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Over fifty years ago, jazz cornetist Nat Adderley recorded “Work Song”. Oscar Brown Jr. later added lyrics and included the record on his album *Sin & Soul . . . and Then Some*.

Breaking rocks out here on the chain gang
Breaking rocks and serving my time
Breaking rocks out here on the chain gang
Because they done convicted me of crime
Hold it steady right there while I hit it
Well reckon that ought to get it
Been working and working
But I still got so terribly far to go

(Adderley and Brown Jr. 1961)
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For much of the twentieth century black (and some poor white) prisoners were forced to labor for southern businesses in prisons like Mississippi’s Parchman Farm (Oshinsky 1996).¹ “Work Song” tells the story of a poor hungry worker convicted for stealing food from a grocery store.

Motown was two years old when “Work Song” was released. Against “Work Song” I put Ace Hood’s “Hustle Hard”.

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Motown was two years old when “Work Song” was released. Against “Work Song” I put Ace Hood’s “Hustle Hard”.

... same old shit, just a different day
Out here tryna get it, each and every way
Mama need a house, baby need some shoes
Times are getting hard, guess what I’ma do
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¹ Often imprisoning men for the weakest of infractions, political officials subcontracted prison labor out to business interests, often increasing arrest rates when businesses needed more laborers.
The hustle. The concept of the “hustler” has changed somewhat over the past thirty years or so. Whereas in the late sixties and early seventies the hustler was someone who consistently sought to get over, the person who tried to do as little work as possible in order to make ends meet, with the “hustled” being the people who were victimized by these individuals (“He hustled me”), the hustler is now someone who consistently works. I can’t go a week on the subway without seeing someone sell incense or gloves in the winter. I can’t wait for the MTA 22 bus at Mondawmin mall for more than ten minutes without running into someone selling “loose ones” (individual cigarettes) or bottled water during the summer. And the hustle, rather than being the act of trying to get over, has now been transformed to the point where it means the exact opposite: “hustle” and “grind” are now often used interchangeably. Much of rap explicitly exalts the daily rise-and-grind mentality black men with no role in the formal economy need to possess in order to survive and thrive. Black Sheep (1994) in his track “Autobiographical” rhymes about selling drugs on the street in sub-zero weather. In Kanye West’s “Diamonds from Sierra Leone (remix)” (2005) Jay-Z says “I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man!” These and dozens of other rap records depict MCs as risk-taking street entrepreneurs consistently having to make ends meet, responsible for success/failure. Ace Hood is willing to do whatever he needs to do (“Mama needs a house. Baby needs some shoes. Times are getting hard. Guess what I’ma do?” Sell clothes, bootleg CDs, candy bars, whatever he has to). If we were to put Ace Hood’s hustler up against Adderley’s chain-gang worker we’d see some obvious differences. But what we’d see in both cases are black men who are forced to work incessantly with no way out. Both songs represent
stylized attempts to deal with the nature of black labor in two different time periods.²

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In the foreword I defined neoliberalism as the general idea that society works best when the people and the institutions within it work or are shaped to work according to market principles. We see this idea in public policy—in government attempts to privatize public resources (either by explicitly selling them off or by treating them as if they were privately rather than publicly owned). We see this idea in common sense accounts that routinely suggest businesses are better than governments at providing a range of services. We see this idea in seemingly non-political techniques designed to make individuals, populations, and institutions more entrepreneurial. What I haven’t done is define what I mean by “the neoliberal turn”. There was a time, decades ago, when the ideas, policies, and techniques associated with neoliberalism were viewed as radical. Now? Domestically and internationally we’ve got something close to a neoliberal consensus with political parties that are often on

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² It would be a full eleven years before Motown would release an album that contained songs as explicitly political as “Work Song” (Marvin Gaye’s classic “What’s Going On?”), which Gordy only reluctantly released. Everything the label produced was arguably shaped by the politics and economics of labor. Of course the name “Motown” itself, the nickname blacks throughout the country gave Detroit, was derived from the auto industry (“MOtorTOWN”). But Gordy borrowed techniques from the assembly line in producing Motown’s songs. Just like the automotive plants divided the process of car manufacturing into a number of discrete activities, Gordy cut up music production and distribution, separating out the processes of writing, singing, and playing music. The Funk Brothers were some of Motown’s most productive and prolific session musicians. Oftentimes Gordy would have them come in and play music for songs that hadn’t even been written yet, much less sung. And just like in the auto industry, after the final song was produced, a team of quality control specialists met to determine whether the final song was good enough to be released. Gordy even went so far as to tailor the sound quality of the song and the song length to the car radio audience (Smith 1999).
the opposite ends of the spectrum agreeing on the necessity of neoliberal policies, ideas, and techniques of government. How did this happen? I begin with two graphs, one depicting levels of inequality from the early twentieth century to now (Figure 1), the other charting productivity alongside wages from 1973 to now (Figure 2, page 11).

From the beginning of the twentieth century to around 1929 the wealthiest Americans control a significant portion of America’s wealth compared to the poorest. Then it drops, only to rise again around 1970... to the point that we have now the highest levels of inequality in the last one hundred years. Wealth is now extremely concentrated in the hands of a few—the net worth of the top 1% is 288 times the net worth of the average American family (Jacobs and Hacker 2008). What happened?

In the wake of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, under pressure from activists, proposed and Congress passed what we now know as the New Deal. The New Deal gave labor the right to organize, it created unemployment insurance, it put people to work (on infrastructure projects, on
data collection projects, on artistic projects) by creating the Workers Progress Administration, and gave people baseline access to health insurance by creating Medicare. Finally, it supplemented the income of single mothers by creating Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). The Second World War, as many deaths as it caused, put millions of men and women to work (including my maternal grandmother). After the war ended Congress passed the GI Bill, subsidizing the education and homeownership of millions of veterans. In the sixties Congress passed civil rights legislation making many forms of racial and gender discrimination illegal, and passed anti-poverty legislation designed to give resources to cities and health care to the poor.

These legislative acts were not possible without political struggle. Groups (political parties, laborers, unions, activists, businesses, women, African Americans) fought over proposing and passing these policies. Once these policies were passed, groups fought over how much funding they would receive and over how they would be implemented. And they fought over these things in part because they had different ideas about how to think about the problems the nation faced, and in part because they had different interests to protect (businesses wanted to protect their ability to make a profit, labor wanted to protect the ability of laborers to make a living off of their work, black men and women wanted to be treated as full citizens).

Partially through these acts, inequality fell significantly to the lowest levels of the modern era.

However, in the late sixties levels of inequality began to increase again.

While there are many different ways to define politics, with some focusing solely on elections and the like, and others focusing on a wide range of cultural activities, I define politics very simply as the group competition over scarce resources, as well as the various activities that comprise this competition. Every vote cast for one political candidate cannot, by definition, be cast for another political candidate. Every tax dollar

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3 Later called the Work Projects Administration.
4 Which later became Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which later became Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF).
spent on defense cannot be spent on welfare. Every minute spent debating legislation that would give more resources to single mothers cannot be spent on legislation that would give more resources to the dairy lobby. Every public policy dedicated to dealing with poverty cannot be dedicated to dealing with some other issue. These tangible resources—votes, money, time, public policy—are both incredibly important in structuring society and are easy enough to wrap one’s head around.

But we do not only fight over scarce tangible resources. We also fight over resources that aren’t quite as tangible.

For decades political scientists have studied “agenda-setting” as a central component of politics (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Cohen 1999; Kingdon 1984). On the surface, an agenda is just a list of items a group needs accomplished and isn’t “tangible” in the way that time, money, or votes are. However, agendas can only contain so many items, suggesting agenda items too are scarce resources. Further, to the extent agenda items represent problems that need to be solved, ideas people use to solve these problems can become resources groups fight over. Also, the way we fight—the rules of the competition itself—can become political terrain. How are votes counted? who is allowed to vote? how many votes does each individual receive? I referred to public policy above, a term we take for granted. We also fight over the meaning and form of “the public”—in fact, it may be one of the most important resources we fight over (and for).

5 One counter-response is that there are very few differences between political candidates, given the neoliberal turn. As I note later, the turn has broad bipartisan support. However, with that said, existing differences between political parties are still large enough on some issues—reproductive health looms large—that electing one slate of candidates vs. another could still result in very different political outcomes.

6 In some democracies, for example, people are given a number of votes they can use to distribute between the candidates and parties of their choice. In the early nineties Lani Guinier (2002) was a strong proponent of this idea.

7 By “the public” I generally refer to three different connected concepts. First, “the public” is a community, a body of people that share membership in a political community (a city, a county, a state/province, a nation) or share a common identity. Second, “the public” is a set of resources that these people should share and have access to by dint of
Finally, in making decisions about time, money, votes, policies, agendas, the public, we use reason but we also use emotion—love, hate, disdain, derision. In deciding when, where, and how to act politically we routinely allot care to some groups while withholding it from others. There’s more to politics, a lot more. But when I write about “politics”, this is what I refer to. And when I talk about “black politics” I am referring to the ways different black populations compete over scarce resources, over time, over money, over votes, over public policy, over agenda items, over care, and other resources that have a significant impact on how black communities and the people within them are structured.

Politics is about competition over scarce resources. Politics is also, to an extent, about problem-solving. Inequality levels dropped around 1930 or so because of politics—because formerly less powerful groups fought against more powerful groups and won, changing legislation, changing public policy, changing political institutions, changing ideas about labor and the economy, about race, about citizenship, and, through these actions, changing the way material, social, and psychic resources were allocated. Now let’s revisit those charts. How might we use politics to understand what happened?

Around 1972 two phenomena severely affected America and the rest of the developed world—high levels of unemployment and high levels of inflation. Economists thought inflation was the function of high demand for goods and services, high demand that could only come if there were enough workers making a living to want the goods in the first place. It was supposedly impossible to simultaneously have this type of demand and high levels of unemployment. The events of the late sixties and early seventies proved them wrong.
anxiety and suffering. It was a crisis of ideas as well, in part because the theory routinely used to fix the economy proposed that we’d almost never have high levels of inflation and unemployment at the same time. High prices are usually the result of people spending a lot of disposable income on goods, and you don’t have that when people are unemployed.

I noted that inequality began to drop as the result of political struggle. One of the things people struggled over was the discipline of economics. What economic theories best explained how economies worked and should work? Some political leaders and economists suggested that it was the government’s role to ensure that unemployment stayed relatively low by providing employment in times of severe economic crisis, and to provide citizens with resources (public education, unemployment, health care, retirement insurance) when citizens couldn’t garner those resources through the market. And some political leaders and economists favored much more radical solutions.

Low levels of wealth inequality are very good for workers and for societies in general. People tend to have more options, they tend to be more mobile, they tend to live better lives. However, low levels of wealth inequality do not work particularly well for powerful business interests, nor do they work particularly well for the wealthy. If businesses have to pay workers high wages, if businesses have to spend valuable resources on making their workplace favorable to labor, their profit margin will significantly decrease. And the more legislative power labor has, the more likely the government collects and spends tax dollars on things that reduce business power and the power of the wealthy in general.

For a very specific group of intellectuals, this intellectual crisis—this inability to solve the economy using traditionally supported economic theory—became a political opportunity. They believed decreasing levels of inequality would give too

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9 “Keynesians”, named after British economist John Maynard Keynes. Keynesian economists argued that the actions of private actors alone could not keep an economy stable. Rather, government had to actively be engaged in the economy by setting policy and by spending money in times of recession.
much power to labor, would disrupt the generation of a supposed “free market”, and as a result would kill capitalism.

So they took the opportunity presented by the crisis to roll out a different economic theory, one that proposed a very different relationship between the government and the market and between supply and demand. Whereas Keynesian economics suggested consumers were more important than producers and entrepreneurs (because entrepreneurs and businesses couldn’t profit without consumers), and radical economists suggested that laborers were more important than business owners (small and otherwise), the new theory emphasized the importance of entrepreneurs and business owners (because if they didn’t innovate, consumers wouldn’t have jobs, and their society wouldn’t progress). Whereas Keynesian economics suggested that governments should guide the economy in ways that would tend to lead to high levels of employment and productivity, and radical economics suggests that governments should guide the economy in ways that would tend to improve the course of human development, the new theory suggested these approaches would end up having the opposite effect.\footnote{If laborers, for example, knew that they couldn’t be fired, they would be more irresponsible. Their irresponsibility in turn would reduce their productivity, which would in turn make societies worse off rather than better off. If governments attempted to plan every aspect of the economy they would eventually fail and devolve into totalitarianism.}

\footnote{The idea that human beings have a set of skills, values, and habits that they can develop to produce assets, just as classical economists believe businesses use capital to produce goods and services.} The idea of human capital theorized by the late Chicago economist Gary Becker plays a critical role here because it transforms labor from a simple unit you plug into an economic equation (so many units of labor translate into so much profit for the company when combined with so many units of equipment) into something human beings can themselves transform through skill development, education, creativity, and, perhaps most important of all, \textit{choice}. Any attempt to use government to reduce the ability of business interests to make a profit, any attempt to use government to reduce the ability of entrepreneurs to innovate and create, any attempt to use government to artificially inflate or deflate the ability of an
individual to profit off of his or her labor, were attempts to stifle freedom.\textsuperscript{12}

Instead of reducing inequality by increasing government spending on infrastructure during downturns (hence stabilizing and perhaps increasing employment levels) or by providing public housing, unemployment insurance, a living wage, or other entitlements to citizens, people supporting these new ideas proposed that government dismantle such programs even if doing so increased inequality. Giving poor people and the unemployed resources actually makes them \textit{more} poor and \textit{more} reliant on the state rather than less (and hence \textit{less free}), so we should cut the resources we give to them. Rather than provide poor single mothers with benefits to take care of their children, the new economic theory supported forcing single mothers to find work outside of the home. Because the new theory viewed the market as incredibly fragile, government should be used to bolster markets where they already existed and to create markets where they didn’t exist. In fact, they argued government itself should be governed and critiqued by market standards — by how “efficient” it was, by how well it served its “customers”, by how “entrepreneurial” various government actors behaved.

These ideas and the policies and techniques associated with them tend to increase levels of inequality. Further, they tend to “naturalize” inequality. That is, they tend to attribute inequality to personal, populational, or institutional flaws rather than structural ones. Even when politicians and policy makers do believe inequality is produced by structural factors, as a result of the neoliberal turn they are more likely to turn to the market for solutions than they are elsewhere. Indeed, and I write about this later, the very idea of “social entrepreneurship” revolves around the notion that we can somehow harness the wonders of the market to deal with social ills like poverty, hunger, and homelessness.

I want to go back to Ace Hood and the idea of the hustle above. The term’s meaning changes 180 degrees because of the

\textsuperscript{12} For a fuller explanation of this story read Mark Blyth’s work (2002, 2013).
The growing use of and acceptance of the concept of human capital. Indeed, under the neoliberal turn arguably the most important figure is the figure who consistently works. And the market becomes the most important venue with which the individual can figure out when to, where to, and how to develop his/her human capital, because only the market can give real time, dynamic, and accurate information about the context in which he/she can make human capital choices (when to go back to school, for example). In order to consistently provide for his mother, his child, as well as himself, Ace Hood has to be consistently productive.

The above chart (Figure 2) traces increases over time in productivity, and then increases over time in wages. As we can see over the past several decades we’ve seen a steady rise in productivity. Compared to 1973, 2011 productivity had increased approximately 80%. But we are being paid far less in comparison. In fact, when we chart increases in productivity and wages together going back to the forties we find that they rise at about the same rate until around the same time inequality begins to spike again. After that point wages flat-line (Mishel 2012). The median average household income is $51,000. If this income rose at the same rate productivity did, it would now be

Figure 2. Productivity vs. Average Hourly Income (Economic Policy Institute 2012)
approximately $91,000 (Gilson 2014). That is to say, if we took every American family and ranked them according to how much money they brought in, the family smack dab in the middle of that group would have almost twice as much money now if the money it brought in increased at the same rate its productivity did.

One way to explain the rise in productivity along with flattened wage rates is through globalization, through increased connections between countries like China and India and the United States. Compared to the 1950s, very few of our automobiles are produced by American workers. Rather, these and consumer goods like smartphones are increasingly produced outside of the United States and then imported back, in part because doing so enables American companies to produce these goods cheaper than if they were produced in the United States.

I mention smartphones. Another way to explain both the rise in inequality and the rising gap between productivity and wages is to explain it through increases in technology. Thinking about the automotive industry that made Motown possible, this sector is far more productive than it once was because the automation process made it possible to produce more cars more efficiently and less expensively. We can see this in any number of workplaces outside of the automotive plant. Increases in transportation technologies make it possible to create goods using overseas labor—it costs far less to ship goods in bulk to the US than it once did.

These increases in technology are also a partial function of globalization. Because of technological innovation in transportation it is possible to ship goods back and forth cheaper. Furthermore, because of the Internet it is now possible to outsource software development and engineering to nations like India for less than $10/hour through websites like virtualemployee.com (motto: “the future of work”).

But technology didn’t necessarily have to generate the gap between productivity and wages. We could have had a society in which wages and productivity increased at about the same rate. And globalization didn’t necessarily have to generate this gap either. We could conceivably still have the type of global connectivity we now have while increasing wages domestically and globally.
The neoliberal turn explains this. Even as people are expected to be more and more productive, and like Ace Hood increasingly place more and more expectations upon themselves to be productive, the money they make as a result of that productivity flatlines, largely because of the way government (local, state, federal/national) ability to regulate businesses have been cut.

What are the effects of the two graphs? Again, we can get a sense of it by looking at the degree to which the hustler has become so important in hip-hop and in American popular culture in general. However, we can probably get a better sense of it by looking at labor. In the current moment four labor divides loom large: the divide between “good” and “bad” jobs; the divide between unionized and non-unionized jobs; the divide between the employed and unemployed; and the divide between the institutionalized and the non-institutionalized.

I begin with the “good job”/“bad job” divide. Good jobs offer benefits, good salaries, stable hours, job security, dignity, and safe working conditions. Unionized jobs in the auto or steel industry are good jobs. Many corporate managerial jobs are good jobs. Most programming jobs at places like Google are good jobs. My tenured job at a research university is a good job. People with these jobs can usually provide for themselves and their families, can get decent health care when they require it, have at least some due process in case of job disputes, and are given a degree of respect because of their job. These jobs require a great deal of human capital.

Bad jobs, on the other hand, offer very low wages, unstable hours, little to no job security, little to no dignity, no due process, unsafe working conditions, and little to no benefits. Jobs at Walmart and places like it tend to be bad jobs. Most temporary jobs are bad jobs, as they may offer decent wages but often offer no benefits and no job security. Unpaid internships, even ones that could lead to paid jobs, are also bad jobs (Lurie 2013). My first job at Wendy’s, flipping burgers for $3.35/hour as a 15-year-old, was a bad job. Some adjunct faculty jobs are so bad they have to go on welfare, even though they have PhDs (Patton 2012). People working in these jobs are often just a hair above poverty, unable to fully provide for themselves or their families, unable to protect themselves or protest if they are fired, and unable to move to find better job opportunities.
The second divide is the divide between union workers and non-union workers.

Unions used to be a fixture of the American political and social landscape. The college educations my sister and I received were paid in part by my father's (union-supported) wages. Before manufacturing employment began to decrease, 35% of all American workers were part of a union. Near the end of President Ronald Reagan’s first presidential term in 1984, approximately 20% of all wage and salary workers 16 years and older were unionized, compared to 2014 when only 11.1% of all wage and salary workers were unionized (Bureau of Labor Statistics). This drop largely comes from a drop in private sector union membership. In 1983 16.8% of private sector workers were members of a union, but in 2014 only 6.6% were. In contrast, 35.7% of all public sector workers were members of unions in 2014, compared to approximately 37% in 1983. As of 2014 most union workers are now public sector employees who work for federal, state, and local government rather than private sector employees who work for a private corporation like Ford or GM (Greenhouse 2011).

The good/bad and union/non-union distinctions are still about jobs. The third labor gap deals with unemployment. One of the most important and most analyzed aspects of the second great depression is the unemployment rate. But while high (as high as 10% in 2009), the conversation about unemployment does not begin to truly capture how dire this gap is, because the government doesn’t define unemployment as the state of not having a job. Rather, the government defines unemployment as the state of not having a job while actively looking for employment. This definition does not include people who have stopped looking for work.

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13 Along these lines the union job my brother has came from my father as well.
14 I deal with education later, but one of the reasons why conservatives attack teachers’ unions is because they constitute a large portion of public sector union workers.
15 Technically it is a bit more precise than that. People are defined as being “unemployed” if they are out of a job and have looked for work at least one of the preceding four weeks.
Further, the unemployment category doesn’t begin to capture how the long-term unemployed are treated in the labor market. In a market where the number of people looking for jobs far outstrips the number of jobs available, employers have a significant degree of power to choose exactly who they want (often at lower wages than if the job market were better or if unions were stronger). Taking advantage of their power here, employers have begun discriminating against the long-term jobless (Krugman 2014). Indeed, this problem is so bad that a number of states have introduced legislation making it illegal for employers to discriminate against people based on their employment status.

The first two labor gaps distinguished between people with jobs. The third labor gap distinguishes between people with jobs and people without them. The fourth labor gap distinguishes between people counted in job data and people who aren’t counted in job data at all.

Approximately 6.9 million Americans are either on parole, in prison, in jail, or on probation (Glaze and Kaeble 2014). The United States incarcerares more of its citizens than any other developed nation in the world, and many more than most underdeveloped nations as well. The United States has over twice as many prisoners serving life sentences (over 159,000), than Japan has in prison (60,486 as of 2014) (Institute for Criminal Policy Research, 2015; Nellis 2013).

We think about labor and work as being “productive”, while we think of the unemployed as being “non-productive”. To the extent we think about the incarcerated population, we think of them as being counter-productive rather than productive, that is, we view them as producing something (crime, disorder, violence) that hurts rather than benefits society. But there are at least two ways this account is complicated.

“Work Song” put to music an experience tens of thousands of black (and some white) prisoners dealt with throughout the first several decades of the twentieth century. Particularly in the Deep South, state officials would use prison labor to work on public and private projects cheaply, often timing arrests and imprisonments to coincide with corporate labor needs (Oshinsky 1996). This process has become modernized.
Corporations routinely use prison labor as a means of cheaply producing goods and services for consumers and for state government. California’s Prison Industry Authority has an online catalog that sells a variety of prison-created products to state institutions, from a ceremonial indoor American flag with fringe (product number 495400.0000) for $60, to an assembled executive desk (product number 608500) for $90, to California prison uniforms (product number 406201.2080) for $32 (California Prison Industry Authority 2014). State law requires the prisoners be paid at least a minimum wage, but up to 80% of that wage goes to room and board and other bills.\textsuperscript{16}

Secondly, in many states rural political districts count prisoners as residents of those districts for political representation purposes, even though these prisoners cannot vote in rural elections. Note how urban areas lose here. Several census blocks in urban areas are “million-dollar blocks”, sending millions of dollars to the state and to rural districts in the form of prison labor, labor then counted in rural districts for the purposes of political representation.\textsuperscript{17} Urban areas send thousands of bodies to rural districts for political representation. Upon freedom prisoners are often reluctant to engage in most forms of political participation and it is often incredibly difficult for former prisoners to find employment (Burch 2013; Weaver and Lerman 2010).

All of these labor divides are racialized.

As a direct result of housing segregation, blacks are concentrated in poor neighborhoods, cities, and educational systems. Unemployment is particularly concentrated in what we now think of as the Rust Belt, the former manufacturing hub of the country. Cleveland, Gary, Flint, Detroit, Baltimore, St. Louis, Milwaukee, all have incredibly high rates of unemployment and bad jobs (and high black populations). While cities like Seattle and New York City appear to thrive, in reality they are

\textsuperscript{16} If the prisoner is a father, for example, he is responsible for paying child support (Mink 1998).

\textsuperscript{17} The work of the Justice Mapping Center (www.justicemapping.org) is critically important here as they not only came up with the concept of the “million-dollar block”; they came up with an online tool that enables individuals to see for themselves how their neighborhood may be affected by the million-dollar block phenomenon.
good and bad job hubs.\textsuperscript{18} Within metropolitan areas in general, unemployment is even more concentrated in poor non-white suburbs and neighborhoods.

During the nineties, white male and female job growth came almost solely from the growth in good jobs,\textsuperscript{19} while approximately 75\% of bad jobs went to African Americans and Latinos (Wright and Dwyer 2000). In fact, 3 out of every 5 jobs that were added among black and Latino populations were bad jobs. Currently there is a slight racial gap in union membership. Unionization rates for blacks and Asian Americans are high compared to their overall population percentage. Unionization rates for whites and Latinos, on the other hand, are low—and for whites, extremely low. And there has always been a large gap in employment rates, with the black unemployment consistently twice as high as white unemployment. Finally, over half of the (growing) incarcerated population is African American. Sending blacks to jail by the tens of thousands, taking away their voting rights, and then counting them as citizens for the purpose of white, rural, and conservative political representation, represents a form of economic and political exploitation. Many if not most of our nation’s “million-dollar blocks” are black blocks.\textsuperscript{20}

The contemporary nature of these divides is largely the product of the neoliberal turn.

The divide between good jobs and bad jobs comes from deindustrialization, which itself comes from public policy designed to first entice manufacturers to move out of industrial centers

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\textsuperscript{18} New York City’s financial managers, lawyers, doctors, entertainers, and entertainment executives need bike messengers, taxi cab drivers, dry cleaners, waiters, concierge service, janitors, landscapers, jobs that pay very very little and offer even fewer benefits.

\textsuperscript{19} White women were especially able to take advantage of the market. Not only did they outpace their white male counterparts in their ability to find jobs, they outpaced their white male counterparts in their ability to find good jobs.

\textsuperscript{20} It is possible to overstate this dynamic. One of the myths black people routinely spread about the plight of black men is that there are more black men in prison than there are in college. Now, even given the fact that undergraduate college students tend to be between 18–22 while incarcerated men range in age from 18 (and less in some cases) to 80, there are still fewer black men in prison than there are in college.
\end{flushleft}
(with high labor costs) and then secondly to reduce international trade barriers in ways that reduce labor costs even more. But this divide is also increasingly supported by our own growing acceptance of the idea of human capital. If human capital is something we work on and make choices to develop, just like businesses, then the benefits we receive or do not receive are the result of our choices. In other words, people who work at Walmart “deserve” to work at Walmart, and “deserve” the low wages they are given. People who work at Google, on the other hand, not to mention the people who created Google in the first place, “deserve” the high wages (and stock dividends) they receive. Why, using this logic, would we pay someone the equivalent of a middle-class salary and benefits to engage in nothing more than routine physical labor?

The divide between union and non-union jobs can be viewed through a similar lens. I distinguished good jobs from bad jobs by wages, job security, benefits, dignity, and due process. These came from union activism. Through collective bargaining, unions made it possible for most blue and white-collar employees to make good wages, be treated with dignity, have concrete ways to deal with conflict and workplace harassment, and to work under safe conditions. Even now, people in unions get paid on average much better wages than people not in unions, across all sectors (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). In part because unions are so weak, undereducated workers (and, increasingly, workers in general) find it hard to provide a decent living for their families. Reducing the strength of unions did not eradicate good jobs entirely. Google, for

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21 The beginning of the trend actually occurred in the fifties as the federal government subsidized relocating manufacturers away from the Midwest and the North-central regions of the country in response to what they perceived to be the growing Communist threat, but it really began to take hold in the seventies as a direct result of the late sixties/early seventies economic crisis. Before this moment, even given the shrinking jobs in the manufacture sector, it was still possible for men with less than a high school degree to find employment with good salaries, benefits, and dignity. White men were able to get more of these jobs than other racial groups, but because of civil rights era gains blacks were able to find jobs this way as well, particularly in places like Detroit. By the mid to late seventies this pretty much dried up — unemployment levels and relatively uneducated men in these regions increased and their salaries decreased (Bound and Holzer 1993).
example, tends to pay workers well, tends to offer good benefits, and creates the type of workspace many of us would dream of, although Google’s employees are not unionized. However, as unions decreased the number of mid-range jobs decreased also. Further, the number of “bad jobs” increased, with “bad” becoming “worse”.

Human capital is an individual trait, not necessarily a collective one. Neoliberal logic suggests unions distort the ability of markets to function perfectly by taking away the ability of individuals to negotiate their wages based on their own human capital. Further, unions distort their ability to function on the job because the benefits unions provide can make people less likely to work hard (or at all). This logic is reflected in decisions at both the national and state level that reduce the ability of unions to form or negotiate. Here I’d also include the legislation that reduces international trade barriers.

The divide between the employed and the unemployed is also connected to the concept of human capital, as human capital can both be used to explain why some people are employed and some people are not, and to argue for certain types of solutions as opposed to others. If the reason people are unemployed is not because of structural deficits or discrimination but because they haven’t done what it takes to be employed, then the solution is for them to somehow attain the needed skills to become competitive on the job market. Here the ascension of neoliberal economics is particularly acute. The reason unemployment is high during recessions is because companies do not have the profit base required to sustain a full suite of employees. The only entity with the ability to hire and put money into the economy when private businesses don’t (or more accurately, won’t) is the government.

These labor divides reduce the ability of individuals within the various segments to fight for singular political alternatives because they each have different interests. They also tend to concentrate what political successes occur within the higher end of the labor spectrum because those at the top of the various divides tend to have relatively more political resources than those at the bottom.

The neoliberal turn began in 1972 during Richard Nixon’s presidency. However, the American political figure most associated with the turn is Ronald Reagan. Given how long ago
Reagan was in office, it is worth dealing with how transformative a figure he was. Before Reagan’s election, government spending on public housing had increased significantly. After his election, he stopped construction of new public housing units. He cut full-time Housing and Urban Development (HUD) staff by 21% and restructured it by making it a voucher program, and by the middle of his second term had reduced public housing by 80% compared to 1982. Reagan reduced unemployment benefits by $4.6 billion in 1983 alone. Reagan weakened labor by killing the air traffic controllers strike of 1981 (Shostak 2006), and then by appointing men and women with strong anti-labor positions to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), who then reversed several previous pro-labor decisions. Reagan significantly reduced the ability of the government to raise taxes by making deficits a political issue, by generating broad support for tax cuts (even though the prime beneficiaries of those tax cuts were wealthier Americans), and by reducing the ability of state and local governments to collect taxes—this even as he both cut aid to local governments and cut resources to organizations created for the purpose of promoting local government interests (Conlan 1998; Pierson 1994; Waidref 2008). Finally, in addition to the policy changes he instituted and the legislation he supported, he consistently promoted the idea that government was the problem rather than the solution to the ills society faced.

Ronald Reagan transformed the way we think about government, and this not only affected the Republican Party, it affected the Democratic Party. Every Democratic president we’ve elected since Reagan has promoted neoliberal ideas and policies. It wasn’t a Republican who ended welfare: it was Bill Clinton. As I show in chapter 4, George W. Bush helped

22 Vouchers are a key aspect of neoliberal policy transformation as they marketize public goods.

23 We now look backwards to the Clinton era with fondness because we think it was a particularly good time for the economy. Unemployment rates were as low as 4%, incredibly low by current standards. However, this backwards glance is rose-colored. Most of the jobs created during this period were either very good or very bad. Approximately 40% of the job growth during the nineties came from either very good (20%) or very bad jobs (17%) (Wright and
neoliberalize public education (with No Child Left Behind), and Barack Obama continued rather than stopped this attempt (with Race to the Top). And an array of policy experts, local political officials, and even in some cases political activists have promoted neoliberal ideas and policies. Over the past few years a number of people with progressive politics have begun to tout GoFundMe and Kickstarter as ways to sidestep the significant lack of resources activists often have to pursue progressive political ends. These applications and others like them require individuals to treat their cause as if it were an economic product, and their personal network as a potential “market”.

It makes sense that a group of people and institutions interested in hoarding and accumulating wealth would promote policies that also promoted their self-interest. But what doesn’t make sense is the support these policies receive from regular everyday citizens. Why were the various policies and ideas proposed predominantly by business interests and by conservatives taken as gospel from people who were hurt by them? Some knew that the effects of these policies would be disastrous on the working class. And surely once people like Reagan began to actually implement these strategies it should have been clear that these policies would have horrific consequences. Yet the American populace still supported them. What happened to get the American populace to support them in such large numbers?

Racial politics.

As inequality increases, the number of societal “losers”—individuals who can’t make ends meet, who simply cannot
succeed on society’s terms, try as they might—also increases. The public policy developed to deal with these populations becomes increasingly punitive, increasingly cordonning off these populations from the rest of society, increasingly reducing the resources they have access to, increasingly forcing them to undergo government surveillance and control in exchange for those few resources they receive, and increasingly leaving them to die when they are unable to behave “responsibly”. Increasingly exposing populations to pain and suffering the way neoliberalism does can only occur under very specific circumstances. Somehow, members of society must be convinced that losers deserve what they get, that they lose not because the deck is stacked against them but rather because they have something wrong with them that can only be dealt with punitively. And they must see themselves in the winners. Similarly, they must begin to think that the “public good”, particularly in the form of increased taxes and service provision, is the equivalent of theft.

Racial politics perform work here, as white attitudes about labor, work, crime, and taxes are fused to attitudes about black men and women and, through them, to other non-white populations. As a result, a wide variety of public institutions and public goods come under attack. It isn’t that people begin to hate “big government”, as this is technically inaccurate. It’s that people begin to simultaneously hate government programs that offer progressive assistance to populations perceived to be undeserving and desire government programs that punish these populations. Under neoliberalism people increasingly support spending resources on imprisoning (black) criminals, on border protection against (Latino/a) immigrants, and on protecting our infrastructure from (Middle Eastern) terrorists.

The racial differences within each of these important labor divides hurt American populations in general. They increase housing segregation that in turn exacerbates inequality. They increase negative attitudes about poor and working class populations—if people in “good jobs” tend to live in distinctly different neighborhoods than other populations, they are not likely to be exposed to them, causing them to develop attitudes
about this population through the media or through random (negative) personal encounters. Race does a tremendous amount of work in generating public support for punitive policies. Even for the unemployed.

Take the following comment made in 2012 by Representative Blake Farenthold (R-TX) at a community meeting:

Drug testing for recipients of various welfare programs, I really think that’s something that needs to be considered. We’ve gotta, you know, nobody wants to starve anybody. Everybody wants to help folks out. But we’ve got a system where you can stay on unemployment for an awfully long time. And I think we need to create a system of decreasing benefits over time to encourage you to get a job. I think anybody who’s had an alcoholic in their life or somebody with a drug problem, realizes that until things get bad enough there’s no incentive to change. I think that we’re so generous in some of our social problems that people are unwilling to get a job outside in the heat. Rather than get 15 dollars to go get [a roofing job] . . . they’d rather get 9 or 10 dollars in benefits. I think drug testing is not an unreasonable requirement to get benefits. (Jilani 2014)

First note his comment about unemployment. “You can stay on unemployment for an awfully long time.” Compared to what? During the current recession Congress passed legislation to allow unemployed men and women to collect benefits for up to 73 weeks (depending on the state), but the normal maximum (which states have now gone back to) is 26 weeks. This is half the maximum Germany allows for younger unemployed workers, and only one quarter what France allows for unemployed workers. Second, note how he connects unemployment to drug addiction. For him the unemployed need to hit rock bottom by being forced to work.

Arguing that unemployment benefits (which only pay a fraction of the worker’s original salary) last too long and that the unemployed need to be treated like drug addicts and forced to work is easier to do when the people listening already believe
that the unemployed are stereotypically lazy and shiftless. I referred to the ways various Democratic presidents reproduced neoliberal ideas. Although the rise in the number of the incarcerated begins in the early seventies, we really see an increase after Bill Clinton signs the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (Feldman et al. 2001). None of these labor gaps would be as significant as they are if the federal government paid for college education, for example, thereby easing parental anxiety about paying for their children’s education, or paid a minimum income or provided universal health care. But not only do we not have a robust welfare state, Clinton cut back what we had when he repealed welfare by signing the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which transformed a lifetime right to a temporary privilege (with significant strings attached). And he was able to make the cutbacks because people associate welfare with black women (Gilens 1999). Indeed, Clinton signed the bill with two single black mothers on federal assistance standing by his side. Compared to whites, blacks have less income, less wealth, less education. They tend to live in poorer neighborhoods and tend to be sicker than their white counterparts. And, compared to whites, blacks tend to benefit far less from a variety of “submerged state” tax expenditures than their white counterparts.

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24 An economist recently ran an experiment creating resumes for 4800 fictitious job candidates. The resumes only differed by the amount of time the fictitious candidates had been unemployed. The results were telling. The fictitious candidates unemployed for more than six months received very few callbacks compared to the fictitious candidates who’d been unemployed for less time (O’Brien 2013). Even though more long-term unemployed are white rather than non-white (Mitchell 2013), the language of race extends to the long-term unemployed to the point where some could argue that the unemployed are now “black.”

25 In some states, for example, women had to take paternity tests in order to qualify for the temporary aid. In most states women had to actively look for work. Joe Soss, Richard Fording, and Sanford Schram (2011) definitively show that these and other punitive measures were connected to race — states and counties with larger black populations were far more likely to have punitive welfare policies than other states. Suzanne Mettler’s (2011b) work is important here. The home-mortgage interest deduction alone is worth over $100 billion dollars. But while a program like Food Stamps (which in 2010 dollars costs less than half the home-mortgage interest deduction) is condemned at best, the home-mortgage deduction continues without critique.
While 99% of all citizens need progressive government and need government programs that actively provide income and other resources to poor and working class populations, black citizens arguably need them more and are wounded more when they don’t exist.

This brings us to black politics.

If we were to compare levels of “white inequality” over time with levels of “black inequality” (that is, inequality within black communities), what we find is there is actually more inequality within black communities than there are within white ones. Well-off black families tend to have a larger share of the resources than not-so-well-off black families have . . . and this share is larger than the share well-off white families have in relationship to not-so-well-off white families. I by no means want to suggest that intra-racial and inter-racial inequality are the same; they are not. Whites have much more wealth than blacks (Conley 1999; Oliver and Shapiro 1995). However, focusing solely on inter-racial inequality causes us to erase the inequality that exists within black communities.

And this causes us to gloss over the fact that neoliberal ideas and policies are not simply produced and reproduced by whites to withhold resources from blacks. Black institutions and ideas have themselves been transformed. Black elected officials and civil rights leaders reproduce these ideas, participating in a remobilization project of sorts, one that consistently posits that the reason black people aren’t as successful as their white counterparts is because of a lack of hustle, is because they don’t quite have the work ethic necessary to succeed in the modern moment. A remobilization project that consistently posits that the greatest danger black people face is one posed by other black people, black people who are not only not productive but are in fact counter-productive. This remobilization project posits that there are two types of black people — black people who have the potential to be successful if they take advantage of their human capital, and black people who have no such potential.

This is one of the biggest hurdles we have to face in the early decades of the twenty-first century.