

“Faith-Washing” Right-Wing Economics

How the Corporate and Christian Right Are Marketing Medicare’s Demise

If you have worked all your adult life and are now receiving Medicare health benefits, you may be vexed to find that the third-largest federal program¹ may not cover everything you need. Indeed, as PBS reported in July, “Medicare certainly does not cover long-term custodial care in nursing homes or other institutional settings.”² Despite its limitations, the federal benefit program remains among the most popular government initiatives in U.S. history, even among Tea Party Republicans, who found a rallying cry in one South Carolina man’s infamous 2009 demand to establishment politicians: “Keep your government hands off my Medicare.”³ A 2011 Marist poll showed that 70 percent of those identifying themselves with the Tea Party opposed any cuts to Medicare.⁴ More recently, an April 2015 poll from Reuters/Ipsos showed that 80 percent of all Republican voters opposed cutting either Medicare or Social Security.⁵

Medicare’s broad popularity presents a problem for conservative candidates who are racing each other to eliminate the program as we know it. Some politicians want to cut Medicare as a means of shrinking the welfare state; others want to redirect Medicare’s vast payroll deduction revenues into the hands of private corporations. (Private contractors already administer at least one category of Medicare benefits.⁶)

Either way, following the demise of Mitt Romney’s 2012 presidential campaign—helped along by Romney’s mocking of poor and working class voters as “entitled” “victims”⁷—conservatives from across the ideological spectrum have been in search of a new marketing strategy: one that downplays the take-from-the-poor, give-to-the-rich foundations of their policies. Whether and how factional disputes between the Tea Party’s “Free-

dom Caucus” and the GOP leadership in the House of Representatives can be managed remains to be seen. As William Greider recently wrote⁸ in *The Nation*, “The party can’t deal with the real economic distress threatening the nation as long as rebellion is still smoldering in the ranks. Of course, that suits the interests of the country-club and Fortune 500 wing of the party—the last thing they want is significant economic reform.”

In the throes of this turmoil, the free market or “country-club” conservatives are test-marketing a new brand: a Christian-inflected, contemporary remix of the 1980s’ and ’90s’ “compassionate conservatism.” Even as candidates like Jeb Bush (who wants to “phase out” Medicare⁹), Sen. Marco Rubio (a Florida Republican who has said he wants to raise the retirement age¹⁰), and former candidate Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker (who proposed cutting \$15 million from his state’s Medicare program¹¹) sharpen blades to slash retirement security, a chorus of voices preaching Christian love and generosity toward the poor is rising from two groups whose connections with each other are not widely understood—the Christian Right and what we might call the free market fundamentalists.

Though this new brand may be meant to appeal to those—including many Christians—uncomfortable with rhetoric that demonizes vulnerable people, conservative groups pushing this new poverty narrative aren’t breaking with free market and Christian Right leadership. They have no plans to redress income inequality. Instead, responding to internal pressure from both the Tea Party Producerist Right (whose “makers and takers” frame blames both the undeserving poor and liberal elites as drivers of a system that takes from “real,” productive Americans) and external pressure from

the economic populist Left, the Christian Right and free market fundamentalists are changing the packaging on their long-shared policy agenda¹² of cutting the government benefits on which vast numbers of people rely.

During this primary season, right-wing populists such as Donald Trump and Sarah Palin have grabbed headlines with the racist implication that everyone who isn’t a “maker” is to blame for keeping the United States from greatness. From a public relations standpoint, this sort of unrestrained demagoguery—dangerous as it is—could polish the shine on the relaunch of compassionate conservatism. But when we turn down the volume on these deliberately offensive antics, it becomes easier to recognize how the new right-wing slogans about poverty pose a serious threat.

This isn’t an entirely new phenomenon. Neoliberal conservatives like Bush, neoconservatives such as Rubio, and free market libertarians like Walker benefit from the decades-long Christian Right re-education of Evangelical voters, around half of whom now believe that capitalism is a Christian system.¹³ These politicians make the demolition of seniors’ retirement security seem like a tragic inevitability, as uncontrollable as the weather, rather than the political choice that it is.

An early election-season example of this narrative came from Jeb Bush in a July 22 interview, in which he argued that Medicare should be preserved for those already receiving the benefit, but “we need to figure out a way to phase out this program for others and move to a new system that allows them to have something—because they’re not going to have anything.”¹⁴

But Jeb’s concerns amount to crocodile tears. As Trump parades through city after city, spewing hate-filled rhetoric,

Bush coolly explains how he will enact policies that will cause millions of future seniors to become destitute. By the standards of progressive economic populists, there are no “good guys” among the current roster of conservative candidates. They may differ on message and tactics, but as historian Geraldo Cadava wrote of Bush in a September essay in *The Atlantic*, “do not mistake his moderate tone, performance of goodwill, or marketability to Latino voters for an entirely different message than his cruder primary opponents.”¹⁵

Washington Post political commentator E.J. Dionne; and President Barack Obama.¹⁷ But Brooks did not mean to express approval of direct government benefits such as Medicare, Social Security, Medicaid, TANF, and food stamps. Instead, his declaration of “peace” was the opening gambit for a broader argument to weaken these highly popular government programs.

“The safety net should be limited,” Brooks said, “to people who are truly indigent, as opposed to being spread around in a way that metastasizes into

“welfare queen.” (“Poor, uneducated, single teenaged mothers,” he wrote, “are in a bad position to raise children, however much they may love them.”) Brooks’ comparison of government aid to metastatic cancer echoed those earlier waves of AEI antagonism.

It also underscored an implied threat. Brooks went on: “If you don’t pay attention to the macro-economy and the fiscal stability you will become insolvent. And if you become insolvent you will have austerity. And if you have austerity the poor always pay.” Such statements help make the increasingly precarious middle class fear that government direct aid programs that help their fellow citizens will lead to an economic tailspin. And if Brooks and his peers can effectively frighten the middle class away from defending the social safety net, there will be no constituency left that is strong enough to defend it.

But what will certainly remain are the largely invisible government aid programs for the wealthy and corporations: the billions in public subsidies that allow businesses to profit. That’s the cruel irony at the heart of free market fundamentalism. As political scientist Suzanne Mettler wrote in her 2011 book, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies*



President Barack Obama participates in a discussion about poverty during the Catholic-Evangelical Leadership Summit on Overcoming Poverty at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., May 12, 2015. From left, moderator E. J. Dionne, Jr., *Washington Post* columnist and professor in Georgetown’s McCourt School of Public Policy; President Obama; Robert Putnam, professor of public policy at the Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government; and Arthur Brooks, president of AEI. White House photo courtesy of Pete Souza.

WHOSE SAFETY NET?

“It’s time to declare peace on the social safety net,” announced Arthur C. Brooks, president of the free market think tank American Enterprise Institute (AEI), at Georgetown University’s May 12 Catholic-Evangelical Leadership Summit on Overcoming Poverty, before calling the social safety net “one of the greatest achievements of free enterprise.” Sharing the stage with Brooks were Robert Putnam, a best-selling author and Harvard political scientist whose latest book examines the diminishing prospects for economic mobility in the U.S.¹⁶; veteran

middle class entitlements and imperils our economy.” Brooks did not mention that AEI scholars spent the 1980s, ‘90s and 2000s publishing commentaries and reports pillorying people who apply for public assistance.¹⁸ Perhaps the most famous of these scholars is AEI’s W.H. Brady Scholar Charles Murray (coauthor of the noxious 1994 tome *The Bell Curve*), whose 1984 book, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980*, provided the intellectual basis for the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, which effectively ended the federal welfare system. Murray’s arguments helped shape the myth of the

Undermine American Democracy, privatizing social welfare programs can appear like a more efficient use of taxpayer dollars, and, as such, part of a Reaganite reliance on market-based policy. “Yet, in fact,” she wrote, “such policies function not through free market principles of laissez-faire but rather through public subsidization of the private sector.”¹⁹ Because the gigantic subsidies Mettler describes primarily benefit the wealthy corporations that support conservative think tanks such as AEI, conservative intellectuals like Brooks never talk about cutting them.

CLOAKING CRUELTY WITH CATCHPHRASES

Brooks' threat of austerity may appear less directly racist than the "bad parent" attacks on African Americans that Murray and others used to pass welfare reform during the 1990s.²⁰ Instead of demonizing the poor outright, this time around Brooks melds Christian rhetoric with economic-speak to offer a more paternalistic, "colorblind" characterization.

"Every one of us made in God's image," he said, "is an asset to develop."²¹ Brooks is vague about how poor Americans (whom he describes as "the least of these, our brothers and sisters") can become "assets" in a capitalist sense. But he seems convinced that free enterprise will save them from poverty. Brooks concluded his Georgetown remarks, "That's a human capital approach to poverty alleviation." In his recent book, *The Conservative Heart: How to Build a Fairer, Happier, and More Prosperous America*, Brooks expands on this Christian-lite evangelizing about the sacredness of work: "Work with reward is always and everywhere a blessing."²²

So, instead of welfare or government jobs, Brooks is proposing that work in the private sector will help poor people lift themselves out of poverty. Jeb Bush expressed a version of this idea at a Republican women's event in late September, saying, "Our message is one of hope and aspiration...It isn't one of division and get in line and we'll take care of you with free stuff. Our message...says you can achieve earned success."²³ But this strategy has already spectacularly failed, particularly for communities of color. In a May 2015 *New York Times* article, Patricia Cohen reported how African Americans who used to be able to make a middle-class living at government jobs have increasingly fallen into more precarious economic situations as their agencies have been privatized.²⁴

Brooks' use of "brothers and sisters" and "the least of these," is just one example of how neoliberals have been adapting their language to better appeal to conservative Christians in recent years. The Christian Right has become such an important part of the conservative firmament that other factions of the Right are often obliged to cast their arguments in religious terms, weaving religious ideas directly into mainstream policy debates.

And the most glaring example of this shift is that, whenever the public discourse turns to a criticism of income inequality, Corporate and Christian Right intellectuals turn to their new narrative: one that laments the existence of poverty while at the same time prescribing mythic free market capitalism—rather than jobs programs or tangible government supports such as Medicare—as its cure.

market the Corporate and Christian Right policy goal of dismantling retirement security and health coverage for seniors. But many conservative donors want more than a catchphrase; they also expect a return on their investment in politics. They also want access for themselves to the largesse of the state. Christian Right groups have been working with free market groups since the 1980s to shrink government programs for the needy and



Arthur Brooks speaking at the 2015 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in National Harbor, Maryland. Photo via Wikimedia.

THE BILLIONAIRES' CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS

Conservative billionaires who have invested hundreds of millions in the U.S. political system, such as the Koch brothers, the Kern family, the DeVoses, and others, now fund a caravan of Christian social scientists, theologians, and scholars to serve as their free market evangelists. The most high-profile of these wealthy backers are the Koch Brothers; not only has AEI received funds from both the Charles Koch Foundation and Donors Trust (a dark-money organization that allows wealthy donors to give anonymously to conservative causes²⁵), but David Koch also served on AEI's National Council as recently as 2014.²⁶

Brooks and other Christian free market surrogates use biblical language sanctifying the "dignity of work" and the entrepreneurial spirit, and craft slogans to

move the funds from these programs into the hands of unaccountable, private religious charities.²⁷

Writers in this magazine and elsewhere have documented this trend of ending direct government aid to the poor and elderly in favor of private charity, starting with the 1996 Welfare Reform Act and continuing to the "compassionate conservatism" that *WORLD* magazine editor Marvin Olasky helped brand for President George W. Bush.²⁸ As Bill Berkowitz wrote for *The Public Eye* in 2002, "Stripped of alliteration, 'compassionate conservatism' is the political packaging of the Right's long-term goals of limited government, privatization, deregulation and the creation of a new social contract."²⁹

One tool that "compassionate conservatives" invented for redirecting state

funds into private hands was the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. PRA has reported on this office's funneling of federal grants to religious nonprofits under Bush, and on its continued lack of transparency and accountability under Obama.³⁰

CHARITY VS. COLLECTIVE ACTION

Free market neoliberals from both sides of the aisle have not historically concerned themselves with the problems of the poor. Indeed, as the late political scientist Jean V. Hardisty and North-eastern University law professor Lucy A.

central tenet of Christ's teachings, and free market ideologues know that even the most profit-motivated Christian has been taught to give back a percentage of his or her income and time to those in need. Christian Reconstructionism³³ and its "softer" counterpart, Christian Dominionism, the intellectual movements that undergird much of the Christian Right,³⁴ offer a set of solutions for how a Christian government should treat the poor. As religion scholar Julie J. Ingersoll writes in her 2015 book *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction*, many of these "solutions," which are rooted in a strictly literal interpretation of God's law in the Bible, have filtered into the policy platforms of conservative political figures, most notably Ron Paul, Mike Huckabee, Ted Cruz, and Rick Santorum.

According to the Reconstructionist and Dominionist worldview, only the elect, or God's chosen few in the church, get to govern.³⁵ These elect see it as their duty, Ingersoll writes, to "transform every aspect of culture to bring it in line with [the] Bible."³⁶ This follows from a Calvinist interpretation of the Bible, which posits that only the elect will get into Heaven.

A recent example of this vision came in a July 6 video interview that self-styled Tea Party "historian" David Barton gave,³⁷ in which he helped amplify the conservative chorus for cutting Medicare. "Retirement is not a Biblical concept," Barton said. "That is a pagan concept." Barton seems to be in favor of doing away with



Occupy D.C. protesters outside the 2012 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, D.C. Photo via Flickr / www.GlynLowe.com. License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

In the Georgetown panel discussion with Obama and Putnam, as well as in his book *The Conservative Heart*, Brooks updated compassionate conservatism to draw a sharp divide between what he considers the legitimate "safety net" and the abuse of it in "middle class entitlements." "Help should always come with the dignifying power of work," Brooks said.

Perhaps hearing Brooks' remarks as yet another version of the Right's attack on government assistance programs, Obama responded with a defensive question, asking, "What portion of our collective wealth and budget are we willing to invest in those things that allow a poor kid, whether in a rural town...in Appalachia or in the inner city, to access what they need both in terms of mentors and social networks, as well as decent books and computers and so forth, in order for them to succeed?"³¹ Obama was giving Brooks a chance to show his support for equality of opportunity for all people, not just for corporations. Brooks offered no response.

Williams pointed out in their 2002 essay, "The Right's Campaign Against Welfare," the New Right coalition that brought Ronald Reagan to power popularized the idea that there were fewer people living in poverty than government data showed, and that anyone still in need of aid after Reagan's implementation of supply-side economic policies, such as tax cuts for businesses, was simply abusing the system. "As a result of a decade of message development," Hardisty and Williams wrote, "the Right was able to augment the justification for the elimination of federal social programs; they should be defunded not simply because they tax our paychecks, but because they destroy recipients' character."³²

But conservative Christians have a more complex relationship to poverty. Care for the poor is unquestionably a

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retirement altogether. But despite this hardline—and surely unpopular—position, Barton's political star appears to be on the rise. In September, Texas senator and GOP presidential candidate Ted Cruz hired Barton to lead his superPAC. Time will tell whether Barton can parlay his grassroots Tea Party network into votes for Cruz.³⁸ But with Barton granted such an influential platform, other Christian

Dominionists will likely be emboldened to promote their version of biblical government.

FAITH-WASHING INEQUALITY

Since even a shrunken, limited government would have to remain as part of a Dominionist transformation, in recent years the Christian Right has had to address the sticky question of how govern-

ment should behave toward the poor—especially within the context of unfettered global capitalism. In other words, how can the Christian Right reconcile Christ's admonition in Matthew 25:40 to care for "the least of these" with a system of global capital that allows the one percent to hoard trillions while 16.4 million U.S. children are living in poverty?

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Enter the Koch brothers and Christian free enterprise. As Peter Montgomery wrote in *The Public Eye's* Spring 2015 issue, "The Koch brothers, who describe themselves as libertarians uninterested in social conservatives' culture wars, are more than willing to use Christian Right voters as well as mountains of cash to achieve their anti-government, anti-union ends."³⁹ Through the use of obscurely-named trust funds such as Themis, ORRA, and EvangCHR4,⁴⁰ the fossil-fuel tycoons have established the Christian free market think tank Institute for Faith, Work and Economics (IFWE), which has set about resolving this area of potential tension between the Corporate and Christian Right.

Beyond advocating simple charity, IFWE theologians have developed a scripture-based argument to address populist anger over economic inequality, blending the Christian Right's traditional Calvinist hierarchies—the preordained,

saved "elect" vs. the rest of us⁴¹—with an economically Darwinist framework that says it is correct and just for wealth to accrue to those who manage it best. IFWE's Anne Rathbone Bradley, an economist and former advisor to Charles Koch,⁴² offers the fullest version of this argument, writing in a recent paper, "Why Does Income Inequality Exist?,"⁴³ that people are simply "created differ-

ently, and some of us will earn higher incomes than others."

Much of Bradley's theological justification for this claim rests on her Calvinist interpretation of the Bible's "Parable of the Talents," and how it provides for what she calls "a diversity in income."⁴⁴ Also known as The Parable of the Bags of Gold, Matthew 25:14-30 tells of three servants and their master, who, before departing on a journey, leaves the servants to guard his wealth. To the first, he gives five bags of gold. To the second, he gives two. And to the third, only one—"each according to his ability." Upon his return, he finds his first two "good and faithful" servants have invested and doubled the amount of gold that each was given. The third buried his master's gold in the ground and naturally retrieved only what was given to him. This servant, who merely saved the money, was chastised as wicked and lazy, and sentenced to be thrown "outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnash-

ing of teeth."

Bradley sees in this parable a lesson about God-granted "diversity in abilities," which in turn justifies and normalizes income inequality. Those who gain wealth have done so because they applied their God-given abilities. Those who have not lack the ability to do so. Bradley's interpretation also rationalizes the perpetuation of income inequality because, had the master "given each man an equal amount, putting equality over ability," Bradley writes, "he would have squandered his resources" by limiting his potential profits. (AEI's Arthur Brooks echoed this point in a July interview with *The Christian Post*, saying, "I think Christians, in particular, can design their own thinking about politics around the 25th Chapter of Matthew,

and thinking about people with less, and especially people with less power."^{45,46})

Using the Parable of the Talents to inform policy decisions is just the latest in a long series of Christian and Corporate Right intellectual projects. Marvin Olasky emphasized the importance of the business-faith alliance in a 2010 essay titled "Prophets and Profit," in a Heritage Foundation anthology called *Indivisible: Social*

and Economic Foundations of American Liberty. "Social conservatives who revere the Bible can learn much about how to apply it from economic conservatives

People are "created differently, and some of us will earn higher incomes than others."

who share a realistic outlook," he wrote. "Economic conservatives also can learn from biblically motivated conservatives the importance of ethical and other non-economic factors in determining economic success."⁴⁷

And for those who find themselves on the short end of the "talents"- and profits-stick? For those, Bradley and fellow IFWE theologian Art Lindsley prescribe char-

ity, citing Proverbs 14:30 in their book, *For the Least of These: A Biblical Answer to Poverty*: “whoever is kind to the needy honors God.” But they make clear that the Bible’s instructions for people don’t apply to governments, or government aid.⁴⁸ Such arguments help set the table for political debates that devalue the role of government and make it easier for conservative politicians to carve into programs such as Medicare.

Christian free enterprise has thus made significant inroads in policy circles. The “bad guys” in their poverty narrative may have changed; they are no longer the “welfare queens” of the Reagan era so much as liberals accused of a “lack of civility”⁴⁹ for calling free market capitalists greedy, or progressives labeled fiscally irresponsible for refusing to cut Medicare. But the narrative follows a familiar formula—one that Jean Hardisty identified in her 2000 book *Mobilizing Resentment: Conservative Resurgence from the John Birch Society to the Promise Keepers*: “skillful leaders recruiting discontented followers by offering simple explanations, complete with scapegoats, for their resentments.”⁵⁰ We can see the progress this new coalition has made when even the President of the United States is compelled to defend the country’s continued investment in established public benefits on a stage with the head of the American Enterprise Institute.

MOMENT OF OPPORTUNITY

Christian Right politicians sometimes acknowledge a personal wish to help the poor. Former Virginia Congressman Frank Wolf, speaking at an AEI event in May 2013, offered such a platitude: “I am compelled because of my faith,” he said, “to have compassion for the weak and vulnerable in our midst.”⁵¹

Working class and poor people form a diverse grassroots base that can mobilize to win political power; they may not be quite as “weak and vulnerable” as Wolf supposes. Leaders on the Right have in some ways learned to harness this power. While the 2008 economic crash led, on the Left, to the Occupy movement and the Wisconsin pro-labor uprisings of 2011 and 2012, the Tea Party used populist anger over the economy to marshal White working-class voters to sweep the state and federal legislatures in

Jay W. Richards: The free market’s culture warrior

One of the “skillful” leaders—as PRA founder Jean Hardisty characterized right-wing strategists who mobilize conservatives’ resentment against poor people and communities of color—who has gone largely unremarked in the mainstream press is Jay W. Richards, a conservative Catholic who currently holds an assistant research professorship at The Catholic University of America’s School of Business and Economics. Richards has been a guest lecturer at the anti-choice, anti-LGBTQ Family Research Council as well as a former visiting fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation. Richards, who earned his Ph.D in philosophy and theology from Princeton Theological Seminary, has also worked stints as a fellow at other right-wing think tanks, including the anti-evolution Discovery Institute, where he edited a book defending creationist curricula. He has authored around half a dozen other books, including the 2009 *Money, Greed, and God: Why Capitalism Is the Solution and Not the Problem*.⁶² From his current perch at Catholic University, Richards now focuses on the Christian defense of free market capitalism.

When he isn’t building bridges between the Corporate and Christian Right, Richards is a culture warrior. He expresses transphobic, homophobic, and anti-abortion views on his social media pages. On April 10, he posted an article bearing a photo of concrete gargoyle-demons on his Facebook and Twitter pages with the caption, “The subject few are willing to broach: The Attack on Marriage Is Diabolical”—a suggestion that the devil is behind the push for same-sex marriage. On May 24, he snarked on Facebook and Twitter about the news of the Boy Scouts allowing gay troop leaders by commenting, “Sticking a crow bar in the Overton Window” next to the article title, “Be Prepared’: ‘Gay Men’ with Boy Scouts in Tents,” equating openly gay Scout leaders with sexual predators entering Scouts’ tents.

More recently, though, Richards has shifted his emphasis from social and cultural sniping to economic and political issues. The Christian Right is increasingly turning to Richards as a thought leader on reconciling biblical economics with homophobic, white nationalist-tinged Producerism.

2010. But after Mitt Romney’s defeat in the 2012 presidential campaign, following his tone-deaf comments about working Americans “who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it,”⁵² conservative candidates are working harder than ever to appeal to working-class voters.

As historian Bethany Moreton, author of the 2009 book *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*, has observed, Tea Party leaders gained ground by building a voter base through local town hall events and involvement with White cultural institutions such as conservative churches and corporations like Walmart. Because

Tea Party populism included Christian free market principles among its broadly shared core values, it has been difficult for dissenting Left groups such as the union-backed Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart) and the Fight for 15 movement to disrupt Tea Party populism with a call for better treatment of workers. Thanks to Walmart’s cultural innovation of “blending Christian service ideals with free market theories,” Moreton has written,⁵³ the company has given rise to an entire low-wage workforce in the retail sector that prefers Christian ideas about charity to collective action or government reform. “The same retail workers that progressive unions sought to organize,” writes Moreton of Walmart’s exponential growth in the 1970s and ‘80s, “report that they are

more likely to turn to God for help on the job than to a union, a feminist organization, or a government agency.”

But where there are still unions, the grassroots political power of the working class still militates toward the Left. In the face of a jobless recovery and historic inequality, economic justice arguments are making an impact. The 2009-2014 de-

WHOSE VISION WILL PREVAIL?

Industrialist donors are not waiting around for the Christian Right to step in and help them sell their policy agenda of dismantling government benefits. Instead, as demonstrated above, they have begun recruiting—and funding—experienced Christian scholars and public

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cline in median wages across all income groups,⁵⁴ along with high-profile demonstrations by low-wage workers, has left the Corporate Right politically vulnerable. An August Gallup poll showed that one in five U.S. workers worry they will have their hours and wages cut at work (up from the teens before the 2008 recession).⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the rich keep getting richer: between 2009 and 2012, one study showed that the top one percent captured 95 percent of total income growth.⁵⁶

Even in non-union regions and sectors of the workforce, movements for economic justice have gotten more sophisticated, sometimes with an analysis that appeals to Christians. The North Carolina-based Moral Mondays movement, for example, has built a robust activist base through progressive pastors and faith leaders calling for broad-based economic justice, investment in public education, and an end to inequality. Further, about a year ago, the Fight for 15 fast-food campaign began involving home care workers,⁵⁷ who represent a workforce, two million strong, of mostly low-wage women, immigrants, and people of color. Although home care workers' campaign for public support—a moral appeal called Caring Across Generations—has been underway for years, they had never before combined forces strategically to stand with other low-wage workers. The marriage of a bad mood among the voting public with effective economic justice organizing has created a moment of opportunity for mass political mobilization.

relations experts to make their case in the media and on college campuses. The Koch-funded IFWE is one center for this activity; so is the Foundation for Economic Education, a project of the ultra-conservative Mackinac Center for Public Policy run by libertarian leader Lawrence Reed⁵⁷; and the Institute on Religion and Democracy, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that takes aim at mainline churches with funding from neoconservative and Christian Right groups.⁵⁸

But their victory is by no means assured. Communities of color who were pilloried and thrown off the welfare rolls under President Bill Clinton's Welfare Reform Act were, it turns out, the canaries in the coal mine. Now, most of the White workforce finds its wages cut; many have had to go on food stamps or apply for other benefits. Indeed, 40.2 percent of 2013 food stamp recipient household heads were White⁵⁹; in addition, more than half of 2013 Medicare beneficiaries were White in all states except Hawaii and the District of Columbia.⁶⁰

Now, while Producerist right-wing populists like Trump demonize immigrants and liberal elites as moochers (and worse⁶¹), some Corporate and Christian Right leaders are offering another line: that everyone flourishes according to his or her talents. This approach could appeal to those conservative Christians unconvinced by market logic and resistant to the mean-spirited attacks of Trump and the Tea Party.

Christian Right and Corporate Right

thought leaders like Barton, Bradley, and Brooks may use gentler language that strikes a chord with some conservatives, but the policies they promote bespeak a different vision. The elitism that undergirds their collaboration is fundamentally at odds with the equality of economic opportunity that liberals, and even some Republicans, hold as a core value.

The coalition of Christian conservatives and free market fundamentalists promotes a vision that elevates property rights—rather than human rights—to the level of sacred principle. With wages continuing to fall even as the business world recovers from the Great Recession, it is clear that enacting policy according to this principle leads to profit for a few, and suffering for many.

In a world where the Parable of the Talents justifies regressive economic policy, those who lack property are left to fend for themselves. But there is another way. It is not enough for those who desire economic justice to ridicule or denounce the overtly racist rhetoric of a Donald Trump. Politicians also need to hear a full-throated rejection of the narratives that treat poor people, immigrants, and people of color as “the least of these” or “assets to develop.” Such messages infantilize everyone who may one day rely on widely supported social safety nets; they are also portents of the broader benefit cuts that conservatives hope to enact. Now that billionaires have already purchased many of the mechanisms of democracy, people who do not want a future without programs such as Medicare and Social Security must act quickly to join and strengthen the collective movements that can defend them. ⁶²

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