Godfather* did for gangsters; it created compelling anti-heroes, amoral but appealing. A life of luxury, beautiful women and high stakes negotiations was undoubtedly appealing, even if it destroyed lives while breaking the law. It made people want to be stock traders.

Wall Street's most famous scene featured the putative villain, Gordon Gecko, explaining -- to shareholders of a paper company he is taking over -- why "greed... is good." He makes the case for free-market economics, how the profit motive ultimately is good for everyone, including shareholders who are being screwed over by corporate bureaucrats. America, he complains, has abandoned the free-market, letting deficits rise with no accountability.

"Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms -- greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge -- has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed -- you mark my words -- will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA."

The film debuted two months after Black Monday, the largest one day drop of the market since the Great Depression. Yet despite the crash and the film's ending, in which Gekko's protégé (played by Charlie Sheen) does the right thing and helps his union father (played by Martin Sheen) at Gekko's expense, the public remembers *Wall Street* largely for romanticizing the life of a stock broker. Gekko would not be the last semi-fictional Wall Street villain to gain a following.

Two other films during this period about Wall Street took a different tact. In *Other People's Money*, Danny Devito plays a corporate raider who wants to buy, dismantle and sell a family-owned wire manufacturer run by a patrician Gregory Peck. Ultimately he succeeds, having convinced the business that getting value for a business today is better than running it until it fails. *The Secret of my Success* (1987), a comedy starring Michael J. Fox as a mailroom to boardroom finance wiz, reinforces the notion that business rewards innovative, profitable ideas.

By the time Americans elected a cowboy, the country was mostly done with Westerns. In their place rose other kinds of action heroes. Indiana Jones, a scrappy archeology professor traveling the world to collect artifacts, became one prototype. He was smart, charming, handsome, tough, brave; an alpha male and a renaissance man. Michael Douglas played a version of this character in *Romancing the Stone* and *Jewel of the Nile*. Cocky, go-it-alone soldiers were also popular. Richard Gere as a street-smart young man trying to become a naval officer in 1982's *An Officer and a Gentleman* becomes hothead Tom Cruise in 1986's *Top Gun*. Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger often play beefed up versions of the lone warrior. Finally, I-work-alone police officers were also popular in the 80s, including Eddie Murphy in *Beverly Hills Cop* (1 and 2) and Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*.

If these lone warriors generally reflected and reinforced a more Randian view of the world, there was one very heavy hitter weighing in for more collaborative, collective action: *Star Wars*. The original trilogy, begun in 1977, continued with *The Empire Strikes Back* in 1980 and *Return of the Jedi* in 1983. The two films were the second and third highest grossing of the decade, after the original had been the highest grossing of the 70s. With their massive fan base and almost total penetration into the public consciousness, *Star Wars* has been the best hope for far-reaching anti-free-market messaging in the pop culture space.

A brother and sister, one raised working class, the other a princess. A reformed smuggler and his first mate. Two droids: one nervous, one brave. Two old wise men, spiritual warriors who must mentor the next generation. The rebel alliance in *Star Wars* is a multicultural democracy that embraces equality, the progressive framework, as its lodestar. It seeks to overthrow the militaristic fascist empire and restore an intergalactic democracy.

Over time other teams of heroes, most drawn from existing literature, replicate the formula developed by *Star Wars*. *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Avengers*; all written before the Reaganomics era and all made into successful films in its twilight.

How does government fare in during the first decade of this period? Poorly. In *Ghostbusters*, another 80s blockbuster, it's an EPA bureaucrat who forces the team to shut down its storage unit, releasing hundreds of ghosts on New York. He enforces the rules, assuming he knows better than the Ghostbusters themselves, in what is perhaps the most effective fictional counterpoint to the vital nuclear power regulators from *The China Syndrome*. The 1991 film *JFK*, a conspiracy-laden account of the Kennedy assassination, deepened mistrust of government. In the years after the film's release, public trust in government reached all-time lows.

Dismantling the New Deal

"The era of big government is over."

President Bill Clinton, State of the Union, 1996

After Reagan was reelected in 1984 to a second term, a group of Democrats created the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC). Convinced that its embrace of social movements and economic populism was a losing strategy for Democrats, it sought "to define and galvanize popular

support for a new public philosophy built on progressive ideals, mainstream values, and innovative, non-bureaucratic, market-based solutions.” While the DLC was not fully on board with Reagan’s free-market economic agenda, it did more than meet them halfway from traditional New Deal policies. This meant embracing Wall Street and the financial sector as partners, eschewing or undercutting many government-run social programs, and seeking ways to lower taxes and relax regulations. It also meant putting some distance between the party and the labor movement, while demonstrating “toughness” against (white) America’s perceived enemies, foreign and domestic. Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton became the DLC’s leader, and in 1993 he brought the DLC philosophy with him into this White House.

Thus while the White House changed hands, from the Greatest Generation to the Baby Boomers, and while many people believed progressive politics had returned as well, Reaganomics remained. The failed Clinton health care bill broke from the foundation laid by the New Deal and Great Society programs; government run, single payer health care was out in favor of the DLC’s so-called “market-based solutions.” At the same time, to gain the trust of its friends on Wall Street, the White House pursued aggressive deficit reduction by reigning in government spending, a pre-Reagan centerpiece of conservative economic policy, and raising taxes.

When the Democrats lost control of Congress in 1994, at a moment when public trust in government had hit historic lows, the DLC blamed the left. For the rest of the Clinton presidency, free market capitalism was ascendant, Wall Street unshackled, and the safety net weakened. By signing legislation that removed the federal guarantee of cash support to the poor, Clinton accomplished a goal conservatives had been pursuing for generations. Significant restrictions on the financial sector were also lifted under Clinton, who repealed the New Deal era Glass-Steagall rules that split commercial banks from securities firms. This contributed to the financial crisis of 2008, in which banks engaging in newly permitted risky behavior overreached and were (once again) bailed out by the federal government.

As the post-recession economy stabilized and the end of the Cold War brought a peace dividend, job growth returned. Free trade deals signed by Clinton, along with technological changes, accelerated a shift from middle class manufacturing jobs to low wage service jobs. Technology start-ups were minting billionaires while the rising stock market mostly helped the rich get richer. Thus the net effect of the job growth was to flatten out the middle class while accelerating income and wealth inequality. Relatively low marginal tax rates and less robust social programs would only make the inequality more pronounced, particularly during future downturns.

At the same time, international financial institutions, most prominently the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, were embracing free-market economics. By leveraging their influence over foreign countries that had taken on debt, the World Bank and IMF forced governments to make policy changes that effectively shred safety nets, lowered wage floors, and deregulated industries. These changes benefited global corporations seeking a low cost, easy to control workforce, while creating a race to the bottom among countries seeking manufacturing jobs.

The backlash to what became known as neo-liberalism gained international attention in 1999 in Seattle, when environmentalists and labor unions joined with anarchists and other protesters to disrupt a meeting of the World Trade Organization. What became known as the anti-globalization movement gained momentum with successful actions in cities across the globe, including a massive engagement on April 16, 2000 in Washington, DC at the headquarters of the IMF and World Bank. Many of the issues raised by the movement would be central to activists in the next era, including objections to “corporate personhood” (Occupy Wall Street), unregulated capitalism (Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaign), and free trade agreements like NAFTA (Trumpism).

Bush tweaked some of the Clinton era policies while moving ahead with trickle-down dogma. Corporate taxes and marginal rates for high earners were lowered, while the estate tax was sunset over 10 years. All of this was supposed to pay for itself, which it didn’t. Ultimately in December 2010, immediately following massive losses in Congress, Obama extended the Bush tax cuts and allowed the estate tax repeal to lapse, although it ended up covering only the very wealthiest estates. Provisions were added to lower the effective tax rate on all but the wealthiest earners by, among other things, adjusting the Alternative Minimum Tax and helping low-income earners with a payroll tax cut and more money for unemployment insurance.

In 2008, after almost three decades of deregulation in the financial sector -- a period marked by regular economic downturns driven by market speculation and risky investments – the economy collapsed. What started as a mortgage crisis, in which bad loans were made (and then resold again and again) to undercapitalized buyers with unsustainable terms, cascaded through the financial sector, Wall Street, pension funds, the auto industry, insurance companies, and more. Home prices collapsed, leaving millions of homeowners owing more on mortgages than the value of their homes. The burgeoning Black middle class, which had begun to accumulate wealth, saw it zeroed out between the bad mortgages and the drop in home values and mutual funds.

First Bush and then Obama bailed out the banks and the auto industry. Both were saved, but individuals hurt by the recession didn’t fare as well. Expanded unemployment insurance and an increase in the Earned Income Tax Credit helped some low-income Americans; the expansion of Medicaid through the Affordable Care Act also made a difference. But the stimulus was less robust than most Keynesians though necessary, with a greater emphasis on tax cuts than spending.

In his first term, Obama sought to secure his legacy by passing the Affordable Care Act (ACA). It expanded coverage using a free-market model innovated by Mitt Romney when he was governor of Massachusetts. Despite calls from the left for a single payer plan, which is the norm in most social democracies, or even a public option, the Obama White House stayed with the free-market plan. Republicans falsely claimed it was a government takeover of health care; none voted for it. Democrats also have supported efforts to privatize prisons and charterize schools, amplifying assertions that competition and the profit motive will necessarily get better results at a lower cost.

Efforts by Democrats to win support for new programs from free-market conservatives appear to have made conservatives more doctrinaire, less willing to compromise. All taxes on income or savings or investment or business were bad. All regulations were suspect. The federal government

served no critical function beyond national defense. After anti-government terrorist Timothy McVeigh bombed the Oklahoma City Federal Building in 1994, killing 168 people, Clinton finally responded forcefully to the mainstreaming of anti-government hate speech.

“It is one thing to believe that the Federal Government has too much power and to work within the law to reduce it. It is quite another to break the law of the land and threaten to shoot officers of the law if all they do is their duty to uphold it. It is one thing to believe we are taxed too much and work to reduce the tax burden. It is quite another to refuse to pay your taxes, though your neighbor pays his. It is one thing to believe we are over-regulated and to work to lessen the burden of regulation. It is quite another to slander our dedicated public servants, our brave police officers, even our rescue workers, who have been called a hostile army of occupation.”

As the New York Times reported, “After the bombing, Mr. Clinton said he chose to no longer even use the term federal bureaucrat because he believed it had become a term used to demean and dehumanize federal workers.”

While the anti-government rhetoric didn’t stop after the bombing, the percentage of Americans who trust in government began a steady climb from the 20s to the 40s during the last six years of the Clinton presidency. This continued despite the impeachment of Clinton by the Republican-led House, a process much of the public saw as narrowly partisan and lacking in substance. Bush was able to maintain this level of trust in government, boosted even higher briefly by the attack on 9/11, for his first two years in office. But it began to slide again when the U.S. entered the drawn out war in Iraq, based on false government assurances that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Pushed along by the failed government response to Hurricane Katrina and the government’s inability to avert the mortgage crisis of 2008, public trust dipped into the teens and stayed in the 20s through 2015.

At the same time, public trust in business wasn’t faring much better. According to the book “Public Trust in Business” by Jared Harris, it has been in steady decline since Reagan became president. Factories closing and moving abroad; illegal behavior by business leaders and financial professionals; campaign contributions to elected officials used to advance narrow self-interest; manipulation and fraud committed against dues-paying Americans; public bailouts. In the Bush years alone the corporate and financial sectors were involved in two enormous frauds; first Enron, which broke in October 2001; then the mortgage scandal in 2008.

Finally, in 2009, the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the Citizen’s United case. It held that as “persons” corporations could not be restricted from exercising their First Amendment rights around elections. Earlier limitations on direct spending by corporations on electoral campaigns were undone. The table was set for our current era.

The Real World on MTV premiered in 1992. One of the first American “reality show” hits, it proposed to show what happens when a group of cohabitating young, attractive men and women “stop being polite and start getting real.” The success of *Survivor* on CBS in 2000 solidified the

genre's viability with a mainstream audience. By 2011, reality shows dominated America's TV screens. It was a winning formula for a medium whose audience had been fractured across hundreds of channels, then fractured again by the rise of web-only video sharing sites like YouTube and streaming channels like Netflix.

Reality TV was inexpensive to make, with no special effects and no big-money talent. It promised (and usually delivered) fireworks by casting conflict. Viewers were encouraged to choose sides, pick favorites, join a "team." In a sense, much of reality TV, both the competition and community shows, are modern-day gladiator matches. Many of the shows seemed descended from *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* (a show that was reimagined, more or less, as *Cribs* by MTV in 2000). The stars were wealthy, their lifestyle showcased, while viewers got to live glam lives vicariously through the subjects. The *Real Housewives* series and the Kardashian clan shows are the most successful of this genre. Viewers who love or hate the stars obsessively follow their lives.

Several popular reality and competition shows starred high profile businessmen. Shark Tank, which premiered in 2009, gives entrepreneurs an opportunity to pitch their businesses as investment opportunities for an assembled panel of experts. Beginning in 2010, *Undercover Boss* shows what happens when a company's CEO joins his own workforce, undercover. Episodes usually conclude with the boss humbled and cutting checks to needy workers. It remains one of the few shows that provide Americans with insight into the lives of the working class. Finally, in 2004, *Survivor* producer Mark Burnett teamed up with Donald Trump to create *The Apprentice*. Contestants had to complete a series of tasks to determine which was best suited to get a job working for Trump. When viewers weren't watching the contestants bicker with each other, Trump is giving an "exclusive" tour of his gold-plated penthouse suite in Trump Tower.

At the opposite end of the reality show spectrum were popular shows like MTV's *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant*, which helped viewers understand not only the challenges faced by young and unprepared new moms, but also the lives of the working class families and friends that populated most episodes. Yet while the shows generate sympathy and understanding for young, low-income mothers, they did little to help viewers understand some of the ways government programs provide a safety net for vulnerable Americans. As Amy Kramer explained about Jamie, one of the mothers:

"These days Jamie is mom to a precocious 2-year-old, attends school full-time and lives in her own apartment. And by her own admission, none of that would be possible without government assistance. She gets food stamps, child care vouchers, financial aid for school and even her rent is subsidized. We don't hear much about public aid on "16 and Pregnant" or "Teen Mom," but it's actually very common for young mothers to receive some kind of government help."

Because of reality TV, Kim Kardashian, Donald Trump, and Paris Hilton, three children of extreme privilege, took their place on our national red carpet next to talented actors like Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, and Jennifer Aniston.

Government programs made a few appearances in film during this period, none more powerful than 2009's *Precious*, based on the 1996 novel *Push* by Sapphire. Nominated for six Academy Awards, it tells the story of an African American teenager growing up in poverty in Harlem during the worst years of the crack epidemic. Her mother is gaming the welfare system, and the family lives in Section 8, government subsidized, housing. The film generated controversy for its depiction of inner city Black poverty; further linking public assistance to African Americans in the minds of some observers. Yet *Precious* is a sympathetic character, ill-served by her parents and ultimately saved with the support of government workers (a teacher, a social worker, a nurse).

The acclaimed HBO series *The Wire*, which over five seasons (2002 – 2008) explored the gritty lives of drug dealers, cops, longshoremen, teenagers, teachers, politicians, and reporters in 1990s Baltimore, was easily the pop culture's most direct fictional engagement with the consequences of free-market economic policy, disinvestment from urban areas and the war on drugs. Considered by critics to be one of the best TV shows ever made, *The Wire* provided writer and director David Simon – an outspoken critic of free-market economics – with a platform to explore the lives of working class and poor people in his hometown. The sitcoms *The Middle* (2009-today) and *The King of Queens* (1998-2007) emulated classic working class comedies *Rosanne* and *The Honeymooners*, respectively. Yet neither achieved anything near the reach or cultural influence of the originals.

For many Americans during the Bush years, the White House of NBC's hit show *The West Wing* (1999-2006) provided a hopeful vision of what a Democratic administration might accomplish. Created by Aaron Sorkin, *The West Wing* followed the work lives of the senior White House staff as they struggled with complex policy choices, buffeted by interest groups and the media and looming elections and divided government. All of the characters were flawed but well meaning; all believed deeply that government should and could be a tool to help people live better lives.

In the show's second season, it takes a swipe at then President Clinton's abandonment of New Deal economics and embrace of Reaganomics. Here is a summary of the scene:

Toby goes to see the President in the living quarters where he is recovering from the flu. He's joined there by "Deputy Chief-of-Staff Josh Lyman." Toby utters the line to the President: "The era of big government is over."

President Bartlet: "You want to cut the line?"

Toby reaches into his liberal gut to deliver an emotional appeal for hardcore liberalism: "I want to change the sentiment. We're running away from ourselves. And I know we can score points that way. I was a principle architect of that campaign strategy right along with you Josh. But we're here now. Tomorrow night we do an immense thing. We have to say what we feel, that government no matter what it's failures in the past and in times to come for that matter, government can be a place where people come together and where no one gets left behind. No one gets left behind. An instrument of good. I have no trouble understanding why the line tested well, Josh, but I don't think that means we should say it. I think that means we should change it."

Toby's sermon convinces the President: "I think so, too. What do you think Josh?"

Josh: "I make it a point never to disagree with Toby when he's right, Mr. President."

Only in *The West Wing*, which was watched by 17 million people at its peak, did we see this debate between traditional liberals and DLC Democrats dramatized. The show was required viewing for politically engaged Americans, and undoubtedly had an outsized influence on the policy preferences of Democratic Party activists.

In 2004, HBO brought the Western back with *Deadwood*, set in a frontier mining town in the area of the future Dakota Territory during the 1870s. To keep robber barons and the emerging territory from taking control of the town and undermining everything they have built, local businessmen, a banker, and newspaper editor come together to try their hand at self-government. Over three seasons viewers come to understand the meaning of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes' famous line, "taxes are what we pay for civilized society." Yet the characters who have the same realization are not pointed headed liberals, they are frontiersman; former soldiers; capitalists; gangsters.

On the other hand, the animated film *The Incredibles* delivered a conservative, anti-government message in an untraditional wrapper. Superheroes are grounded by lawsuits and a society that doesn't believe in exceptionalism. Yet when a city is about to be destroyed, it's the superheroes who must save the day.

The final decade of this era has been dominated by superhero and fantasy movies, a trend that continues today. Since the release of the first Star Wars prequel in 1999, these films have been the top grossing in 10 of the next 13 years (and all but one of the years between 2012-2016). As we saw in the 1930s and 40s, some superheroes work alone. This tends to reinforce a more Randian, pro-free-market perspective; the individual above the collective. Each of us can succeed on our own if we try hard enough. Yet in recent years, studios have favored teams of heroes, rather than individuals. *The X Men*, *Harry Potter*, *The Avengers*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, even *Transformers* all emphasize team over any one individual. While clearly motivated in some instances by a desire to maximize profits by creating vehicles for multiple stars (many of whom have their own solo films), the trend has reinforced the benefits of teamwork, shared responsibility, even solidarity.

Rise of the 99 Percent

"We are the 99 percent!"

Chant from the Occupy Wall Street protest, 2011

In 2010, the Tea Party Movement, supported by business leaders associated with free-market economic policy, deployed anti-government and anti-Obama rhetoric to deliver the House to Republicans. While the Tea Party itself was new, the issues were not. In what felt like a rerun of 1994, the administration initially responded to the losses in Congress by making concessions to the free-marketers, including extending the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans. Two years later, at the SOTU during his reelection campaign, Clinton proclaimed, "the era of big government is over." That might have happened again in 2012, but something intervened.

On September 17, 2011, a group of activists set up camp in Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan. Its goal was to emulate the Arab Spring occupations of public spaces, which earlier that year had helped force the president of Egypt from power. The main focus of what came to be known as Occupy Wall Street was the power of the 1%, corporate malfeasance, wage stagnation and the growing wealth divide. It was a reaction to the Great Recession, the Supreme Court's pro-corporate decision in Citizen's United, and ultimately, political actors' failure to correct the structural problems in the economy that were crushing hopes for upward mobility among most Americans.

Occupy Wall Street was a movement against free-market economic policy.

On December 6, 2011, as Occupy was winding down, President Obama gave a speech at a high school in Osawatomie, Kansas. After touting President Teddy Roosevelt's record of trust busting and support for worker protections and regulations, Obama indicted Reaganomics.

[T]here is a certain crowd in Washington who, for the last few decades, have said, let's respond to this economic challenge with the same old tune. "The market will take care of everything," they tell us. If we just cut more regulations and cut more taxes -- especially for the wealthy -- our economy will grow stronger. Sure, they say, there will be winners and losers. But if the winners do really well, then jobs and prosperity will eventually trickle down to everybody else. And, they argue, even if prosperity doesn't trickle down, well, that's the price of liberty.

Now, it's a simple theory. And we have to admit, it's one that speaks to our rugged individualism and our healthy skepticism of too much government. That's in America's DNA. And that theory fits well on a bumper sticker. (Laughter.) But here's the problem: It doesn't work. It has never worked. (Applause.) It didn't work when it was tried in the decade before the Great Depression. It's not what led to the incredible postwar booms of the '50s and '60s. And it didn't work when we tried it during the last decade.

Then in July of 2012, while campaigning for reelection against Mitt Romney, President Obama pushed back against the narrative that claimed government played no role in helping people succeed.

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business — you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen. The Internet didn't get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet.

The point is, is that when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together. There are some things, just like fighting fires, we don't do on our own. I mean, imagine if everybody had their own fire service. That would be a hard way to organize fighting fires.

So we say to ourselves, ever since the founding of this country, you know what, there are some things we do better together. That's how we funded the GI Bill. That's how we created the middle class. That's how we built the Golden Gate Bridge or the Hoover Dam. That's how we invented the Internet. That's how we sent a man to the moon. We rise or fall together as one nation and as one people, and that's the reason I'm running for President — because I still believe in that idea. You're not on your own, we're in this together.

Obama's argument, which reflected the logic of the New Deal, is that government is NOT the problem; that we need each other to succeed. Harry needs Hermione; Ironman needs The Hulk; Anakin needs Obiwan; Professor X needs Storm; Gimli needs Legolas; etcetera. Even while none of these superhero and fantasy films speak about taxes, all contrast a multicultural social democratic order, often in tune with the natural environment, with authoritarian regimes built around rigid hierarchy and the exploitation of resources for personal gain. Emperor Palpatine from *Star Wars*; Voldemort from *Harry Potter*; Soron from *Lord of the Rings*; Ronan from *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

Obama went on to win reelection, while Romney, the wealthy son of a multi-millionaire auto executive, was memorably caught dividing Americans between "makers" and "takers." A few weeks after Election Day, community groups and SEIU launched the Fight for \$15, a campaign to raise the minimum wage and grant workers the right to form a union. 100 fast food workers in New York City walked off their jobs. Thirty months later, tens of thousands of workers took to the street, making the same demands. Cities and states began passing the recommended increases in the minimum wage, including New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle.

Six months later, Senator Bernie Sanders joined a Fight for \$15 rally, pledging support for the movement and raising the federal minimum wage to fifteen dollars. Sanders, a democratic socialist with a modest national profile who has long advocated for universal health care, progressive taxation, fair trade, aggressive regulation, a strong safety net, and higher wages for low and middle-income workers, caught fire in his primary campaign against Hillary Clinton. At the same time, Donald Trump was gaining traction on the Republican side. Breaking with free-market orthodoxy, Trump condemned trade deals, called for infrastructure spending, promised universal health care, and claimed he would protect Medicare and Social Security. He indicted the buying of politicians by Wall Street, went after Goldman Sachs, and empathized with coal miners and assembly line workers.

Sanders lost the primary, but captured the hearts of younger voters, a majority of whom, according to an October 2016 poll, said they were dissatisfied with the current economic system and thought socialism might be good for them. Trump won the primary, and then won many Rust Belt states in the general election, thanks in part to his attacks on NAFTA and Goldman Sachs, and his promise to do whatever it takes to bring back manufacturing jobs, including deporting immigrant workers. Yet since his inauguration, Trump's administration has embraced free-market economy policy on steroids.

So we have entered a new era. It is a period of heightened public concern about stagnating wages, income and wealth inequality, and less economic mobility. It is also a period of heightened public

concern about corporate influence over government, abuse of power by elected officials, and an extremely high level of partisanship and gridlock. Finally, it is a period when social movements have energized millions of Americans, giving them the sense that through their participation, change is possible. But free-market fundamentalism remains.

Some of the trends we saw at the end of the Reaganomics era are still with us. Hollywood is still churning out superhero and fantasy blockbusters. Television is wall to wall with reality shows. Yet we have seen some pop culture content that may be helping to deepen opposition to free-market economics and support for middle-out policies.

If Occupy Wall Street was the people's response to the behavior that crashed the economy, Hollywood had its own response. Adam McKay, a successful comedy writer and director, had hinted at his interest in corporate and finance industry wrongdoing in 2010's action comedy *The Other Guys*. The villain is a corporate big shot eventually arrested for embezzling money from the NYPD pension fund. During the closing credits, McKay created an animated video (set to "Maggies Farm" by Rage Against the Machine) explaining the Bernie Madoff ponzi scheme and the cost of corporate bailouts. In 2015 McKay released *The Big Short* based on the book by Michael Lewis, which told the story of the housing bubble and resulting recession from the perspective of several people who anticipated the crash and profited from it.

The Big Short was a critical and popular success, garnering five Academy Award nominations and \$133 million at the box office. To help explain some of the complicated financial instruments used to create and sustain the housing bubble, McKay used eye-catching talent in cameo appearances. Margot Robbie explained subprime mortgages while in a bubble bath and Anthony Bourdain analogized his leftover halibut to collateralized debt obligations while cooking.

Margin Call, a fictional look inside an investment firm that was overleveraged during the housing bubble, was released in October 2011. Public attention on Occupy Wall Street was at its peak. Despite a modest \$20 million box office, the film had an outsized footprint because of its cultural relevancy. As film critic Roger Ebert wrote in his review, "I think the movie is about how its characters are concerned only by the welfare of their corporations. There is no larger sense of the public good. Corporations are amoral, and exist to survive and succeed, at whatever human cost. This is what the Occupy Wall Street protesters are angry about: They are not against capitalism, but about Wall Street dishonesty and greed."

Finally, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Jonah Hill, was an enormous critical (five Academy Award nominations) and financial success (\$400 million worldwide gross). Set in the 1980s, it tells the true story of a stockbroker who loses his job on Wall Street, makes a fortune selling penny stocks in a boiler room, and then builds his own firm. All of the characters are motivated by greed and make their money at the expense of the clients whose investments they are supposed to be managing. Like *Wall Street* before it, *The Wolf of Wall Street* creates a compelling anti-hero, who lives the high life and pays a minor price for his transgressions. Victims of the scam are not depicted in a meaningful way, leading to criticism that the audience would identify more with the glamorous celebrities than their anonymous victims.

The Dark Night Rises, the third of the Christopher Nolan-directed Batman films, was released in 2012. It is currently the 17th highest grossing film of all time, bringing in more than \$1 billion. The villain, Bane, takes Gotham hostage and releases inmates from prison, encouraging them to loot and assault the wealthy. Many observers felt the anger at the elites was a reference to Occupy Wall Street, while the hero (Batman) is a corporate CEO turned vigilante, armed with expensive toys. Although denied by Dolan, much of the film fits into a pro-free-market framework. Liberals coddle criminals, hate those who are successful (ie: the wealthy), and believe in a controlling government. Conservatives are pro-cop, pro-Wall Street, and self-reliant.

One juggernaut well positioned to provide a counterpoint to *The Dark Night Rises* is the young adult trilogy turned movie blockbuster series, *The Hunger Games*. As the LA Times described it, “set in a dystopic future defined by the rigid classism of ‘Panem,’ citizens of the ruling Capitol live lavish lives of leisure, while citizens of the outlying districts struggle with poverty, abuse, and exploitation in support of the wealthy.” The Hunger Games of the title are an annual televised gladiator-style competition featuring two children from each district. Katniss Everdeen, the female representative from the Appalachian-like District 12, finds herself becoming the leader of an uprising by the districts against the Capitol. A three-finger salute is adopted as a gesture of solidarity across districts, while a bird called a mockingjay becomes the symbol of the resistance.

The three-finger salute jumped from the screen to the street in 2014, when protesters in Thailand faced arrest for this silent act of protest. The film was then pulled from theaters for being too political. In the United States, a campaign asserting that “The Hunger Games Are Real” encouraged fans to post photos of them raising three fingers in solidarity with workers seeking fair wages and benefits. Actor Donald Sutherland, who plays the leader of Panem (and thus the series villain), saw the connection too.

“I believe there is a comparison to the United States, and when I first read the script [For ‘The Hunger Games’] I truly wanted to be a part of this project, so that I could look back at the end of my life — which is pretty close — and say, ‘I was a piece of this.’ Because for me, she [Suzanne Collins] presented this villain to young people, and demanded from them a resolution — demanded from them participation that could change things.

“Because the world that my generation is leaving everyone is a disaster, in every respect. Environmentally, socially, economically... So when I read it [the script for ‘The Hunger Games’] I just begged to be a part of it. So that, in the hope it would be a catalyst for young people to get them off the seat of their pants that they’ve been sitting on for at least two generations. That somebody from somewhere — “Occupy” or whomever — might use these films to generate for young people an energy that will take them into the booths in the United States in 2016, and make people responsible — politicians responsible for their words and their actions.

On television, the show *Mr. Robot* (on USA Network) does its best to run with the Occupy zeitgeist. The main character is a computer hacker who joins an Anonymous-type collective seeking to wipe

away all consumer debt held by E(vil) Corp, a cross between Enron and JP Morgan Chase. It is steeped in anti-corporate rhetoric and imagery, yet its solution is extra-governmental. Its heroes are, like Batman, vigilantes. The critically acclaimed show has a small but devoted audience, and its coverage in the press has given it some influence beyond its viewers.

Several television shows seem to have been created to set the stage for a Hillary Clinton presidency. *Veep*, an HBO satirical comedy, starring Julia Louis Dreyfus as a fool who goes from Vice President to President, bumbling and screwing her way through the affairs of state. *Madam Secretary*, a popular drama about a female Secretary of State, is one of the more sober and high-minded portraits of the federal government in much of its complexity. As played by Tea Leoni, she tackles serious challenges while balancing outrage with her wry sense of humor.

Other portrayals of the White House are less uplifting. The megahit ABC series *Scandal*, which premiered in 2012, is a thriller and soap opera set in the world of political consultants, senior government officials, and spies. The main character is having an on again, off again affair with the President. *House of Cards* was the first original show produced by the streaming service Netflix in 2013. The protagonists are a married couple, he a senior member of Congress, she a non-profit executive. They are calculating, charming when necessary, determined to claim their place at the top of the DC food chain, no matter the cost. And the cost is very high; murder, infidelity, double crosses, threats made and carried out. It is a Shakespearean drama set in today's Washington. Yet it tackles public policy issues, including a jobs program paid for with cuts to social programs and an education bill opposed by the teacher's union. The shady side of politics is the dominant feature of the show, with businessmen paying off elected officials to advance their private interests.

Since *The West Wing* went off the air, nothing arose to replace its celebration of America's government... until Lin Manuel Miranda's smash hit musical *Hamilton*. *Hamilton* premiered on Broadway in 2015, but its cultural reach was limited until the best-selling soundtrack came out in time for Christmas of that year. Based on the book of the same name by Ron Chernow, it uses a largely Black and Latinx cast to tell the story of an immigrant founding father – the person responsible for establishing our banking system, among other things – who burned hot and bright and died young.

The quality of the music, singing, and storytelling is what has made it so popular. But it is also a love-letter to the dream that is America; a democracy where being a part of the government (and building a nation) is a privilege and an honor. Begun as a single song, written for President Obama and performed at the White House, *Hamilton* took on layers of additional meaning. It was a way to place people of color into the highest echelons of government, during a historical period when they were subjugated not celebrated, at the very moment the first African American President and First Lady were living in the White House.

Conclusions

We believe the public's lack of faith in government is the most significant challenge in shifting American's tolerance of free-market economic policy, despite the unpopularity of the corporate and financial sectors. In an April 2017 *The New York Times Magazine* article, historian of

conservative movements Rick Perlstein explores why he and so many other historians missed this rise of Trump within these movements.

In their 1987 book, “Right Turn,” the political scientists Joel Rogers and Thomas Ferguson presented public-opinion data demonstrating that Reagan’s crusade against activist government, which was widely understood to be the source of his popularity, was not, in fact, particularly popular. For example, when Reagan was re-elected in 1984, only 35 percent of voters favored significant cuts in social programs to reduce the deficit. Much excellent scholarship, well worth revisiting in the age of Trump, suggests an explanation for Reagan’s subsequent success at cutting back social programs in the face of hostile public opinion: It was business leaders, not the general public, who moved to the right, and they became increasingly aggressive and skilled in manipulating the political process behind the scenes.

But another answer hides in plain sight. ***The often-cynical negotiation between populist electioneering and plutocratic governance on the right has long been not so much a matter of policy as it has been a matter of show business.*** The media scholar Tim Raphael, in his 2009 book, “The President Electric: Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Performance,” calls the three-minute commercials that interrupted episodes of The General Electric Theater — starring Reagan and his family in their state-of-the-art Pacific Palisades home, outfitted for them by G.E. — television’s first “reality show.” For the California voters who soon made him governor, the ads created a sense of Reagan as a certain kind of character: the kindly paterfamilias, a trustworthy and nonthreatening guardian of the white middle-class suburban enclave. Years later, the producers of “The Apprentice” carefully crafted a Trump character who was the quintessence of steely resolve and all-knowing mastery. American voters noticed. Linda Lucchese, a Trump convention delegate from Illinois who had never previously been involved in politics, told me that she watched “The Apprentice” and decided that Trump would make a perfect president. “All those celebrities,” she told me: “They showed him respect.”

We need more of our own show business. If we want people to trust government, we need to tell stories about effective government, like *The West Wing* or *Guardians of the Galaxy*. If we want people to support fair taxes on wealthy individuals and businesses and fair wages for workers, we need to tell stories about how both lead to shared prosperity, like *The Hunger Games* and *Snowpiercer*. If we want people to embrace regulations that protect consumers, investors, and workers, while allowing businesses to thrive, then we need to tell stories about essential regulations, like *The China Syndrome* or *Deepwater Horizon*.

And if we want to discredit free-market economics, we need to ridicule it. One of the most famous examples of this approach found just the right pop culture vehicle to deliver the ridicule: Superman. According to Matt Novak,

In the mid-1940s, an activist named Stetson Kennedy infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan to learn about the hate group’s secret handshakes and code words. Kennedy passed on this

information to the producers of "The Adventures of Superman," one of the most popular radio shows of the time, and the show serialized Superman's battles against the KKK. Over 16 glorious episodes the Klan was ridiculed nonstop for their ridiculous beliefs and silly practices. Virtually overnight, Klan recruitment slipped to zero.

White Americans of the 1940s didn't instantly become less racist. But joining the Klan was now something laughable — it was something you didn't admit to in public. Klansmen continued to exist and racism persisted, but Americans no longer wanted to be openly affiliated with an organization that dressed up in their bedsheets and whispered stupid codewords to each other. The introduction of ridicule to anyone who thought of joining the Klan had worked.

In the next section, we'll explore a few concepts we believe can have a similar impact on those who spout trickle-down economic theory to justify redistributing wealth upwards.

Addendum: Sources

This document shares the various resources and sources we utilized to develop our landscape analysis of trickle-down economics. It includes interviews, books, articles, and data sources. We also drew on a large number of films and television shows, which are too many to list here. Some of the films we specifically watched to inform us further around this project are *Margin Call*, *The Big Short*, *Snowpiercer*, and *Too Big to Fail*.

Interviews with stakeholders, experts, and insiders

To gain a better understanding of trickle down economics theory, its history, and the arguments both for and against it, we had conversations with the following people:

Adam McKay, Director, *The Big Short* and *The Other Guys*

Brendan Duke, Associate Director for Economic Policy, Center for American Progress

Heather Boushey, Executive Director and Chief Economist, Washington Center for Economic Growth

Josh Church, Producer, *The Other Guys*

Justin Miller, Writing Fellow, American Prospect

Marshall Steinbaum, Senior Economist, The Roosevelt Institute

Nick Hanauer, Founder, Civic Ventures

Nicholas Britell, Academy Award nominated composer and former hedge fund manager.

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