Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics

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When the memorial opened, Cornel West wrote a scathing editorial in the New York Times arguing King would not want a memorial—he’d want a revolution. And rather than being the standard bearer for that revolution and for King’s ideals, President Obama turned his back to it, to him, and to them.

The age of Obama has fallen tragically short of fulfilling King’s prophetic legacy. Instead of articulating a radical democratic vision and fighting for homeowners, workers and poor people in the form of mortgage relief, jobs and investment in education, infrastructure and housing, the administration gave us bailouts for banks, record profits for Wall Street and giant budget cuts on the backs of the vulnerable.

As the talk show host Tavis Smiley and I have said in our national tour against poverty, the recent budget deal is only the latest phase of a 30-year, top-down, one-sided war against the poor and working people in the name of a morally bankrupt policy of deregulating markets, lowering taxes and cutting spending for those already socially neglected and economically abandoned. Our two main political parties, each beholden to big money, offer merely alternative versions of oligarchic rule.

The absence of a King-worthy narrative to reinvigorate poor and working people has enabled right-wing populists to seize the moment with credible claims about government corruption and ridiculous claims about tax cuts’ stimulating growth. This right-wing threat is
a catastrophic response to King’s four catastrophes; its agenda would lead to hellish conditions for most Americans. (West 2011)

I happened to run into Dr. West at a conference the following week, and I told him I disagreed strongly with his editorial. West responded by referring to the West African concept of Sankofa, symbolized by a bird turning backwards (while walking forward) to reach an egg on its back. Expressing the idea of understanding one’s history in order to properly navigate the future, it makes so much good common sense on the surface. Why shouldn’t we use our history to go forward? If we forget our history, aren’t we condemned to repeat it?

While West’s criticisms of Obama caused him to lose his standing in black communities, he was right to be critical of Obama. Domestically and internationally, Obama’s done much to aid and abet the neoliberal turn. However, West’s understanding of King and of that important period in American history is too narrow. And his narrow vision stifles rather than increases the possibilities of contesting the turn. West privileges the Civil Rights Movement’s anti-democratic tendencies by focusing on King’s prophetic vision than on the movement’s day-to-day organizing and policy analysis. Further, West places more importance on “speaking truth to power” rather than on critiquing public policy and proposing alternatives. Finally, he significantly reduces our ability to understand the politics of the neoliberal turn by turning to the civil rights era. West is by no means alone in this. Many of us routinely use the Civil Rights Movement and the leadership of that period—particularly King’s leadership—as a measuring stick. But this doesn’t make the flaws above any less important.

Rhetoric played an essential role in the neoliberal turn. A range of “experts” made rhetorical claims about the relationship between economy, government, and society, claims that were then translated into neoliberal policies. And a number of black elites, including President Obama, have used rhetoric to express support for the idea that black cultural dysfunction, rather than neoliberalism, is the central problem facing black people.
On Father’s Day 2008 he made the following comments to a predominantly black church in Chicago.

Of all the rocks upon which we build our lives, we are reminded today that family is the most important. And we are called to recognize and honor how critical every father is to that foundation. They are teachers and coaches. They are mentors and role models. They are examples of success and the men who constantly push us toward it. But if we are honest with ourselves, we’ll admit that what too many fathers also are is missing—missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it. You and I know how true this is in the African-American community. We know that more than half of all black children live in single-parent households, a number that has doubled—doubled—since we were children. We know the statistics—that children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of schools and twenty times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioral problems, or run away from home, or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it. (Politico Staff 2008)

During both the primaries and the presidential campaign, Obama consistently cajoles black people to vote, urging black audiences to get their friends, neighbors, and family members to vote, including “Pookie” and “Jethro”:

If Cousin Pookie would vote, if Uncle Jethro would get off the couch and stop watching SportsCenter and go register some folks and go to the polls, we might have a different kind of politics. (Tilove 2008)

In the 1990 film New Jack City, Chris Rock plays a struggling want-to-do-right crack addict named “Pookie” who dies trying
to help undercover police officers take down a drug dealer. He is the modern incarnation of a long-running racial stereotype, the young, shiftless, black male, who means well but doesn’t succeed largely because he is random and trifling. Here Obama uses “Pookie” to blame black men for the lack of more transformative politics. But he never really states what that politics looks or even feels like—he leaves this to the listener’s imagination. Obama consistently used poor and working-class black men to make claims about black irresponsibility. He does this in front of black audiences—his Father’s Day speech is delivered to a predominantly black church, and his comments about “Pookie” were typically delivered in front of black audiences as well. But like black mayors—and to be fair some black activists and civil rights leaders as well—he delivers these comments in a way that sound like common sense to African-American ears.

And this rhetoric shapes his policy responses.

On February 27, 2014, the second-to-last day of Black History Month, Christian Champagne, a senior at Chicago’s Hyde Park Career Academy, stood at a White House podium flanked by over a dozen black and Latino boys when he introduced President Obama. Christian spoke of how he encountered the President through the Becoming a Man (BAM) program, a violence and dropout prevention program led by Marshaun Baker and touted by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel as having done a tremendous job in reducing violence and increasing educational outcomes of young black males.

When the President takes the podium, he talks about the BAM program, about its statistical successes (participants in BAM are far less likely to be arrested and far more likely to graduate than their peers who don’t participate), and about interacting with BAM participants. He went on to talk about the network that enabled him to fail and get back up over and

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1 Another notable example is J.J. Evans, the character played by actor Jimmie Walker on the seventies television show Good Times. The character J.J. Evans was not originally supposed to be as buffoonish as he appeared on the show. But as a partial response to the character’s popularity, show writers (with Walker’s participation) increased his buffoonish character. The tension this generated caused both John Amos and Esther Rolle to leave the show (Iton 2008).
over again. And then he talks about the importance of giving every American the same types of opportunities. Finally, he overemphasizes the importance of ensuring that resilient young men who make good, responsible choices are rewarded.

After listing a series of policy proposals his administration supports in order to make sure that in fact happens, he begins to drill down on the problems faced by black and Latino men; however, rather than simply connecting this problem to ills people of color face, he argues that the problem is a moral and an economic issue for the entire nation. A moral issue, as we’ve all become so used to the statistics and the various cultural depictions of black and Latino communities that reinforce absentee fatherhood that we’re now numb. An economic issue, as the young men left out as a result of these challenges are unable to participate in the labor force, which ends up hurting the nation’s bottom line.

He then rolls out the program.

After months of conversation with a wide range of people, we’ve pulled together private philanthropies and businesses, mayors, state and local leaders, faith leaders, nonprofits, all who are committed to creating more pathways to success, and we’re committed to building on what works. And we call it “My Brother’s Keeper.”

Now, just to be clear—“My Brother’s Keeper” is not some big, new government program. In my State of the Union address, I outlined the work that needs to be done for broad base economic growth for all Americans. We have the manufacturing hubs, infrastructure spending…But what we’re talking about here today with “My Brother’s Keeper” is a more focused effort on boys and young men of color who are having a particularly tough time. And in this effort, government cannot play the only—or even the primary—role….Nothing keeps a young man out of trouble like a father who takes an active role in his son’s life. (Obama 2014)

Obama firmly believes, even given the structural hurdles communities face as a result of the economic downturn, that culture matters. Having a father in the home is more important in
Obama’s mind than all of the structural resources in the world, as a father—particularly one who spends significant time with his child—can provide a level of role modeling that no structure can. Individuals become responsible not because some government program makes them responsible. In fact, one could imagine a government responsibility program as kind of a contradiction in terms—how can someone be responsible if they are forced by the government to do so? Instead, a far more durable method of making people responsible is by making sure people are regularly exposed to responsible adults. These adults can role model correct behavior in a way that the government cannot. And although Obama notes that there are individuals who have been able to succeed without a father in the home, indeed he is one of them, these individuals are far from the norm. To the extent that government has a role to play, its role is to on the one hand reward responsibility, and on the other develop responsibility.

Crucial components of the neoliberal turn in the wake of urban disinvestment are the public-private partnerships many cities have turned to in order to coordinate and spur interest in certain types of development projects. Private firms possess the capital and the ideas, and public institutions possess the capacity to create markets and redistribute risk broadly enough so as to entice private investment as well as the bureaucratic muscle required to coordinate the development in such a way as to fulfill political requirements. Foundations, which, while not-for-profit institutions, are still private institutions as they were created with private money, possess both the ideas—think of foundations as kind of like venture capital firms and the various programs they create as their products—and the capital needed to put these ideas into practice. Furthermore, because they, like private businesses, have a vested interest in seeing what works and what does not—they don’t have unlimited resources, hence they need to have some way of distinguishing “profitable” ideas from “non-profitable” ideas—they have mechanisms in place to assess the quality of the ideas they generate. Finally, as the ability of cities and local municipalities to provide social services to needy populations diminish, foundations are a lot closer to the ground than the federal government.
The president does not have the political capital required to get anything like “My Brother’s Keeper” (MBK) passed by Congress. He does, however, possess the power of the bully pulpit and the power of the Executive Order, both of which can function in such a way as to create space for private interests that are already organized around a given issue, and to incentivize foundations to become involved.

So one way to read the structure of MBK is as a perfect way to combine the strengths of government (its ability to coordinate, its ability to create markets, its ability to reduce risk) with the strengths of foundations (their ability to generate ideas, their ability to translate those ideas into local solutions, their ability to test those solutions in the marketplace), in order to deal with a pressing problem (the problems of boys of color).

I’ve got another take.

When he says that this is not a big government program, he in effect makes it incredibly difficult for it to become a government program. To the extent that we could imagine a useful function for foundations, because they trade in ideas, we can imagine foundations generating powerful ideas that function well in solving a particular problem and are scalable, that is to say, can work as well at the national or subnational level as they do at the local level, and then “giving” those ideas to the state to then translate into national policy that then can be subject to mechanisms of public accountability. Private foundations here would serve as the ideational equivalent of research and development, seeding ideas for the government to use. There are still significant problems here, inasmuch as private dictates are used to determine what issues get taken up, and inasmuch as expertise can often be used to trump public interests here. But let’s put that aside for a moment. When Obama says that he’s not talking about a big government program, he’s precluding even that from ever happening. In fact, if the various institutions involved or the constituencies they potentially mobilize were to come to the realization that what they need is a “big government program”, they’d actually have to fight Obama before they ever even got to Congress.²

² Michael J. Dumas (forthcoming) fleshes this out much further.
Rhetoric plays an important role in politics. It can shape how we think about political problems. It can shape how we think about political solutions. It can shape the form that institutions take once the political will is generated to create them.

Cornel West wouldn’t spend so much of his time speaking to black audiences if he didn’t believe speaking to them had an effect on their politics. But in relying primarily on rhetoric that emphasizes a certain type of political leadership he misses other important aspects of political action.

Jeanne Theoharis (2013) recently wrote a powerful book about Rosa Parks that demystifies her history and the history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. I’m going to boil her work down a bit into two stories.

The first story is the story most of us know.

One day, seamstress Rosa Parks was tired. She’d spent a long hard day working and wanted nothing more than to be able to rest her feet. Sitting near the front of the bus, she was asked to move to the back by a white patron. The white patron was within his legal rights to do so because the buses in Montgomery, Alabama, were segregated. Rosa decided she didn’t want to move to the back of the bus, because she was tired. So she refused.

This put the white patrons of the bus and the white bus driver in a tizzy. They promptly stopped the bus, and had Rosa Parks arrested. Afterwards, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. decided to organize the black community to boycott Montgomery buses. The boycott was a resounding success, leading to the desegregation of the buses and inevitably leading to the death of Jim Crow. As a result of his success in Montgomery, Martin Luther King Jr. worked to create a larger movement throughout the South, one that changed history.

Note the role black leaders and black rhetoric plays here.

Although many think of Rosa Parks as the mother of the Civil Rights Movement—indeed she is both the only woman and the only non-official to ever lie in state at the nation’s capital—the traditional story limits her role to being the tired seamstress who refused to give up her seat. Martin Luther King Jr.’s role in organizing and sustaining the boycott through his charismatic leadership—particularly his rhetoric—was much more
important. Any differences of opinion leading up to, during, and after the boycott, were pretty much written out of the story. Indeed, this story doesn’t even tell us how long the boycott was.

Now, every “quick” story is going to miss some details, otherwise it wouldn’t be very quick. But glossing over the details here serves a particular purpose — it enhances the general idea that black progress is purely a function of the rhetoric of black (male, charismatic) leadership. The rhetoric of black (male, charismatic) leadership works instantly and courageously. The rhetoric of black (male, charismatic) leadership galvanizes the community. The rhetoric of black (male, charismatic) leadership removes doubts. The rhetoric of black (male, charismatic) leadership organizes and directs capacity.

The second story is a bit more complicated.

Rosa Parks was a longtime political organizer, trained at a center devoted to training grassroots organizers (the Highlander Center in Tennessee). Parks worked for the NAACP and was a member of the Women’s Political Council, an organization of black women devoted to racial justice and gender equality. Parks made a tactical decision not to get up, rather than a decision born of fatigue. Parks wasn’t the first woman to get arrested for refusing to give up her seat, but people felt that only Parks had the requisite class background required to get people to rally around her.

According to the first story, until Martin Luther King Jr. came along, black people had simply laid down, unwilling to fight Jim Crow racism. Martin Luther King Jr. noted as much in Stride Toward Freedom when he congratulated black Montgomerians for finally “waking up” — in fact, here he also explicitly shoots down the idea that Rosa Parks’s action was planned as an “accusation that was totally unwarranted” (1991, p. 424). Just as Rosa Parks had no political history at all, and simply got up when she couldn’t stand it anymore, blacks in Montgomery also had little political history, finally waking up after it had passed some pre-determined boiling point.

This couldn’t be further from the truth.

Even at the height of Jim Crow terrorism, blacks in Montgomery and elsewhere were organizing. Through the Women’s Political Council and other organizations, blacks contested
Jim Crow racism in a number of ways decades before the movement began. Indeed, the best works on the civil rights movement (Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* and Barbara Ransby’s *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, for example) acknowledge that black women were the backbone of the movement, not only providing labor but tactical and strategic innovations.

We think the decision to boycott was simple.

It wasn’t.

35,000 blacks in Montgomery had to be contacted and organized within days. Although given current technology we could possibly reach that many people within an hour through Twitter, connecting and organizing all those people required a tremendous degree of coordination and negotiation.

An action like the Montgomery Bus Boycott doesn’t occur without thinking about dozens of details. It also doesn’t occur without dealing with the different interests black people had. The segregated transportation system did not harm all blacks in Montgomery equally. Blacks who didn’t use the bus at all, for example, suffered less than blacks (primarily female domestic workers) who used the bus frequently. Segregation created a separate economy, with black-owned businesses providing many services that whites either wouldn’t supply to blacks or wouldn’t supply to blacks with the same degree of care they gave to whites. Montgomery had several black taxi cab companies that had to be convinced to accept far cheaper bus fares from their passengers in support of the protest. Inasmuch as the taxi cab drivers had their own families, taking cheaper fares meant they would bring less money home to take care of their own responsibilities.

Finally, segregation was often managed by a combination of black and white middlemen. Jim Crow was an incredibly violent regime. But in order to make sure the system still worked, that the school year proceeded without a hitch, that the business community could make enough profits to grow their businesses (and by extension the city), that people were able to act relatively civil to one another even given the nature of Jim Crow, people had to manage the various flare-ups that would inevitably erupt. These black people, concerned with keeping
the status quo but, in the best-case scenario, keeping violence against blacks to a bare minimum, had very different ideas about how to treat what happened to Rosa Parks than others. These different interests had to be carefully navigated, taken seriously, and dealt with.

And then, once the boycott began in earnest, an array of institutions had to be created in order to manage the various aspects of it. I mentioned the taxi cabs above. Black boycott participants originally planned to give their bus fares to black taxi cabs, who would then drive the passengers to their preferred destination. The black taxi cab companies already had the infrastructure needed to communicate with potential passengers and to coordinate with drivers—they had the staff, they had the offices, they had the phones, they had the drivers. Also, they already had the mechanism to charge customers and to keep records of the moneys paid. But this plan had to be scrapped because white political officials passed laws which prevented taxi cabs from charging passengers low fares.

This forced boycott leaders to quickly improvise in response. Over 150 individuals volunteered their cars to drive people back and forth in response, but this too had to be negotiated and organized. Here, King and the others relied on the experience of a Louisiana pastor who’d organized a similar boycott in his home town. This pastor basically created a transportation dispatch service complete with pickup stations strategically placed throughout the city.

Donations and calls began coming in from across the country. Even though there was no real coordinated fundraising effort, people from around the world donated at least $250,000, by King’s estimation. Which on the surface would appear to solve a number of the problems boycott participants and organizers could face. But it also created problems.

Truly the Montgomery movement had spoke to a responsive world. But while these letters brought us much-needed encouragement, they were also the source of persistent frustration for me. The MIA lacked the proper office facilities and staff, and due to the shortage of secretarial help most of the early letters had to go
unanswered. Even financial contributions were often unacknowledged. The more I thought of my inability to cope with these matters, the more disturbed I became.

My frustration was augmented by the fact that for several weeks after the protest began, people were calling me at every hour of the day and night. The phone would start ringing as early as five o’clock in the morning and seldom stopped before midnight. Sometimes it was an ex-bus rider asking me to arrange to get her to work and back home at a certain hour. Sometimes it was a driver complaining about uncooperative passengers or a passenger complaining about a temperamental driver. Sometimes a driver’s car had broken down . . .

We came to see the necessity of having a well-staffed office to face such problems as these. At first we attempted to run it with volunteer secretarial help. But this was not sufficient. So we hired a full-time secretary to do the regular work of the association, and set up a transportation office with a secretary to work directly in that area. (King 1991, pp. 445–46)

Finally, protestors had to not only know what they were fighting against, they had to have a clear idea of what they were fighting for. What would victory look like? What type of policy should be put in its place? This required them to understand the exact public policies that led to the discrimination they were fighting against, as well as the exact type of policies that needed to be put in their place. This required them to educate themselves about the law and about how it worked.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted for 381 days. Far longer than anyone associated with it imagined it would go. By the end of it, participants were exalted . . . and exhausted.

In the simpler story, folks just got tired and then decided to move. Black male charismatic leaders gave orders. Black people followed. The plans were perfect from day one. There were no conflicts of interest. Black people didn’t have differences of opinion, and if they did these differences were quickly smoothed over. It reads like a fairy tale driven by prophetic rhetoric.
The more complicated story emphasizes contingency, acknowledges conflicts of interest, and recognizes the importance of institutional development, tactical innovation, and public policy change. The complicated story emphasizes the role institutions play in generating change and the role creative individuals often play in creating institutions (better yet, in sometimes creating the need for institutions). The boycott involved a great deal of innovation not only in using the tactic but in modifying it to fit the unique context of Montgomery. The complicated story puts much more weight on the hard work of building institutional capacity, and far less weight on the role of inspirational rhetoric and moral suasion.

By focusing purely on King’s vision as opposed to that hard work, West implies that the primary thing we need today is moral suasion. And by focusing solely on King, West ignores an entire civil rights legacy, a legacy that was far more democratic, far more inclusive gender-wise, far deeper and substantive than the tendency King represented. A model of struggle embodied by women like Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer. This struggle did have rhetorical elements, but relied far less on “speaking truth to power” and far more on organizing black poor men and women to take and wield power for themselves.

Furthermore, by going back decades before the neoliberal turn, West makes it far too easy for readers to argue that the conditions we face now are not that different from the conditions that civil rights activists faced. But this is not the case. As much rhetorical common sense as it makes to suggest that what we face now is the “new Jim Crow”, to borrow a phrase from Michelle Alexander’s important work, the neoliberal turn is not the twenty-first century version of Jim Crow. Jim Crow systematically withheld material, social, and psychic resources from black people regardless of their class, status, or occupation, up to and including the right to vote, the right to a jury of one’s peers, the right to serve on a jury, and the right to free speech. I would have no more rights under Jim Crow given my status than my unemployed uneducated black male counterpart. Under the neoliberal turn, by contrast, I can vote, I can serve on juries, I have freedom of movement, I have freedom
of speech. I can walk on the same side of the street as whites without fear of reprisal. I can start a business without fear of being lynched. If a white electrician breaks a contract with me, I can sue him and conceivably win. I can do these and a wide range of other things I used to be precluded from doing solely because of my race. This isn’t to say that racism is dead and gone. Far from it. It is to suggest, though, that what we do face is not similar enough to the challenges faced fifty years ago.

Freezing both King and the Civil Rights Movement demobilizes black communities by creating a historically inaccurate perfect standard, a perfect standard that they cannot possibly hope to meet, a perfect standard the people they are being compared to themselves didn’t meet. Going too often to the past freezes our tactics, strategies, freezes the very language we use to articulate our problem.

King himself recognized how important institutional development was. In *Where Do We Go From Here?*, though, written years after the bus boycott, King is far more reflective and almost melancholy. He felt that as hard as the bus boycott was, neither it nor the various successful actions that followed (including the March on Washington) could compare to the hard institutional work that had to be done in order to defend and extend the gains they made.

Not long after the moment where they’d in fact won almost everything they explicitly fought for, King was incredibly critical of his own actions as well as those of other “black leaders”.

We made easy gains and we built the kind of organizations that expect easy victories, and rest upon them. It may seem curious to speak of easy victories when some have suffered and sacrificed so much. Yet in candor and self-criticism it is necessary to acknowledge that the tortuous job of organizing solidly and simultaneously in thousands of places was not a feature of our work. This is as true for the older civil rights organizations as for the newer ones. The older organizations have only acquired a mass base recently, and they still retain the flabby structures and policies that a pressureless situation made possible.
Many civil rights organizations were born as specialists in agitation and dramatic projects; they attracted massive sympathy and support; but they did not assemble and unify the support for new stages of struggle. The effect on their allies reflected their basic practices. Support waxed and waned, and people became conditioned to action in crises but inaction from day to day. We unconsciously patterned a crisis policy and program, and summoned support not for daily commitment but for explosive events alone.

Recognizing that no army can mobilize and demobilize and remain a fighting unit, we will have to build far-flung, workmanlike and experienced organizations in the future if the legislation we create and the agreements we forge are to be ably and zealously superintended. (1991, pp. 612–13)

As one of the first modern public intellectuals, West has put a great deal of weight on prophetic utterance, on the role rhetoric plays in transforming the conditions for political action. But in a time where prophetic utterance—even when used to make neoliberalism’s brutal effects nakedly evident—does more to laud prophets than it does to drive people to do the hard work needed to take control of the reigns of power, perhaps we’d do ourselves a service by leaving prophets, even ones like King, and public intellectuals in the past.