

Funding the Future

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I spend a lot of time thinking about metaphors. It may not sound like the work of an economist, but if you want to build a political economy that people can believe in, you have to. Because economics, and most especially political economy, is not mathematics, or physics, or even history. It is a story about how we live together, told in a language that only makes sense if the metaphors underpinning it feel true. And that is where the trouble begins, as the interpretation some put on [yesterday's essay on Darwin](#) showed.

The interpretation I discussed was not of what Darwin literally said, and I presumed that was clear. It was, instead, of the metaphor that Darwin created in the way that most people understand it. That, after all, is what the metaphor is. Then I interpreted the political economic interpretation of that commonly understood metaphor within neoliberal thinking that has embraced Darwin in its simplest form - suggesting, as a result, that there is greater return to the fittest, who are then equated with those who make the largest economic returns in society.

By doing so, neoliberal economics has produced from Darwin's thinking one of the mechanical metaphors that it has used to build narratives. Mainstream economics has, after all, been built on a series of metaphors so powerful that they have come to seem natural. The market is a "mechanism". The economy is a "machine". Money "flows" through it like oil through an engine. Prices "adjust" to achieve "equilibrium", as if human beings were particles obeying physical laws. We even talk about "the invisible hand", as though the economy were guided by a supernatural force that we must not question. Survival of the "fittest" slips very easily into such themes as justification in itself for the outcomes of market processes.

These metaphors have done more to shape our politics than any technical model ever has. They make us think that economies can be "overheated" or "cooled down" with fiscal and monetary "levers". They make us believe that governments "run out" of money like households do. They give us comfort in pretending that complexity can be controlled by a few well-chosen dials in the Treasury or the Bank of England.

But the economy is not a machine. It is a living, breathing, messy system of relationships that is full of power, fear, hope, and contradiction. And when you build

your political story on a mechanical metaphor, you remove the people from it. You make care invisible. You erase conflict. You make inequality sound like the natural outcome of efficiency rather than the consequence of design. And you make "fittest" the indicator of a reward system.

I have tried, and am still trying, to find better metaphors. In my [quantum economics](#) writing I have drawn on physics, on biology, and on systems theory, always looking for a way to describe the economy that captures its entanglement, its uncertainty, and its living nature. I talk about energy, about flow, and about feedback. But each of those metaphors has limits, too. Biology implies survival of the fittest. Physics can sound deterministic. Systems theory can seem abstract. Every metaphor seeks to illuminate one truth while taking the risk of hiding another.

The challenge is that political persuasion requires metaphor. Without it, you cannot communicate meaningfully. People do not live inside equations. They live inside stories. So I find myself in a constant tension: how to use metaphor to make the economy comprehensible without being captured by it; how to use it to open minds rather than close them.

That, to me, is the real work of political economy. It's not just describing how things are, but finding the language through which people can imagine how they might be different. To do that, we need metaphors that centre humanity, care, and interdependence. We need to talk about the economy as an ecosystem, and not as an engine; as a community, and not as a competition.

But that is hard. It takes effort to resist the mechanical metaphors that have been drilled into us since the first economics lesson we attended. It takes courage to tell stories that admit uncertainty, ambiguity and emotion. It means rebuilding the language of economics from the ground up, and doing so in ways that invite people in, rather than shutting them out.

That, in the end, is what I am trying to do on this blog. It is not just about the facts or the data. It is about reclaiming the story. Because whoever controls the metaphors controls the meaning, and whoever controls the meaning controls the politics. And I, for one, am not willing to leave that control in the hands of those who think an economy is just a machine to be fine-tuned, when it is, in truth, a society that we must learn to care for, which must have better songs to sing.

And if you want to know where the last line comes from, it's from this clip from the film *Educating Rita*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5sjjvVP8Eg&si=wz1UYnGbhbxf-jS>

Although not labelled as being in the quantum essays series, I think this post does fit into it. These are others in that series:

Other essays in this series:

- * [**The Quantum Economics series \(this link opens a tab with them all in it\)**](#)
- * [**The Quantum Essays: Observing and Engaging**](#)
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