

*New Scholars*

**SWEEPING THE STREETS OF THE NEOLIBERAL CITY:  
RACIAL AND CLASS DIVISIONS AMONG NEW  
YORK CITY'S SANITATION WORKERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Starting with the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s, cutbacks in New York City's sanitation department have led to the shortening of routes plied by mechanical brooms, cutbacks in public waste basket collection, and the removal of manual sweeping crews. However, today the city's streets are cleaner than ever, as business improvement districts and private work training programs for the homeless increasingly invest in street sweeping. This article explores the way in which the shift from public to private street sanitation creates racial and class divisions with respect to the working conditions of street sweepers in New York City and to public discourse on them. It shows that the partial displacement of unionized municipal sanitation workers by cheap private sector sweepers goes hand in hand with a binary discourse that constructs municipal workers as white working-class heroes while racialized sweepers in work training programs are exploited on the grounds that they are in debt to society.

**INTRODUCTION**

Critical studies emphasize the role of neoliberal policies such as privatization and austerity measures in the restructuring of New York City's municipal services following the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s. Peck and Tickell (2002: 384) have argued that neoliberal policy is marked by "roll-back" and "roll-out" phases.

Roll-back neoliberalism refers to “the active destruction or discreditation of Keynesian-welfarist and social-collectivist institutions,” a process that involves cutbacks in public services and contracting out of them. In contrast, roll-out neoliberalism refers to “the purposeful construction and consolidation of neoliberalized state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations.” It involves socially interventionist policies and public-private initiatives such as welfare-to-work programs and welfare entrepreneurialism.

According to Krinsky (2011), New York City’s financial crisis of the mid- 1970s initiated a roll-back phase of neoliberal public-sector retrenchment, with the city cutting its workforce by 60,000 positions between 1975 and 1981 and pioneering new ways to get public service work done cheaply. Policies include the contracting out of municipal services, the expansion of local workfare programs combined with the assignment of public aid recipients to municipal jobs, the creation of partnerships between the city and private business associations, and the promotion of welfare entrepreneurialism. These policies share at least one common feature: they result in the displacement of public service workers by cheap private sector workers and free nonemployee personnel. Critical research further argues that roll-out policies and programs are aimed at disciplining, criminalizing, and controlling the most precariously situated sections of the postindustrial working class: public aid recipients, homeless people, and African American males from the inner-city ghettos (see, for example, Aguirre, Eick, & Reese, 2006; Wacquant, 2010b).

While critical studies emphasize the role of austerity measures, privatization, and socially interventionist policies in the restructuring of New York’s public sector over the last three decades, urban scholars argue that neoliberal restructuring has been taking part in the reorganization of urban space in the form of privatization and displacement-inducing gentrification (MacLeod & Johnstone, 2012). In fact, public-sector retrenchment affects the way in which urban space is governed, maintained, and controlled, for example, when public street sanitation services or means of public transportation are cut. But how does neoliberal economic and urban restructuring affect people’s living and working conditions? While research on neoliberalism has made an important contribution to the theoretical understanding of these phenomena, there are few scholars who analyze neoliberalism as an embedded reality (Fairbanks & Lloyd, 2011). This article addresses that void by interrogating the working conditions of and public discourse on individuals assigned to street sweeping in the public and private sector in New York City, in particular with the New York City Department of Sanitation, private business improvement districts, and work training programs for the homeless. Following Fairbanks and Lloyd (2011), I argue that the street is a key site for understanding the intertwined effects that economic and urban restructuring and neoliberal ideology have on people’s working and living conditions. Street sweepers are linked to the street in at least three ways: they work in the street; the street is the object on which they perform their work; and, in the case of homeless people, they are “from the street.”

Street sanitation is one of the main targets of municipal austerity measures in New York City. Starting during the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s, cutbacks in the sanitation budget have become a constant feature of city policies. In 2009, the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) gave voice to the permanent economic pressure under which it has to work by calling its annual report “Doing more with less.” Yet, while City Hall has been cutting the resources allocated to DSNY, “clean streets” and “safe streets” have become key elements of urban revitalization and the quality-of-life rhetoric that has accompanied urban revitalization since the time of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani (Smith, 1998). With cuts in public spending, the goal of keeping New York City’s streets clean has been achieved through the shift from public to private sanitation work, particularly through the partial displacement of unionized municipal sanitation workers by welfare recipients who are assigned to street sweeping as a condition of receiving benefits, private sweepers working for business improvement districts (BIDs), and homeless individuals assigned to street sweeping as part of work training programs. BIDs are private associations of property and business owners whose purpose it is to improve conditions for businesses and the “quality of life” in a designated area. Promoted as public-private partnerships between the city and private sector business actors, they have come to play a crucial part in New York’s urban renaissance efforts over the last three decades. While earlier research focused on the importance of BIDs as a response to the failure of city governments to adequately maintain and manage urban space (Mallett, 1994), my argument is that BIDs have been a means to get sanitation services performed cheaply by bypassing unionized labor regulations. Indeed, not only do BIDs have increasing control over public space, but they also define the working conditions and wages of private sanitation staff and the discourse on them (Ward, 2006). According to the BIDs’ advocates, it is precisely their “private” characteristics that make them a perfect tool for urban governance: “The great advantage of BIDs lies in their private characteristics. Unlike government, BIDs possess finite goals, which they can accomplish free of civil service rules and bureaucratic procedures. More importantly, they negotiate labor contracts from a clean slate: unbound by decades-old municipal labor deals, they can reward—and fire—employees according to their productivity, not their civil service status” (MacDonald, 2000: 389).

Privately run work training programs for the homeless have also been participating in New York’s urban restructuring by assigning program participants to street sweeping as part of their job training. In the form of private welfare entrepreneurialism, these programs not only contribute to the privatization of street sanitation and the casualization of labor, but they also actively participate in the production of a new system of poverty governance (Fairbanks, 2011; Schram, Fording, & Soss, 2011). This system, made into federal law by Bill Clinton in 1996 with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), institutes work requirements for welfare recipients on the

grounds that poor people need to become “active citizens” responsible for the transformation of their economic position. As a rationale for its “work first” policy, PRWORA draws heavily on the binary opposition between the positive figure of the independent, self-sufficient wage worker and his negative counterpart, the dependent and therefore stigmatized welfare recipient (Goldberg, 2001). Contrary to former welfare programs whose work requirements had the aim of training public aid recipients so that they could acquire new skills, PRWORA is based on the assumption that welfare recipients don’t lack the training but the work experience and work ethic to find and keep a job (Ellis, 2003). In order to acquire work experience and a work ethic, it is therefore a matter of fundamental necessity to integrate them into the labor market. In a “work first” approach, any job is better than no job for welfare recipients, in order for them to escape the stigma of welfare dependency: “To demean and punish those who do not work is to exalt by contrast even the meanest labor at the meanest wages” (Piven & Cloward, 1993: 3–4).

Job training programs run by private nonprofits and for-profits are among the social welfare services contracted out by federal, state, and local governments as a way of meeting PRWORA’s work requirements. They often work in tandem with public welfare agencies and focus on enforcing the work participation of welfare recipients, aiding them in the transition to work, and moving them away from the welfare rolls (Ridzi, 2007). While this form of private social entrepreneurialism is often contingent because it depends heavily on public funding (Ridzi, 2007) and/or private donations, the availability of a sub-minimum-wage workforce gives social entrepreneurs and nonprofit organizations that fund their charitable operations by selling goods and services—such as street sanitation—a competitive advantage in the marketplace (Ellis, 2003).

I argue that the “activation” of homeless people through their assignment to street sweeping as part of a work training program is a means for the city to get what was formerly public service work done cheaply. Furthermore, it is a way of “socializing” the poor to precarious and underpaid employment. By analyzing the working conditions of and discourse on street sweepers in DSNY, the BIDs, and work training programs for the homeless, I explore how the neoliberal shift from public to private street sweeping affects New York City’s sanitation workforce. I argue that neoliberal public-sector retrenchment and the expansion of private sanitation work create new material and symbolic racial and class divisions in the largely male sanitation workforce. In fact, while the majority of sanitation workers with DSNY are still white (mostly descendants of Italian and Irish immigrants), private sweepers are overwhelmingly foreign- and native-born blacks or Hispanics: immigrants from Central America and Africa in the case of BIDs, native African Americans and Hispanics in the case of work training programs. Public discourse constructs city sanitation workers as blue-collar working-class heroes working a “middle-class job.” In contrast, the rhetoric on private sweepers, strongly influenced by the neoconservative discourse that accompanied

PRWORA, combines quality-of-life rhetoric on clean and safe streets with neoliberal norms such as “personal responsibility,” “self-sufficiency,” and “work ethic.” As such, it reproduces the individualistic discourse of the “active” welfare state that individualizes forms of poverty and leaves individuals solely responsible for their place in society rather than addressing structural problems of inequality in the society at large.

The evidence presented in this article is drawn from a field study of sanitation workers conducted in New York City in 2010 and 2011. The data for this article stem from 30 semistructured interviews and discussions with municipal and private sanitation workers and representatives of DSNY, three BIDs, and two work training programs for the homeless called Shelter and Match—both names are fictional. Information was drawn from the organizations’ Web sites and annual reports. Additional data were gathered through participation in graduation ceremonies held by Shelter and Match. The data are combined with a discursive analysis of publicly accessible documents produced by and on public and private sanitation actors, including Web sites, annual reports, newsletters, newspaper articles, brochures, and media footage. I relied mostly on documents that are available electronically or in published form. I used content and discourse analysis to examine the symbolic construction of sanitation workers in both the public and the private sector.

In this article, I first draw the outlines of the partial shift from municipal to private street sweeping in New York City and discuss the role of BIDs and private work training programs in the privatization of sanitation work and its interplay with quality-of-life policy and the responsabilization of the poor. I show how this shift affects peoples’ working and living conditions. Finally, I contrast the rhetoric on municipal sanitation workers with that on sweepers in the private sector.

### **FROM MIDDLE-CLASS MUNICIPAL SANITATION JOBS TO PRECARIOUS PRIVATE STREET SWEEPING**

Since its establishment in 1929, the New York City Department of Sanitation has been New York’s major actor in street cleaning. Today, DSNY is in charge of residential garbage collection, mechanical street sweeping, public waste basket collection, and snow removal in the city’s five boroughs. Working conditions, wages, health care benefits, and pension plans for municipal sanitation workers improved throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s, thanks to the local sanitation workers’ union, the Uniformed Sanitationmen’s Association. Since the mid-1970s, as a consequence of the fiscal crisis, cuts in the resources allocated to DSNY have led to the shortening of routes plied by mechanical brooms, cutbacks in public waste basket collection, and the disbanding of the department’s manual sweeping crews in the early 1990s (Levy, 1991; Shepard, 1993). The number of municipal sanitation workers dropped from 11,000 in the 1970s to 6,200 today. However, today, New York City’s streets are cleaner than ever (Department of

Sanitation, 2011), as business improvement districts (BIDs) and private work training programs for the homeless increasingly involve themselves in manual street sweeping.

### **Business Improvement Districts, “Quality of Life,” and “Zero Tolerance”**

Starting in the 1980s in New York City, the creation of business improvement districts, that is, private associations of property and business owners in a designated area, is tightly linked to the reduction of public services after the financial crisis of the 1970s and to what was perceived both by politicians and the general public as urban decay. While 72% of the city’s streets were acceptably clean in 1976, the proportion had dropped to 53% by the end of 1980 (Levy, 1991). Big corporations with headquarters in midtown Manhattan threatened to relocate to other cities because of filthy sidewalks, broken street furniture, and the presence of a large homeless population in and around sensitive areas such as Grand Central Terminal. To reverse this tendency and promote the city’s renaissance in a context of decreasing public spending, the city joined forces with business owners to come up with private solutions to the problem of a decaying urban landscape. The creation of business improvement districts (BIDs) represents one way for the city to privatize sanitation, streetscaping, and security throughout the five boroughs. Strongly promoted by NYC’s current mayor, Michael R. Bloomberg, BIDs have played a key role in the city’s urban revitalization since former mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s quality-of-life program and its promotion of “clean and safe streets.” In 1991, a *New York Times* article underlined the BIDs’ role in relieving “their neighborhoods of grime and crime” (“When City Hall fails,” 1991). In fact, providing sanitation services for their districts is a core mission of BIDs, which spend 23% of their annual budget on sanitation—over \$22.2 million in 2009. Although BIDs may, by law, only supplement, not substitute for, city services, sweepers with the BIDs have become fundamental to keeping the city clean, picking up trash, sweeping sidewalks, removing graffiti and stickers, and shoveling snow. In 2009, the BIDs’ 612 in-house and contracted sanitation workers provided over 3,000 blocks with sanitation services and collected over 2.55 million trash bags (New York City Small Business Services, 2009). But while their fundamental role in New York’s urban renewal is widely acknowledged, BIDs have also been confronted with sharp criticism from scholars, community organizations, and unions (see, for example, Adler, 2000a, 2000b; McArdle, 2001). Critical scholars draw attention to the role BIDs play in an increasingly authoritarian local political regime, the privatization of previously public spaces, and the policing of urban areas through the removal of those individuals whose activities and looks do not fit in with the image-building exercises being conducted: homeless people, prostitutes, street vendors, panhandlers, squeegee cleaners, squatters, and graffiti artists (see, for example, Bannister, Fyfe, & Kearns, 2006; Smith,

1998, 2001). These are the populations identified as being at the core of urban decay in *Police Strategy No. 5*, a document by former mayor Rudolph Giuliani and police commissioner William J. Bratton, which was dedicated in 1994 to “Reclaiming the public spaces of New York.” *Police Strategy No. 5* was based on the “broken windows theory” put forward by conservative social scientists Wilson and Kelling (1982), according to whom minor forms of disorder such as defacement with graffiti, littering, panhandling, prostitution, and breaking windows will result in neighborhood decline and increased serious criminal activity if left unattended. Monitoring urban environments and maintaining them in a well-ordered condition are thus seen as the most effective means of crime prevention. BIDs have become the city’s major partners in the implementation of *Police Strategy No. 5*—including the criminalization of homelessness—and of quality-of-life policies as a means of reversing urban decline in their districts. Thus, they have a regulatory function in the criminalization and displacement of homeless people through collaboration with local police, and through the provision of security guards and “social services” whose main goal is to “clean” the streets of the homeless. In fact, numerous BIDs provide what they promote as “homeless services,” consisting mostly of providing shelters and food distribution centers for the homeless (“When City Hall fails,” 1991). At the same time, community organizations have denounced BIDs for chasing homeless individuals from public spaces. Also, unions and other labor organizations have been accusing BIDs of exploiting a cheap sanitation workforce while giving out generous salaries to their presidents (Lambert, 1995; Lasdon, 1998; Stout, 1995). In fact, some BIDs recruit homeless people to work for \$1 to \$1.50 per hour as trainees in custodial, office, security, and laundry jobs as part of their social service programs. Others hire sanitation workers at the minimum wage (\$7.25/hour), which, according to a study conducted by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (2010), requires a person in New York to work 132 hours per week in order to afford a two-bedroom dwelling at the median price. And even though some BIDs pay up to \$10 per hour, this is still only half of what municipal sanitation workers earn in their first year, currently \$31,200, rising to \$67,141/year after five and a half years of service. According to some sanitation workers, experienced workers with DSNY make up to \$90,000/year with overtime and extra shifts. They also have health care benefits and full retirement benefits after 20 years of service. In contrast, workers with the BIDs don’t always have health care benefits and pension plans and their jobs are precarious. According to the chief of operations of the Flatiron 23rd Partnership, a BID in lower midtown Manhattan, flexibility with respect to cleaning staff is one reason why the BID contracts sanitation services out to a private maintenance company: “They give more workers when more are needed, less when less are needed.”

Whether it is through social service programs, contracting out, paying the minimum wage, or collaborating with work training programs, BIDs have been able to provide sanitation at a third of what it would cost the city (Jacobs, 1996).

Most importantly, BIDs have found the perfect solution to the “problem of the homeless” in their districts: they hire homeless people through in-house contracts or in collaboration with social service or work training programs to sweep the streets at low cost and increase the “quality of life” of those whose presence in the urban space is legitimate: tourists, shoppers, residents, business owners. “The city can only do so much” is the credo of city officials and representatives of the BIDs and the work training programs alike when it comes to street cleaning. In contrast, the homeless can do a lot—and they do it for little money.

### **Work Training Programs for the Homeless: Redemption through Work**

Shelter and Match (fictional names) are New York City’s two major work training programs for the homeless actively participating in street sweeping. Some of the city’s BIDs have a long tradition of collaborating with Shelter, a private nonprofit organization founded in 1985. Shelter is sponsored by individual, corporate, and foundation sponsors and by federal and local government grants. The organization provides housing and job training for formerly homeless men. Program participants are referred by the NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS)—some of Shelter’s residential facilities are part of the DHS system—from corrections and veterans’ affairs. Most have a history of imprisonment and/or drug addiction, some are war veterans, and 69% were African American and 27% were Hispanic in 2011. The high percentage of African American and Hispanic men in Shelter’s program reflects the hyperincarceration of lower-class racialized males in the United States reported by Wacquant (2010a). This author argues that neoliberalism builds simultaneously on the replacement of the protective welfare state with disciplinary workfare and the development of the penal state as a means for government “to impose insecure labor as the normal horizon of work for the unskilled fractions of the postindustrial laboring class” (Wacquant, 2010a: 74). In fact, as Wacquant shows, inmates of U.S. prisons are overwhelmingly poor people from the precarious sections of the urban working class, homeless people, the mentally ill, and the alcohol and drug addicted from deprived neighborhoods. They are also overwhelmingly African American and Hispanic—and they form the bulk of Match and Shelter’s program participants.

In 2010, 400 exclusively male sweepers participating in Shelter’s “community improvement project”—the organization’s official name for the street sweeping program—collected 9,250 tons of garbage and maintained 150 miles of streets every day. In 2006, the New York City Department of Small Business Services presented Shelter with an award for the “excellent services” provided to the city through its community improvement project. Ironically, the award—signed by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and on display in one of Shelter’s residential facilities—was accompanied by a photograph showing street sweepers from the



city's former Department of Street Sweeping: those same municipal sanitation workers who have since been displaced by private sweepers.

Match, a nonprofit organization founded in 1992 in Manhattan's SOHO, participates in street sweeping with 50 men and women, 85% of whom are African American or Hispanic. In all, 25% of program participants are female. Match only just started collaborating with BIDs, and the organization is 99% privately funded by local business owners and residential partners. In 2010, Match's program participants logged 54,990 hours sweeping the streets, collected 200,000 bags of trash, and removed 1,440 tons of debris and litter from city streets.

Although sanitation work done by Shelter and Match has become fundamental to keeping New York City clean, sweepers with the two programs don't have employee status. They share the fate of most workfare participants, who are not entitled to basic protection under the Fair Labor Standards Act and therefore don't have a legal right to the minimum wage (Ellis, 2003). Constructed as nonemployee personnel by Shelter and Match rhetoric (Benelli, 2012), they are "trainees" (Shelter) or "clients" (Match) and are paid a "training incentive" (Shelter) or a "stipend" (Match). Sweepers with Shelter are guaranteed 30 working hours a week. They start at \$7.40/hour, which is raised to \$8.50 after four months. Half of the money goes into a mandatory savings program, and participants receive it only on the condition that they successfully complete the program, find full-time employment and an apartment, and are drug-free. Participants with Match spend 20 to 24 hours each week sweeping streets and removing trash. Daily work schedules include four days of four hours and one day of eight hours. Sweepers are paid \$6/hour, but like Shelter participants they receive only part of the money, starting at \$3.15/hour during the first month and having this raised to \$4.15 after four months. They receive the rest of their stipend on the condition that they find full-time employment and are able to keep it: one third at graduation, one third 30 days after graduation, and one third 60 days after graduation. According to representatives of the two organizations, the mandatory savings program works as an "incentive" for participants not only to stay in the program but also to do what is necessary to successfully complete it, by looking actively for full-time employment, staying drug-free—regular drug testing is a common practice in both programs—and, in the case of Shelter, finding housing. Furthermore, participants pay for what Shelter calls "room and board" as a way of teaching them how to spend their money in a reasonable way. The underlying assumptions here are that poor, racialized individuals are not willing to look for employment unless they risk economic sanctions and that they need to learn how to spend money parsimoniously and put part of it into savings (Delgado & Gordon, 2002). Shelter's director of public affairs explains the organization's policy with respect to participants' monetary penalties, and obligations:

Before, their [program participants'] rewards have often come from drugs or, you know, a variety of things that aren't constructive and that the mainstream

doesn't follow, so we try to transition them into the mainstream; the offered reward is work for pay. That's what we offer. . . . [They pay what] we call . . . room and board because the idea is that the men will be paying when they leave here for room and board, for their food and shelter. But while they're with us . . . I mean the food and the shelter are paid for by the contracts with the Department of Homeless Services, so we use the money for, you know, various things. Program fees basically. We don't call it a program fee because it's, you know, . . . part of the life learning how to put this piece of money here and this piece of money here and this piece of money into savings. It's part of the financial management program.

Shelter's director of community improvement project adds program participants' "self-respect" to the organization's rationale for its monetary policy: "And it gives them a sense of self-respect as well because [they can say] 'You're not giving me this, I'm doing it myself.' Again, hugely effective."

However, what program representatives call "hugely effective" often results in precarious living conditions for sweepers. Unlike Shelter, Match does not provide housing and transportation for the sweepers, most of whom don't live in the neighborhood whose streets they clean. They come to work by subway and spend the stipend for their first working hour and half of their second on subway tickets each day. What remains of their stipend is barely enough to buy food. It certainly does not cover basic needs, and program participants depend on food stamps and Medicaid. During their interview, Big and Patty, two sweepers with Match, spoke about the impossibility of living on their stipend and the fear of losing part of their money to the organization:

It takes a strong man and a strong woman to come out of their bed in this type of weather to come to this job, just to change garbage and to walk around and knowing that you are not even paid enough every week. We only get a stipend. And what's so bad about this, . . . you're only getting three dollars an hour or four dollars an hour and you only get 90 dollars a week, and the other half of my money is being put away and I have to find a full-time job. I'm seven months already here and I'm not gonna let half of my money go to the bank account. I'm gonna get my money. . . . The money we get every Thursday, it's just enough to eat something and to go get coffee. Thirty dollars a week for the Metrocard. That's half of my check. If I didn't have public assistance, which is cash money, or food stamps, I wouldn't survive this job. . . . We're only working 25 to 30 hours a week, so you figure five dollars an hour, which is . . . under minimum wage. Way under minimum wage. So you make five dollars an hour, 30 hours a week. That's no more than 150, maybe less. That's kid money. (Big, 38 years old, living in the South Bronx with his sick mother)

The only thing that is really bad about this [program] is you have to pay to get here. And pay to get back [home]. They don't furnish your fare to get from one place to the other. You got to furnish that yourself. . . . You got to ride here to work, you got to pay to get your money, whatever. Either way you look at

it, you got to pay all the way around. (Patty, 50 years old, living in a homeless shelter in Manhattan)

Although sweepers with Match and Shelter would like to work more hours in order to increase their stipend, they're not allowed to. Representatives of Shelter and Match stress the importance of program participants not getting "too comfortable" with the program. Match limits their working hours to 24 per week during a maximum of eight months. The person in charge of Match's education program stated that "if they don't find work within six months, it goes up to eight months. Then they're weaned off of working on the crew so they're not receiving that stipend anymore. We don't want people to get too comfortable, you know, doing the work and earning a stipend." Shelter also sets a limit on the hours sweepers can put into work. But while limiting program participants' working hours, both organizations put forward the idea of redemption through work for the homeless. A poster in one of Shelter's Harlem facilities reads "Work is love made visible." By sweeping the streets, program participants are supposed to get "a second chance" in life—a life often marked by a difficult childhood, a violent and/or absent father, an alcoholic mother, drugs, crime, and homelessness—and "give back to [the] community." Sweeping the streets not only helps them acquire "healthy work habits" that should then allow them to find a job in the mainstream economy, but it is also a way for them to give back to the community the generosity it shows by funding the programs. Match's director of development pointed out the sense of the organization's street sweeping activity and how it helps former homeless individuals to "get back into society":

It [street sweeping] sort of came out organically. There's a need in the city the department of sanitation just can't handle, especially down here because we get so many shoppers, tourists, which is great, but they leave their mark. And so because there's that need we have a crew of men and women who want to work. They want to serve the society. So it just started and it makes a lot of sense. And also what's so great is that talking to our clients and also talking to the clients of Shelter [I understood that], you know, for so long they were homeless and they're almost . . . you'll be out in the streets and people would just walk right by, you feel like you don't even exist. But now that they're giving back to [the] community, they're doing something; people stop and they say, "Oh, thanks so much. It looks great!" Like those little gestures, the good mornings: that really brings them back into society. Now they're neighbors, now they're among the work community.

Viewed as individuals who are in debt to society, they have to redeem themselves through doing "dirty work" in order to earn the right to a potential future salary and a life as a valued member of society. Like welfare recipients in general, Match and Shelter program participants tend to accept and internalize their symbolic profanation (Goldberg, 2003). A Shelter participant explained how sweeping the streets has helped him get his life back on track:

I did sweeping the streets for 90 days. So during that time I had a lot of time to . . . think. You get to think a lot because, you know, I never thought I'd be doing something like that. I was always thinking I would finish my degree, become a doctor. Make money. I'd never think I'd be set back, this far back where all my friends are ahead of me now. They graduate in college. They're married. So I got to reflect a lot. Deep times, deep thoughts. . . . So now I'm off the streets. I'm in the computer lab. But the whole 90, 90 days was like a thinking period. A process of . . . finding myself again. Why I'm here and make sure that when I go back to Oklahoma City to value my family and friends and what's there. You know, finding a good job, good living, a car . . . stuff like that. So . . . it taught me the power of the dollar.

The idea of redemption through work is also present in the discourse of program participants presented on the organizations' Web sites and of those who represent the organizations at public events. At a graduation ceremony in March 2011, a former Shelter program participant told the graduates and the general audience in a touching speech how sweeping the streets had changed his life:

At the orientation [they told me] it was time to put on the uniform and go to work. [*Laughter from the public*] I was sceptical and said, "I ain't pushin' this bucket." [*Laughter from the public*] But . . . something happened doing the first few blocks. It turned out I didn't mind at all. In fact, I kind of liked it. And not before long I started to realize . . . I wasn't just picking up trash from the streets. I was picking up integrity. I was picking up values, morals, and principles. [*Applause and cheering from the public*] I was picking up . . . SELF-ESTEEM! [*Applause from the public*] And then, when I would look back down the block I'd just cleaned I would see what a great job I had done . . . and I realized, I realized that I had been picking up pride. [*Voice from the public: Right!*] I picked up pride. [*Applause from the public*] But most of all I picked up dignity. That's something for a homeless person.

### WHITE WORKING-CLASS HEROES VERSUS DESERVING MINORITY SWEEPERS

Discourse on public and private sanitation workers is overwritten by class, gender, and racial norms. Sanitation jobs in DSNY are promoted as middle-class jobs allowing male blue-collar workers without college degrees and their families to lead a middle-class life. Municipal sanitation workers are able to provide for their wives and children, own a house and a respectable car, and send their children to college. Quoted in a book on the history of Local 831, the Uniformed Sanitationmen's Association, the union's president, Harry Nespoli, stresses family as one of the most important values of his union and "the guys": "Our guys, well, they can take care of their families. That's what it's all about, family" (Rice, 2009: 192). Municipal sanitation workers are constructed as dedicated husbands, fathers, and citizens who sacrifice themselves for their families and their city by working a dirty and dangerous job. Contrary to popular belief, being a sanitation worker in

New York City is in fact three times more dangerous than being a police officer or a firefighter. Nationwide, the fatal work injury rate for sanitation workers was 29.8 deaths per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers in 2010, while the average rate for all workers was 3.6 per 100,000 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

Sanitation workers themselves overwhelmingly specify the security and stability of municipal jobs as the explanation of why they “chose” to become sanitation workers at some point in their lives:

My motivation honestly to take the test was . . . city jobs to me are stable. They’re long term, they’re stable. It’s, you know, a good pension, benefits. That’s my main reason for taking the job. (Sanitation worker, 31 years old, with DSNY since August 2008, married, two children)

A female sanitation worker whose family didn’t want her to “pick up garbage” stresses the pride she has in her husband, also a sanitation worker, for his hard work and what he does for the city:

It’s also different for my family because my husband is a sanitation worker also. I guess they accept it more now because they see that he goes to work, he works hard, he comes home. Maybe they just thought of it as, oh, you know, Christina is a sanitation worker, she picks up garbage, you know. Maybe it’s because I’m a woman. But I’m proud of my husband. I’m proud of the fact that he helps the city. (Sanitation worker, 31 years old, with DSNY since 2001, married, one baby son)

Union discourse further depicts sanitation workers as rebellious individuals who fight for their rights and deserve to be respected (Rice, 2009). In an interview he gave to the *Daily News* (September 23, 2009), Kevin Rice, author of the history of the Uniformed Sanitationmen’s Association, stated that while he was working on the book he “learned that they really are heroes.” In contrast, rebellion among people from minority groups is often viewed as insubordination and as a threat to the social order (Steinberg, 2001). The symbolic construction of municipal sanitation workers—who are called “New York’s Strongest”—further focuses on a positive masculinity based on the physical strength needed in the daily battle against garbage, dirt, and snow. In 1996, New York’s City Council decided to honor the city’s sanitation workers by naming a stretch of Worth Street in Manhattan the “Avenue of the Strongest.” Asked why sanitation workers are called the Strongest and not, for example, the Cleanest, department officials said, “Anyone can be clean, but not anyone can make 13,000 tons of garbage disappear every day.” The name change was decided on after a series of snowstorms had hit the city and sanitation workers had labored around the clock to clear snow from 15,000 miles of city streets and collect 100,000 tons of accumulated garbage.

In short, the symbolic construction of municipal sanitation workers focuses on white working-class heroism, a positive masculinity based on physical strength, and gender and class dignity based on willingness to fight for one’s rights and defend (white) middle-class family values. In contrast, the discourse on street

sweepers with the BIDs and work training programs is characterized by paternalism, class contempt, and racism. The BIDs' emphasis is on the "hard work" of their sanitation crew. Workers are portrayed as being proud of their work, humble, and docile. This is how the Spring 2010 newsletter of the Lincoln Square BID presents its sanitation workers, in an article with the title "Our best investment is our people": "Clean Team members are extremely proud of their work. . . . The streets of Lincoln Square are impeccably clean and attractive. . . . We owe it all to the Clean Team's hard work and dedication. They are part of our family." Quotations from sanitation workers included in the BID's newsletter stress the generosity of the people they work for: "I like to clean this area. The people who live in the neighborhood are very polite and the BID treats us well and appreciates what we do." "I like working for the community, working for the people. They thank us for a beautiful job; they thank us for keeping the streets so clean." Paid \$10/hour as a starting salary, rising to \$11.75 after five years, sanitation workers with the Lincoln Square BID are probably the BID's cheapest "family members" and thus can indeed be considered as the BID's "best investment." The Times Square Alliance, whose in-house cleaning staff partly consists of former homeless individuals, also focuses on the "hard work" of the BID's sweepers as well as the pride sweepers take in their work. Asked why the Times Square Alliance would hire homeless people to clean the streets, the BID's senior vice president of security and operations stated, "It's a way of giving back to the people who lived here before the big businesses came here. . . . We need people who work hard, people who take pride when the block looks much better after they've cleaned it, people who enjoy their job. They're outdoors 365 days. . . . We get a great workforce." In other words, hiring people who lost their homes due to the redevelopment of Times Square is a way for the BID to "clean" the district of the same individuals who still would have a home if their neighborhood had not become the target of city developers. Mitchell and Staeheli (2006: 145) have pointed out the same paradox in the case of urban redevelopment in downtown San Diego: "For proponents of downtown redevelopment, one of the crucial issues has always been—and remains—the homeless and other street people. . . . They are seen as the primary impediment to redevelopment and its success. . . . Yet at the same time, redevelopment itself exacerbates and *causes* both invisible and visible homelessness as single-room occupancy hotels are destroyed, rents rise, shelters are relocated, and services (like public toilets) closed down."

For people with Shelter and Match, street sweeping is promoted as a "second chance" for the homeless to "rebuild their lives" and become "productive" and thus deserving members of society, as opposed to undeserving welfare recipients, drug addicts, and criminals. According to Shelter and Match rhetoric, the transformation from welfare recipients to taxpayers and credit card holders, from dependent individuals to self-sufficient citizens, and from "absent" to "responsible" fathers, husbands, and partners will be achieved through sanitation work. Through sweeping streets and bagging trash, program participants are supposed to

acquire a “solid work ethic” and learn the rules and requirements of a “real” job: get to work on time, take instructions from others, deal with authority, interact with the public, and maintain the standard of the work throughout the course of the day. Thanks to these skills, they will then be able to find a job in the mainstream economy. This is how Match’s education program coordinator and Shelter’s director of its community improvement project explained the idea behind their organizations’ work training programs:

We want it to mimic a regular work experience as much as possible. So people are expected to show up on time. We say half an hour before their shift starts so that they have time to get their uniform together, to get their buckets, and, you know, get everything set up. They punch in every morning; they punch out every afternoon. It really is meant to feel like a real job. And there’s a pay check every week, so it’s not something where they’re paid at the end of every day. They’re not paid in cash; they’re given a check. And really with this work experience we hope that people are gaining whatever soft skills they’re out of habit with. So whether that’s attendance, whether it’s a really solid work ethic, whether it’s, you know, getting along with their coworkers. Whatever the case may be. So that’s also a big part of our program. (Education program coordinator, Match)

It’s a soft skill thing. It’s . . . you know, we’re taking gentlemen who like we said had not interviewed for a job, never had a job, have spent, you know, 20, sometimes even more years in prison, you know, it’s . . . it’s acclimating them to the real world, to the professional world. So it’s very very simple things like . . . simple for us but difficult for them, getting up on time, following directions, interacting with the public, you know, they obviously have to do that quite a bit and just maintain that work ethic and the standard of the work throughout the course of the day, which is sometimes difficult. (Director of community improvement project, Shelter)

The underlying message here is that if poor, homeless people are willing to “activate” themselves, for example, by going through a work training program, they will then have the requirements to “transition into the mainstream” and become productive citizens. Rather than pointing to the structural causes of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and hyperincarceration of lower-class African Americans and Hispanics in New York City, the discourse on program participants thus focuses on their individual flaws and responsibility. In addition, this rhetoric conceals the reality of neoliberal labor markets, where flexible, precarious, and underpaid employment has become the new norm for the increasingly disenfranchised sections of the postindustrial working class (Arnold, 2008). As Diller (1998) points out, PRWORA workfare policy assumes that there are jobs available to welfare recipients, but that people on public assistance choose welfare over getting a job. In fact, most of the jobs available to workfare participants—maintenance work, delivery services, work as security guards, as kitchen helpers, and so forth—don’t pay a living wage, and there’s little chance for

program participants who do find full-time employment to achieve economic independence. Following Schram et al. (2011), I thus argue that rather than seeing street sweeping as a way for the homeless to become self-sufficient, we must see it as a disciplinary device aimed at socializing homeless and other stigmatized individuals to precarious wage labor. To make the economic exploitation of the poor socially acceptable, advocates of mandatory workfare and voluntary job training programs promote a concept of human dignity based not on material security but on a “work ethic”: “Ensuring a decent standard of living is one way to help achieve it [human dignity and respect], but it’s not the only way, and not necessarily sufficient. Work is another, necessary prerequisite: Americans who leave welfare for work gain the respect our society reserves for workers, even if they gain not a cent of income” (Kaus, 2001: 1). Following Cruikshank (1999), it can be argued that disenfranchised populations such as the homeless themselves subscribe to the idea of “dignity through work” as a means to avoid the social stigma attached to welfare, economic dependency, and unemployment. During an interview, a sweeper with Match strongly criticized the program’s compensation policy. At the same time, he himself subscribed to the idea of dignity and human worth through work:

This is a job training. It’s a job to help you progress in life. It’s not paying you a whole lot of money. The money is very cheap. But that is not the priority here. Priority of this job is to motivate your mind that when you get a chance to get a full-time job and maintain it, whether it is paying a lot of money or little money, you have to know that you have to have a life. So this motivates me because I don’t know what day I might meet somebody in the street that sees my motivation to come out in this weather, you know, so that then [they say to themselves,] “That man got dignity. I need somebody like that.” So somebody’s always watching you. So that’s what makes me motivate myself to come out here, to show these people that I’m a man with dignity. . . . Now, nobody wants to get out there in the cold and sweep no streets. But somebody has to show the community that you’re clean.

By retooling the welfare state, public policy indirectly facilitates the work of organizations such as Shelter and Match, whose economic entrepreneurial and self-sufficiency programs are supposed to offer individuals “a second chance” and support them through their transition toward social and economic independence. In fact, these programs contribute to the disciplinarization of a population that never got a first chance.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I explore the partial shift from public to private street sweeping in New York City and the way it creates racial and class divisions among the overwhelmingly male sanitation workers. By addressing the working conditions and symbolic construction of New York City’s public and private street sweepers, I



show the interplay of public-sector retrenchment with the privatization of urban space and the responsabilization of disenfranchised urban subjects in the creation of racial and class divisions.

The partial privatization of street sweeping in New York City goes hand in hand with the casualization of working conditions and the exploitation of socially marginalized and, in the regenerated urban space, “undesired” homeless individuals. It takes place in the context of public-service retrenchment, high unemployment, homelessness, and the hyperincarceration of lower-class African American and Hispanic males—the very same individuals who form the bulk of the private sanitation workforce. Combining quality-of-life rhetoric with neoliberal values such as “personal responsibility,” “self-sufficiency,” and “work ethic,” the discourse on private street sweepers legitimizes the material exploitation of the lower-class minority people assigned to street sweeping.

The municipal sanitation workers with the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) are (still) primarily white. Thanks to stable employment, good working conditions and wages, health care benefits, and pension plans, jobs with DSNY grant sanitation workers and their families access to a middle-class lifestyle. In contrast, private street sweeping is precarious, underpaid, and, in the case of work training programs, stigmatized with an inferred debt to society. Street sweepers with the business improvement districts and private work training programs are overwhelmingly lower-class African American or Hispanic males with a history of homelessness, imprisonment and/or drug addiction. They are part of the marginalized, racialized, and classed populations who have become the means of getting public service work done cheaply as a low-paid or free labor force.

A Match program participant said in an interview that he didn’t understand why the organization wouldn’t hire him and the other program participants to sweep the streets for a salary. At the time of the interview, he’d been in the program for seven months without finding a full-time job. He was afraid he would lose the part of his money that had gone into Match’s mandatory savings program. It’s what he had seen happening to numerous people who had dropped out of the program. The following facts provide some contributions to an answer to his question. Since the setting-up of New York City’s work experience program (WEP)—the city’s local workfare program—in 1995, numerous WEP workers have been assigned to street sweeping. In 1996, 1,000 WEP workers were cleaning the city’s streets every day for DSNY. In 1999, there were between 2,000 and 3,000 of them, and in 2010, 13,200 WEP workers were cleaning the city’s streets of litter and snow (Department of Sanitation, 2010). In 1996, Richard Schwartz, the program’s architect, declared that “it has improved the city’s cleanliness at a modest cost” (Firestone, 1996). In 1999, the DSNY annual report stated that WEP workers were a major factor in the department’s achievement of record cleaning ratings. While it is true that sweepers with Match and Shelter aren’t exactly in the same position as WEP workers, since Match and Shelter sweepers’ participation in a work training

program is voluntary, they share the fact that the “free labor” (Krinsky, 2007) they provide is seen as a way for them to pay their debt to society. Like the WEP programs, Match and Shelter work training programs provide public and private economic actors with a cheap and easily exploitable labor force.

What options do private sector street sweepers in New York City have to better their working and living conditions? Among the factors that make it difficult for street sweepers to fight for better working and living conditions, one must be pointed out in particular: as with park maintenance (Krinsky & Simonet, 2012), street sanitation is performed by individuals with different employment statuses. Although they work side by side and often perform the same tasks, they don't have the same workplace rights. WEP workers assigned to street sweeping with DSNY or with a BID (Adler, 2000a) are welfare recipients. Since their work is legally defined as compensation for the welfare benefits they receive, they don't have employee status and are legally forbidden to unionize (Krinsky, 2007). The same is true for sweepers with voluntary work training programs such as Match and Shelter. They are considered “trainees” and are therefore not covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act minimum wage legislation; nor do they have the right to unionize. In-house sweepers with BIDs and sweepers who work for a BID but are employed by a subcontractor might both be covered by union contracts but not be paid the same wages. Adler (2000a) has shown in the case of the Madison Avenue BID that, instead of simply firing its in-house sanitation workers when Local 210 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters started organizing them, the BID agreed to contract out sanitation to the subcontractor Atlantic Maintenance Corporation, whose contract with the union called for lower wages than did the BID's contract. Since the union's contracts with the BIDs and with Atlantic Maintenance Corporation don't guarantee sweepers the same minimum wage, BIDs can use contracting as a means to put downward pressure on workers' wages.

The wide variety in employment status, workplace rights, and legal protection among New York City's street sweepers is one important barrier to labor solidarity between public and private sweepers and among private sweepers. Krinsky (2007) has shown that with regard to WEP workers, New York City's largest municipal public employee union, DC 37, chose distancing strategies—rather than labor solidarity—with respect to lower-status welfare recipients doing work formerly performed by municipal workers. In on-line forum discussions such as those to be found at [www.city-data.com/forum](http://www.city-data.com/forum), DSNY sanitation workers also show little solidarity with WEP workers, who put city jobs at risk. Solidarity with WEP workers has largely come from community organizations that started mobilizing WEP workers soon after the program's inception in 1995 (Krinsky, 2007). Despite these organizing efforts, the program expanded apace during the second half of the 1990s. However, by the end of 1997, the debate on WEP had shifted from a focus on WEP workers' rights and identity *as workers* to a focus on WEP workers as *potential workers*, whose primary needs were education, training, and childcare (Krinsky, 2007). In the case of parks maintenance, this shift resulted in the creation

in 2001 of the Parks Opportunity Program (POP), a program for welfare recipients that granted POP workers employee rights and union protection. In 2003, POP workers became Job Training Participants represented by DC 37, which also represents employees of the parks department, but in a separate section of the DC 37 organization (Krinsky & Simonet, 2009; 2012). As long as sweepers with Match and Shelter don't have employee status, they have to rely on community organizations to defend their rights. Yet, community organizations in New York City, such as the Urban Justice Center, Community Voices Heard, and the Fifth Avenue Committee, have been focusing their mobilizing efforts on mandatory workfare, while voluntary programs such as Match and Shelter seem to be more favorably considered because of their educational component and, in the case of Shelter, the provision of affordable and supportive housing. Public figures such as former New York City mayor David Dinkins and actor Ethan Hawke also publicly endorse Shelter's work training program.

From a market perspective, private maintenance companies such as Atlantic Maintenance Corporation probably have the biggest interest in better wage conditions for job training participants. In a phone conversation, one of the founders of Atlantic Maintenance Corporation stated that due to their cheap workforce, nonprofit organizations such as Match and Shelter were able to put pressure on the wages of private sector sweepers. An increase in program participants' stipends and/or protection under the Fair Labor Standards Act might in fact have a positive impact on the wages of sweepers with private maintenance companies and the BIDs. Ultimately, it is the political debate on homelessness and poverty that needs to change if we want the racialized urban poor to have better living and working conditions. Above all, this means engaging in a debate that focuses on the structural causes of unemployment, homelessness, and poverty rather than on people's individual flaws and weaknesses.

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