Assume a Can Opener

An architect, an engineer, and an economist are trapped on a deserted island. They have no fresh water or food, but have bountiful supplies of coconut (for milk and fruit) and canned tuna. Unfortunately there is no way to open any of them.

The three men sit down to brainstorm a solution.

After some time the engineer steps forward and describes an idea for a catapult hurling a coconut from a distance at a can of tuna, opening it and splitting the coconut simultaneously. Tracing calculations in the sand regarding trajectory, velocity, and gravity, he explains in detail the physics supporting his plan. The other two are intrigued and the three proceed with the implementation. Upon completion, and having positioned the catapult according to the engineer's specifications, they launch a coconut at a can of tuna. It is a direct hit, but fails to open either the tuna or the coconut.

They sit down again to brainstorm.

Next, the architect stands up saying he has an idea. Using illustrations sketched in the sand, he describes a structure of coconuts and tuna cans with twin stress points, and a chain reaction that would force open a can of tuna and a coconut at the same time. The three men decide to proceed and build the structure according to the architect's design. The last piece of the structure is placed at the point calculated to start the chain reaction that should direct the force to the precise locations of the target tuna can and coconut. Nothing happens.

The three men sit down again to brainstorm.

After a short time the economist excitedly proclaims, "I have it!" The other two listen expectantly, only to hear the economist begin, "Assume a can opener ..."

Partisans and ideologues frequently make unsupported assertions that make me want to object to the assumption of facts not in evidence. People of any political stripe are capable of such a "handwave," but liberals do it with particular panache. They are often so wildly presumptuous and factually challenged, yet conveying strangely unflinching certitude, that I find a kind of respect for the sheer audacity. Although the joke pokes fun specifically at the dismal science, "assume a can opener" often springs to mind as generally representative of the ivory tower and, as such, an apt characterization of the short-circuited "logic" and dearth of facts that are the underpinning of neo-liberalism. That is the reference for the category of that name on nomorespin.com.