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Cory Booker, More Stalin Than Superhero

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After the internet erupted in response to the [heroic exploits](#) of Newark's mayor, Corey Robin (via [Ari Kohen](#)) decided to [puncture everyone's bubble](#). He culls up a passage from Slavoj Žižek on the “Supreme Genius” leader that is comically hyperbolic.* But his main point sticks:

The whole story speaks to a quintessentially American love of amateurism and cowboy theatrics, but it also speaks to our neoliberal age: like the superhero of comic-book lore, Booker is a stand-in, a compensation in this case for a public sector that doesn't work. And the reason it doesn't work—the reason we put more stock in the antics of a [Batman Mayor](#) than a well paid and well trained city employee—is that we've made it not work: through tax cuts, privatization, and outsourcing, policies that [Booker himself often supports](#).

Lefty admiration for Booker has always struck me as odd since, in most of his policies, he's the prototype for a fiercely moderate Democrat. He's repeatedly sliced the city budget significantly. His sizable police cutbacks have become [anational story](#), as the Newark crime rates creep up. (Crime data are notoriously hard to properly assess. Don't read too much causality in those NPR figures.)

And, as Robin points out, Booker has not been shy about privatizing city services. Critics in Newark are calling [his proposal](#) for an independent water agency a repeat of his failed 2010 privatization bid. They might not be far off. Plans to put water services in private hands are floating around in [Pittsburgh](#) and [Detroit](#), and whispers of the p-word surround major water infrastructure changes in [Philadelphia](#) and [Chicago](#).

Last year, Dana Goldstein profiled Booker's bold moves on education, and his particular fondness for charter schools:

Though Booker has no official control over his city's public schools, whose superintendent has reported directly to the state education commissioner since 1995, he is a longtime national advocate for a certain brand of school reform: mayoral control, opening new charter schools, providing vouchers for inner-city children to attend private schools, weakening teacher tenure and tying teacher evaluation and pay to student test scores. He sits on the advisory board of Democrats for Education Reform, which lobbies for such policies, and the \$40 million raised so far to match Zuckerberg's \$100 million grant comes from donors with a similar focus, including Bill Gates; NewSchools Venture Fund board member John Doerr, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist; and New York City banker Ravenel Curry and his wife, Elizabeth, who have a history of supporting school choice efforts and libertarian think tanks, including the Manhattan Institute and Cato Institute. Booker's older brother, Cary, is the co-founder of Omni Schools, a Memphis-based charter school operator.

In his latest budget, the number of charter schools are slated to expand 21 percent over the next five years.

This school reform, with its animosity towards unions and influx of philanthropic cash, is certainly the type of "neoliberal" stuff that frightens Robin. To his credit, Booker hasn't been disingenuous about his desire to "instill fiscal discipline." He never promised to be a liberal superhero. And his move to trim a clearly bloated City Council is certainly commendable.

Yet, with his school push and privatization plans, the Newark mayor is at the forefront of a shift toward policies whose cost-effectiveness and impact remain relatively untested and unproven.

*As a mayor who is undoubtedly unafraid to "dirty his hands," Booker may be more of a Leninist. My headline, in case it isn't obvious, is also meant to be comically hyperbolic.