One of the hardest subjects to tackle in works seeking to problem-solve the neoliberal turn is the subject of “solutions”. How do we stop it? How do we reverse it?

I want to revisit the idea of the neoliberal turn. What happened?

The causes of the turn lay in two related phenomena.

First, the economic shocks of the late sixties and early seventies generated an ideational crisis. Neoliberal elites stepped into this gap, providing another set of policies that would in effect kill the welfare state. Instead of policies that protected individuals from radical market swings (through government-sponsored health insurance, unemployment insurance, incomes, and family benefits), they promoted policies that exposed individuals to them. Instead of policies that gave governments control over markets, they promoted policies that used markets to control governments. Instead of policies that supported and valued labor, they promoted policies that valued owners under the guise of promoting entrepreneurial activity. These ideas basically make competition and market-oriented behavior the guiding principles of governments and the standard by which to judge individuals, populations, and institutions.

These neoliberal ideas radically change what it means to be human, as the perfect human being now becomes an entrepreneur of his own human capital, responsible for his personal development. These ideas also radically change what it means to be free — freedom is redefined as the ability to participate in the market unfettered. This transforms the citizen into a producer/consumer. Democracy, even when (in fact, some would argue, *particularly when*) it is practiced well, is often messy — it
can be hard to ferret out what the public interest is and should be in a given instance. It is inefficient. It is sometimes ineffective. The neoliberal turn replaces the democratic with the free market, assuming that individuals making market-oriented rational decisions generates better decisions (and individuals) than individuals engaged in politics—voting, debating, protesting, collectively acting in the public.

The economic shocks I mention above occur at the same time people of color begin to garner political power in the United States and elsewhere. Since the turn, we’ve seen capital extract more productivity from labor while paying them less in wages, causing economic inequality to rise dramatically. Along these lines, we’ve also seen a stark division between good jobs and bad jobs, a significant rise in unemployment and underemployment, as well as the slow death of the union. Finally, we’ve seen a significant increase in the cost of higher education, as more and more responsibility is placed on regular citizens to take on the risk of increasing their (and their children’s) human capital. Race and racism work in justifying both the turn away from progressive (and even liberal) government and the turn towards more punitive approaches. The consequences of the turn are stark for people on the wrong end of the inequality curve, and ideas about racial difference help convince citizens that those on the wrong end of the curve are somehow different (and thus deserve their fate). Different culturally. Different biologically. As the West has never truly defined “the human” as black to begin with, and as the welfare state was not created to provide care to non-white populations, syncing the neoliberal turn to a certain type of racial project was relatively straightforward.

But it isn’t as if black people have just been affected by the turn. “I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man.” “Momma needs a house, baby needs some shoes…guess what I’m gonna do? Hustle. Hustle. Hustle. Hard.” We are forced to think of ourselves this way, as the welfare state withers away, as union power declines. This isn’t just a matter of force, though. This is also what we increasingly want to do. Who doesn’t want to take care of their families? Who doesn’t want to be successful in life? And as it becomes increasingly harder to make ends meet, who doesn’t want to be resilient? Who doesn’t want to
have the required discipline? Who doesn’t want to take the risks necessary to become better able to take advantage of our circumstances? We turn to people like Jay Z, Ace Hood, and people like Napoleon Hill and other prominent black entrepreneurs as models, and then adopt any number of techniques to try to be more like them.

And we pick up these techniques through a variety of black institutions. Even though black churches were never quite as political as we believed them to be—the leaders of the Montgomery Bus Boycott chose Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy not because they were known throughout the South as being political pastors, but rather because they were young and no other pastors in Montgomery were willing to be involved in the movement—the neoliberal turn gradually changes black churches. Increasingly, through the work of pastors like Creflo Dollar, Eddie Long, and T.D. Jakes, we see the spread of a gospel that promotes material wealth and abundance through spiritual discipline. Note the logic at work. Perfect followers of the prosperity gospel will submit to the discipline of the Word of God, and this disciplinary practice will not only lead to spiritual rewards, it will lead to material rewards. The “perfect” or perhaps the “perfecting” human being after the turn is the individual who consistently seeks to grow and take advantage of his human capital, forever seeking to be more and more entrepreneurial. The prosperity gospel can and should be read as an attempt to make that effort a spiritual effort. The church becomes an institution designed to assist us with developing the techniques we need to become more entrepreneurial.

Simultaneous with the growth and spread of the prosperity gospel, we see the growth and spread of megachurches—huge churches with thousands of worshippers that look more like malls than traditional church structures. Although many megachurches promote some version of the prosperity gospel, not all do. However all megachurches do rely on some combination of individual giving and public-private partnerships in order to generate the resources they need to exist. The public-private partnerships churches often engage in are themselves an important component of the neoliberal turn. As the ability of local, state, and the federal government to
provide social services dwindle as a result of the turn, a variety of non-profit actors attempt to step into the gap, with churches and foundations being chief among them.

Some argue that these changes come as a result of a fall from grace. Cornel West (1993), for example, writes of black people driven by the pursuit of “pleasure, property, and power” in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. This is decidedly not the case. As my own experience with these churches suggest, black people in these spaces are deeply moral and committed. However, the very conception of what it means to be “moral” has changed, fused to an individualist program that blames individuals for their own failings. In churches colonized by the prosperity gospel, poor men and women are poor not because of structural dynamics but because they’ve lost touch with God. And understand that this isn’t solely a top-down process—it’s not that prosperity gospel churches and megachurches change individuals, although again that does occur. The churches find themselves measured based on their ability to be entrepreneurial, judged and assessed by potential churchgoers who choose based on their feet and by their pocketbooks. So even as pastors of prosperity gospel churches discipline and provide disciplinary tools to their churchgoers, they are disciplined. Further, churches too are “punished” for being insufficiently entrepreneurial both by individuals (who may “punish” a church by refusing to donate the right amount or by leaving it) and by institutions. As a result of the real estate crisis, a number of churches have undergone foreclosure.

The only institution viewed in and by black communities as more important than the black church is the black family. The effect of the neoliberal turn on black families is severe. Black families forced to hustle hard are forced to be responsible for every aspect of their life while the resources required to do so in the first place are withheld from them. Even “nuclear families” with two steady “good jobs” are not immune to the stresses here, as they are required to be ever more productive and at the same time they are expected to be more and more

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1 The church I examined in the third chapter has changed its name and moved to a local theater, likely because of financial issues.
responsible for the costs of educating their children. But the stresses placed on working class and poor families are particularly high. As a result, the number of single parent families increase significantly, to the point that black kids in working class communities don’t even see marriage as an option (Jones 2006).

Elites seeking to solve the problems black families face consistently adopt harsh rhetoric urging them to take more

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2 Joy Jones’s Washington Post article “Marriage is for White People” represents a powerful example of the class dynamics going on within black families and among black women in particular. It’s also an example of the powerful effect “way back” narratives have on our contemporary politics. Ms. Jones:

I grew up in a time when two-parent families were still the norm, in both black and white America. Then, as an adult, I saw divorce become more commonplace, then almost a rite of passage. Today it would appear that many—particularly in the black community—have dispensed with marriage altogether. (Jones 2006)

With the first sentence we’re immediately transported to a time when two-parent families were “the norm” in “the black community”. And then smashed against today’s reality, which Jones then spends the majority of the article addressing. As of 2012, 44.8% of black men and 43.3% of black women had never been married. Compare that to 28.4% of white men and 21.8% of white women. From this Ms. Jones moves to the causes.

Among African Americans, the desire for marriage seems to have a different trajectory for women and men. My observation is that black women in their twenties and early thirties want to marry and commit at a time when black men their age are more likely to enjoy playing the field. As the woman realizes that a good marriage may not be as possible or sustainable as she would like, her focus turns to having a baby, or possibly improving her job status, perhaps by returning to school or investing more energy in her career.

As men mature, and begin to recognize the benefits of having a roost and roots (and to feel the consequences of their risky bachelor behavior), they are more willing to marry and settle down. By this time, however, many of their female peers are satisfied with the lives they have constructed and are less likely to settle for marriage to a man who doesn’t bring much to the table. Indeed, he may bring too much to the table: children and their mothers from previous relationships, limited earning power, and the fallout from years of drug use, poor health care, sexual promiscuity. In other words, for the circumspect black woman, marriage may not be a business deal that offers sufficient return on investment. (Jones 2006)
Recall that in the wake of the neoliberal turn we are all increasingly expected to act in an entrepreneurial fashion, thinking of a range of everyday activities as if we were buying, selling, or producing widgets. Having to treat ourselves as entrepreneur of our own human capital, one of the things we are forced to do is consistently conduct cost-benefit analyses, measuring the long and short term costs of our behaviors.

Above, Jones traces the cost-benefit analyses of black men and women in the “marriage market”. Black men postpone marriage because they believe the benefits of postponing marriage outweigh the costs. Women, on the other hand, postpone marriage because by the time it becomes possible for them the benefits of being single outweigh the costs (because the pool of potential men doesn’t meet their standards). Note how Jones refers to marriage as a “business deal” that does not offer “sufficient return on investment”. Note also the reference to “risky behavior”. While the straightforward way to read this is to read her as talking about the various and sundry things single men do, the other way to read this is to think about the various ways investors routinely have to wrestle with, manage, and account for risk. Along these lines, she’s suggesting that because black men themselves didn’t properly manage their levels of risk when they were in their twenties, they’ve in effect become “risky investments” for black women.

Her argument makes a great deal of common sense. While marriage used to be normal among blacks and whites, it’s no longer normal among blacks because the costs outweigh the benefits. To the extent there’s a price to be paid, that price is increasingly paid by single black professional women who can no longer literally and figuratively afford the high economic and social costs of being with black men.

There’s a reason why we see “black family crisis” narratives at every single point in time from the beginning of the twentieth century to now. The resources required to build and raise families are routinely withheld from black populations and from poor populations in general. Even as the expectations placed on those families and the individuals within them increase. Jones notes that one of the reasons she wants a husband with which to have a child is because of the relationship she had with her father. But she also notes that one of the reasons is because she’s got too many contemporary examples of shared parenthood gone awry. Here I’d argue, without knocking her decision, that she does not take into account the routine ways that black parenthood — single or otherwise — is and was always fraught.

And given the way we’ve placed the burden of parenting, of marriage, and of work increasingly on individuals and families, it’s clear that a number of people are being worked harder and harder, yet at the same time expected to be better parents and better spouses. The neoliberal turn creates a condition where we are increasingly expected to be responsible for ourselves, and then increasingly expected to be responsible for our families. The stress this places on families is absolutely enormous.
and more responsibility, harsh legislation designed to surveil and punish them if they do not make the “proper” choices, and increased charity and volunteerism.

Undergirding both the family and the church is the school and the idea of education, an idea that has almost always had political overtones in black communities. In the wake of the neoliberal turn, education becomes the primary vehicle by which individuals build their human capital as well as the primary vehicle used to neoliberalize local government. Legislatively, programs like George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind and Barack Obama’s Race to the Top embed competition into the structure of public education, requiring schools to compete against one another for state resources. In order to standardize the competitive dynamic, administrators measure students, teachers, principals, and the schools themselves by a wide variety of metrics. Those that perform well compared to their counterparts are rewarded. Those that perform poorly are punished. Schools that consistently fail their children are closed down.

I noted the burden placed on families. Parents are expected to act as rational consumers, collecting data on schools so as to know how well schools perform. They are expected to know their children’s unique skills so as to effectively maximize them—paying to put their children in high performing sports camps if they exhibit a particular athletic talent, in various academic leadership camps so as to give them the best possible chance to get into the right colleges.3 As early as the 1950s, when blacks in the Deep South were fighting to desegregate the Jim Crow education system, neoliberal economists like Milton Friedman argued for the value of introducing choice and competition into the school system through vouchers. Decades later charter schools—public schools run by private corporations—are becoming the norm in urban public school systems nationwide even though the research definitively shows these

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3 In 2014, Kevin Durant was named the Most Valuable Player of the National Basketball Association. In his powerful acceptance speech, he thanked a number of players and coaches, but he spent a significant portion of his speech thanking his mother, a single parent, for
schools do not perform better and often perform worse than regular public schools.

In thinking through the way the neoliberal turn transforms black communities and the politics that occur within them, there can be a tendency to overstate the changes that occur as a result of the turn. Just as black people have a long history of fighting for education, black people also have a long history of using education as a way to justify hierarchies within black communities. It wasn’t uncommon even before the turn of the twentieth century, when racism was in some ways far more virulent than it is now, for black people to blame racism not on whites but on poor undereducated blacks (Scott 1997). When black elites consistently promote excellence as a political project, urging that black people be excellent in spite of persistent racism, they are doing what black people like them have done for well over one hundred years. There is also a tendency to understate the role of desire. Again, who doesn’t want to be excellent? What child doesn’t, at some level at least, want to be a high performer? In this case, the desires of black parents and black children are used to support a project that consistently requires excellent behavior in exchange for resources, even though excellent behavior is by definition rare. But even given

the sacrifices she continually made for him and for pushing him to become the player he is:

You wake me up in the middle of the night in the summertimes making me run up the hill, making me do pushups, screaming at me from the sideline of my games at eight or nine years old. We wasn’t supposed to be here. You made us believe. You kept us off the streets, put clothes on the back, food on the table. When you didn’t eat, you made sure we ate. You went to sleep hungry. You sacrificed for us? You’re the real MVP.

The entire speech is heartfelt, and a joy to see. As a longtime fan of the game I was so proud of Durant, as he’s consistently played the game the way it was meant to be played and has consistently carried himself on and off the court with grace and dignity. But while I believe his mother should indeed be thought of as the MVP, I also believe that the model of motherhood she represents is not one most working-class mothers either could or even should aspire to, for many reasons other than the fact that the sons of most of these mothers will not be able to grow up to be smooth shooting 6’9″ small forwards. However, particularly as welfare decreases, it is the model poor mothers increasingly have forced upon them.
these tendencies to overstate the changes and to understate the role of desire, there are differences. The breadth and scope of the rhetoric is new, as are the programs themselves which persistently work to generate entrepreneurial behavior and to transform institutions.

As I note above, churches and schools are consistently disciplined under the neoliberal turn, transforming themselves into institutions capable of rational market behavior. The same type of process reshapes the cities where many of these institutions are located. I wrote about the effect of the seventies economic crisis on cities. Unemployment skyrocketed, and the demand for social services increased, but as a result of corporate and white middle-class flight (made possible by racist housing policy), revenues decreased, so cities had fewer resources to deal with the demand. Rather than increase cities’ ability to generate revenue, political and economic elites hamstrung them, forcing them to rely on the bond market—which made them even less able to use revenue to provide social services.

New York City was the poster child for this move—it almost went bankrupt in the seventies because it was both prevented from raising taxes and from participating in the bond market. In exchange for getting the ability to participate in the bond market back, New York City was forced to cut its budget severely and subject itself to significant fiscal oversight—its budget had to be approved by an unelected board of political officials and economic elites. Increasingly, cities are viewed as economic units designed primarily to generate profit for capital, and we see an ideational shift as a variety of terms are redefined. When Clinton gave his MLK Day speech in 1994 touting his empowerment zone initiative, he defined freedom explicitly in market terms, and implicitly argued that what makes America great is not its promise of political equality and freedom but rather its ability to grow markets and develop “underused assets”. America (and urban America in particular) is not the place where people can express fundamental political liberties, but rather the place where people can develop products and services for the market and then sell those services without undue regulation.

Part of this reconstruction project involves making cities good places to do business in. If a corporation cannot purchase
and develop real estate in a city without dealing with environmental regulations designed to keep residents from getting sick, then it is less likely to do so. Similarly, if a corporation cannot locate its corporate headquarters in a city without tax incentives, then it’s less likely to do so. Under this logic, political leaders must create the right climate for corporate partners, a climate in which their regulative burden is incredibly low, a climate in which their tax burden is incredibly low. If they create the right climate, corporations will come and the resources they expend in the city will trickle down.

Another part of this reconstruction project involves making cities good places for “productive” people—people who are either the most likely to be able to consume the goods the corporations offer, the most likely to work for the corporation, or the most likely to generate the type of buzz the city can use to further sell itself to other corporations and potential residents (“the creative class”), and relatedly the ones least in need of certain types of public goods (public housing, food stamps, etc.). This too involves incentives—tax breaks and other incentives to make urban real estate more enticing than suburban real estate, for example—but it also involves creating a favorable labor climate as well as a sense of security and safety. If in enticing corporations to the city urban leaders are competing against other urban leaders, in enticing “productive” people to the city urban leaders are competing against other cities but (particularly in the case of “productive” people with families) also against suburbs.

How do they create this sense? In 1994, the same year that Bill Clinton announces his urban empowerment zone initiative, two years after Los Angeles rebels in the wake of the Rodney King verdict, James Q. Wilson and George Kelling write an article for the Atlantic called “Broken Windows” (1982). They make three arguments. First, they argue that the rise of violent crime in urban areas across the nation is increasing and threatens to overturn and overrun the country, with most of the crime committed by the nation’s poorest (and implicitly, blackest) citizens.

Second, the concept of “choice”, so important in the turn, appears. They argue that crime is not a function of poverty or unemployment, but rather a function of choice. Criminals
are not people down on their luck forced to commit crimes because they don’t have jobs or stable income. Criminals are people who choose to commit crimes. And in choosing to do so they look at opportunity costs. For example, they choose one potential victim over another potential victim based on their ability to get away with the crime safely. If one potential victim appears to be able to defend him/herself, they choose a victim less likely to be able to do so. Similarly, they choose neighborhoods in the same way, looking for signs that the neighborhood and the people within them are unable to defend themselves. Sure signs of a neighborhood unable to defend itself?

Broken windows.

Third, they argue that, given that criminals choose where and when to commit crimes, and that one of the things they look for in deciding to commit crime is the ability to get away with the crime, the best way to reduce crime is to reduce the visible signs of neighborhood decay. And this is by getting police to enforce a range of nuisance laws—for example, laws making jaywalking illegal.

Wilson acknowledged that he and his co-author weren’t developing social science theory. In fact, his ideas hadn’t been tested. However, this didn’t prevent police departments from applying them under the general heading of “zero-tolerance policing”. New York City was one of the first major cities to adopt this approach, causing the rise of stop-and-frisk policies and the aggressive enforcement of a range of minor infractions, from jaywalking to jumping over subway turnstiles. Two years after the Atlantic published “Broken Windows”, Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Although the Atlantic published no similar article about welfare during this time, Losing Ground (Murray 1984), published ten years earlier, packed a similar punch, arguing that the best way to deal with poverty was by refusing benefits and forcing people to work. Again the concept of “choice” played a powerful role—people were poor and unemployed because they chose not to develop their human capital in ways that would enable them to function in the market. Giving people benefits (in the form of unearned income, food, housing, child care, etc.) they didn’t work for would skew their priorities and would make them more likely
to make the irrational and unproductive decisions that kept them poor. Unlike “Broken Windows”, the ideas in Losing Ground took more than a decade to percolate upwards, but when they finally did they significantly shaped the content of PRWORA.

Along with increasing societal suffering and anxiety, these policies have a few problematic effects. First, they increase the type and degree of surveillance techniques used on black and brown citizens. As a result of zero-tolerance policing, we see an increase in the absolute presence of police officers, particularly in neighborhoods deemed to be “high crime” neighborhoods. We also see an increase in technology designed to surveil populations from afar. Here I refer to the proliferation of movement-triggered remote controlled cameras that more and more employ facial recognition (hence significantly reducing the need for humans to monitor the video feed), as well as devices used to track the movement of people on parole. I also refer to the development of information technology used by welfare case managers to identify the individual work, reproductive health, and medical history of women on welfare (and often the men they have children with).

The second problem is that both approaches generate perverse incentives. By increasing the number of police encounters that lead to infractions, it in turn increases the revenue police officers bring into the city and the revenue of police departments themselves (through search-and-seizure laws that enable police departments to keep a portion of what they seize). This generates a powerful set of incentives to police black and brown bodies that goes beyond the desire to “fight crime”, an incentive that becomes particularly powerful in cities that are already resource poor because of the turn. By making the most important goal of welfare policy the reduction of welfare rolls as opposed to the reduction of poverty, welfare case workers are incentivized to remove people (particularly those who don’t seem to have the requisite hustle needed to find and maintain employment) rather than help them.

Third, relating specifically to the police issue, over the past several decades American police departments have progressively patterned themselves after military units, materially, culturally, organizationally, and operationally. Materially, the amount of money police departments have spent on military
weapons and vehicles skyrocketed (particularly after 9/11). Culturally, it’s become normal to see police in military garb, using military-inflected language and styles. Organizationally, police have adopted military modes of organizing. Finally, operationally, police increasingly carry out their duties with a military mindset, often seeking to use violent methods of policing first as opposed to non-violent ones (Kraska 2007). And this has often occurred with the explicit aid of the federal government.

And although the relationship between black citizens and police have always been fraught, arguably the move to secure urban space has helped generate the recent wave of anti-black police violence. On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner, a New York City resident, was murdered by two police officers. In the course of trying to break up a fight, Garner himself ended up being accosted by police officers. After telling the police officers he was tired of being accosted (as part of his hustle, Garner made money selling untaxed cigarettes—a misdemeanor—and was often harassed by the police for doing so) one of the police walked behind Garner and employed a choke hold on him. He continued to deploy the choke hold even as Garner said several times that he couldn’t breathe. The entire encounter between Garner and the police was caught on video by one of Garner’s friends, and the video quickly went viral. On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, a resident of Ferguson, Missouri, (population 21,000) was murdered by Darren Wilson, a Ferguson police officer, in the middle of the street. His body was left uncovered under the hot Missouri sun for several hours, in full view of his parents and neighbors. Finally, on April 19, 2015, Freddie Gray died in a Baltimore hospital due to spinal cord injuries apparently received during an April 12 encounter with six members of the Baltimore City Police Department.

These encounters present stark evidence of increased harassment and surveillance. In an analysis of stop-and-frisk patterns, researchers found that between 2004 and 2012 over 3.7 million black and brown men, women, and children were stopped by NYPD (Serwer and Lee 2013). Five years after “Broken Windows” was published, Baltimore City Councilperson Martin O’Malley ran on and was elected mayor of Baltimore on a zero-tolerance approach to crime. His zero-tolerance policy resulted in over 667,000 arrests between 1999–2005—in 2003
alone Baltimore police made over 110,000 arrests (Snyder and Mulako-Wangota 2015). The ACLU and the NAACP later sued the city, which led to an out-of-court settlement (Fenton 2015).

In some of these encounters we see evidence of how policing has been used as an urban revenue generator. In the city of New York, policing brings in approximately $10 million in revenue per month for stopping citizens for nuisance crimes (Gonen 2015). Ferguson is one of the poorest municipalities in St. Louis County. Its second greatest source of revenue is taxing and fines. In fact, over 21% of its revenue comes from policing. Policing citizens in Ferguson and elsewhere has not only become a mechanism of preventing or responding to crime, it has become a revenue generator. The residents of Ferguson have, on average, three outstanding warrants per household (Arch City Defenders 2014). Ferguson isn’t alone here—a number of poorer, predominantly black municipalities in St. Louis County have taken the same approach. The result of this approach is not only an increased tax burden, but also political disempowerment. Ferguson’s black population percentage is approximately 75%. At the time of Brown’s murder, Ferguson’s political officials were almost all white and Republican. Working on the assumption that blacks tend to vote Democrat, and when possible tend to vote for black candidates, this particular configuration is only possible if blacks have somehow been disfranchised. In Baltimore, we don’t see police used as a revenue generator as much as we do in either Ferguson or New York City. However, the city’s policing budget has exploded over the past two decades. In 1991, the city spent $37 million on parks and recreation and $165 million on policing. In 2014, the city spent approximately the same amount on parks and recreation; however, it spent almost $450 million on policing (Reutter 2015). Finally, in response to uprisings in Ferguson and Baltimore, police with military-grade weapons and body armor were deployed along with military-grade vehicles. This, even though the level of property damage and the loss of life were the smallest ever recorded in the modern period for an urban rebellion.⁴

⁴ A comparison is in order. The 1967 Detroit rebellion caused approximately $80 million in damages and 43 people lost their lives. Twenty-five years later, in the Rodney King rebellions, over $1 billion in
The growing use of social media to document and spread these instances have increased the ability of people to organize against them. In response to these and other murders like them, young activists organized protests under the hashtag #blacklivesmatter, garnering international attention and support.

The neoliberal turn is far broader than what I’ve detailed, but what I’ve tried to do is give a sense of its scope. But if, to quote the eighties television cartoon G.I. Joe, “knowing is half the battle”, how do we get to the other half?

First, let me state what won’t quite work.

Some argue that we have to return to the values of black love and care that got us to this moment in the first place, and that we have to use this self-love to begin bearing prophetic witness. Cornel West is perhaps the most important proponent of this approach. Of mainstream scholars and journalists, he and Tavis Smiley have been the most vocal in their criticism (I say “mainstream” here because there are a whole host of black scholars and activists who have been critical of Obama and the Democratic Party for years), and of that mainstream group they have arguably paid the biggest cost for their criticism. Here’s West, writing about the politics of conversion in Race Matters.

Is there really any hope, given our shattered civil society, market-driven corporate enterprises, and white supremacy? If one begins with the threat of concrete nihilism, then one must talk about some kind of politics of conversion. New models of collective black leadership must promote a version of this politics. Like alcoholism and drug addiction, nihilism is a disease of the soul. It can never be completely cured, and there is always the possibility of relapse. But there is always a chance for conversion—a chance for people to believe that there is

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5 Created by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi in the wake of George Zimmerman’s 2013 acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin.
hope for the future and a meaning to struggle.... Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses: it is tamed by love and care. Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one’s soul. This turning is done through one’s own affirmation of one’s worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion. (West 1993, p. 19)

Above, West compares nihilism to alcohol and drug addiction, strongly suggesting that the best way to deal with this is through a politics of therapy. One way to read the work Cornel West does in bearing witness against President Barack Obama is to read him as making a last best call for Obama to exhibit the type of moral leadership required to solve the black nihilism of the underclass. For West, Obama has ignored and arguably gone against the Kingian legacy of non-violence.

Others have made many of the same criticisms West has, implicitly promoting the idea that black leaders have abrogated their responsibility to speak for and to black people’s interests, and that our biggest mission is to do this in order to rebuild black communities. To an extent West is calling for a kind of noblesse oblige—a dynamic whereby elites, in this case black elites, do the right thing for “the black masses” out of a sense of moral obligation and duty. It sounds remarkably like what W.E.B. Du Bois had in mind when he wrote and talked about the Talented Tenth.

But Du Bois’s ideas themselves were doubly problematic—first, they were based on the notion that “the masses” were culturally backward and unable to act for themselves, and second, they were based on the notion that black elites were capable of acting morally and selflessly. Although Du Bois never recognized how problematic his first idea was, he did recognize how problematic the second one was, discarding the notion of a Talented Tenth (Gates and West 1996). However, even here he did not totally discard his elitism—instead of the Talented Tenth he proposed a Guiding Hundredth (determined by scientifically arranging marriages and births between the best and the brightest black people). Many borrow Du Bois’s ideas about the roles elites should play in black communities
without recognizing the deep flaws within them, flaws that go
against the democratic impulses many claim to hold dear.

Furthermore, along similar lines, some have argued that
change can occur through “speaking truth to power”. West and
others place a significant value on “prophetic utterance”. Here
I’d make two claims. The first is that while we should in general
be wary of using religious metaphors in talking and writing
about political struggle, we should be particularly wary about
the use of prophetic language, because it places more value
on powerful speech (often articulated by charismatic male
figures) than on labor, and hence, privileges individuals over
communities, and privileges an aristocracy (based on speech)
over democracy. Although intellectual labor is incredibly valu-
able—as I’ve noted, the neoliberal turn is in many ways an ide-
ational one, created or at the very least shaped by intellectual
ideas—with the turn we’ve seen a strong move towards mon-
etizing intellectual production in a way that makes “speaking
truth to power” lucrative for intellectuals with some combi-
nation of prestige and the right type of institutional backing.
The rise of the “black public intellectual” in the nineties also
comes with a rise in the black public intellectual market, a
market that often rewards “truth speakers”.6

With the rise of the internet, some people have argued that
the revolution will be “tweeted”. That is to say, that Facebook,
Twitter, Instagram, and the like can help connect and mobi-
lize individuals and communities across long distances. Cer-
tainly, without the Internet, the murders of Trayvon Martin,
Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray (among others)
would never have garnered the public attention they did, and
the #blacklivesmatter movement would likely not exist. At best,
though, “hashtag activism” does more to mobilize resources
for short-term high-profile events than it does to enable the
type of long-term organizing and institutional development
we need to counteract the turn. And at worst it shunts valu-
able resources away from that long-term organizing project in
order to salve the internet-enabled desire for quick solutions,
and creates a new set of charismatic elite hashtag brokers.

6 For more on this, the work of Adolph Reed (2000) is incredibly valuable.
We see a much richer account in the work of black political scientists who argue that we need to recreate a vibrant counter-public (Cohen 2010; Dawson 2011, 2013; Harris 2012; Reed Jr. 1986b, 2000). The concept of the counterpublic takes politics seriously by taking the different material interests segments of black populations have seriously, by not privileging black leadership, by acknowledging the power of ideas (particularly, I’d add, in periods of crisis), and by similarly acknowledging the power of institutions. We don’t need a conversion experience. We don’t need new leaders. We don’t need prophets. We don’t need to go back to the sixties. Further while communication technology is important, we’re not going to solve our problems through technological fixes.

What do we need? I’m going to focus on a few examples of black people acting alone and in concert with others against the turn.

In 2008, Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley proposed building a $104 million prison in Baltimore for youth charged as adults, under pressure from federal officials (who argued that youth currently incarcerated in prisons with adult inmates were being mistreated). Over the past three decades we’ve seen a drastic increase in the number of incarcerated men and women, and we’ve also seen increase in the number of children charged as adults, even though the research definitively shows that children aren’t necessarily developed enough to fully understand the consequences of their actions in general (much less when their actions are deemed to be criminal). The creation of an entire building designed solely to house them would further crystallize this identity. Recognizing this, two Baltimore youth organizations—the Baltimore Algebra Project and Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle (a black youth advocacy think-tank comprised of young Baltimore Algebra Project and Baltimore Urban Debate League alumni)—organized against the move, with the help of a broad coalition of Baltimore activists. After a long struggle, they ended up turning the Maryland State Legislature against the move and Governor O’Malley eventually ended up pulling his support from the project. No one likely would have predicted this outcome given the powerful forces lined up in support of it, the population targeted by it (although in the wake of Michele Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow* it is becoming easier, it is still incredibly hard
to organize on behalf of black prisoners), and the population largely responsible for organizing against it (young working class and, in some cases, high school aged black people).

Activists and philanthropists supported both the Algebra Project and the Urban Debate League for two different reasons. They wanted to increase black academic achievement. They wanted to promote non-hierarchical political activism. Many if not most attempts to reduce the racial achievement gap works from the presumption of cultural dysfunction—that black and Latino populations face unique cultural deficits that adversely affect their ability to succeed academically. The solution under these circumstances is to somehow fix the kids, or to provide them what they lack culturally, with the “fixing” usually done by some authority figure. Here, founders and members of both the Algebra Project and the Urban Debate League assumed black and Latino children already had all they culturally needed to be successful. The challenge, to the extent there was one, was a challenge of translation, how to take the skills they already possessed and apply them to learn a skill they didn’t necessarily think they had the ability to master. The bus ride to school kids took everyday could potentially teach them the rudiments of algebraic theory—they literally lived math, they just didn’t recognize it as such. Kids played the dozens against one another every day; debating for them came almost as natural as breathing—it was just about mastering the form.

Both organizations were created with political goals in mind. The Algebra Project was the mastermind of Robert Moses, an SNCC organizer who also happened to have a PhD in mathematics from Harvard University. Moses understood increasing mathematical literacy as a continuation of his sixties SNCC work, which largely consisted of increasing civic literacy (Moses and Cobb 2001). The Urban Debate League itself was funded in part by the Open Society Institute in order to explicitly create ways for youth to be more involved in politics. The explicit goal with the Algebra Project was not just to get black and Latino students to master algebra through peer-to-peer education by using the skills they already had, but also to get them to apply those organizing skills—and what they were doing was, in effect, organizing—outside of the arena of math. Similarly, the Urban Debate League taught kids policy debate, the form of debate which is arguably the most directly related
to public policy, as every year the students debate either a domestic or an international policy issue. The two organizations, as well as Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle, combined the mastery of political speech required to pointedly shoot down the various policy-driven arguments supporting the jail, arguments that often reflected a neoliberal cost-benefit analysis, with grassroots mobilizing necessary to organize hundreds of people against the attempt.

There are challenges here. A number of people have called for youth-related organizing. However, “youth” identities are by definition temporary—“youths” are only “youths” for a short period of time. Although the political interests black working class youth have may remain stable, these interests may not translate into the same suite of actions and ideas once these youth reach adulthood. There’s another challenge. Youth do have the capacity to organize and the capacity to critique and develop public policy. However, their age precludes them from engaging in a wide range of activities that would have to occur in order to create sustained change over time. They cannot run for office, for example. There are certain types of contracts they cannot sign because of their age. There are hours they cannot work—during school hours or after curfew. With this said, as the people often most directly affected by policy shifts, these organizations are invaluable in increasing the ability of people to govern.

In 1988, black radical nationalist Chokwe Lumumba moved from his longtime home in Detroit, Michigan, to Jackson, Mississippi. Lumumba had been a member of the Black United Front and the Republic of New Afrika, and helped to found the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. In 2009, Lumumba successfully ran for city council, and four years later was elected mayor. There are a few things that made Lumumba’s election unique. The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement that helped elect him was a real flesh-and-blood organization, as opposed to organizations like the National Action Network or Rainbow Push (both of which function as appendages of Rev. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton respectively). It is relatively self-organized and has both the autonomy to organize around issues that matter to them and the capacity to work with Jackson’s black communities to devise a needs-based political
platform. While the organization is still a radical one, as it calls for black autonomy and for restructuring Jackson’s economy, unlike many seventies-era organizations that rose and fell, it is deeply invested in seizing power through government. Lumumba was elected on the basis of the organization’s ability to mobilize voters as part of a longer term plan (“the Jackson Plan”) that has three “pillars”: people’s assemblies, electing a suite of progressive candidates, and developing a “solidarity economy”.

The first two pillars work together. The People’s Assembly is an institution designed to develop people’s capacity to govern and make decisions, to assess the needs and wants of various sectors of the community, and to hold elected officials accountable from a place outside of the state. The progressive officials will come from and be accountable to the People’s Assembly. The officials will work to implement the solidarity economy, to stave off the rise of the prison industrial complex (neutering when possible the punitive aspects of government), and reduce the power of transnational corporations to shape and direct community life. But what is the third pillar mentioned above, the solidarity economy?

Our conception of Solidarity Economy is inspired by the Mondragon Federation of Cooperative Enterprises based in the Basque region of Spain but also draws from the best practices and experiences of the Solidarity Economy and other alternative economic initiatives already in motion in Latin America and the United States. We are working to make these practices and experiences relevant in Jackson and to make greater links with existing cooperative institutions in the state and the region that help broaden their reach and impact on the local and regional economy. The Solidarity Economy practices and institutions that MXGM is working to build in Jackson include:

Building a network of cooperative and mutually reinforcing enterprises and institutions, specifically worker, consumer, and housing cooperatives, and community development credit unions as the foundation of our local Solidarity Economy
Building sustainable, Green (re)development and Green economy networks and enterprises, starting with a Green housing initiative

Building a network of local urban farms, regional agricultural cooperatives, and farmers markets. Drawing heavily from recent experiences in Detroit, we hope to achieve food sovereignty and combat obesity and chronic health issues in the state associated with limited access to healthy foods and unhealthy food environments

Developing local community and conservation land trusts as a primary means to begin the process of reconstructing the “Commons” in the city and region by decommodifying land and housing

Organizing to reconstruct and extend the Public Sector, particularly public finance of community development, to be pursued as a means of rebuilding the Public Sector to ensure there is adequate infrastructure to provide quality health care, accessible mass transportation, and decent, affordable public housing, etc. (Malcolm X Grassroots Movement 2014)

This plan is imperfect, and there are challenges here as well. The primary power the People’s Assembly has to hold officials accountable is social power. Social power is very difficult to sustain over time, particularly as older members are replaced with newer ones. It is also very difficult for a horizontal organization like the People’s Assembly—meant to share power broadly among the people as opposed to concentrated among a few individuals—to stay horizontal. Even non-hierarchical organizations where everyone has more or less the same degree of wealth and income end up developing hierarchies (based on the ability to speak or perform other functions the organization requires). Secondly, building a solidarity economy is difficult to do given the power bond-rating agencies exert over city operations and the various logistical challenges involved with generating a robust urban economy that relies heavily on locally produced goods. Finally, less than three months after Chokwe Lumumba was elected mayor of Jackson, he passed away. His son ran in the special election held to determine his successor, but came in second. A number of the
plans Lumumba put in place are still there, but putting them all in motion without Lumumba’s presence (both as mayor and as leader of the movement) are now going to be much more difficult.

The third example I turn to is the example of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). As I’ve already noted, education has been one of the primary victims of the neoliberal turn. Parents in urban school systems with the resources to send their children to private schools now routinely do so, unless they are able to win the equivalent of the lottery by getting their child accepted into magnet schools⁷. Charter schools and vouchers transform parents into education consumers and transform the school system into a school market. George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind and Barack Obama’s Race to the Top have created federal mandates that force schools, principals, and teachers to compete against each other on an unequal playing field, with the losers being punished (principals and teachers removed, schools closed). And almost ten years before NCLB was passed, the Illinois state legislature began the neoliberalization process by giving the Chicago mayor full control of the Chicago public school system and by replacing the school superintendent with a school CEO, signaling a strong preference for a corporate manager as opposed to an educator.

Chicago’s Mayor Rahm Emanuel (formerly Obama’s Chief of Staff) took the radical step of closing over 50 schools in the Chicago Public School system, affecting over 30,000 students (90% of them poor and African American) (Democracy Now 2014). Although the reason proffered was budgetary—the school closings would save over $500 million, reducing the city’s budget shortfall by 50%—the school board did not take the costs of busing kids into consideration, significantly reducing what cost savings may occur. But, perhaps more importantly, the decision comes at the same time the city decided to spend hundreds of millions on a sports stadium and has refused to

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⁷ Of the six lottery chances my four children had for middle school and high school, we “won” the lottery five times. My middle son was the exception—he ended up going to the local middle school because he didn’t get selected for the magnet middle school. He ended up getting selected for the magnet high school, however, which meant that I didn’t have to think long and hard about what to do had he been forced to attend the local public high school.
consider raising taxes as an option. Similarly, while one of the arguments made in favor of closing schools was that there were too many schools for too few students, dozens of new charter schools are proposed to open over the next several years. Along the philosophy established by NCLB/RTTT, officials argued that the schools were low performing and that removing the children would be not only a good budgetary move but a sound educational move as well. But research suggests that the population purportedly best served by charters—poor students attending poor neighborhood schools—actually perform better when compared to their charter school counterparts (Caref et al. 2012). And contrary to the standard notions of a unified black political response, while many black parents and students railed against the move, the Chairman of the Chicago City Council’s Black Caucus (Alderman Howard Brookins) supported the move (Dardick 2014).

In 2011, the Illinois state legislature passed a law increasing the school day and the school year in Chicago and rewarding successful teachers by reducing time to tenure. Both of these moves make a great deal of sense. The length of the school year and the idea of summer vacation itself are nineteenth-century holdovers that don’t apply now, particularly given research suggesting summer learning gaps increase race- and class-based achievement gaps (Alexander et al. 2007). Others argue solid teaching should be rewarded as a way to both get teachers to strive to be better and to retain quality teachers. On the other hand, requiring a longer school year and a longer school day requires teachers to be compensated more for their labor. And if we assume that no one is born with a good teacher “gene”, the fast-track project may end up disproportionately rewarding already resource-rich teachers. Teachers unions are usually the institutions best designed to work these issues out in order to ensure that teachers are adequately compensated for their work and to ensure that whatever hierarchies that do exist (some teachers get paid more than others, some teachers have more authority than others) are not the result of patronage (“hookups”) or structural inequity.

But in addition to the changes above, the Illinois state legislature made one other change. To go on strike, the CTU had to have a 75% vote of all eligible members. This supermajority requirement severely limits the ability of the CTU to negotiate
on behalf of their members, and through them on behalf of the children they educate. Supermajority votes (actions that require more than 50% vote of support) are incredibly difficult to garner in almost any circumstance, because union members have to subsume their own individual material interests to the interests of the union as a whole. This decision by the state represents yet another way by which local municipalities are disciplined to work with rather than against the neoliberal turn. Given the hurdles the CTU had to face, no one would have predicted that the teachers would be able to garner the necessary votes to strike.

In response to the school closings and to the persistent efforts of political officials to misrepresent their activities and to consistently criticize the work teachers performed, the CTU got the votes. In fact, they not only got the 75% needed, they received 90% (Uetricht 2014). Now, to a certain extent, in using this example I’m cheating a bit because the CTU isn’t a black organization. Furthermore, I’m cheating a bit in that they weren’t as successful as the other examples—they didn’t roll back the school closings, nor did they roll back the general move to privatize the Chicago Public Schools. But the fact that they were able to overcome such significant legislative hurdles in getting 90% of the teachers to support work on behalf of better conditions and on behalf of black children bears inclusion. Particularly as it appears that members of the union had engaged in deep organizing for a ten year period, doing the hard work over time to build a broad base of support.

Finally, we have the #blacklivesmatter movement. Particularly with the cases of Michael Brown in Ferguson and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, we see the movement not only bringing attention to anti-black police brutality but winning signal victories. In Michael Brown’s case, although his murderer Darren Wilson was not indicted, the Justice Department placed the Ferguson police department under investigation, revealing in its report the conspiracy they conducted against black citizens. Political officials explicitly incentivized police to increase the number of tickets they collected in anticipation of decreased income from other revenue streams. They appointed judges based on their ability to collect revenue rather than their ability to mete out justice. Furthermore, they routinely issued warrants for the failure to pay tickets and related fines, in
effect criminalizing poverty, while simultaneously dismissing tickets they (and their friends/family members) themselves received. And they consistently violated the constitutional rights of black citizens. Over a three-year period, the City of Ferguson issued almost 450% more warrants than the city itself had residents (Friedersdorf 2015). Although it isn’t clear at this point in time how the police department will change, the report creates the conditions to increase the odds that the department is gutted and transformed.

Unlike Ferguson, Baltimore already has black political representation. Indeed many of them have exhibited support for the neoliberal project I’ve been writing against. However, until voters elected Marilyn Mosby, Baltimore did not have a prosecuting attorney willing to prosecute police officers. Mosby was elected during the last election in a very contested race that saw her outspent by the (white) incumbent three-to-one. She ran on an explicit campaign of bringing justice to Baltimore’s residents, but on an implicit campaign promise of dealing with police violence. Both the charges she brought against the officers and the speech she made in making the charges suggest that she was attentive to the broad calls for police accountability made by activists. Similar to Ferguson, the activist activity in Baltimore did not end with the charges.  

The #blacklivesmatter movement represents an attempt to contest this move and can be read as an attack against the neoliberal turn in three ways. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, some black elites have argued that the best way for blacks to attain the rights of full citizenship is to become “respectable”—that is, to adhere to and physically represent

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8 Pre-existing infrastructure enabled the relatively quick creation of an activist coalition that had concrete short-, medium-, and long-term goals. The most important short-term goal was getting indictments for Gray’s murder. The most important medium-term goal is twofold. The coalition wants the officers involved in Gray’s murder convicted, and they want the repeal of the Law Enforcement Officers Bill of Rights. And over the long term, the coalition calls for more black control over the political, economic, and cultural resources in black communities. Furthermore, they’ve generated a set of clear steps that can lead to accomplishing these goals. For instance, in order to ensure a fair trial, the coalition is in the process of registering voters, because the jury pool will be chosen from registered voters.
the normative values espoused by the American middle class. The reconstruction project the neoliberal turn relies on takes the concept of respectability so critical to black politics over the last several decades and sutures it to notions of entrepreneurial hustle as well as to traditional family structures.

But not just any type of entrepreneurial hustle. Even when a social safety net existed, poor and working-class populations have had to engage in a range of hustles to make ends meet, from providing day care to selling untaxed cigarettes to using their cars as unlicensed taxicabs to hawking bootleg CDs, DVDs, and designer clothing. But the state and civil society usually frowns upon this type of entrepreneurial behavior because it doesn’t generate tax revenue and doesn’t shunt people into acceptable forms of income-generating employment.

Similarly, even though the economy makes it incredibly difficult for middle- and upper-income earners to sustain two-parent households, poor populations have either tried to establish two-parent households as the normative model towards which they strive or to create families as best they can. However, the state and civil society frowns down on these alternative family structures too. Whereas in the middle of the twentieth century activists felt they could only mobilize on behalf of people like Rosa Parks who appeared to uphold the values of respectability, the individuals #blacklivesmatter activists have mobilized on behalf of have been far from “respectable”. Although Michael Brown was never charged with a crime, circumstantial evidence suggests that he had a violent encounter with a party store worker just minutes before his fateful encounter with Darren Wilson. Eric Garner was murdered by members of the NYPD while selling untaxed cigarettes—in fact, some argue that one of the reasons he could be heard telling police that he wasn’t going to tolerate their treatment of him any longer was because they were shaking him down and he’d threatened to report them for doing so. Rather than ignore these cases in favor of more “respectable” ones (Tamir Rice or John Crawford, for instance) the #blacklivesmatter activists argued that how they behaved should not have any bearing on how they were treated by police.

In making anti-respectability the center of its politics, the movement also represents an attempt to fight for a uniquely...
black right to the city. The neoliberal turn swaps out “rights” with “privileges”—people don’t have an inherent “right” to the city unless they perform the way the city and city elites need them to perform. These privileges are concentrated in the populations that either own the city or can behave entrepreneurially in a way that best serves the city. The #blacklivesmatter activists are implicitly arguing against distributing privileges based on ownership and entrepreneurship. As such, they are aggressively asserting a uniquely black right to the city.

All four examples have a few things in common. First, all occurred at a moment where all seemed lost. While I wouldn’t go as far as to suggest that these events suggest that neoliberalism is “naturally” contested—just as there is no “good teaching gene”, there is no “contest neoliberalism gene”—I would say that while the neoliberal turn has significantly altered our ability to argue for public goods, it hasn’t killed that ability. It still exists. It exists in institutions we have written off thinking they are no longer relevant—like teachers unions. It exists in populations we’ve written off because we believe they are incapable of radical political action—black youth. It exists in cities that we don’t think of as having a long history of radical political struggle—like Jackson, Mississippi.

Second, all four recognized the fundamental role politics played in their struggles. The black youth organizers recognized that they had to pressure Maryland state legislators to kill the prison. The black radicals in the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement made electing Chokwe Lumumba a component of their organizing. The CTU chose to take the city head-on and to hold a series of town hall meetings designed to inform people of the ways political officials, philanthropists, and corporations are working together to neoliberalize and kill public education. The #blacklivesmatter movement recognized that politics was at the center of their struggle in Ferguson, Baltimore, and elsewhere.

All campaigns used moral language in making their arguments. In Jackson, they argued that the current way power was allocated was immoral because it largely concentrated all of the benefits into a few (predominantly white) hands. In Baltimore, they argued that putting $104 million to the goal of incarcerating youth was immoral given the lack of money
being spent on youth in other areas, and later that Freddie Gray’s (and before him Tyrone West’s) murder was immoral. In Chicago, they argued that closing 50 schools was immoral because it severely impacted the ability of poor black parents and black students to get the same degree of learning their white counterparts had. However, they didn’t rely on those arguments. They understood that seizing power (rather than speaking truth to it), that proposing new alternatives, would at some level have to involve political struggle. Morality wasn’t enough. Even if we had a common definition of morality, a Christian-influenced morality for example, that sense of morality could still be interpreted in different ways based on material interest. Relying on morality can make it hard to move against the wealthy charter school proponent who sincerely believes that privatizing public schools represent the best hope for increasing positive outcomes among black children. Relying on morality can make it very difficult to argue against the political bureaucrat who says—as they did in the case of Baltimore—that the conditions of youth currently held in adult prisons is so bad that the moral choice would be to give them their own facility where they won’t have to face the risks associated with being housed with adults. In deciding how we go about making our arguments and how we go about choosing our strategies and tactics, we should act morally—I do believe our politics have to be rooted in a certain sense of ethics. We should never, however, ignore the fundamental role politics plays and should play in our struggle.

Not only did they focus on politics, they all relied on political organizing. Organizing that included long discussions about political issues that mattered, but also parties and other events designed to get people working with each other and trusting one another. In general, people do not come to a common understanding of the structural dynamics of the problem they face, and to a common understanding of what the solution should be, through being exposed to a charismatic speaker, or through “loving black people”, without having the space to talk about the issues in depth over a long period of time. The CTU organized for several years to be able to get a 90% vote. The infrastructure black youth in Baltimore relied upon was by definition designed to inculcate critical thinking skills as
well as a sense of the way racism worked at structuring black life chances. The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement worked for years to build the critical capacity required to elect Lumumba, first to the city council, then mayor, and to put the political platform into action. There is no way to get around the fact that the type of work we have to do to rebuild a sense of the public interest is going to take a long time and has to start by building connections between people who may not think of themselves as political, who may not think of the various issues they struggle with as being the product of the neoliberal turn, who may not know what neoliberalism is. What I am referring to here is not the same as getting people to attend a rally or a march. I’m referring to political organizing—building the capacity of people to govern and make important political decisions for themselves—not political “mobilizing”. Mobilizing people for a protest act of one kind or another may get people out to engage in a specific act, but unless combined with organizing work, will not cause those people to organize for themselves.

Third, in each case they were not only reactive, they were not only being critical of the turn and its effects, they proposed a positive alternative. Protest is not enough. Just as the neoliberal turn did not simply occur when the welfare state was removed, rather it occurred when the welfare state was removed and then replaced with a new program, we will not be able to build a sustainable constituency for a new world without articulating as clearly as possible what that new world will look like, what type of policies would result, what the benefits of those policies would be.

Fourth, while each of these instances represent responses against the neoliberal turn broadly considered, they each began locally. The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement has several chapters throughout the country and has already held one conference (planned before Lumumba’s untimely passing) about the Jackson model (which itself is partially based on ideas developed in Spain) and how to export it to other cities. The movement against the proposed youth jail in Baltimore relied in part on data accumulated by the ACLU on the school-to-prison pipeline. And as I noted above the Chicago Teachers Union have begun organizing events all across the country to
get people to understand how the privatization movement in education affects them.

And each of the #blacklivesmatter campaigns began with a specific local act of police brutality and used that act to organize locally. With this said, though, each case represents a local struggle people could experience directly. Mark Purcell (2006) argues that academics and activists alike run the risk of falling into the “local trap” by arguing that there is something inherently better and anti-neoliberal about organizing locally. I agree with him a little. The Civil Rights Movement represented in large part a fight against white supremacy as embedded in local and state politics—the local was not the site of empowerment but rather the site of profound disempowerment for black people throughout the North and the South. However, at the same time I argue that sustainable organizing is more likely to occur in response to a local issue (a local school closing, a rise in foreclosures in a local neighborhood, a jail built up the road, a local referendum) that can then be connected to other local issues and made national rather than the other way around. And again the Civil Rights Movement represents the best example of this—people weren’t interested in ending Jim Crow as much as they were interested in desegregating the buses they took to work everyday, desegregating the restaurants they passed on the way to school, desegregating the schools themselves.

Fifth, they used a variety of black institutions in their struggles. The Baltimore youth all attended black public schools in Baltimore. They used the public schools to garner support for their work and to build relationships with black adults and black children. While a number of Baltimore area churches do promote the prosperity gospel, not all do. A few black churches in Baltimore became critical spaces for organizing against the jail—in fact, I ended up finding out about the movement against the jail in the first place through hearing a young progressive black nationalist Baltimore pastor speak about the movement. And they used popular culture. They used poetry, they used rap and hip-hop, they used parties, understanding that while again the national terrain for hip-hop may move with rather than against the neoliberal turn, they themselves
could use it to speak to their local condition. And later they used these same institutions and spaces for their fight against police brutality. Similarly, in Jackson the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement did not operate from a clean slate. They relied on professors from nearby Jackson State University, they used connections with local churches to gain support for their activities. And the CTU was itself located in one of the most important institutions in black communities, schools.

Lastly, they all relied on the fundamental premise that black people had the capacity to be the change they wanted to see in the world. They neither believed that black people’s fundamental condition was bruised and broken, nor did they believe that black people, because of the contemporary condition, didn’t love each other. At the same time, though, they understood explicitly and implicitly that love was not enough. And while each organization does have a number of leaders, they have largely (though not fully) stayed away from the type of prophetic politics that have often created problematic internal hierarchies.

Again, there are significant differences between these instances. And even though each of these instances were victorious ones that helped to change the terrain of political struggle, there is still much more to be done. In the case of Baltimore, they stopped the youth jail but were not able to stop the privatization of Baltimore youth recreation centers, nor have they been able to (as of yet) redirect the $104 million to more progressive ends. Jackson elected Lumumba mayor but after his untimely passing his son ended up coming in second. Chicago teachers made substantial gains as a result of the strike but they were not able to prevent the 50 schools from being closed.

The #blacklivesmatter movement as it stands has not gone without critique. The most notable one is that even though the project has increased the range of black lives that people are willing to fight for, it still hasn’t gone far enough. Although it’s reasonable to assume, based on the limited data we have, that black boys and young men are victimized by police more than other populations (and to the extent the zero-tolerance technology itself generates broader forms of policing in places like schools), black boys and young men are not the sole target.
Black women have been victimized both directly and indirectly by police, as have black transgender populations. These acts have in many instances been as violent as those perpetrated against their male counterparts, and they have been videotaped as well. But they haven’t garnered the same degree of support and/or outrage. Extending the #blacklivesmatter movement to include the lives of black women and transgender populations that are also the victims of police violence would be more than simply a good thing.

However, there’s a more systemic problem at work. The idea behind “black lives matter” represents an opportunity to organize around and against a certain type of suffering, a uniquely black suffering, made possible by the neoliberal turn. (It bears repeating, this is not simply the “new Jim Crow” at work. The odds that someone like me would suffer the type of horrific death someone like Freddie Gray did is very slim.) However, the politics of the #blacklivesmatter movement do not quite match the phrase. Every single time the #blacklivesmatter movement appears, it does so in the presence of either a horrific instance of black death or a startling instance of police brutality. One could argue, given this, that the real politics of the movement reflect the concept that (graphic) black death matters rather than black life. This move makes a great deal of sense—one way to think about this move is to think about the way civil rights movement activists used nonviolence. Particularly when news cameras were present, nonviolent tactics of protest tended to really highlight how violent and terroristic white supremacy in the South and other places was. However, by privileging the graphic black death, the victim shot in his back while running away, the victim who had his back violently broken by police, it ends up ignoring the many forms of non-graphic black death that occur not because of police violence per se, but because of economic violence. If Freddie Gray hadn’t been murdered by the police but rather experienced a slow death due to lead poisoning, it’s unlikely we’d be talking about him right now. It’d be unlikely that Baltimore would’ve had anything like an uprising.

Following up, by privileging black death, graphic black death, we privilege certain types of tactics, strategies, and institutions. We counter the spectacle of the murder with
the spectacle of the mass assembly, in the form of the protest march, or the spectacle of the mass disruption, in the form of the highway stoppage, or even in the form of the type of violent activity the uprising hinted at. Actions, in other words, that are designed to transform the event into a black-and-white catalytic moment where people and the institutions around them feel forced to make a choice for the status quo or against it. And the organizations and institutions we call into being end up being those designed to generate these types of activities and to generate support for these activities (in order to grow the organizations and institutions themselves).

As far as solutions go, we also privilege anti-police legislation, and, perhaps more broadly, legislation designed to counter the school-to-prison pipeline. The political solution for #blacklivesmatter is to reduce the likelihood of a graphic singular black death—a kid shot on the way to the corner store, a young man shot while holding a BB gun he may have planned on purchasing, a black couple driving a car with a tendency to backfire. The types of politics that generate change when the deaths come slow, painfully, and in aggregates, or when the issue is an entire legal framework (like the Maryland Law Enforcement Officers Bill of Rights) is a different politics. It is not solely or primarily a politics of the spectacle. Spectacle can work here in instances. It can be used to mobilize support. It can be used to increase awareness and general participation. And, sometimes in combination with other tactics, it can be used to disrupt. To generate and prolong crises. The types of crises that engendered the same type of problems that caused the neoliberal turn. Certainly in the case of Baltimore, a range of institutions and elites had no ready-to-roll-out solutions to the issues that the uprising called up.

But these aren’t enough. It requires a politics attuned to the type of long-term institution building that builds the capacity of individuals to govern and devise alternatives themselves. It also requires a solution set that is more about combating the type of long term institutional violence that doesn’t necessarily have a Trayvon Martin or a Freddie Gray at the center. The types of violence that instead might have Freddie Gray at the center not at the moment of his murder, but at the moment he was found to have lead poisoning.
I use these examples in order to argue that we aren’t starting from scratch necessarily—some of the work is already being done on the ground.

I use these examples in order to show that we already have the seeds for a new institutional framework that re-roots the economy in politics and in the public interest. To show that we aren’t alone, and that a number of people recognize another way of life is possible. There aren’t as many of us as we’d like, but there are far more of us than we think.