Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics

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The city is the base which we must organize as the factories were organized in the 1930’s. We must struggle to control, to govern the cities, as workers struggled to control and govern the factories of the 1930’s.

—Grace and James Boggs (1970, p. 46)

The right to the city cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life.

—Henri Lefebvre (1996, p. 158)

I began the last chapter with the hustle. Though we can technically find evidence of “the hustle” everywhere, it’s difficult to imagine a record like Ace Hood’s “Hustle Hard” taking place anywhere other than in an urban neighborhood. While it is indeed possible to “hustle” in rural areas, the city provides unique opportunities simply not available anywhere else. In this chapter I want to tackle the city explicitly.

I begin with two quotes from urban organizer-theorists. Grace and James Boggs were some of the first people to recognize that the growing obsolescence of industrial labor had a very particular effect on black urban workers and on what we now know as the Rust Belt. Their essay “The City is the Black Man’s Land” was written in 1966 about Detroit and cities like it. Henri Lefebvre is best known for his work on the production of space. In his essay “The Right to the City” (written just a few months before student protests in France) he argued that people who lived in the city had more right to construct and reconstruct it than people/corporations who technically owned it.
Both the Boggs and Lefebvre understood that the city was ground zero for the development of alternative ways of life. And they understood that cities like Paris and Detroit did not just grow naturally—rather, they were the product of larger economic, political, and social forces that threatened to reduce them to capital hubs.

These forces are crucial to the development of what George Clinton (1975) calls “chocolate cities”. Two forces loomed large in the early half of the twentieth century. The first was growing industrialization. Black laborers migrated to cities like Detroit to meet the labor needs of manufacturers like Ford. The second was war.

During World War II American political elites recognized that veterans had to be given more resources in order to compensate them for their sacrifice and to maintain support for the military. In recognition of this they passed the GI Bill, which provided US veterans with free education and inexpensive housing (provided the housing was built outside of the city). And, with the threat of Soviet Union missile strikes looming large, they realized they needed to decentralize America’s industrial capacity. This meant moving industry out of major cities like Detroit and into the suburbs. In recognition of this they passed the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956, which significantly reduced the resources corporations needed to create new (suburban and rural) plants and to ship goods from one part of the country to the other.

Before these bills, cities like Detroit concentrated labor, capital, and productive capacity. The GI Bill and Interstate Highways Act reversed this dynamic. GIs prevented from building new homes in the cities moved into suburbs. The nation’s plants were relocated and rebuilt in the suburbs. It’s important to note the racial consequences of these two policies. Although

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1 Yes, the Defense Highways Act. Our freeways are the product of and designed for war.

2 The Big Three did not just simply take old plants and move them into the rural hinterlands. They updated the plants. Because land was cheaper in rural areas than urban ones they were able to build outward rather than up. Further, they were able to automate their plants, which significantly reduced their need for (unionized) labor.
the GI Bill was not explicitly discriminatory—black GIs had as much right to the resources given by the bill that their non-black counterparts did—suburbs throughout the nation racially discriminated against blacks (Katznelson 2005). Further, although race was not at the forefront of the decision to decentralize America’s “arsenal of democracy”, moving plants to white-only suburbs further segregated the nation and concentrated unemployment within urban (now predominantly black) communities all throughout the Rust Belt. Many of the suburbs created to house the new plants and new middle-class populations were racially exclusive, precluding blacks and other racial minorities from moving into them.

These two forces hastened the development of chocolate cities and, in the sixties, conspired to create a powerful stew. White and capital flight, made possible by the GI Bill and the Interstate Highway Act, combined with the increasing influx of black and brown populations, crystallized growing urban poverty and unemployment. In the sixties, cities exploded in dozens of race riots—over 125 rebellions in response to Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination alone (McAdam 1982). In reaction to this and to growing political activism, Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society program spent billions on anti-poverty programs often, bypassing state and local governments in doing so. But by the early seventies, with the onset of the neoliberal turn, support for these programs began to wither.

Richard Nixon’s presidency becomes important here for several reasons, but I want to focus on four.

Internationally, it was under Nixon’s watch that we see the first (forceful) application of neoliberal policy. The first nation to actually try to put neoliberal policies in practice was Chile.³ But the Chilean government didn’t implement these policies democratically. The Chilean government was overthrown by its military, who then—through University of Chicago–trained

³ These included privatizing social security, slashing government regulations, and removing trade restrictions, all of which had the effect of increasing wealth inequality and significantly decreasing the quality of life of Chile’s poorest citizens.
Chilean economists—implemented the reforms. Nixon supported the coup.

Domestically, Nixon was the first president to begin to use the same methods of analyzing government effectiveness that businesses used. While this seems to make a great deal of common sense, inasmuch as there are a variety of aspects of government that can’t effectively be measured (the importance of clean air and water for example), the more this approach is adopted, the harder it becomes to make a claim for a uniquely “public” domain that shouldn’t be treated the same way as one would treat the private market.

He was also the first president to adopt “the southern strategy”, a campaign strategy designed to build support for the Republican party through racist appeals to white voters. There’s a long history going all the way back to the Reconstruction of white elites convincing working class white voters that they should not support progressive government. The “southern strategy” represented the late twentieth-century version of this model, as Nixon convinced white working class voters that progressive government was by definition corrupt in part because it increased black lawlessness.

Finally, although he didn’t do this on purpose, his involvement in and subsequent resignation due to the Watergate scandals significantly dampened support for government.

The end result of Nixon’s approach? When the economic crisis of the seventies hit, unemployment in cities, already high because of plant relocation and automation, exploded.

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4 In policy terms, this led Nixon to support three different moves. First, he supported a set of reforms designed to simplify the often complicated relationship between federal, state, and local governments. Second, he supported combining a number of smaller grants into larger “block” grants that could be given to state and local governments to use as they wished (within limits). Third, he supported revenue sharing—returning to state and local governments a percentage of the revenue that they paid out in taxes. The three policy changes in tandem kept the relationship between the federal government and other levels of government and the purpose of that relationship more or less intact.

5 Industrial corporations did not simply take their urban plants and relocate them to the suburbs; they used the opportunity to modernize, and they did this largely by introducing automated labor that had the effect of significantly reducing their labor needs.
As the nation became more and more suburban and urban areas began to be perceived (and depicted) as drains on the economy (in large part because of their increasingly black population), the country was incredibly receptive to the idea that blacks and corrupt liberals were responsible. The growing concentration of poor and unemployed blacks was increasingly viewed as the crisis of progressive government itself rather than being viewed as a crisis of the lack of progressive government.

As a result of white and capital flight, city revenues began to decrease, even as demands for social services increased. Cities turned to the market, relying more and more on municipal bonds to generate revenue. These bonds were rated by bond agencies. Bonds with low ratings are worth little more than junk. Bonds with high ratings are viewed as being top-notch investments. In 1960 tax-exempt municipal bonds only accounted for 21.6% of bank portfolios in 1960. Within less than fifteen years, this number had increased to 50% as cities began to rely on them a lot more (Tabb 1982). Their increased reliance on bonds made cities hostage to the bond rating agencies. If bond rating agencies gave less favorable ratings to cities interested in neighborhood development, cities didn’t float bonds for that purpose.

The case of New York City is illustrative.

In the mid-seventies, New York City experienced a significant budget crisis. New York City Mayor Abraham Beame appealed to the state and federal governments, following the trend established by his predecessor and other big city mayors. Republican state legislators refused to give the city the levels of state aid it needed, and President Ford refused to give federal aid.

The result was one of the first modern austerity experiments. The state of New York created an Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB), composed of the governor, the mayor, the state’s and city’s comptrollers, and three corporate leaders selected by the governor. The purpose of the EFCB? To control all of the city’s budgetary decisions, taking these decisions away from local elected officials. While it was designed to be temporary, an “emergency” failsafe of sorts, after 1978 “emergency” was removed from its title.
It’s worth considering the costs of this decision.

Between January 1, 1975, and May 31, 1976, the city payroll was cut by 25 percent, the sanitation department by close to that, and schools by slightly more. A 13.7 percent cut in the number of police meant, according to the mayor, ‘substantial decreases in enforcement efforts’. … Fire department response time increased by a factor of four. Hospitals were closed, and in many sections only one nurse was on duty. … In 1975, 15,000 teachers and paraprofessionals—constituting 20 percent of union membership—were laid off, and this reduced the proportion of black and Spanish-surnamed teachers from 11 to 3 percent—remember that two-thirds of the students are black or Spanish-surnamed. … Between the fall of 1974 and the winter of 1976, the city workforce lost half its Spanish-surnamed workers, two-fifths of its black male employees, and one-third of its female employees. (Tabb 1982, p. 30)

By the end of this period, New York City, one of the most progressive cities in the country, had become one of the least progressive. I’ll just focus on one issue—that of higher education. The City University of New York (CUNY) system provided free college educations to tens of thousands of poorer black, brown, and white citizens. In order to make the system more “efficient”, political elites added tuition without significantly increasing financial aid. As a result, between 1974 and 1980, the system had 80,000 fewer students. The “right to the city” had been effectively transferred. New York City had been transformed from a city designed at least in part to meet the needs of its residents, to a city designed to meet the needs of its investors.

New York City Mayor Beame’s replacement, Ed Koch, not only accepted the work of the Financial Control Board, he touted it, explicitly redefining the purpose of the city to fit the new context. According to Mayor Koch, the role of the city was not to provide services for its residents; the role of the city was to create the proper climate for business development.
The policy solution New York adopted swiftly became the new normal.

When Ronald Reagan was elected president he took this approach national, reducing federal spending on domestic priorities in general, placing a far greater burden on state and local governments to tackle domestic issues while also making it much harder for states and local governments to do so.⁶

When people elected Bill Clinton in 1992, some thought that Clinton would reverse this. And he did in a few ways — he raised taxes, for instance,⁷ and significantly increased the number of African American political appointees. However, Clinton also aggressively promoted the idea that government worked best when it worked according to market principles. In 1993 he created the National Partnership for Reinventing Government, a public-private task force comprised of corporate leaders and political officials for this purpose. Touting the initiative, he consistently referred to citizens as consumers, emphasized corporate innovation and entrepreneurialism over government inefficiency, and touted waste reduction and efficiency over almost every other organizational principle. The effect of the rhetoric above and beyond the actual policy prescriptions was to radically alter the way citizens thought about government and to radically alter the way citizens thought of citizenship itself. But in addition to the rhetoric the task force led to a significant reduction in government employees, combined with a significant increase in the responsibility government employees had to bear.

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⁶ Between 1980 and 1985, Reagan reduced all outlays to state and local government by almost 24%, outlays in the area of community and regional development by approximately 40%, for educational training and service by approximately 33%, and general purpose assistance by 45% (Conlan 1998, p. 147). Reagan also reduced their ability to collect taxes and their lobbying capacity. This forced them to fight against the mandates and to increasingly turn to business interests to help shore up the shortfall in revenues.

⁷ Technically Reagan did this too, but Reagan was forced to do so and, even as he raised taxes, rarely veered from rhetoric suggesting that taxes were the problem rather than the solution.
In 1994, he sought to apply this approach to cities by creating urban “empowerment zones”. Empowerment zones would receive federal grants and special tax abatements designed to increase local business investment and employment. Unlike Reagan’s approach, empowerment zones were partially funded by the federal government. However, like Reagan’s approach, federal funding was limited — not every city and rural area that could have potentially benefitted from the empowerment zone designation received one. So a competition was established. Local governments would compete for empowerment zone status by drafting a proposal outlining what they would do if they were awarded EZ status. The proposal had to reflect not only government participation but bank, business, non-profit,

8 Of all days, Clinton announced the initiative on the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday in 1994:

This empowerment zone initiative, therefore, is a central part of a broadly coordinated strategy. With business people in mind, the plan seeks to make places more attractive for new investment so that people can — Arland Smith can fulfill their dreams. We built about $2.5 billion in tax incentives into this plan. They say if you hire a new worker in this zone, you’ll get a tax break. If you retrain a worker who lives in this zone, you’ll get a tax break. In other words, the plan rewards people for results, for reaching people in communities that presently are seeing disinvestment instead of new investment.

It’s much better than welfare, and it recognizes that it doesn’t make any economic sense for us to be trying to build new markets all around the world when we have huge, untapped, undeveloped markets right here at home: millions and millions and millions of potential consumers for American products and services who cannot be part of the American market because they, themselves, do not have the education, the training, the jobs, and the supports that they need. If we simply can apply our international economic policy to south central Los Angeles, Harlem, Milwaukee, Detroit, you name it, the Mississippi Delta, south Texas, we’re going to do just fine in this country. We should see the American people who have the ability of this fine young man who just spoke as an enormous asset that we are not tapping. And we have no excuses now for not doing it, because we know better, and we know it. How many times did I give that speech during the NAFTA debate? The only way a rich country grows richer is to find more people who buy its products and services. In America we have millions of people who don’t buy our products and services, because we have not invested in them and their potential and created the conditions in which they can succeed. So that is what this is all about. (Clinton 1994)
and community participation as well. Cities able to compete were rewarded, in this case with tax credits, with block grant money for social service provision, and with waivers from federal regulations. Both the rewards and the application process itself were designed to make cities more amenable to businesses and to “public-private partnerships” that would further force cities to act according to market principles.

We see Clinton apply a similar but much more punitive approach to poor populations. Two pieces of legislation stand out.

In 1994, the same year he proposed the creation of empowerment zones, Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control Act. Although Ronald Reagan is responsible for the biggest percentage increase in prison funding and incarceration rates, Bill Clinton is responsible for the largest absolute increase in prison funding and incarceration rates (Alexander 2010; Burch 2013; Clear and Frost 2013; Wacquant 2009). The act increased the number of federal crimes, and gave almost $10 billion in state funds to support new prison development. Before the passage of the bill, prisoners could receive a Pell Grant to either begin or continue education while in prison, and people with criminal records were still eligible for public resources (like public housing, for example). The bill discontinued the practice, which eradicated the ability of poorer prisoners to educate themselves while in prison, and made people with records ineligible for public resources.

Two years later Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). While Reagan rhetorically condemned people on welfare—in fact, Reagan helped popularize the concept of the “welfare queen”—he never successfully killed welfare policy. The act effectively did what Reagan couldn’t, replacing a permanent program designed to give resources to poor single mothers and their children (Aid to Families of Dependent Children or AFDC—itslef a replacement for Aid to Dependent Children) with a temporary program (Temporary Aid to Needy Families or TANF). Rather than being held hostage by the Republican Party, Clinton ran for office promising to “end welfare as we know it”.

With TANF, the primary goal of welfare becomes transitioning women to work, as opposed to providing the benefits
they need to take care of themselves and their children. States remain important in determining benefits and requirements. But under TANF, local jurisdictions within states could shape and determine their own rules and levels of benefits — between 1996 and 2001 fourteen states decided to give local authorities significant control over benefits (Soss et al. 2011). However, this came with strings — by law states and local jurisdictions cannot offer more benefits without facing significant federal penalties.\footnote{If Baltimore, for example, wanted to give teenage single mothers more benefits, given the particular burden they have to face in taking care of their children, they can only do so if they either withhold benefits from another potential beneficiary group or if they suffer penalties from either the State of Maryland, the federal government, or both.}

Further, while states and local jurisdictions were given incentives to experiment, they are given more incentives to experimentally punish than experimentally reward.\footnote{Because black people have always been more likely to be poor, race has significantly shaped the form and function of welfare. Arguably, one of the reasons we even think of welfare as synonymous with AFDC is because we now routinely associate black people with “being on the dole”, so to speak, as opposed to benefiting from Social Security or Unemployment Insurance, much less from aspects of the hidden or submerged welfare state like the home mortgage interest deduction or 401k programs (Howard 1997; Mettler 2011). But research suggests a negative relationship between black population size and ADC payments — as black population size increased ADC payments decreased (Lieberman 1998). Because blacks were more likely to require ADC than whites, this relationship is the exact opposite of what we would expect given black poverty. Further, as the image shifts — and as newspapers increasingly depict welfare recipients as black rather than as white — white support for welfare drops and white support for punitive responses to poverty increases (Gilens 1999). When TANF becomes the law of the land, research definitively shows a relationship between state black population size and the willingness of the state to give control to local jurisdictions and a relationship between black population size and the willingness of states to adopt increasingly punitive measures to get welfare recipients to work (Soss et al. 2011).}

Finally, under TANF fathers become financially responsible for their children, and the father must pay back any benefits the state provides to his children in his absence.\footnote{Indeed, if a mother either doesn’t want to have a relationship with the father of her children, does not know the father of her children, or does not wish to place financial responsibility onto the father, her benefits will be withheld (Mink 1998).} Clinton institutionalized a
program that ignores the work mothers perform in the home, and forces poor women (and indirectly poor men) to take full economic responsibility for their reproductive health choices. Whereas we routinely laud the idea of stay-at-home mothers, recognizing that children tend to do better if at least one parent can spend quality time looking to their needs, we castigate poor women for making that decision.

The bill wreaked havoc on poor communities and did little to nothing to reduce the stigma of “welfare”, did nothing to kill the stereotype of the welfare queen, and did nothing to reduce poverty levels (Mink 1998; Schram 2000, 2006). It ended a longstanding right to aid from the government, replacing it with a temporary “privilege” that could only be received if the recipient behaved correctly. It made women on it take more and more responsibility for finding employment (as if being a single mother wasn’t job enough) by withholding resources from them until they proved they were doing so, and then on top of that by placing a five-year lifetime limit on their benefits.

When Bill Clinton signs the PRWORA he does so flanked by two single black mothers. This isn’t a coincidence. Echoing the “southern strategy” used to build the modern day Republican Party, Clinton relied heavily on racist images of black women and black men to consistently increase support for punitive approaches to crime and welfare, images that exerted a powerful effect on public opinion (Gilens 1999; Gilliam Jr. et al. 2002; Hurwitz and Peffley 1997; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Peffley et al. 1997).

Clinton did what Reagan couldn’t do on welfare. He did what Reagan began to do on crime. Further, while Clinton did not go quite as far as Reagan did in castigating the role of government, he did go farther than Reagan did in arguing that government should do more to model itself like a business and that the relationship between government and citizen should be more like the relationship between business and consumer (Moe 1994). And as can be seen by the rights he took away from formerly incarcerated individuals as well as the implicit right to welfare he took away in transforming AFDC, he arguably did more than Reagan in emphasizing citizen responsibilities over citizen rights, and more than Reagan in emphasizing the punitive arm of government. However, in part because he appointed
more African American appointees than anyone before him, and expressed a significant level of comfortability with black people—so much so that some jokingly referred to him as the country’s first “black president”—he escaped significant criticism.

Under the neoliberal turn, cities and individuals alike are forced to become more and more entrepreneurial, bearing both the responsibility and the risk for a range of actions. Under the neoliberal turn, progressive policies like welfare, public housing, and unemployment insurance are either slashed or are attacked, as these policies are viewed to make people less entrepreneurial and less responsible for their own choices. Although the drug gangs that quickly fill the vacuum left by manufacturers do generate a certain type of “entrepreneur”—the hustler represented by Ace Hood—that particular entrepreneur is routinely victimized and punished by the government. Further, as federal and state governments reduce local governments’ ability to collect tax revenue, cities themselves are forced to become more “competitive” by remaking themselves for the purposes of capital.

Along these lines, I noted the importance of the Financial Control Board in disciplining New York City, forcing it to stop providing a range of services for city residents.

Truth be told, though, cities do not reduce all of their services. In fact, some services increase. In order to entice downtown business development, cities increasingly provide a range of services to corporations and real estate developers, often giving them help with drafting development proposals, and giving them a range of tax write-offs that enable them to purchase and develop land inexpensively. Cities increasingly devote resources to transform themselves into tourist hubs.12

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12 Take Times Square. Almost 40 million people visit Times Square every year. It bombards the senses with brilliant high-resolution billboards ten stories tall, a cacophony of car horns, movie trailer soundtracks, street musicians, cellphone conversations, and clicking camera shutters.

But thirty years ago Times Square was home to perhaps the most vibrant pornography film district in the nation. It was a place for outcasts—the homeless, the indigent, the wayward, the sex worker. In a number of cities we see a subtle increase in a range of policies
I’ve noted how the central byproduct of neoliberalism is inequality. With the neoliberal turn, inequality within cities and inequality between cities increases. I’ve also noted that race plays a central role in the turn.

Chocolate cities — cities with large black populations — are the byproduct of particular social and political forces. As a result of defense policy, cities with significant industrial capacity hollow out, leaving poorer and blacker populations behind. As a result of civil rights legislation these populations have increased political power. As a result, we see the increased election of black political representatives. However, we also see three different political moves. While black political officials tend to be anti-racist, taking hard lines against racial discrimination, we see them mirror the rhetoric of their white counterparts when it comes to issues of poverty and crime. As a result of the forces that hollow them out, we see the cities themselves besieged by crises. Finally, when these crises occur, we see neoliberal solutions proposed to deal with them, making them worse.

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... and design elements that work to exclude undesirable populations. Park and subway car benches are increasingly designed to be homeless-proof and cities are increasingly passing anti-homeless regulations. Skateboarders are implicitly shunted away from downtown areas through the use of anti-skateboard handrails as well as through legislation.

In the case of Times Square a succession of mayors and political officials from Ed Koch to the city’s first black mayor David Dinkins, to Rudy Giuliani, to Michael Bloomberg, supported zoning laws making pornography illegal within 500 feet of homes, schools, and churches. They aggressively enforced (illegal) anti-loitering laws, and developed rigid street vendor quotas (Barry 1995; Hicks 1994). Further, Giuliani cut development deals with Disney and other multimedia corporations to redevelop the area. While I do not want to make the provocative argument that a vibrant pornography industry was better for Times Square and New York City than the vibrant multi-neoned monstrosity we now have, I do want to suggest that Times Square thirty years ago was arguably a more public and open space than it is now, and that in transitioning Times Square to the disneyfied thing that we know now, public officials made an explicit decision to transform the space for the sole purpose of commerce.
We have an obligation to give back. We have an obligation to protect our women, our children, our elderly.
—Former Philadelphia Police Chief
Sylvester Johnson (Associated Press 2007)

Teens need to make better decisions. Parents need to step up and take care of their children. We, as a government, cannot raise people’s children. You want to have children? You have to take care of them.
—Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter
(CNN Wire Staff 2011)

Philadelphia is one of the nation’s largest predominantly black cities. For more than twenty years the Pennsylvania Intergovernmental Cooperation Authority (PICA), an unelected body, has had significant oversight over the City of Philadelphia’s finances. In order to be able to gain full access to municipal revenue, the city must submit (for PICA approval) a financial plan that ensures a balanced budget and access to short- and long-term credit markets. In the event of a previous shortfall, the financial plan must detail how that shortfall will be erased. The most recent big-ticket item PICA approved was the sale of Philadelphia’s gas utility (Vargas 2014).

Like the example of New York City before it, PICA significantly shapes the political agenda of the city, its elected officials, and its political appointees. The two quotes above show how this plays out in official rhetoric.

By September 2007, Philadelphia made national headlines after almost 300 homicides had been committed. After a particularly rough stretch in which 27 murders occurred in a very short period of time, outgoing Philadelphia (African American) police chief Sylvester Johnson made what some deemed to be a radical call for 10,000 black men to patrol Philadelphia neighborhoods. The men would not be armed, would not be paid, would not be deputized to make arrests, but they would be trained in conflict resolution techniques. Johnson made his pitch to a number of prominent black male organizations, had the support of Dennis Muhammad (a former Nation of Islam official), and held a public recruiting event less than a month after he made his call. Before the year’s end, close to 100
more men (and seven women) would be murdered, bringing Philadelphia’s total to 392, the second highest murder total in almost ten years (Associated Press 2007).

Less than four years later, violent crime again brings Philadelphia into the national spotlight. After a series of (black) flash mob\textsuperscript{13} assaults in two Philadelphia neighborhoods, Mayor Michael Nutter extended curfew hours for teenagers in the two neighborhoods hardest hit and increased the fines individuals guilty of violating curfew would have to pay. He then gave a blistering sermon at his (predominantly black) church, Mount Carmel Baptist, arguing the participants “damaged” their race. The events Nutter spoke to came at a particularly ironic time—less than two weeks earlier, an organization of Philadelphia youth (the Philly Youth Poetry Movement) took first prize in a prestigious San Francisco poetry contest and the youth (who’d done everything right and come from working class backgrounds themselves) felt as if they were overshadowed (CNN Wire Staff 2011).

In both examples, we see black political officials attempt to place primary responsibility for crime on black families. For Johnson, the primary responsibility fell on black middle- and upper-income men—the type of men W.E.B. Du Bois likely had in mind when he wrote about “the Talented Tenth” well over 100 years ago. For Nutter, the primary responsibility fell on black lower income families—the type of families Du Bois examined in *The Philadelphia Negro*. Once they articulate the problem of crime as a cultural problem, the solution becomes clear. For Johnson, if black males don’t have the right role models, if they are culturally predisposed to dislike and distrust the police, then they need to be exposed to black men who care about them, and these black men need to replace the police.

There are a range of other drastic measures Johnson could have pursued, particularly because he was on the cusp of retiring. He could have, for instance, implored the city to legalize drugs or to stop prosecuting non-violent drug crimes. He could have attempted to do what the character of Sergeant Bunny Colvin did in the Baltimore drama *The Wire*—render

\textsuperscript{13} Large groups of individuals quickly mobilized by social media.
certain areas of the city drug-enforcement free. But he didn’t. Instead, he suggests black men engage in a partnership with the city that would have them take on almost all of the risk and many of the responsibilities of police officers, without any of the training, the equipment, the legal protections, and the pay and benefits. And, of course, they are expected to do this while working on their jobs and being good husbands, fathers, etc.

It’s not hard to see the problems here. What would happen if a citizen ended up suing one of Johnson’s “volunteers”? When citizens sue the police for violating their rights, police officers are protected and defended by the state. Would the volunteer pay for his own defense even though he’s performing the police officers’ job? On the flip side, what recourse do citizens have if one of the volunteers commits an act of brutality? Johnson’s solution to crime remakes black families into extra police units, placing much of the responsibility for policing, a responsibility black citizens pay taxes for, on the backs of black citizens and families themselves. But because the citizens under discussion are black, the idea seems like common sense.

Black people wisely passed on Johnson’s suggestion. However, it is noteworthy that no one, to my knowledge, publicly raised these critiques of the program.

For Nutter, if black families don’t have the capacity to raise their kids, then to the extent the government should be involved, it should be involved in punitively forcing families to develop the capacity. To the extent the government has any responsibility at all here, it is to force responsibility onto black parents. I mentioned PICA above. Philadelphia continues to face a budget crisis. Parks and Recreation had its budget cut to the tune of $8 million in 2013. In fact, over a five-year period, the department received $43 million less than the FY 2009–2013 budget promised. Furthermore, when political officials decided to increase the city parking lot tax, they promised (but never gave) a portion of that money to the department (Greco 2012). These budget cuts kept Parks and Rec from providing the full suite of youth programs and routine maintenance it normally would. As a result of the cuts in maintenance, a Philadelphia neighborhood group had to raise money themselves for a broken slide, spending $600 of their own money (Greco 2012).
While Nutter referred to the economy in his sermon about the flash mobs, stating that he understood how it negatively affected neighborhoods, he made no mention of the role budget cuts played, no mention at all of how the city’s Parks and Rec’s budget had been slashed.

We can imagine what his sermon could have looked like if he had. If he explicitly tied the flash mobs to lack of youth activities and then to the slashed budget, he could have theoretically used his sermon to urge city stakeholders to accept tax increases that would lead to better services. Nutter made little mention of the lack of youth employment opportunities, even though he noted how hard hit the families of those neighborhoods were because of the depression. Again, we can imagine what his sermon would have sounded like if he had—Philadelphia is one of the most important economic hubs on the east coast, second only to New York City. If Nutter would have focused on the lack of youth jobs, we could imagine him using the opportunity to urge churchgoers and other listeners to push the development of job programs at the local, state, and federal levels. Here, given the role construction still plays in cities like Philadelphia Nutter could have called for more youth construction jobs. Particularly, given problems with the School District of Philadelphia (which, in another example of the slow death of local political power, was taken over in 2001 by the Pennsylvania governor), one could imagine using such a push to deal with two problems at once. He could have easily taken the angst those parents feel and transformed it into a call for more municipal resources. But when he did call for more resources, he called for more resources to punish and surveil seemingly “irresponsible” working class black families, increasing curfew hours and increasing the fine for violating curfew hours, but only in those neighborhoods. He was all for spending more resources on neighborhoods when it came to spending money on police enforcement. Instead of saying these neighborhoods have more problems and require more political and economic resources, he was, in effect, saying that these neighborhoods have more problems and require more policing.

Johnson implicitly attributed the spread of crime to the lack of black role modeling and the lack of black policing. For
him, it was a cultural issue tied to black-on-black crime. For Nutter, too, the problem was a cultural one and one primarily about black familial responsibility in a narrow sense and in a broader sense. In the narrow sense, he explicitly noted that government had no responsibility for raising children. Rather, it was the family’s responsibility. Taking his sermon along with the anecdote above about the $600 slide—the one the neighborhood had to raise money to pay for—we can see him pushing more and more responsibility down to the families themselves, virtually crushing them. And, as he pushes more and more responsibility down on them, he, like Johnson, increases the scale and scope of their responsibility. Nutter makes the speech in a predominantly black church because the issue again is not primarily a political one but a cultural one. If it were a political issue he would’ve spoken at city hall. If it were an economic issue he would have spoken in the center of Philadelphia’s business district. But because he represented the issue as primarily a moral and spiritual one unique to black populations, he gives a speech at a predominantly black church. And because the issue is primarily one of two-fold black irresponsibility—the black children were being irresponsible in embarrassing the race, black parents were being irresponsible in raising those children—he explicitly speaks to and punishes black communities.

Now, one argument we could make about Nutter and Johnson is that neither have love for black folk. And that both have, in effect, “sold out”. But this argument doesn’t really work. Nutter didn’t just give his sermon in a black church—to consider­able black applause—he did so in his own church. Nutter could even be said to have love for hip-hop. Not only was he a DJ in his younger days, he performed Rapper’s Delight (the ten-minute extended version) at one of his inaugural events, backed up by Questlove (DJ of the Philly-based hip-hop band The Roots). Similarly, Johnson had support from a former member of the Nation of Islam, suggesting that he had support for his idea from at least a portion of Philadelphia’s black nationalist community.

Instead, we can make an argument that Nutter and Johnson were both able to use their love for black people to actually bolster their neoliberal rhetoric. Nutter couldn’t have made this clearer. The poor and working class black kids involved in the
flash mobs were not only “representing” themselves, they were representing the entire black community. As such, they—not the state, not the city, not the political officials in charge of the city—are responsible to change their behavior. Without the state resources required to do so.

These two examples reveal the unique problems black elected officials pose for black citizens in the wake of the neoliberal turn. Neither could be said to dislike black people or black culture. But even as their cultural roots connected them to their communities in certain ways, it also gave them the latitude to criticize their black constituencies in ways their white counterparts arguably couldn’t.

The neoliberal turn doesn’t happen without crisis. I referred to the example of New York City above — the austerity program forced on New York City was not possible without the fiscal crisis the city faced in the seventies. Currently, New Orleans and Detroit (two of the nation’s most prominent chocolate cities) represent the “best” twenty-first-century American examples of the function crisis performs in cities. Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in 2005 and was one of the most costly disasters in American history, taking over 1800 lives and causing almost $110 billion in damages. Over the past several decades Detroit lost almost two-thirds of its population and hundreds of millions of dollars in municipal revenue as a result. At the height of the twenty-first-century depression approximately 50% of Detroit’s workforce was unemployed (Wilkinson 2009). In March 2013 Michigan governor Tom Snyder (GOP) placed the City of Detroit under emergency financial management, giving almost all of the power of its elected representatives to an unelected emergency financial manager. A little over a year later that manager (Kevyn Orr) filed for bankruptcy, the largest such filing in American history.

I used the two Philadelphia examples above to show how black political officials dealt with black populations deemed to be problematic. What we see in the cases of New Orleans and Detroit are more akin to system-wide neoliberal makeovers. Public housing in New Orleans has not only served to provide inexpensive housing to New Orleans’s poor working-class community, it has also served as a valuable space of community building and political activism. In the wake of Katrina, political and economic elites used the disaster to attempt to
gut public housing. Rather than handle the rebuilding project directly, the federal government subcontracted almost all of the disaster and recovery projects to private corporations. The end result? Most of the monies allocated to help New Orleans rebuild ended up going to corporations in the form of profit, and many residents ended up being saddled with more debt than they had before the hurricane hit.

Detroit wasn’t hit by a Class 5 hurricane, but the effect of private and public disinvestment was no less severe. As a result of a combination of a diminishing tax base, a series of giveaways to corporate investors, and a bond deal so skewed it won an award from a national bond buyers’ organization, the city

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14 Kwame Kilpatrick is now viewed as the poster child for bad urban government, as Kilpatrick is currently serving a 28-year sentence for corruption. As a mayor and as a state representative (before elected mayor, Kilpatrick served as a state legislator) Kilpatrick consistently used his office to enrich his friends and his allies at the expense of the (black) taxpayers he represented. However, for my interests, perhaps the most important crime Kilpatrick committed may not have technically been a crime. In 2005 the city (under Kilpatrick’s leadership) borrowed approximately $1.5 billion in variable-rate debt in order to cover the costs of taking care of retired Detroit workers, a deal that was the city equivalent of the adjustable-rate mortgage loans that led to the financial crisis of 2008.

The deal involved two layers of speculative financial instruments. One layer involved “pension obligation certificates of participation”—essentially IOUs that allowed Detroit to borrow money to give to its two pension funds.

The second layer involved interest rate swaps, a high-risk bet that Detroit lost. The certificates of participation carried a variable interest rate. So the city bought the swaps as a hedge against the risk that interest rates would rise. In fact, interest rates fell sharply during the 2008–2009 financial crisis. The city lost the bet, adding to the pensions’ underfunding by as much as $770 million over the next 22 years.

Under the terms of the swap contracts, the banks were owed up to $400 million in early 2009 when the city’s credit rating fell below investment-grade status. (Bomey 2013)

Since 2002 The Bond Buyer (a municipal finance publication) has recognized innovation in municipal finance at an annual gala. In 2005 Kilpatrick was one of the awardees.

Kilpatrick was sent to prison in part for extorting approximately $850,000. The deal Kilpatrick was awarded for cost the city almost 40 times more in real money, but arguably more than that in political terms.
was placed under emergency financial management. One of the reasons Detroit became important in the first place was because it is situated near the largest body of fresh water on the planet. To deal with the city’s budget crisis, the city’s water department slashed its employment rolls by over 1500 workers, increased its water bills over 100% over a ten-year period, and in 2014 sent shut-off notices to almost 50,000 residents (Kaffer 2012, Smith 1999). Some estimate that 40% of the city’s 88,000 street lights are inoperable (Helms et al. 2014). In January of 2015 a story about a 56-year-old Detroiter (James Robertson) who had to walk over 21 miles to work went viral (Laitner 2015). His commute was so tortuous because the metropolitan Detroit region’s public transportation system is poorly integrated and resourced. Its bond ratings as of 2012 were five levels below investment grade (Preston and Christoff 2013). Detroiter weren’t asked to equally share its burden, however. Mike Ilitch, owner of the Detroit Red Wings (and the Detroit Tigers), was given almost $290 million in public resources to build a new $450 million stadium for the team in the heart of the city (Bradley 2014).

Public policy was largely responsible for the growth of both Detroit’s and New Orleans’s metropolitan region. Public policy was also responsible for their fall. In Detroit’s case, the fall comes from the government-subsidized creation of racially exclusive suburbs on the one hand, and government-subsidized decentralization of big business on the other. In the case of New Orleans, the fall comes from the failure of the government subsidized canals. Now, even given the fact that the problems both cities face come from public policy in the service of private interests, public policies could still have protected the cities from the calamities they faced.

In the case of Detroit, a regional solution could have spread out the impact of the exodus of auto manufacturers in a way that would have protected the region in general and Detroit specifically. Alternatively, the leadership of Detroit could have

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15 Here William Freudenburg’s (2009) work on Katrina is required reading. The marshland that would have conceivably protected New Orleans from even a class 5 hurricane like Katrina was destroyed by the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) — a canal built by the Army Corps of Engineers but pushed by local business interests.
either increased taxes, perhaps kept taxes stable, or even pursued such radical strategies as buying teams like the Detroit Red Wings themselves.

In the case of New Orleans the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) could have been far more effective in managing Katrina even after it happened. Rather than creating a plan that assumed New Orleans residents could and should be responsible for their own transportation they could have created a plan that took better advantage of existing transportation resources to take care of a higher percentage of their citizenry.

The fact that both cities were and are still “chocolate cities” significantly increased the degree to which people inside and outside of the region tended to think both cities were ungovernable. As New Orleans and Detroit’s population became (and was increasingly depicted as) poorer and blacker, the attitudes of whites became more and more antagonistic. Ever since Detroit’s been run by black elected officials it’s been castigated in the media and by political officials as being uniquely corrupt. New Orleans has historically been promoted as being one of the most corrupt cities in the nation. Similarly, big government itself has been proposed as being corrupt as well and, at the very least, inefficient. When Katrina hit New Orleans, and when Detroit’s fiscal straits became clear, the last thing people wanted to think about was the potential that government could actually **solve** the problems the cities faced.

This doesn’t mean that progressive forces simply left the cities to die. Far from it. However, to the extent each city had a reservoir of goodwill because of their unique histories — Detroit’s status as the capital of the modern industrial age, and New Orleans’s status as the jazz capital of the world — a range of populations and non-government institutions were mobilized to come to their aid. Even the aid they received, though — which primarily comes in the form of “social entrepreneurship” — is neoliberal in nature.

In New Orleans, for example, the organization Go Propeller has incubated an organization that’s successfully raised over $20,000 to help clean up the 2010 BP oil spill, a legal center that’s helped more than 1500 clients with non-violent criminal
records find work, and another legal center that’s successfully won approximately $300,000 in benefits for disabled children. Detroit boasts similar projects, from for-profit firms like the Fresh Corner Café (which provides inexpensive fresh food to food deserts), Rebel Nell, which employs working-class Detroit women to make graffiti-inspired jewelry, non-profit firms like The Empowerment Plan, which hires homeless residents to manufacture coats that double as sleeping bags, and Motor City Blight Busters, which works to help demolish tens of thousands of abandoned homes. And in the cases of both the water-shutoff and James Robertson, volunteers were swiftly mobilized to help pay the water bills of those threatened with shutoffs, and to help purchase James Robertson an automobile.

Finally, in both cases we see a significant increase in the numbers of young entrepreneurial members of “the creative class”—predominantly white educated artists, intellectuals, and small business owners interested in taking the opportunity of cheap real estate and relatively open space to take the types of economic risks that would be almost impossible in cities like New York City or San Francisco.

The entire concept of social entrepreneurship relies upon the notion that innovation, creativity, and energy are best mobilized by the application of market principles, particularly in crisis cases like Detroit and New Orleans. It misses the crucial role business principles played in generating the crisis, and the role government should play in solving the crisis. Robinson isn’t the only person with such a long commute to work, but pitching him as if he were masks the deep systemic challenges that led to his transportation problem in the first place. He commutes from the city because manufacturers fled as a partial byproduct of legislation designed to make it easier for them to do so. There are few reasonable public transportation options because automobile manufacturers conspired to make a particular individualistic vision of freedom (captured by the

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16 All information taken from the Go Propeller Impact page (gopropeller.org/impact).
17 The works of Cedric Johnson (2011) and Jay Arena (2012) are particularly important in unpacking the neoliberalization of New Orleans.
idea that every individual should own a car and have the freedom to go where he/she wanted) universal,\textsuperscript{18} and because the (predominantly white) suburban residents don’t want to subsidize the transportation costs of poor and working class (black) Detroit residents.\textsuperscript{19} The BP Oil Spill of 2010 was one of the greatest environmental catastrophes of the nascent twenty-first century. While any effort to deal with the problems of the oil spill should be applauded, even a cursory cost of the cleanup (which affected more than 15,000 miles of coastline) runs into the \textit{billions}. There is no amount of individual charity that could effectively generate the infrastructure needed to clean up the spill.

In the sixties Henri Lefebvre argued that the central battle of the latter decades of the twentieth century would be the battle over the city, the battle over the “right” to the city. Who should have the ability to determine how the city functioned, the people who lived, worked, and played in the city, or the people who “owned” it? While Lefebvre’s work was far-sighted, he totally ignored the fundamental role race and racism would play in that battle. Around the same time Grace and James Boggs believed that the city was the black man’s land, and that cities like Detroit should become revolutionary black political strongholds from which new visions of urban life could develop. Unlike Lefebvre, they did understand the role race and racism played, but by the mid-seventies they’d moved

\textsuperscript{18} Compare this vision, for example, to a vision of freedom that posited that metropolitan areas should be integrated such that individuals without vehicles wouldn’t need them to move around.

\textsuperscript{19} This, combined with the fear of giving poor blacks easy access to white suburbs. This is not a uniquely Detroit problem. In 2014, for example, the Atlanta region was hit with one of the worst snow storms in its history. In a Katrina-like snafu, rather than staggering school and work closings so as to give adequate time and room for commuters to pick up their children and get home, officials closed the schools without giving commuters notice, and then shut down the city at once. Because Atlanta suburbs have consistently turned down opportunities to integrate the Atlanta region’s public transportation system — in part due to racial animus — Atlanta commuters were stuck in traffic so long that in several cases the schools had to keep children overnight (Thompson 2014). One of my childhood friends moved to Atlanta from Detroit and was stuck in the storm so long she had to spend the night at a co-worker’s home.
away from their position, because they saw the beginnings of the neoliberal turn in black-led cities firsthand. While the neoliberal turn has spread far beyond chocolate cities, the focus on the hustle is particularly prevalent within them. Black elected officials, rather than knocking the hustle — the legal hustle, at any rate — condemn their populations for not doing it enough, blaming a range of government issues on them. Similarly, we see this approach not only applied to populations within cities but, in the case of chocolate cities like Detroit and New Orleans, we see this applied to the cities themselves. Even solutions touted as progressive rely on the hustle for their energy. The city will likely remain ground zero for the battle against the neoliberal turn. But in that battle we’d do well to fight against the move to cast this solely as a fight against racism, as we will likely have to fight black elites with their specific black interests as well.