

"From here to the rest of the world":  
Crime, class, and labour in David Simon's  
Baltimore.

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## ABSTRACT

### **CRIME, CLASS, AND LABOUR IN DAVID SIMON'S BALTIMORE: "FROM HERE TO THE REST OF THE WORLD".**

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Despite the systemic societal critique apparent in *The Wire*, David Simon rejects the label of marxist. However he defines himself, he is worthy of analysis as a dramatist, by virtue of the relative coherence of the left-leaning arguments expressed within his work. This thesis explores, and attempts to define this worldview, through analysis of three dramas based in Baltimore, Maryland.

*Homicide: life on the street* and *The Corner* are based on books of narrative journalism, respectively authored and co-authored by David Simon. The books also inform the narrative of *The Wire*. I attempt to track the worldview expressed through their intersecting representations of crime, class and the nature of work. All dramas are critiqued from the perspective of textual analysis rooted in literary and television studies, and influenced by, but not limited to, left critical theory.

As a secondary thread, I consider the historical and political economic context of US television, and limitations placed on such expansive dramas by the television crime genre.

These narratives are part of a worldview that develops as each text builds upon its predecessor. They reveal a worldview critical of the existing economic and social order, defined by David Simon as "unencumbered capitalism". The conclusion attempts to define this worldview and its evolution, as expressed through these connected dramas, and also briefly considers Simon's more recent dramas, *Generation Kill* and *Treme*.

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“Meaning no disrespect, but I ain't cut out to be no CEO.”

## INTRODUCTION

### “IT SEEMS TO BE A COP SHOW...”<sup>1</sup>

“You know, murder is really a legal term,” Joey said. “You should say homicide. Or slaying, maybe. That’s a word the newspaper really likes – slaying.” Great, Joey the security guard was going to instruct her in legal nuance.

“Are you studying to be a lawyer?”

“Naw, but I was an extra on *Homicide* last season. And I watch those real cop shows. You know, those shows where they arrest people on camera? They’re very educational.”

- Laura Lippman, *Baltimore Blues* (1997).

Walk into the true crime section of most bookshops and amongst taste stretching narratives of the Mafia, Charles Manson and the Kray twins, you will likely find two books by David Simon. One, *The Corner: a year in the life of an inner city neighbourhood* (1997), was co-written with a former Baltimore homicide detective called Edward Burns. The second, *Homicide: a year on the killing streets* (1991) was the result of a year spent with a shift of Baltimore homicide detectives. They are weighty books in both senses of the word, spanning several hundred pages while mixing narrative urban journalism with social, political, and economic history and analysis. They strike a discordant note, wedged among primary coloured paeans to mobsters, serial killers and tough, hardened street cops [Fig. 1]. This is particularly true of *The Corner*, an account of the war on drugs in one American city that humanises those on its receiving end. *Homicide*, on the other hand, focuses on the “rarefied species [of] thinking cop:” the homicide detective (Simon 2006a, p.18). It was the primary inspiration for *Homicide: Life on the Street*, a ratings-challenged drama broadcast by NBC in the United States from 1993 to 1999. The influence of both books, which sold modestly on publication (Simon 2006a, p.628) is also apparent, albeit more indirectly, on HBO’s *The Wire* (2002-2008).<sup>2</sup>

The first episode of *Homicide: Life on the Street* aired after the American football Superbowl in January 1993 (Kalat 1998, p.112). It carried a banner declaring that the show was based on the book *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* by David Simon, and it was to have a fraught and precarious seven year run. Network executives had difficulties with the fact that a show called *Homicide* would be short on upbeat,



happy endings. Over the course of its seven seasons they pushed for just such conclusions, tidy resolutions and more conventionally telegenic actors (Simon 2008d). They were partially successful in the latter case. Nevertheless most of the writers, directors and producers attempted to retain the basic tone of Simon's epic piece of narrative journalism. Some characters, on both sides of the law, remained clearly identifiable. Some were composites, and some went through changes of gender and skin colour to reflect the evolving expectations of the television audience. Some stories were lifted almost verbatim from Simon's book and others liberally adapted. *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* is not a tale of derring-do: it is not, on the whole, a tale of noble cops pursuing evil men who hatch dastardly schemes.



Fig 1: *Homicide* and *The Corner* (centre) in the “True Crime” section of Eason’s bookshop, Dublin.

It is an exceedingly dark piece of journalism that at times borders on the dystopic. Its pervading atmosphere of social and institutional decline is replicated, largely successfully, in the TV adaptation. The cops work in a crumbling building where the phones don't work properly, where they are under-resourced and constantly subject to conflicting instructions from the chain of command. Details of homicide calls are scribbled on pawn shop tickets instead of customised forms emblazoned with the

Baltimore police department logo. The criminals they pursue are not masterminds. They are often ill-educated, frightened perpetrators reacting in the most brutal way to the circumstances in which they have been placed. There are once idealistic cops ground down by their Sisyphus like tasks. Others doggedly cling to some form of idealism and work ethic. There are also cops who are racist and sexist, and who have little more than contempt for the community they are expected to police.

Yet, despite these continuities, to describe *Homicide: Life on the Streets* as a David Simon drama would be misleading. Aside from the acknowledgement in the end credits, and the contribution of one co-written, Emmy winning, episode in season two, he had no input into the show's early content or direction. In later seasons Simon contributed more scripts, many of which are embryonic explorations of the themes explored in greater detail in *The Corner* (HBO 2000) and *The Wire*. With a growing reputation as one of television's pre-eminent auteurs, it should be acknowledged that the TV incarnation of *Homicide* was not a Simon creation in the way that the latter dramas were. Although even here he makes clear that his contribution is part of a more collective and collaborative process:

Every single one of us, all the writers, all the actors, all the crew, all the directors; everything in our bag of tricks, it's all tools in the toolbox. It's not about how often the hammer comes out; it's about the house we're building. So, all the details are essential. The only thing I care about in the end is the house. In the writers' room at least, that's a given. (O'Rourke 2006)

While this suggests a magnanimous appreciation for the collective contribution of labour, it is equally apparent that Simon's contribution is qualitatively different. In the case of *The Wire* in particular, it is collective labour in the service of his vision. George Pelecanos reveals how the scripts were "minutely mapped out" with the final word on script inclusions and overall storyline belonging to David Simon (Talbot 2007).

A key difference is that *Homicide: life on the streets* was produced by people who had read *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*. The primary creative force in the other dramas was the person who wrote it, and who lived and worked in that world, in the case of Ed Burns, a former homicide detective. This has not simply contributed to a heightened sense of realism or dramatic naturalism, but has also decisively influenced the *The Wire's* self-imposed injunction to show the world (Simon 2005). Ed Burns would later describe how, to write credibly, "you've got to know the world... otherwise

it's just medical crap here and cop crap there and a love story" all by the numbers (Simon and Burns 2008). As a consequence *The Wire*, in particular, has been praised for its coherence, its return to the tradition of television realism, and its dissections of urban society and neo-liberal capitalism (Sheehan and Sweeney 2009; Toscano and Kinkle 2009; Kennedy and Shapiro 2012; Read 2009). It has reconfigured the boundaries of the possible for the cop show and television drama in such a way that future urban drama will inevitably be measured against its achievement. It is a drama whose scope and ambition was always possible in theory, but never seemed so in practice. Why should this have been the case?

For many television writers, the idea that a drama should convey a message or express a worldview is one to approach with suspicion or deny. In a possibly apocryphal example, the Irish dramatist Brendan Behan, when asked about the message of his play replied, "Message? What do you think I am, a bloody postman?" The comment may have been tongue in cheek, but it highlights the gulf between what has traditionally been expected of theatrical drama and its television offspring. Theatre is usually, not always with justification, expected to express something of significance, to enrich or enlighten its audience, or to speak to its time. Traditionally, television drama has been expected only to enrich advertisers (Gitlin 1994; Barnouw 1990, pp.184-186). Theatre goes usually expect demands to be made on their attention span, television viewers have not traditionally been perceived as so discerning. Why has television, in over half a century, often seemed so reticent to challenge in the same way? Of course there have been attempts to do otherwise. The fabled golden ages of both North American and British television are, if not replete, then at least liberally scattered with attempts to do just this. There are examples from what Paddy Chayefsky called the "marvellous world of the ordinary" during the first US "golden age" in the 1950s, to the British social realism of the 1960s and beyond.

Whether reflexively or consciously all television drama embodies a worldview, a way of perceiving and interpreting the organisation of the social order and the world itself. It can be coherent and consciously informed by a particular philosophical and ideological perspective. Or it can be less considered and a collection of ill-formed and half-baked propositions found lying around in the general culture. A piece of dramatic writing may strive to express a particular argument or perspective, or it may simply and unthinkingly regurgitate the assumptions and prejudices of its time and place. The latter dramas have unfortunately proved to be most prevalent.

In the United States, the period since 1990 in particular, has been characterised by a tendency to subvert and break with generic conventions. This was the year when ABC broadcast David Lynch's postmodern, kitsch, and deliberately confusing *Twin Peaks*. The years since have seen a preponderance of dramas which superficially appear more complex than much that came before. The writing appears snappier, but also weighted with knowing, self-referential irony. Modern dramas have been unafraid to confuse and challenge, and this courage often reflects the confusion and uncertainty prevailing in the world inhabited by their viewers. Much of this drama has been classified under the rubric of postmodernism. While drama should be challenging, and should confuse and disorientate where necessary, it is hard not to conclude that many of these challenges are merely puzzles with nothing at stake. Yet it also seems evident that in recent years an increasing number of US dramas, often from cable channels, have attempted more direct and coherent engagements with the social order. These range across the political spectrum from the neo-conservative torture porn of *24* (Fox 2001-2010), whose creator Joel Surnow was happy to admit his neo-conservative agenda (Mayer 2007), to more nuanced and dissident worldviews.

Many of the latter can be characterised as engagements with a globalised economy which heralded the death of small businesses unit and has threatened the viability of the middle class (Kennedy and Shapiro 2012, pp.150-151). For example, David Chase's *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007) was always much more than another mafia story. It was a treatise on family, communal identity, and the thin line between different modes of capital accumulation. What Tony perpetrated in New Jersey was a microcosm of what was occurring globally under the rubric of globalisation, even as the same forces threatened the viability of the family. David Milch's *Deadwood* (HBO 2004-2006) revisited the myths of the American west, minus personal hygiene and perennial blue skies. The pioneers were small businessmen too: robber barons and sociopaths contending with allegorical globalisation as the federal government encroached into their primitive capitalist Eden. Series as diverse as *Six Feet Under* (HBO 2001-2005) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB 1997-2001, UPN 2001-2003) explored the contradiction at the heart of sunny California through the eyes of those who, in contrasting ways bury the bodies in the golden state.

The thrust toward more ambitious, potentially resonant stories was not confined to the cable channels. *The Office* (NBC 2004-2013), in its early years a superior remake of a British original, showed the death of aspiration, dearth of talent and ultimately

farical nature of the corporate entity. *Lost* (ABC 2004-2010) traded on its fragmented, postmodern and polysemic storyline, but could be read in so many ways that ultimately no reading was viable or definitive, which seemed to be the point. The other point was seemingly to spin out a narrative that would keep viewers coming back indefinitely. The Capraesque and paternalistic *The West Wing* (NBC 1999-2006), with “its *Father Knows Best* tonality” (Simon 2006c) had moments of insight but more often possessed the complexity of a school civics lesson. Genuine dissidence, in the shape of anti-corporate globalisation protesters, or those opposing a US centred worldview, was treated with disdain and ridicule.

Television programming in the period of network dominance from the late 1940s to the early 1980s (Edgerton 2008, p.2) was aimed towards a putative white audience, of varying levels of affluence. The shows themselves largely normalised the values of the white working and middle class, who were often members of strong unions. They were also the beneficiaries of the post-New Deal settlement, which included a rudimentary welfare state, social security and institutionalised collective bargaining. This is the social compact repeatedly referred to by David Simon, as the compromise created in the tension between capital and labour. It seemed unassailable until the 1970s. Then the juggernaut of neoliberalism emerged from the University of Chicago, the sun-belt states of the North American south and west (Davis 1986, pp.157-180), and the New York fiscal crisis of 1974 (Harvey 2005, pp.44-45). An accommodation between the forces of capital and labour, apparently settled for almost two generations was dismantled. Unions were broken, wages and benefits slashed, and jobs outsourced to countries with fewer labour regulations and restrictions on the right to accumulate. The impact on Baltimore, a “second-tier city, of a forgotten rustbelt America,” was devastating (Simon 2004, p.10). Its working class was driven into the underclass. The African-American component, which tended to be concentrated in less unionised and less-skilled sectors, became the workforce for a drug economy rooted in “redistribution through violence” (Harvey 2005, p.48). The assumption “that the basic grinding economic problems had been solved in the United States” was proven to be a lie (Harrington 1962). A game that some may have believed to have been honourably settled between equally matched forces was shown to have been decisively weighted in favour of capital the whole time.

*Homicide: Life on the Street* with or without Simon's direct input, attempted to advance the crime drama, by depicting the progression of urban dissolution during this

period. It was thematically darker than many cop shows, but was not unique in this respect, and *Hill Street Blues* (NBC 1981-1987) was an identifiable influence. The credit sequence was practically devoid of music, with the actors shown in high contrast and not immediately recognisable as the characters they portrayed. It did not seek to teach moral lessons or buttress the assumption that good guys would always win or bad guys receive their comeuppance. Many crimes went unsolved while others were resolved ambiguously. Nevertheless it was under constant pressure from the network to be more viewer-friendly. The final product was a compromise, where thoughtful explorations of societal failings often jostled for space with run-of-the-mill relationship based sub-plots. What remains impressive is that the drama itself rarely feels compromised, and it represented a more fundamental challenge to the genre than its more successful contemporaries, like *Law and Order* (NBC 1990-2010), and *NYPD Blue* (ABC 1993-2005). Unsurprisingly, its lack of ratings success was not unconnected to its iconoclasm. *Homicide* reflects the tentative and faltering steps that crime dramas, from *Hill Street Blues* onwards, have made to engage with the changing nature and public perception of police work. Most importantly, police work is presented as just that: work. There are bosses and workers. The chain of command is invoked, but clearly had more in common with a corporate bureaucracy than with what is normally understood as a military type command structure.

The portrayal of the urban environment, from *Hill Street Blues* onwards is not one where violence is a containable aberration but where it has become an unchangeable part of urban existence. This violence needs to be beaten down by men, and few women, who do what needs to be done. It may not be pretty, it may sometimes be unfair, but it is necessary to keep the chaos from your door, because this is as much as can be achieved. There is no possibility of reform or resolution. The word urban becomes synonymous with guns, grime and gangs, all of which are unsubtly coded as not white, and whose connotations are almost exclusively negative. In *Homicide* there is also a sense that much of the violence is inevitable. The difference is that its source material tries to explain the provenance of the violence and to give some impression of the life of the city apart from shootings, stabbings and overdoses.

Most directly the television adaptation of *Homicide* mines the book for many of its early stories and characters. The nature of the cases adapted, and the ambience and texture of the detectives' working lives, also provide it with a unique style. This is especially apparent in early seasons and David Simon would later describe it as a "very

strange stepchild”, separate from, but similar to, the book (Rose 1999). He would join the writing staff in its fourth season, later serving not only as writer but as story editor and producer. This coincides with the drama’s move to a slightly more conventional, television friendly style, despite which it retained complexity and resistance to tidy narrative resolution. This is where David Simon served his apprenticeship as a television dramatist before moving to HBO to dramatise *The Corner* and develop *The Wire*. It is on the back of these three dramas, particularly the last, that his books of narrative journalism have received their belated popularity.<sup>3</sup>

*Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* initially appears an attempt to provide insight into the lives and work of homicide detectives, but it becomes apparent that the author's intention ranges much further. Threaded through accounts of cases solved and unsolved are treatises on the nature and history of policing in Baltimore, and tracts of social analysis. By focusing so exclusively on murder investigation, Simon is to a certain extent able to circumvent some of the more troubling and coercive aspects of policing. That he is aware of these aspects is apparent throughout. There is an extended riff on the right to silence which ends by concluding that its only relevance to the police is the extent to which a suspect can be coerced into relinquishing it (Simon 2006a, p.209). It is equally apparent in the observation that, in a free and democratic country, a police officer has the right to take a life, in a premeditated fashion, “as an act of personal deliberation” (Simon 2006a, p.113). Yet he also seems to perceive homicide detection as a discreet entity, and as the preserve of “that rarefied species, of thinking cop.” His choice focus here is an early indication of a valorisation of skilled, artisanal labour that becomes more apparent in his later work.

*The Corner* pursues a similar approach while recounting a year in the lives of those living in the vicinity of one Baltimore drug corner. Their lives are pored over and accounted with care, humour and precision. It is important to note that David Simon and Ed Burns did not simply adopt an undifferentiated focus on random drug addicts and minor dealers. They focussed deliberately on one particular extended family who despite their problems remain capable of conceptualising and commenting on their own predicament. Again, the book is peppered with extended essays on the nature of the drug war, on welfare and the failing education system. These are more complex and nuanced than those in *Homicide*, and more engaged with the unfolding dissolution of urban Baltimore, and the United States. *The Corner* attempts to speak for the surplus labour of American capitalism. They are the raw material for the criminal justice

system, and exist as either cautionary tale, or objects of righteous anger in much police drama. Some escape the cycle of addiction and incarceration but, pre-empting *The Wire*, these outcomes are marginal. *The Corner*, as both a specific place and as a marker of another (“the other”) America, continues on as before.

### THE WORLDVIEW OF DAVID SIMON

In 1988, the same year David Simon spent embedded with the Baltimore Homicide Unit, another journalist was similarly immersed in an American subculture. In this case it was sports writer H.G. “Buzz” Bissinger. The resulting book *Friday Night Lights*, published in 1991, chronicled a year in the life of a Texan High School football team. It was a study of the culture of American football, and of class, race, and politics in a recession-hit industrial city. The declining oil town was the predominantly white Odessa, Texas, a city where Democrats and liberals seem to be a rare and endangered species. On the surface, it appears only marginally more hostile an environment to the liberal Bissinger, than the homicide department was to David Simon. It inspired two television dramas, the latter of which remains one of the most critically acclaimed series of recent years, predictably experiencing consistently low ratings.<sup>4</sup> In 2012, Bissinger endorsed the Republican candidate Mitt Romney for President of the United States (Bissinger 2012). His trajectory forms an interesting contrast to that of David Simon.

Bissinger’s support for Romney seems to be less an endorsement of the Republican, than a protest vote and rejection of Obama. Nevertheless, it is obviously not a rejection from the left of the political spectrum. Even taken at face value as a protest, such a decision indicates the lapse into pessimism and misanthropy that often characterises a shift to the right. David Simon, by contrast, had earlier berated Romney’s self-congratulation at his own supposed tax compliance:

Am I supposed to congratulate this man? Thank him for his good citizenship? Compliment him for being clever enough to arm himself with enough tax lawyers so that he could legally minimize his obligations?

...

I can’t get over the absurdity of this moment, honestly: Hey, I never paid less than thirteen percent. I swear. And no, you can’t examine my tax returns in any more detail. But I promise you all, my fellow American



citizens, I never once slipped to single digits. I'm just not that kind of guy.  
God.  
This republic is just about over, isn't it? (Simon 2012d)

Simon later reflected on Obama's re-election, which he welcomed, but less for what it meant in terms of domestic policy than on the significance of Romney's defeat. He describes the victory as "the death of normal", and the end of a period in which "anyone but a fool tries to play - on a national level, at least - the cards of racial exclusion, of immigrant fear, of the patronization of women and hegemony over their bodies, of self-righteous discrimination against homosexuals" (Simon 2012e).

However, Simon's worldview is more nuanced than that of a liberal, Obama supporting Democrat. While Ken Tucker (2007) is undoubtedly guilty of hyperbole in describing Simon as "the most brilliant marxist to write a TV drama", the latter is at least conversant with it as an alternative worldview. Responding to a question about marxism on his blog, he described himself as "a capitalist, and a democratic socialist," who feels that the two "are not in any way incompatible to someone who believes that it is in the tension between those two imperatives that real progress exists" (Simon 2012e). Furthermore, his understanding of marxism is not a caricatured one, and he claims more than passing knowledge of Marx's *Capital*. Nonetheless he draws a distinction between the merits of a marxist critique of capitalism, and "the marxist solution", which needs to be resisted:

Having read *Capital* and much commentary on it, and having borne witness as a citizen of a republic in which the impulse toward utilitarian, representative government is so handily purchased and obscured by capital, I am ready to concede that some of the fundamental Marxist critiques of free-market capitalism have not yet been successfully answered. The Marxist arguments against the excesses of free markets - of an economic imperative that, when left untethered to any social compact, produces little other than wealth itself and guarantees no positive utilitarian effect other than wealth - remain sound.

But if I come to some grudging respect for Marxist diagnostics, I can have little regard for Marxist therapies and prescriptions. Capitalism has the formidable advantage of actually working in creating mass wealth in a way that all practical application of Marxist theory in the past century does not actually work in any but the palest and most mediocre way. (ibid.)

It seems evident that the marxist solutions to which he refers are state controlled economies like the former Soviet Union, and similar experiments in the European east, China and Cuba. These are places habitually described as communist, despite their varied historical contexts, and the diverse trajectories by which they arrived at their varied forms of government. Nonetheless, when David Simon declares that he is not a marxist, he has some understanding of what the “marxist solution” involves, making it clear that the impulse for “to each according to his needs” is not there (Mills 2007a). However, he simultaneously believes that “raw, unencumbered capitalism ... absent any social framework, absent any sense of community, without regard to the weakest and most vulnerable classes in society” is a “recipe for needless pain, needless human waste, needless tragedy” (ibid). This perspective is identifiably close to European social democracy, where the traditional role of the state has been to protect the public from the worst excesses of capitalism. In effect, this amounted to protecting capitalism from itself. In recent years, this model has ceased to exist as European social democratic parties, embraced neoliberalism and began dismantling their welfare states. This process had begun prior to the recent and ongoing financial crisis and depression, in the wake of which capitalism has become even more unencumbered. The space for reform has been rendered increasingly miniscule, partly because, as Simon has understood, the political process has been bought by the lobbyists of capital itself (Simon 2013a).

Nevertheless, his worldview is characterised by a systemic understanding of the deterioration of the social order, eschewing a liberal tendency to view issues as discreet and unconnected. This perspective seems to have been generalised and developed from his experiences on the streets, as a crime reporter and through embedding with both the police and drug users. Conceived from the bottom up, this perspective and the narratives that emerge from it are seen from the point of view of labour and middle management. They are crucial to his evolution as a television writer, something David Simon had no desire to be. He intended to live out his days as a journalist “bumming cigarettes from young reporters and telling lies about what it was like working with H. L. Mencken and William Manchester” (Hornby 2007). That this proved impossible is largely due to the intrusion of the “vagaries of Wall Street” into the world of journalism (Simon 2008b). What he perceived as the complex social contract that exists between newspapers was destroyed by the cash nexus and the share price. The version of newspaper history he put forward at a US congressional hearing in 2009 suggests as an alternative, a locally engaged, moderate Mom and Pop capitalism:

When locally based family-owned newspapers like the *Sun* were consolidated into publicly owned newspaper chains, an essential dynamic, an essential trust between journalism and the community served by that journalism was betrayed ... Where family ownership might have been content with ten or 15 percent profit, the chains demanded double that and more. (Democracy Now 2009)

His perception of the role of the individual journalist, including his own, also seems idealised, if expressed in a slightly more tongue-in-cheek manner. Speaking about the momentous journalism of his youth, he describes how:

Emerging from childhood, I had seen Halberstam and Hersh take apart the fraudulent premises and practices of Vietnam, then followed daily as my hometown paper brought down Nixon for stealing an election and lying about it. (ibid.)<sup>5</sup>

By twenty-three years of age, he was the youngest reporter at the *Baltimore Sun*, “covering ghetto murders, drug raids, and four-car fatals” (ibid.). His self-perception seems characterised by a hint of self-deprecating machismo. Roger Sabin describes how Simon seems to envision a return to journalism as some sort of “Boys Own” adventure (2011, p.146).

Simon’s solutions for the survival of the newspaper industry seem pragmatic rather than radical, and rooted in regulation. He believes that there is no alternative to professional paid journalism as a consistent provider of first-generation news coverage. To help newspapers reclaim some lost revenue, he supports paywalls for online access (Simon 2009d). There is no sense in his proposal of nostalgia for the roar of the printing press and the smell of ink. Rather, it is a model of the future that seems to take for granted that large areas of employment in the newspaper industry, like printing and physical distribution, will cease to exist.<sup>6</sup> Paid journalism, for Simon, does not necessarily imply a for-profit model. He suggests that the United States government seriously pursue options for non-profit status for newspapers, especially “if that model allows for locally based ownership and control for news organisations” (Democracy Now 2009).<sup>7</sup> He also believes that the government should “consider relaxing certain antitrust prohibitions, so that the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and various other newspapers can openly discuss protecting copyright from aggregators and plan an industry-wide transition to a paid online subscriber base” (ibid.).

As counter-intuitive as this latter proposal may seem, it is clearly compatible with a reformed, regulated capitalism. So far as David Simon is concerned the consequences of the decline in news gathering is about more than the diminution of an imagined citizenry. It is about the disappearance and erasure of entire narratives, not through suppression, but simply because the resources do not exist to bear witness to them:

In a city in which half the adult black males are without consistent work, the poverty and social services beat was abandoned. In a region where unions are imploding and the working class eviscerated, where the bankruptcy of a huge steel manufacturer made thousands lose medical benefits and pensions, there was no longer a labor reporter. And though it's one of the most violent cities in America, the Baltimore criminal courts went uncovered for more than a year. (ibid.)

The prospect for the political and economic shift necessary to bring about the necessary change seems increasingly distant, and informs the pessimism in much of his writing. When asked, in 2006, if he thought social and political change were possible, he answered, “No, I don’t. Not within the current political structure” (O’Rourke 2006). While this appears to preclude any possibility of reform, he also frequently speaks of a reinvigorated New Deal, and strong unions, as counterweights to “unencumbered capitalism”. “Labour unions gave us our power,” he argued in a 2011 lecture at the University of North Carolina, referring to the working and middle class with whom he still seems to identify. “Every day that labour loses in this country, human beings are worth less” (Honors Carolina 2011). All of this suggests that his problem is not with capitalism per se, but with its neoliberal deregulated manifestation. His critique is rooted in an understanding that the current lengthy crisis is systemic, but he sees neither a way past it nor a way back to a previous period.

## CONCLUSION

The three dramas that form the primary focus in the coming chapters engage with the impact on the life of a city in a world where labour seems to lose every day. *Homicide: life on the street*, *The Corner*, and *The Wire* are all based in Baltimore but the faithfulness of that city’s representation is less interesting than what is represented

within it. All three are distinct from each other. *Homicide*, for all that it strains against network and audience expectations, remains identifiable as not only a cop show, but a product of the United States television networks. It is written with a certain seasonal length and trajectory in mind, and combines two and three part storylines with more self-contained narratives. Its episodes are also noticeably written with advertisement breaks in mind, with each section ending on a mini-climax. *The Corner* is raw and uncompromising and, befitting an early example of original HBO drama, glories in being “not TV”. *The Wire* is also superficially recognisable as a cop show, but like its HBO forebear happily eschews most of the expected formal and thematic expectations. It is not written to advertising breaks, it largely rejects cliff-hanger endings and its concerns are far greater than who shot who on what street corner for whatever reason.

Yet, what all three dramas have in common is a commitment to representing the urban environment in a substantial, sustained and engaged way. They are helped in this respect by their being filmed, not on soundstages, but on the locations with which their fictional narratives engage. This engagement coalesces around a distinctive preoccupation with the nature of crime, class politics and location, and the nature of work itself within the neoliberal social order. Given that these urban dramas are about the United States and in particular a majority black city, race is often a determining factor, but never in a simplistic, reductive way. While these principle themes are sometimes attenuated in *Homicide* and *The Corner*, they are prominent throughout and central to the depiction of the social order revealed in *The Wire*. Consequently, the representation of crime, class and labour, central to Simon’s writing from the *Baltimore Sun* onwards is also crucial to understanding the evolution of his worldview.

When *The Wire* was first recommended to me, it sounded like just one more cop show based in the ghetto, or another hyped HBO drama, most of which had left me unmoved. There were drug dealers, drug fiends and the cops trying to bring them down. I was initially underwhelmed by what seemed to be another cop show traipsing across the same gritty, urban terrain previously trodden by *Homicide*, *NYPD Blue*, and contemporaneously by *The Shield*. It did strike me as unusually digressive and naturalistic for a cop show, but it was a cop show nonetheless. Like some of HBO’s much vaunted output, it seemed to fulfil its injunction to be “not TV”, primarily by smearing a visual and aural patina of urban grease and grit across established genres.

Admittedly, it did not *look* like other cop shows and from the very first scene there was the hint of something different and more expansive. Yet the history of

television drama is littered with shows that promise much and ultimately deliver little. It is true that by this point US television drama was being touted as the best in the world. *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), and *Six Feet Under* had preceded *The Wire* from the HBO stable. The distinction was that none of these, for all of their relative strengths, was consciously underpinned with a social and political argument about the direction of society. My later, more considered, reaction was that if the writers of *The Wire* were not marxists, then at the very least, their engagement with the social order intersected with marxism.

Similarly, while recent trends within television studies have been towards discrete compartmentalised studies, Simon's work seems to require a return to more socially engaged critical approaches. Critical analysis should seek to contextualise and illuminate that which is latent within the narrative and draw attention to that which is absent. It should draw attention to the social, political and economic context for a particular drama's production, how they impact on it, and how the drama itself expresses and engages with them. Criticism should also try to reveal how the skill of a dramatist lies in their ability to draw together numerous, seemingly unrelated strands together to provide a complete picture of society. Ultimately academic researchers, fans, and other less consciously invested viewers are free to take whatever meaning they want from these stories of Baltimore. My own interest is in the nature of the story that David Simon has been developing and telling for almost twenty years. What does the oeuvre of David Simon try to communicate about the world we inhabit, especially now? How has the worldview underpinning that story evolved, and why it has resonated far beyond the street corners that inspired it? Perhaps most importantly, will *The Wire* be surpassed, or will it in twenty years time appear as an aberration, a brief, fleeting glimpse of the expansive possibilities of television drama?

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<sup>1</sup> Comment by David Simon on the commentary for the first episode of *The Wire* (W1.01 2002, "The Target").

<sup>2</sup> It is here that the photocopier lie detector trick is first described (p.213), utilised in both *Homicide* (H1.09, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," 1993), and *The Wire* (W5.01, "More With Less," 2008), as a way to psychologically manipulate reluctant witnesses. Here also the tale of Snot Boogie, crap game thief and posthumous star of *The Wire's* opening scene, is recounted almost word for word (pp.562-563).

<sup>3</sup> I am not basing this assertion on sales figures, so much as on the fact that in 2008 and 2009 respectively, both *Homicide* and *The Corner* were published for the first time in the U.K. and Ireland, evidently as a consequence of the popularity of *The Wire*, whose fans were much in evidence at the public interviews with David Simon that accompanied each publication.

<sup>4</sup> *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006-2011), the second TV drama inspired by Bissinger's sojourn in Texas, tried to be an affectionate, if critical exploration of the values of the American heartland. (The first adaptation, *Against the Grain* (NBC, 1993), was short-lived and unsuccessful.) That it was often uneven,

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superficial, overly sentimental, and lacking in cohesion was due less to the ineptitude of its showrunners than to its broadcast environment. Admittedly, it did not possess the coherent narrative arc which *The Wire*, for all of its insecurity with HBO, was allowed to fulfil. The experience of *Friday Night Lights* seems closer to *Homicide*. Throughout its five year run, it seemed to constantly struggle to define the type of drama it wanted to be, shifting from revelatory and provocative social realism to melodrama and soap opera.

<sup>5</sup> Todd Gitlin (2013) argues that the period between 1954 and 1974, could possibly be considered something of a golden age in journalism. Like Simon, he singles out the “Vietnam and Watergate reportage [that] helped topple two sitting presidents,” and Seymour Hersh’s reporting of the My Lai massacre. However, unlike Simon he points out that:

Press watchdogs also licked the hands of the perpetrators when Washington overthrew democratic governments in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, and when it helped out in Chile in 1973. As for Vietnam, it wasn’t as simple a tale of journalistic triumph as we now imagine. For years, in manifold ways, reporters deferred to official positions on the war’s “progress,” so much so that today their reports read like sheaves of Pentagon press releases. Typically, all but one source quoted in *New York Times* coverage of the 1964 Tonkin Gulf incidents, which precipitated a major U.S. escalation of the war, were White House, Pentagon, and State Department officials (and they were lying). In the war’s early years, at least one network, NBC, even asked the Pentagon to institute censorship. (Gitlin 2013)

As a consequence, Simon’s narrative of engaged critical journalism brought low by the logic of Wall Street proves too simplistic. Gitlin asks if the press “failing long before it began to falter financially?”

<sup>6</sup> While keen to stress that he is not a “luddite”, Simon is also less than optimistic about the possibilities afforded by the development of social media. The first reason is that he believes bloggers offer little beyond “repetition, commentary and froth.” He acknowledges that much of the commentary on the internet is valuable, but that he does not encounter “bloggers or so-called citizen journalists at City Hall or in the courthouse hallways or at the bars where police officers gather” (Democracy Now 2009).

<sup>7</sup> “Anything the government can do in the way of creating nonprofit status for newspapers should be seriously pursued. And further, anything that can be done to create financial or tax-based incentives for bankrupt or near-bankrupt newspaper chains to transfer or donate unprofitable publications to locally based nonprofits should also be considered” (Democracy Now 2009).

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

### INVESTIGATING THE CRITICAL TERRAIN

#### PRIMARY LITERATURE: DAVID SIMON'S BALTIMORE OUEVRE

The extent of David Simon's animated engagement with the critical reaction to his work and with the wider social and political milieu is unusual in the history of television drama. Plainly put, there have been times when, from a research perspective, it would have been nice if he had shut up. He has spoken and written about what he describes as the decline of the American Empire, the future of paid journalism, and numerous, more ephemeral events. Most recently, he has become a semi-regular blogger, writing on topical issues and engaging with those who comment.<sup>1</sup> He has commented on the 2012 US Presidential election, the Newtown school massacre, the murder of Trayvon Martin in Florida, and revelations by National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden. Insofar as Simon is cited directly throughout this thesis, it is to illuminate his worldview, or provide context for creative decisions made within the context of his books and television dramas. To the extent that this analysis defers to his stated dramatic intentions, it is to test them against the narratives, where supposed authorial intention often seems at variance with the text.

The two main elements to this research have remained reasonably consistent throughout. The intention has been to explore the worldview of David Simon as revealed through his books, articles and television drama about Baltimore. In particular, this exploration focuses on the interconnected representations of crime and the nature of policing, class politics, and labour and capitalism within these varied writings. This focus is not attributable to any particular interest in Baltimore, but because it in these dramas that the themes and the intersections between them are most consistently apparent. A secondary consideration is that this selection suggested itself, in a thematic and practical sense, in terms of a satisfactory engagement with the material, in the space available. Later dramas like *Generation Kill* (HBO, 2008) and *Treme* (HBO, 2010-2013) are dealt with briefly in the concluding chapter.

The author's early journalism with the *Baltimore Sun* has not proven as important as initially assumed. The majority of his work before *Homicide: a year on the killing streets* is first generation news reporting limited to the immediate context of the stories covered. Some examples hint at later dramatic concerns, but these are interesting



for reasons of curiosity rather than the insights they provide. Of particular note are “Homicide squad follows same script at Christmas” (Simon 1985b) and “Violence erupts as non-union laborers unload ship” (Simon 1985a). The former is the seasonal report that would ultimately inspire *Homicide* while the latter is a report of a dispute in the port of Baltimore.<sup>2</sup> Some examples following his time spent with the homicide detectives are more substantial attempts to engage with the drug war at a level beyond the immediate. One, about a drug dealer called Rudy Williams attempts to evoke Shakespeare’s Richard III to draw a contrast between individual evil and a socially determined catastrophe (Simon 1992a). Another is an account of what seems to be the commonplace killing of a young dealer. In fact it is a momentous death, marking the first time the body count had reached 330 (Simon 1992b). Of particular interest is a four-part series from 1994, collected under the title “Crisis in Blue”. It examines the malaise in the Baltimore police department from top to bottom. The titles of the individual articles are indicative of its focus; “A police department in decline” (Simon 1994a), “Drugs: a war with futile tactics” (Simon 1994b), “In police front lines, a sense of duty falters” (Simon 1994c), and “Lackluster policing starts at the top” (Simon 1994d).

While these examples hint at larger contexts and more systemic problems, the long-form journalism of the books is undoubtedly more substantial as an indication of future concerns. They possess an ethnographic quality, revealing the identities, practices and values of two distinct communities; ‘murder police’ in *Homicide* and ‘drug fiends’ in *The Corner*. The mode of research in each consists primarily of near immersion within the groups for periods of a year. In the case of the police this was supplemented by a pre-existing acquaintance with many of the detectives, and continued professional acquaintance afterwards. In the case of the inhabitants of the drug corner, David Simon in particular maintained relationships with many of those featured most centrally in the book.<sup>3</sup>

*Homicide*, in both of its incarnations, recounts a variety of killings. Some are consequent upon the drug trade, and others are more personal in origin. While the wider context is the urban and economic decline of the 1980s and 1990s, neither book or television drama engages with this decline in a sustained way. In the latter case, the focus tends toward those which draw out this context. This is especially true in the earlier seasons which rely more frequently on adaptations of incidents in the book. Therefore, while David Simon had little involvement with the series in its early seasons, he remains an attenuated authorial presence, as the writer of the source material.<sup>4</sup>

Engagement with these adaptations also implicitly acknowledges the presence of other creative voices like scriptwriters, directors, and producers. Significant changes made during dramatisation are also taken into account, and allow for a comparative engagement with the source. For the latter seasons of *Homicide*, episodes are chosen specifically on the extent of Simon's direct involvement as script or story writer. He became part of the production staff at the end of the fourth season, after leaving the *Baltimore Sun*.<sup>5</sup> Fortuitously this approach reveals the entire arc of the series, as David Simon's advent as a creative force largely coincides with its move away from storylines inspired by his book, and towards more original scripts.

By contrast, *The Corner* is rooted very specifically in a critique of the drug war in West Baltimore, and focuses primarily on drug users, rather than drug dealers or police. It presents much stronger links between the drug trade, drug abuse and the advent of mass unemployment. In particular, the book explores the drug trade's development, but also how it expanded in an almost symbiotic relationship with the economic policies of the Reagan period and beyond. Much of its deeper sociological contextualisation, influenced by co-author Ed Burns, was lost in its translation to HBO. Nevertheless, the six episode mini-series remains a reasonably faithful rendering of the substance of the book's narrative of a year in the life of a drug corner. For this reason, and because of David Simon's central role in the adaptation, as producer and co-writer, the mini-series is treated as a credible, if condensed, version of the book. The history of *The Corner* is considered, from initial conception and research to publication and broadcast, as a relatively unified and contiguous creative narrative.

*The Wire* represents both an advance on and a departure from, *Homicide* and *The Corner*, and is far more than an amalgam of earlier works. Its storyline presents multiple narrative perspectives, anchored primarily in the viewpoints of police and drug dealers. Despite these nods towards literary realism, it is more than a realist representation of the drug trade, which is engaged with as an allegorical representation of neoliberal capitalism. As its primary creative force, David Simon claims that *The Wire* is an act of dissent against what he refers to as unencumbered capitalism.<sup>6</sup> His intent to tell a particular type of story, and make an argument about the nature of the city was central to *The Wire's* conception, development, and narrative trajectory. However, despite his centrality and acknowledged authorial authority, the influence and input of other writers and collaborators needs to be acknowledged.

Throughout his career in television, David Simon has worked with numerous writers, directors, and producers. In most cases, most notably with Ed Burns, this

collaboration has been actively sought (*The Corner* and *The Wire*).<sup>7</sup> He has also collaborated, on *The Wire*, with established crime fiction writers, Richard Price, Dennis Lehane and George Pelecanos (*The Wire*).<sup>8</sup>

Richard Price is probably the most famous beyond genre circles, as the author of *The Wanderers* (1974) and *Clockers* (1992). The latter, a multi-perspective novel rooted in the drug trade of a New Jersey housing project, and the police who attempt to disrupt it, seems to anticipate *The Wire*. It was adapted into a feature film by Spike Lee in 1995.<sup>9</sup> Dennis Lehane alternates between largely traditional crime fiction and more diverse, thematically expansive works, like *Mystic River* (2001) and *The Given Day* (2008). Both of these novels feature a strong focus on class and community politics. A major part of the narrative in the latter is devoted to the ‘red scare’ of the 1920s, and the Boston police strike. Lehane was introduced to David Simon by George Pelecanos, who in turn had been introduced to Simon by Laura Lippman. Lippman suggested that what Pelecanos was doing with his Washington based novels was comparable to *The Corner* (Simon 2004, p.27). According to Pelecanos, he was persuaded to join *The Wire* by Simon’s argument that it was a “novel for television,” allowing for narrative digression and an examination of the social aspects of crime (Talbot 2007).<sup>10</sup>

What all of these writers have in common, according to Simon, is a connection with what he defines as “the other America”:

The chumps making it live in Baltimore, or, in the case of guys like Price, Pelecanos, and Lehane, they are at least writing in their literary work about second-tier East Coast rust-belt places like Jersey City, northeast Washington, or Dorchester, rather than Manhattan, Georgetown, or Back Bay Boston. We are of the other America or the America that has been left behind in the postindustrial age. (Hornby 2007)

Each writer brings something unique, but tonally appropriate to the drama, and were chosen because they share certain thematic and aesthetic sensibilities. As observed in the introduction, David Simon views television primarily as a collaborative process. However, it seems clear where overall narrative authority lies:

All the scripts, Pelecanos said, are minutely mapped out. “In the end, the final word is David’s,” he said. “I have come to where I try and write in his voice. We have an expression—‘You give it up.’ There were times when David and I were going at it pretty hard and I managed to get a lot of what I wanted. Other times, maybe thirty per cent of what I’d written made it into the final script. (Talbot 2007)

This sense of commitment to telling the story properly is also evident in Simon’s

willingness to engage with the critical narrative that has developed around the series. The proliferation of online magazines and journals, combined with *The Wire*'s popularity and Simon's willingness to present himself for interview inevitably means a relatively large number of, often repetitive interviews.<sup>11</sup> This proliferation also tends to foster wariness about becoming too immersed in Simon's own articulations of what his dramas mean.

Arguments about the unsustainable nature of unencumbered capitalism, the death of labour, the impossibility of reform, institutional dysfunction, and the end of the American Empire, are rehearsed on multiple occasions. These have been spread across both old and new media but within them, a number of examples are particularly worthy of note in characterising a general tone. A two-part interview by Simon's friend, the late David Mills (2007a, 2007b) on his *Undercover Black Man* blog, ranges across the former's political opinions, and discusses the critical reaction to *The Wire* and the nature of television storytelling. An interview by British writer Nick Hornby (2007) for online magazine *The Believer*, is similarly wide ranging but presented for an audience not as familiar with the US context. The majority of these interviews took place towards the end of *The Wire*'s five season run. Two substantial pieces which deal specifically with Simon's role as the creating force behind the drama are Meghan O'Rourke's 2006 interview for *Salon*, "Behind *The Wire*" and Margaret Talbot's "Stealing Life", a lengthy, and wide-ranging profile for *New Yorker* in 2007.

While the volume of articles and interviews peters out on either side of this period, there are significant interviews from both before and after *The Wire*. Interviews with *Bay Weekly* in 1998 and with Cynthia Rose of the *Seattle Times* in 1999 engage with Simon primarily as a tv writer. Both focus on his role as a journalist and television dramatist, while the latter also discusses what at the time, was the forthcoming HBO adaptation of *The Corner*. A 2002 interview for *Salon* by Ian Rothkerch entitled "What drugs have not destroyed, the war on them has", coincides with the beginning of *The Wire*. It is the first example of an explicit engagement with the wider narrative beyond the drama, revealing the broader purpose behind *The Wire*, as a polemic and argument. Interviews after *The Wire* as Simon moved on to *Generation Kill* and, later, *Treme*, do not add much to the critique around the Baltimore dramas. However, they provide insights both into his evolving worldview, and his perspective on his future in television drama. Of particular note is a lengthy interview by Richard Beck (2008) for *Film Quarterly*, around the time of the broadcast of *Generation Kill*. In it, Simon reveals what he perceives as the commonalities between the drama and his earlier work on *The*

*Wire*, and attempts to justify the lack of context within the later piece. The most recent interview comes from 2012, and discusses the recent cancellation of *Treme*, while revealing developments in David Simon's political perspective since 2008 (Watercutter 2012).

As a journalist, and a public figure with strident opinions, he has also written a number of opinion pieces in newspapers and journals. The most significant of these have engaged with the parlous state of paid journalism (Simon 2008b; Simon 2008d, Simon 2009d), and the popular reaction to *The Wire* (Simon 2008c). "In Baltimore, no one left to press the police" (Simon 2009e) examines the decline in journalism specifically in relation to crime reporting, while "Build the wall" (2009d), from the Columbia Journalism Review argues for the introduction of internet paywalls to protect paid journalism and save the newspaper industry.<sup>12</sup> As mentioned at the beginning, more recently Simon's blog "The Audacity of Despair", named after a critical piece in *Atlantic* by Matthew Iglesias (2008), has been the repository for further interventions.

Finally, in a similar vein to the interviews and opinion pieces are public interviews and lectures filmed for public consumption. Some, like public interviews at the Museum of Television and Radio (Tucker 2007), and Eugene Lang College in New York (Simon 2007a) are included as extras on *The Wire* dvd releases. Others have been posted on sites like YouTube or Vimeo. Because videos are often removed if they are perceived to violate copyright, only those with a long established presence have been relied on for citations. Notable among these are "David Simon on the end of the American Empire" Baltimore Loyola University (Hughes 2007), and "Journalism and the public square" from the University of Southern California (USCGould 2008). These are both important, if pessimistic, expositions of the worldview surrounding "the decline of the American empire" and the decline of journalism in particular. A more recent and significant intervention is the Frank Porter Graham lecture, delivered at the University of North Carolina in 2011, entitled "The end of the American Century and the decline of labour". It ranges across the immorality and unwinnable nature of the drug war to the need for a return to New Deal policies to pull the United States out of its current tailspin. Underpinning it is a sense of often barely concealed rage at the sustained attack on organised labour over the previous thirty years (Honors Carolina 2011).

## SECONDARY LITERATURE: CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH DAVID SIMON

The HBO companion volume to *The Wire*, *The Wire: truth be told* (2004) straddles the line between primary and secondary literature. It combines standard episode synopses with critical writing from a number of sources. Contributors including David Simon, Rafael Alvarez and George Pelecanos provide insights into the production process and the genesis of the series. A particularly important contribution comes from Baltimore crime writer Laura Lippmann, who focuses, often critically, on the role of women in the series. The book is an unusual example of its type, as series guides tend to be commissioned as quite celebratory cash-ins. *The Wire: truth be told* is edited and partly written by Rafael Alvarez, a series script writer and story editor and eschews trivia in favour of considered engagement with the narratives. Its existence underlines the extent to which *The Wire* was explicitly created as an intervention and argument. Published in 2004 after the third season, it predates not only other critical writing on the series, but also seems to be a deliberate attempt to initiate critical engagement.

*The Wire* is where the majority of secondary material is focussed, and there remains a dearth of writing on the earlier dramas, despite two significant additions in recent years.<sup>13</sup> Two books on *Homicide: Life on the Street* were published during the lifetime of the series. The first, described as an “unofficial companion,” and written by David Kalat (1998) is a standard series guide, which contains valuable production information and interviews with key personnel. The second, *Homicide: life on the screen* (Hoffman 1998), leans more toward critical analysis of the series itself, but also provides a comprehensive account of the drama’s origins with NBC. *Homicide’s* genesis and evolution is also recounted by Kalat, and by Robert J Thompson (1997) in *Television’s second golden age*. For reasons of space and relevance, it is not covered to the same degree in this thesis, but referred to selectively. This is in the interests of narrative coherence, or where the impact of decisions dictated by the political economy of television drama production seems important.

It is also indicative of the level of attention the series received that Peter Billingham's chapter on *Homicide* in his book, *Sensing the city through television* (2000) cites only Hoffman and David Simon as sources. There have been few later additions that do not primarily consider *Homicide* and *The Corner* as footnotes to development of *The Wire*. A rare example is a 2011 article from Linda Williams entitled “Ethnographic imaginary: the genesis and genius of *The Wire*”, which perceives that series, alongside *The Corner*, as linked fictionalised ethnographies. Her conclusion that

*The Wire* functions as a journalistic substitute may be contradicted by David Simon (Watercutter 2012), but remains convincing. Other notable exceptions are a pair of articles by Thomas Mascaro (2004; 2005). These are mostly approbatory pieces which examine *Homicide* specifically in terms of how it advanced the portrayals of African-American men and women.<sup>14</sup>

The most significant contribution to the wider critical literature has been Jason P. Vest's auteurial study of David Milch and David Simon, *The Wire, Deadwood, Homicide and NYPD Blue: violence is power* (2011). While it provides thoughtful and substantial critiques, it has proved less useful than anticipated. This is possibly because its focus on the uniqueness of its subjects means that it foregoes a unified critical perspective. While it draws from similar critical literature as this thesis, its concern is more on aesthetic and creative significance, than on defining the dramas' social and political perspective.<sup>15</sup>

The development of online journals, peer-reviewed and often open-source, has expanded the possibilities for critical engagement enormously. To these can be added online magazines, like *Salon.com* and *Slate* which engage in textual criticism, in a popular and accessible way, and often to a very high standard.<sup>16</sup> From an identifiably marxist perspective, three of the most important critiques of the series have been published online. The Australian economist Mike Beggs, blogging under the name "Scandulum Magnatum", produced an insightful comparison of *The Wire* and the realist novel, entitled "The Balzac of Baltimore" (Beggs 2008). Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano (2009) co-wrote "Baltimore as World and Representation: cognitive mapping and capitalism in *The Wire*" examining the series' mapping of "the dynamics of the contemporary uneven and combined geographical development of capitalism". An obvious influence on the current thesis has been "*The Wire* and the world: narrative and metanarrative" (Sheehan and Sweeney 2009), a marxist critique of all five seasons of *The Wire*. In 2010 Fredric Jameson contributed a flawed, but nonetheless serious examination of utopian tendencies within *The Wire*. While it ultimately stretched the definition of utopian to seeming meaninglessness, its general proposition is drawn upon and explored the first chapter on *The Wire*. More recently, the labour studies journal, *Labor: studies in working class history of the Americas*, dedicated an entire issue to the series, specifically from a labour perspective. While it was published quite late in the life of this thesis, I have cited from a couple of contributions, specifically Jennifer Klein's piece about workplace lying and theft and the failure of authority. Its engagement with theft as an act of resistance links in important ways with Jameson's

piece (Klein 2013).

An early long-form engagement with the series, which predated more conventionally published collections, was the online postcolonial journal *Dark Matter*, which produced an entire “The Wire Files” edition in 2009. Critiques range beyond the postcolonial to precedential studies of African-Americans in crime drama (Gibb and Sabin 2009), the representation of Jewish people (Kahn-Harris 2009), and the subversion of heteronormativity (Robbie 2009). In a critical engagement with the politics of *The Wire*, Erika Johnson Lewis (2009) engages with its pessimism. This contrasts with the current thesis and earlier criticisms of its pessimism by writers like Dreier and Atlas (2009), which broadly accept Simon’s contention that reform is impossible. Johnson Lewis argues that significant reform remains possible, even in the current social and economic context.

When research for this thesis began, three collections of criticism on *The Wire* were pending. Two of these have since emerged as *The Wire: urban decay and American television* (2009) and *The Wire: race, class and genre* (2012). Both are characterised by a degree of conceptual unity often missing from collections about television drama. This, in itself, is an indication of the narrative coherence of *The Wire*. Critical approaches have tended to cohere around sociologically informed discussions of the neoliberal city, representations of race and class, and the nature of crime narratives. *The Wire: urban decay and American television*, edited by Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall, spans a range of perspectives from the contextual, to the representational, and the televisual. It covers the history of reform and urban development (Alff 2009; Clandfield 2009), Foucauldian critiques of policing and the reproduction of power (MacMillan 2009; Brooks 2009), and *The Wire* as exemplar of quality television drama (Klein 2009; Nannicelli 2009). Particularly useful from the perspective of this thesis was Jason Read’s (2009) study of Stringer Bell, which draw heavily on Marx’s theories of primitive accumulation. It also explores the differing contexts and understandings of structural violence in the mainstream and shadow economies.

*The Wire: race, class and genre* (Kennedy and Shapiro (eds.) 2012), is another example of how critical approaches toward *The Wire* have mostly cohered around left leaning critical perspectives. This collection begins by looking at the drama’s formal and generic elements, but concentrates mostly on its representations of neoliberalism, race, ethnicity, and class. Those chapters collected under the latter headings include more critical approaches to the drama, especially in terms of its tendency to nostalgia



and valorisation. “Tales of the neoliberal city” (Kennedy and Shapiro 2012), while acknowledging Simon’s achievement, also takes issue with his perceived nostalgia for a good, productive capitalism. Hamilton Carroll’s “Policing the border of white masculinity” (2012) criticises the valorisation of a dated, macho, and regressive model of white working class identity. While not totally accepted, this perspective was a significant influence in the work’s engagement with the representation of the working class in *The Wire*. Other useful chapters are those which engaged with the political economy of the drug trade, “Elasticity of demand: reflections on *The Wire*” (Kraniauskas 2012), and representations of work (Linkon, Russo and Russo 2012).

The collection also features a version of Peter Dreier and John Atlas’s (2009) critique of the series as a pessimistic, disempowering “Bush-era fable about America’s urban poor”. It had previously appeared in the journal *City and Community* in 2009 and, in 2008 as part of a debate in *Dissent* magazine. On that occasion it was the counterpoint to a more positive estimation of the series from sociologists Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson.<sup>17</sup> Wilson’s 1997 examination of mass African-American unemployment, *When work disappears*, was also a central influence on the drama’s second season. From a similarly sociological perspective, Younghoon Kim (2012) examines the marginalised in the series from the perspective of Zygmunt Bauman’s “wasted lives” hypothesis. These wasted lives are the collateral damage of neoliberal capitalism.

Given David Simon’s previous career, it was inevitable that the drama would receive attention from the discipline of journalism studies. This attention has tended to focus on the final season, which featured the decline of the newspaper industry as central to the plot. A substantial, contemporary contribution is Lawrence Lanahan’s (2008) piece for *Columbia Journalism Review*. It ranges beyond the storyline to examine the wider critique of urban journalism revealed by *The Wire*, in particular how coverage of poverty has been abandoned by the print media. Roger Sabin (2011) applies a critique inspired by Chomsky and Herman’s propaganda model to the depiction of journalism in the fifth series. While the article contains some useful insights, the Chomsky-Herman model itself is of limited use in this context, as Simon’s argument is more obviously rooted in economic determinism. Steiner et al. (2012) in “*The Wire* and repair of the journalistic paradigm”, offer a qualitative analysis of journalistic reactions to the fifth season storyline. It concludes that the closer journalists were to the storyline, for example working for the *Baltimore Sun*, the more negative their reactions to it were.

Critical reaction to the drama was obviously not uniformly positive. Negative

reactions in particular focused on its pessimism, and its flawed and insufficient representations of women. In the latter case, the critique usually recognises the overall quality of the drama. It seems that it is precisely this perception of quality and attention to detail in other areas that makes the perceived lack of development or flawed characterisation more disappointing. This is particularly apparent in the depiction of black women. C.D. Marshall (2009) and Elizabeth Ault (2012) draw attention to the stereotyped ghetto mother depictions of African-American motherhood in poor neighbourhoods. Ault argues forcefully that lack of agency on behalf of these characters feeds into a conservative narrative of personal responsibility, coming close to blaming them for their own predicament.<sup>18</sup>

However, most negative critical assessments focus on the drama's pessimism, which in some respects is presented as bordering on nihilism. John Atlas (2008) criticises its lack of focus on positive community initiatives against poverty and unemployment and its marginalisation of narratives about the agency of the poor. Mark Bowden (2008), Reihan Salam (2008), and Matthew Iglesias (2008) have also criticised the drama's pessimism. Bowden in particular attributed much of the drama's anger to Simon's own sense of betrayal by the newspaper industry. Salam critiqued the drama from a more conservative perspective, and took issue with its systemic critique of capitalism. Iglesias concluded that *The Wire* exhibited "the audacity of despair", a contemporary topical twist on Barack Obama's book, *The Audacity of hope*. Simon adopted the term as the title for his own blog. Conor Friedersdorf (2008) presented an idealised version of the free market as an argument against the drama's indictment of unencumbered capitalism. He argued that what *The Wire* presented was not actually capitalism at all, but state inefficiency and restrictive labour practices. In short, he argued that the problem with capitalism as portrayed in *The Wire* was that it was not unencumbered enough.

While critical engagement with *The Wire* has tended to coalesce around its argument about the contemporary urban and social order some critics have focussed in other areas. Chris Love (2010) deals directly with the debt owed by *The Wire* to Greek tragedy, arguing that the epigraphs placed at the beginning of each episode, echo their use in Greek tragedy. This is particularly noticeable in how the thematic resonance of these epigraphs recurs throughout the series, with their relevance only becoming gradually apparent. From another area of cultural history, Elvin Wyly (2010) uses *The Wire's* depiction of Baltimore, framed through Walter Benjamin's argument that "every square inch of our cities [is] the scene of a crime, for a photographic examination of

Baltimore. In marked contrast, Susan A. Bandes (2010) examines the series from the perspective of the criminal justice system in the United States. The most pertinent example of this tendency to use *The Wire* as a jumping off point to engage with larger social issues is *Tapping into The Wire* (Beilenson and McGuire 2012). This collection of essays utilises various storylines and themes to discuss public health issues in Baltimore, with a particular focus on drug use and education. These are all significant contributions to the body of critical writing which has grown up around *The Wire*, even though they have not proven directly relevant to this thesis.

A number of other sources fit within neither primary or secondary sources but are nonetheless important in opening up the wider world of David Simon's drama. These include the novels of his collaborators on *The Wire*, in particular those of Richard Price and George Pelecanos. Price's novel *Clockers* (1991), not only covers similar thematic terrain to *The Wire*, but was mined for scenes throughout the series.<sup>19</sup> While the novels of George Pelecanos remain largely locked within the generic conventions of crime fiction, they sometimes offer glimpses of a more expansive political perspective. *Hard revolution* (2004) uses as a key theme the uprisings of 1968 in Washington, following the assassination of Martin Luther King. It traces the conflicted loyalties of an African-American police officer, who resigns after sacrificing loyalty to the law to communal loyalty. Pelecanos's 2005 novel, *Drama city* (2005) features a character with a similar arc to that endured by Dennis 'Cutty' Wise in *The Wire*, emerging from prison and attempting to stay straight. *Grace after midnight* (Pearson and Ritz 2007) provides further insight into life on the corners of West Baltimore, and into the life of Felicia "Snoop" Pearson, one of *The Wire's* most popular characters. Evan Wright's *Generation Kill* (2005) was the basis for the HBO drama co-written by Simon and is valuable for the insight it provides into the ethnographic focus that presumably drew Simon and Burns to the project. It is described on its dust jacket as comparable with Michael Herr's (1977) *Dispatches*, a study of troops during the war on Vietnam, a book Simon cites as an influence.

Other books have provided valuable background and precedents for the style of journalism pursued by David Simon, and are mentioned by him as influences in this respect. Many of these are not cited directly as their influence lies more in their approach than in any material precedent they set. However, they have formed part of the preparatory reading, and the creative landscape for this analysis. Most notable in this respect is *Paths of glory* (Cobb 1935), an undoubted influence on David Simon's depiction of institutional dysfunction, and for which he wrote a foreword for the 2010

reissue. Both *Tally's Corner* (2003), a study of a Washington drug corner first published in 1967 and *Let us now praise famous men* (Agee and Evans 1939) were more direct, practical influences, particularly on *The Corner*. While their influence is less apparent, both Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and *Ball four* (Bouton 1990), a baseball memoir, are cited by Simon as influential examples of "stand-around-and-watch" reporting (Harabin c.2006).

### TERTIARY LITERATURE: THE WIDER CRITICAL TERRAIN AND METHODOLOGY

David Simon is the focus of this thesis, as the primary, creative and motive force behind these stories of Baltimore. While this may suggest an auteurial study, even the term is not entirely accurate in this case. While in film studies the primary focus of auteur theory remains the director, in television studies the focus is much more on the writer and, more recently, the show runner. While the show runner fulfils numerous roles, like writer, director, or producer, they are principally conceived as custodian of the overall narrative and thematic trajectory of a series. Much recent critical writing has conceptualised television auteurs specifically as show runners, through studies of David Chase (*The Sopranos*), Joss Whedon (*Buffy*, *Angel*, *Firefly*) and David Milch (*NYPD Blue*, *Deadwood*). Alan Sepinwall's recent book, *The revolution was televised* (2012), is organised specifically around such studies of major show runners, including David Simon. However, while the idea of the show runner may provide a reasonable point of entry for *The Wire* (and later, *Treme*), it is less useful for *Homicide* and *The Corner*. In these cases, there are numerous other creative influences, in the shape of writers, directors and producers, not to mention the variance in dramatic forms.

Where *Homicide* is concerned, the role of show runner, as defined by Sepinwall and others, would be occupied not by David Simon, but by Tom Fontana and/or Barry Levinson. Further, because the role of showrunner tends to be associated with ongoing, multi-season dramas, the term does not apply to adaptations like the mini-series of *The Corner* or *Generation Kill* (HBO, 2008). *The Corner's* far more claustrophobic style, while appropriate to its source material, is more a result of creative choices made by the director, Charles S. Dutton. Dutton, and producer Robert F. Colesberry, were brought in by HBO precisely because Simon was perceived as a novice. Colesberry was also an influence on the directorial injunction in *The Wire* to stay wide and "show the world".

Such heterogeneity in terms of creative presence is evidently incompatible with the auteur theory, as formulated by, for example, Andrew Sarris (1968). Therefore, imperfect as the formulation may seem, I perceive my approach to be more authorial than auteorial. Each text has distinct characteristics, but with David Simon's writing as a unifying factor, even if his presence varies in importance: fodder for adaptation in *Homicide*, original dramatic writing in *The Wire*, or a combination of both in *The Corner*. However, David Simon's creative vision remains of central importance. The evolving coherence and focus in these dramas stems from a desire, on his part, to engage with and understand the totality of the social order. The narratives of the detectives in *Homicide* are complemented by the voices of the poor and marginalised in *The Corner*. The critique of the drug war that occasionally appears in *Homicide* emerges as a fully formed social and political argument in *The Wire*.

All of this necessarily implies a predominantly textual analysis, modified to take account of the visual and formal elements unique to television drama. This approach may be broadly described as marxist although it does not hew to any particular trend or theoretical school within it. In terms of approach a significant influence has been the work of Helena Sheehan, who perceives narrative and authorial coherence are perceived as crucial. She argues for the centrality of the writer, who needs to have a developed worldview in order to create "characters who could bear and reveal the fullness of their world" (1987, p.56). Drawing on the Lukacs, she argues that:

The question of world view is crucial. The Hungarian critic Georg Lukacs has perhaps put this most sharply: 'Without a Weltanschauung, it is impossible to narrate properly or to achieve a composition which would reflect the differentiated and epically complete variety of life.' His argument was that, without a philosophy, without the dynamic co-ordination of life in the writer's mind, there was no drama of any real magnitude. The greater the playwright, the more and closer were the ties binding him to the life of his times. (1987, p.56)<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction, David Simon and Ed Burns express this in a more succinct manner, but with similarly incisive accuracy as, "You've got to know the world... otherwise it's just medical crap here and cop crap there and a love story" all by the numbers (Simon and Burns 2008). This focus on narrative, while largely unfashionable in 1980s, has become much more prominent in recent years, especially since the advent of what is perceived as a tv golden age.

For all of that he was a renowned critic of fiction and drama, Raymond Williams' (1974) seminal *Television: technology and cultural form* was primarily a

riposte to technologically determinist in histories of television. It focussed instead on the social, economic and political contexts that led to the particular forms of television development in Great Britain and the United States. As a history of the medium itself, insofar as it engaged with drama, it did so as simply one of many forms of television. It is characterised by dissatisfaction with the seeming inability of television drama to deal convincingly with “contemporary majority experience” (pp.57-58). Williams engaged critically with television drama in other contexts, most notably through his regular column in *The Listener* magazine. “In defence of realism”, his critique of the Ken Loach and Jim Allen play *The Big Flame* (BBC, 1968), was a significant influence on the critique in this thesis of the port storyline in season two of *The Wire* (Williams 1989).<sup>21</sup>

In the context of television drama in the United States, Todd Gitlin’s *Inside Prime Time*, originally published in 1983, stands in marked contrast to this approach. Combining political economy and interviews, with socially engaged critique, Gitlin attempts to engage with television drama on its own terms. Like Helena Sheehan (1987), he comes to a rather pessimistic conclusion. While both feel that television drama can be judged in qualitative terms, and that good drama can be recognised and defined as such, they are not optimistic about its future. As the 1980s drew to a close, both perceived the creative terrain as one determined by the economic bottom line, opportunism, imitation, and an unwillingness to take creative risks. Most importantly, the malaise in television drama is not perceived in discrete terms, but as part of the processes characterising public culture as a whole.

When drama was engaged with critically, evaluation of its complexity, depth of characterisation, or engagement with the social order tended to be sidelined. This was in favour of audience response and how they reacted to, used, and drew pleasure from the text, an approach exemplified in Janice Radway’s still influential reader response study, *Reading the Romance* (1984). This approach was combined with textual analysis in John Fiske’s influential 1987 book *Television Culture*, which also displays a strong emphasis on semiotics and post-structuralism, alongside feminist and political economy based commentary. The influence of postmodernism is even more apparent in the Robert C. Allen edited anthology, *Channels of Discourse: Reassembled* published in the same year. The relative merits of the dramas themselves are increasingly left by the wayside as the focus shifts toward the pleasures afforded by the texts.

Ironically, it was the multiplicity of meanings possible under postmodernist criticism in the early 1990s that facilitated a more sustained shift to textual analysis. This shift has been particularly marked in the United States, undoubtedly driven by a

perceived increase in the quality and complexity of US television drama. Robert J. Thompson, writing in 1997, perceives developments in television drama from the mid 1980s onwards as akin to a second golden age. He defines quality television as writer based, possessing a narrative memory, possessing an ensemble cast, tending to a liberal perspective, and aspiring towards realism (Thompson 1997, pp.13-15). Nevertheless, he feels that by the mid 1990s these elements had themselves become formulaic markers of “quality”. There are other elements, most usually associated with David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991). These include a tendency to surrealism, challenging, and often incoherent narratives, intertextual reference and self-reference, and non-realist, magical realist tropes such as the dream sequence. Criticism of certain dramas was anthologised. Early examples are *Full of secrets: critical approaches to Twin Peaks* (Lavery 1995) and *Deny all knowledge: reading The X-Files* (Lavery, Hague and Cartwright 1996). However, these published collections were merely the first in an ongoing flow that dealt with dramas as diverse as *The Sopranos*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Lost*, and *Sex in the City*.

While critical focus seems to settle on the text, it tended toward a preoccupation with discreetly compartmentalised sites of resistance and subversion, rather than contextualisation. While there were important critiques made around the representations of, for example, gender, sexuality, and race these examinations occurred in isolation. Engagement with class issues was mostly absent, as indeed it was in the dramas themselves. For all of their relative strengths, dramas of the golden age seemed to naturalise largely white, middle class, heteronormative perspectives.

The major change, in terms of the political economy of production and the increasingly anthologised nature of television drama itself has been the centrality of cable television. In particular, critical focus during this new so-called “golden age” has focussed on the offerings of the premium subscription cable channel, HBO, a subsidiary of Time-Warner. Two collections in recent years have combined analysis of the political economy of the cable channel, with critical essays on some of its most celebrated dramas; *The essential HBO reader* (Edgerton and Jones 2008), and *It’s not TV: watching HBO in the post-television era* (Leverette, Ott and Buckley 2008). As is clear from Toby Miller’s (2008) foreword to *It’s not TV*, HBO represents the epitome of the contradictory, self-serving values of neoliberalism. It combines the inflexibility of a concentrated, vertically integrated media conglomerate, with the flexibility of a transient, precarious labour force without tenure or benefits (Miller 2008, p.x). That both books were published in the same year is indicative of the level of academic

interest in HBO, which seemed to experience an unstoppable rise to cultural dominance in the 2000s. *The Wire* is the only drama afforded critical attention in each collection (Rose 2008, Ethridge 2008). It is an early indication of the critical attention which increased in the period following the global economic crash, a crisis it seemed to address directly through its narrative.

While there is a small irony about a quintessentially neoliberal corporation producing a damning critique of neoliberal capitalism, it need not be overstated. As Kennedy and Shapiro (2012, pp.152-153) argue, acclaimed HBO dramas like *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Deadwood* and *The Wire* are all in different ways, arguments against neoliberalism. They are narratives about the threats posed to small family and/or business units, and the wider middle class, losing their struggle for existence in a globalised economy dominated by corporations.<sup>22</sup> David Simon's Baltimore dramas are a prime example of this type of critique. They ultimately amount to an argument against a particular phase of capitalism, which began in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They are not an argument against capitalism's right to exist, as Simon tacitly confirms, describing himself as both a capitalist and socialist (Simon 2012e).

Nevertheless, the period covered in these narratives, from roughly 1988-2008, can be characterised as one dominated by neoliberal reform. The term is used throughout this thesis to describe the social order created by the shifts in economic, political and class power over the past three or four decades. This domination, as Colin Crouch (2011) argues in *The strange non-death of neoliberalism*, has intensified rather than dissipated in the wake of the crisis of capitalism which emerged in 2007-2008. It is precisely for this reason that *The Wire's* depiction of social and institutional entropy resonates so far beyond its immediate locale. Viewers far beyond the United States should experience a shock of recognition as employment levels plummet and welfare states are dismantled. The ameliorative arm of the state is destroyed even as its coercive arm is strengthened, all with the aim of appeasing the capricious deities of the financial markets.

The specific nature of these reforms in different countries need not be rehearsed here, but I perceive the period as one where, as David Harvey and others have argued, "a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" was embarked upon and pursued (Harvey 2005, p.19). The period is marked by large-scale moves towards financialisation, and the immiseration and disempowerment of large sections of the working class. While the specificities change from place to place, certain general trends are identifiable. The



period is marked by wide scale deindustrialisation, and the ascendance of the profit motive and the logic of the free market to the status of unassailable natural truths. Relatively high wage, unionised, stable jobs in cities like Baltimore are destroyed to make way for global manufacturing chains characterised by lower labour costs. Consequent higher profits and ‘savings’ garnered through other concessions from labour, were recycled into financial speculation or more general corporate expansion and diversification (Davis 1986, pp.237, 241-246). Therefore, neoliberalism is not only a useful frame within which to characterise this particular period, it is also a determinant in the changing representations of the changing working class. My reading in this area has not been structured or programmatic. I have relied mostly on David Harvey (2005a; 2007; 2010), and Naomi Klein (2000; 2008) to understand the general processes and the engineering and exploitation of crises to accelerate the process of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2005a).<sup>23</sup>

Also of particular use for their account of the rise of neoliberalism, and the wider historical context have been *Stayin’ alive* (Cowie 2010), *Prisoners of the American dream* (Davis 1986), and *The political economy of racism* (Leiman 1993). Given that the focus of the dramatic narratives is Baltimore, a city with a large African-American population, the representation of class inevitably intersects with racism. All of these books are valuable in their engagement with this intersection between class and race based poverty and marginalisation. Throughout this thesis, the intention has been to address these intersections, while acknowledging the very different experiences of the black and white working class. Jefferson Cowie’s book is a social historical account of the decline of the US working class that moves between the political, economic and pop-cultural realms. It was particularly invaluable in providing a cultural context for the white working class as portrayed in the second season of *The Wire*. Mike Davis provides a much longer history of the American working class, focussing particularly on its failure to create a mass party comparable with the labour parties of Europe. A central tenet of his argument is that ongoing racial division, in which the white working class were often complicit, has retarded the development of a common perspective and purpose. Similarly, Leiman focuses on the persistent economic marginalisation of African-Americans, and how racism was deliberately fostered to serve to strengthen the capitalist class. He critiques the communal and separatist currents of the twentieth century, suggesting they were complicit in a self-defeating, self-reinforcing ghettoisation.

As explained at the beginning of this section, the interest in these dramas does not stem from any particular investment in representations of Baltimore. Rather, it is in how these representations engage with and explain the wider social order elsewhere in the United States and beyond. Nevertheless, some knowledge of local context and history has proved essential to understand how local events referred to in the narratives, relate to the world beyond Baltimore. Numerous articles refer to the drug war and drug trade, urban depopulation and white flight, the advent of mass unemployment and the impact of the civil rights movement. For example, Agar and Reisinger's (2002) study of the 1960s heroin "epidemic" in Baltimore provides valuable background on the development of the African-American drug trade. Prior to this, their role had largely been as local distributors and couriers for the Italian-American mafia, who controlled the trade throughout the twentieth century. However, the following specifically local histories have proven useful. *Not in my neighbourhood* (2010) is a study of housing segregation in Baltimore, written by a former *Baltimore Sun* journalist, Antero Pietila. It explores why African-Americans historically found themselves on the bottom rung in terms of housing, but also why ghettos developed when and where they did as a result of "white flight". Deborah Rudacille's *Roots of steel* (2011) is a history of the mostly white working class community that grew up around the Bethlehem Steel mills near Baltimore. Her account of the lives of its sometimes inter-racial workforce is insightful on the culture and sometimes complicated history between the white and black working class. Given the centrality of the 1968 uprisings to the history of the city, and their recurrence as a reference point in the dramas themselves, the 2010 collection *Baltimore '68* (Elfenbein, Hollowak and Nix (eds.)) also provided useful background. This collection combines essays about the origins, context and legacy of the riots with oral histories of the period. It is particularly useful, like Pietila, on the racist nature of urban policy and the complicated relationships between simultaneously but differently marginalised Jews and African-Americans. While these books have not always proved to be of direct material use, they provided corroboration and nuance to Simon's own provision of historical context in *Homicide* and *The Corner*.

*Cop in the hood* (2008) by Peter Moskos achieves an interesting symmetry with the work of David Simon. Moskos also interned with the Baltimore police department for a year, but as a patrol officer rather than a journalist. It provides a view of the streets about a decade after Simon had concluded research for both *Homicide* and *The Corner*, and intersects with each. One of its chapters is even titled, "The corner: life on the street" (Moskos 2008, p.64). It provides insights into the race and class perspectives of

police officers themselves, as well as a more recent perspective on how the drug war is playing out on the streets. Much of Moskos's critique dovetails with that of Simon, in the intersection between race and class hatred in police worldview, and in its devastating critique of the state regime. It diverges sharply at other points, especially in its estimation of the viability of the drug economy, and the prospective earnings that can be expected from it. Nevertheless, the book is an important and fortuitous addition to literature, especially given its more empirical focus, which contrasts with Simon's journalistic and novelistic perspective.

These books and dramas are all rooted in narratives of urban policing, and prompt questions about the portrayal and perception of the state's role, and the position taken towards it. No one theoretical model has been adhered to in this thesis, in engaging with these questions, although the general perspective is informed by some marxist theories of ideology. While not cited in that context, the moral panic around mugging explored in *Policing the crisis* (Hall et al. 1978), informs the perspective on the drug war, as a moral panic for the marginalisation and containment of particular groups. The work of the Italian marxist Antonio Gramsci has also been a partial influence. Gramsci stressed the dual importance of coercion and consent in the maintenance of the social order and dominant, hegemonic state and economic power. In the work of David Simon, the coercive role is obviously most apparent through the police department. While the police are often portrayed critically, there is never any question about the desirability of such a coercive force in general.

However, as Steve Jones (2006, p.51) argues in the context of the UK, a high level of public consent is also implied in the operation of the state's coercive forces. The institutions through whose operation consent is manufactured, like the school system and the print media, become increasingly central in the latter seasons of *The Wire*. This creates a narrative model that, whether intentionally or not, replicates the dual roles of coercion and consent, reinforcing and interacting with each other. In the case of *The Wire*, the public school system and the newspapers fail in their role of naturalising the social order, as its critique of neoliberalism shows. The economic processes that deepen inequality and create a more unstable social order are undermining the means by which consent for these policies of dispossession are maintained. The police and school system are starved of funds, and the newspaper has been financially eviscerated to the point where it can barely report and its survival is threatened.

While the focus is not on crime drama as a genre, Gramsci also influences the general perspective towards it. Crime stories tend to function in narrative terms around a

disruption to the status quo. The resolution of the narrative usually, albeit sometimes problematically, means the restoration of the social order. Mike Wayne's critique of the British crime drama *Between the Lines* (BBC 1992-1994) is particularly useful in this regard. Wayne argues that the drama, set in an internal unit which investigates police wrongdoing, teaches the audience a simple lesson:

The police operate (albeit contradictorily) within the cultural and institutional hegemony of the status quo. Irrespective of the good intentions of individuals, they are part of the problem, not part of the solution. By revealing this on prime-time television, *Between the Lines* can be said to be a counter-hegemonic text. (Wayne 1998, p.38)

There is an obvious partial correlation here with the way the police department is portrayed in *Homicide* and *The Wire*. While his perspective is not informed by Gramsci, David Simon argues that the institutional priorities of the police will always trump those of individual police officers. The question is less one of whether those priorities are guided by narrow self-preservation or, because they are related, the preservation of the social order. The question is to what extent popular crime narratives recognise and engage with these institutional roles, and resist the type of resolution that buttresses the status quo. Can these narratives be described as counter-hegemonic, to the degree that they challenge dominant (hegemonic) ideologies and narratives?<sup>24</sup> It is the contention of this thesis that, to a greater or lesser extent, all of these the narratives can be so described.

## CONCLUSION

My focus on the text is as a way to reveal how narratives describe, critique, and name the social order and economic system, even as they are produced from and located within it. Of contextual importance is the political economy of television drama production, and the extent to which it impacts, often negatively, on the types of narratives produced. I consider the significance of the dramas in the historical context, not only of other crime drama, but of television dramas of a more social realist perspective. Related to this, one difficulty throughout has been the necessity to balance a literary mode of research, with one that considers the unique formal and visual elements of television drama. Another unanticipated problem, given the relatively

contained parameters of the research, has been attempting to do justice within the space allotted, to the scope and scale of the narratives.

The combination of left theorists and left theoretical perspectives that underpins this thesis may be described as broadly cultural materialist in orientation. This is an approach defined by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield as “a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis” (1994, p.vii). Given the realist and social realist nature of Simon’s dramatic works, I have also attempted to integrate the advice of Raymond Williams, who initially coined the term cultural materialism (Milner 2002, p.18). Reflecting on the critical approaches to the British television drama of the 1960s and 1970s, he argued that:

It is precisely because these [programme] makers are contemporaries engaged in active production, that we need not criticism but analysis, an analysis which has to be more than analysis of what they have done: analysis of a historical method, analysis of a developing dramatic form and its variations, but then I hope in a spirit of learning, by the complex seeing of analysis rather than by the abstractions of critical classification. (1989, p.239)

While cultural materialism tends to be associated with older, literary texts, I feel that there is enough commonality of approach to justify use of the term in this context.

It is important that critical ideas are communicated in the clearest way possible, but without sacrificing academic rigour. I have tried to present my research in the clearest language, unless it is absolutely necessary to do otherwise. For example the repeated use of the terms neoliberal and neoliberalism proved unavoidable as a way to define and differentiate the current social order from what preceded it. From the beginning, the ideal intended audience for this work has been perceived as not only multi-disciplinary, but also composed of those who may not have had the benefit of a humanities education.

Despite David Simon’s oft declared pessimism about the possibility of societal change, I have approached his work from a more optimistic perspective. *Homicide*, *The Corner*, and *The Wire*, are not hopeful works. However I believe that they are positive contributions, to the extent that they at least try to explain the nature of our current predicament. In doing so, they at least prompt reflection on what types of solutions and transformations are necessary to arrest and reverse the juggernaut of unencumbered capitalism. I perceive them in similar terms to those employed, in a different period, and

slightly different context by Raymond Williams' in his conclusion to *Culture and Society*:

There are ideas, and ways of thinking, with the seeds of life in them, and there are others... with the seeds of a general death. Our measure of success in recognising these kinds, and in naming them making possible their common recognition, may be literally the measure of our future. (1958, p.338)

I argue that, notwithstanding its pessimism, scepticism of reform, and numerous other criticisms raised throughout this these, that the work of David Simon contains the seeds of life as well as death. It is the former which I attempt to draw to the surface.

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<sup>1</sup> David Simon blogs at "The audacity of despair," <http://davidsimon.com/>

<sup>2</sup> I have collected these and other examples in Appendix B.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter four contains more on this, but one indication is that in his obituary of DeAndre McCullough, David Simon reveals his ongoing involvement in that young man's life over a period of almost twenty years. DeAndre had a bit part in *The Wire*, and was a member of the production crew on *Treme* (Simon 2012b).

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the book is far more than raw material to be reshaped and remoulded in the interests of television narrative. Peter Billingham describes it as a "unique primary source social document" (2000, p.158). Christopher P. Wilson (1997, p.730) calls it a "labour-centred account, focussing on the tension between the underpaid, overworked, but dedicated calling of the detective," and a department that values quantity over quality. Kerrane and Yagoda (1997, p.16) include Simon alongside George Orwell and John Steinbeck for his experiments in structure, chronology and syntax. As a work of non-fiction it also has several suggested precedents, and contemporaries. Todd Hoffman cites South African crime reporter Rian Malan's *My traitor's heart* (1989) as a contemporary example of a similar "exploration of ... life through the tales of how we kill each other" (1998, p.16). Wilson's article, cited above, considers *Killing streets* as a "cop shop" narrative alongside two other accounts of police work, also written by journalists, in the same period: *Crime scene* (1992) by Mitch Gelman and *The cop shop* (1993) by Robert Blau (p.718).

<sup>5</sup> The role of writer breaks down in a two principle ways. A straightforward "written by" credit implies authorial credit stretching from the initial idea to the finished script. A teleplay credit, usually implies that the original story was conceived by somebody else or, if not, that the teleplay has at least been co-written by a third party.

<sup>6</sup> David Simon originally made this comment in response to a blog post by Matthew Iglesias (2008). The comments have now been removed but Simon's comment is preserved in the article "Balzac of Baltimore" (Beggs 2008): "The Wire is dissent; it argues that our systems are no longer viable for the greater good of the most, that America is no longer operating as a utilitarian and democratic experiment."

<sup>7</sup> In other cases, as with Robert Colesberry producer of *The Wire* the collaboration was at the behest of HBO (Simon 2004, p.16). In the case of Tom Fontana, with whom he worked on *Homicide*, it was a case of Simon joining Fontana's team rather than the other way around. Fontana and Barry Levinson introduced David Simon to Nina Kostroff Noble, who also acted as producer on *The Corner* and *The Wire*. All have left their mark on his televisual narratives in different ways. Arguably most important is the ongoing collaboration with former Baltimore police officer, Ed Burns, co-author of *The Corner*.

<sup>8</sup> Pelecanos has also written for *Treme*.

<sup>9</sup> Simon and Price were introduced to each other by their agent in 1992, on the day of the Rodney King riots (Simon 2006a, p.xii). They met again in Baltimore, presumably a year later, when Simon was researching *The Corner* and Price researching his own novel, *Freedomland* (1998). Price would write five episodes of *The Wire*.

<sup>10</sup> Rafael Alvarez, who wrote three episodes, is another crime writer and contributed a story to a Laura

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Lippman (2006a) edited short story collection called *Baltimore Noir*. David Simon contributed a story called "Stainless Steel" to the same collection, his only foray thus far into straight crime fiction. The latter's contribution is notable mostly as a contemporaneous version of *The Wire* storyline involving Bubbles' accidental killing of his protégé with bad heroin (W4.13 "Final Grades," 2006). The collection is notable not only for David Simon's story (2006d), but for Lippman's own contribution. It is the story of a builder who kills a yuppie and bricks her up inside the fireplace of the renovated house that used to belong to his mother, in the Locus Point neighbourhood (Lippman 2006b). It resonates particularly with a minor plot point in season two which sees Nick Sobotka unable to afford his aunt's old house, because the area has been rezoned for those on higher incomes (W2.05, "Undertow," 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Significant in this respect is the relatively new innovation of the dvd episode commentary and featurettes which often contain interviews with writers and producers. The dvd box sets for both *Homicide* and *The Wire* contain significant additional features, while *The Corner* has none. However, I have not relied on these extensively. Given David Simon's tendency to repeat himself there is usually a more easily citeable source for most of his statements and opinions. The same applies when David Simon is the subject of an interview or, a critical article that contains a significant interview portion. Another indication of the relative seriousness with which he seems to approach these interactions is in a Q&A session undertaken for the HBO website (Simon 2006c). It is now archived on the Borderline Productions website, but is noteworthy for the length of the answers he provides to the questions asked by viewers.

<sup>12</sup> "A lonesome death" (Simon 2009a) is significant for a different reason, remembering a meeting with William Zantinger, killer of Baltimore waitress Hattie Carroll. The case inspired a Bob Dylan song, and both later inspired an episode of *Homicide: life on the street*.

<sup>13</sup> Even less attention has been paid to the books. Only one substantial article on *Homicide: a year on the killing streets* from 1997 was revealed during the literature search. This piece, by Christopher P. Wilson, examines *Homicide* alongside two other true crime narratives from the 1990s. His conclusion is critical, judging Simon to be a little too enamoured of the white working class police culture (Wilson C.P. 1997, pp.737-738). While this is a conclusion I would not endorse, given the critical history of the white working class police force in the book, it is an understandable conclusion if the book is considered in isolation. The article was published, and written, before the advent of either *The Corner* or *The Wire*, both of which project a more obviously critical view of the police culture, from the perspective of African-Americans.

<sup>14</sup> An earlier article by Christopher Campbell (2000) published shortly after *Homicide* ended examined the implications for positive representations of African-Americans on television in its absence. It was published prior to the broadcast of both *The Corner* and *The Wire*, but those series aside its general pessimism that African-Americans would find themselves once relegated to secondary roles seems largely accurate.

<sup>15</sup> An even more wide ranging auteurial study of television showrunners, *The revolution was televised*, by tv critic Alan Sepinwall was published in 2012. While it is an important piece, it is pitched toward a more general audience. Its chapter on David Simon did not add anything substantial to that which had been written previously, by either Sepinwall himself, or other writers. I also disagree with the general tenor of the book that the past fifteen years of American television drama constituted a revolutionary transformation.

<sup>16</sup> Engagement with David Simon's work has also proliferated across the blogosphere, where quality varies widely from insightful analysis to lists of catchphrases. It would be virtually impossible, and not particularly edifying, to provide a comprehensive survey of online engagement, so a representative characterisation will need to suffice.

<sup>17</sup> As the arguments are substantially repeated in other journals, I have not quoted from this debate. However it can be found at <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/author/john-atlas-and-peter-dreier> Chaddha and Wilson's (2011) argument about *The Wire* representation of systemic urban inequality, as a form of social science fiction has been particularly influential. It formed the basis for a conference on *The Wire* in Leeds in 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Her concluding argument is less convincing, even though it may have traction as part of a combined ideological and political economic study. She suggests that the denial of "black mothers' sexualities, their subjectivities, their desires, and therefore their fitness as parents" (2012, p.14) was a price Simon paid to work within the institutional context of Time Warner/HBO. While it is not a suggestion that should be dismissed, little evidence is offered for it.

<sup>19</sup> The most notable examples are Herc's question to a corner boy about where he can get a sideways baseball hat (W3.02 "All Due Respect," 2004) and the "Goodnight Moon" sequence with Kima Greggs

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and her young nephew (W5.07 "Took," 2008). Colvin's "paper bag" speech from "All Due Respect" may have been drawn from an observation made by Ed Burns in *The Corner*, but the wider explanation of the corner as the poor man's saloon is drawn from *Clockers*. Both episodes were written by Richard Price.

<sup>20</sup> She also stresses a holistic approach which stresses the "complexity of mediations, the scope for individual creativity, dissident ideologies and subversive readings, the subtle and subconscious processes through which programmes are constructed and interpreted. It sees the ideological dimension of television drama in systemic rather than conspiratorial terms, ie, in terms of the complex contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, rather than in terms of the conspiracies of conscious and clear-minded capitalists." (Sheehan 1987, p.53)

<sup>21</sup> Insofar as television drama was engaged with throughout this period, the contention that it should have something significant to say about "contemporary majority experience" received relatively scant attention. Dominant trends in television studies tended to focus on how the texts were received, and on their effects, rather than on what they were attempting to communicate. Audience reception studies, which remains an influential strain, tends to perceive drama as a force acting upon an audience, rather than one with which the audience engages critically. The same approach is also present, albeit in a more attenuated way, in the encoding/decoding theory developed by Stuart Hall. This theory, while accepting that television does impact on its audience, also argues that this impact is mediated through a host of other social factors around class location, gender, race and education. Depending on the circumstances, an audience member may totally accept or reject all, or part, or a particular message.

<sup>22</sup> Similarly Mark Fisher (2012), reviewing *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan 2012) observes that anti-corporate and anti-capitalist comment is fine in Hollywood, within certain limits. It is only when the rights of property itself is threatened that narratives descend into dystopian fantasies of proletarian savagery.

<sup>23</sup> Consistent with the centrality of market logic is the accelerated privatisation of public utilities and services, and the consequent disengagement of the state from social provision (Harvey 2005, pp23, 60-61). This is justified in ideological terms as an attack on inefficient state bureaucracies, with the lean, mean, efficient private sector presented as a panacea. However, even in those areas deemed unsuitable for privatisation, for logistical or political reasons, the logic of the market holds sway. Mark Fisher (2009) points out that one of the ironies of the supposed post-bureaucratic has been an expansion in administrative bureaucracies in the public sector. Crucially, this is bureaucracy influenced by the hyper-supervised, target-led, micro-administration of people's working lives characteristic of the corporate sector. Fisher dubs this particular development as "market Stalinism" (source), an element especially prominent in David Simon's work, from *Homicide* onwards.

<sup>24</sup> To a much lesser extent, *Delightful Murder* Ernest Mandel's 1984 social history of the crime story has also been useful in contextualising the evolution of stories about crime in a social order he conceives as itself criminal.



## CHAPTER ONE

### **STAND AROUND AND WATCH: DAVID SIMON AND THE “COP SHOP” NARRATIVE.**

Death in the crime story is not treated as a human fate, or as a tragedy. It becomes an object of enquiry. It is not lived, suffered, feared or fought against. It becomes a corpse to be dissected, a thing to be analysed. Reification of death is at the very heart of the crime story.

This phenomenon of the reification of death in the crime story amounts to the replacement of preoccupation with human destiny by preoccupation with crime.

- Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder* (1984, p.41).

Ernest Mandel's social history of the crime story explores its manifestation in popular fiction, from mean streets to stately homes, from the board room to the corridors of political power. David Simon takes a year of cases from the real Baltimore homicide unit and uses them as raw material for an ostensibly factual book of urban journalism. It is a book that combines the narrative breadth of a realist novel, with something approaching the deep immersion of a subcultural ethnography.<sup>1</sup> It claims to present its protagonist detectives subjects with their flaws and talents intact, and with affection and respect. It also approaches, sporadically, the wider social context of homicide investigation in Baltimore, engaging with interconnected issues of race, class and the changing nature of work itself.

It would be tempting, and not entirely inaccurate, to suggest an identifiable progression running from this book to *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), one of the most acclaimed dramas in television history. In terms of the latter's surface narrative, *Homicide: a year on the killing streets* (Simon 2006a) contributed much, not least in the way of colour providing anecdotes.<sup>2</sup> These are interesting enough, yet the importance of *Homicide* in terms of David Simon's representation of Baltimore goes beyond a few humorous stories.<sup>3</sup> Neither is the book simply reducible to the place where “it” all started, with “it” as the seemingly irresistible critical ascent of David Simon. It is important because of the early appearance of motifs that endure throughout the double life of *Homicide* and *The Wire*, but also *The Corner*, based in narratives of addiction. These motifs include the centrality of narratives of labour, irrespective of context, or what side of the legal line the protagonists inhabit. In *Homicide* this is accomplished partly through the use of a narrative perspective that presents itself as the communal

voice of the detectives. This is combined with what often seems to be over-identification with the subjects, on the part of the author, and which appears to drastically diminish critical distance. The book also contains Simon's first attempt to conceptualise what would become a recurring narrative contradiction between different definitions of labour. This is the conflict between labour, as individual productive craft work, and labour as defined by the bureaucratic needs of the police department. Finally, and crucially for *The Corner* and *The Wire*, is the evocation of a war narrative. Even though as the focus is the homicide unit, and the majority of murders are drug related, this narrative is not explicitly linked to the "war on drugs."

*Homicide* is not a difficult book, in the sense that it is not an earnest dissection of the nature of policing, in the midst of a city in social and economic decline. In another sense, despite its readable and accessible style, this is exactly what it does. Its title evokes Roland Joffé's 1984 film, *The Killing Fields*, about the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia, but it also suggests the killing floor of an abattoir, awash with blood. In his afterword to the 2006 edition, David Simon makes this connection explicitly:

I came to realize that I was standing on the factory floor. This was death investigation as an assembly-line process, a growth industry for a rust-belt America that had long ceased to mass manufacture much of anything, save for heartbreak itself. (2006a, p.628)<sup>4</sup>

This social and political context of Reagan era decline is explored via "tales of how we kill each other", as Todd Hoffman described Rian Malan's not dissimilar *My Traitor's Heart* (Hoffman 1998, p.16). Therefore, prospective readers with a taste for more traditional true crime or "cop shop narratives," as Christopher P. Wilson (1997) defines them, will find much that is entertaining. The primary coloured covers of true crime narratives that stare at us in bookshops retain their popularity because they seem to open a window into a world that most readers will thankfully never experience. This is especially true of those books that deal with crimes of violence. Violence represents:

the ultimate crime against property, and against the state. It thus represents a fundamental rupture in the social order. The use of violence marks the distinction between those who are fundamentally *of* society and those who are *outside* it. It is coterminous with the boundary of 'society' itself. (Hall et al. 1978, p.68)<sup>5</sup>

For David Simon, by contrast, the window opened by crime reporting looked not so much onto a social rupture but onto the nature of the social order itself. It was,

according to his former colleague Rebecca Corbett, “a way of examining the failings of government, a way to think about ... drug policy, and a way of telling stories” (Talbot 2007). What *Homicide* attempts is to combine this examination with the “police populism” (Wilson 1997, p.721) of the “cop shop” narrative. It is primarily this combination which marks the book and its dramatic offspring as separate from less reflective true crime narratives.

Another notable element is the manner way in which the killing streets of Baltimore are not described from the perspective of a distanced narrator. David Simon abandons the “communal voice of the newspaper” to adopt “the communal voice of the city homicide detective” (Simon 1998a). In fact it was a detective who, in 1985, originally suggested that “the shit that goes on up here” in the homicide unit would be worthy material for a book (Mills 2007b).<sup>6</sup> When Simon finally interned with the homicide unit two years later, it was partly to get away from the *Baltimore Sun*, after a particularly bitter strike had left him “disgusted with management” (Jordan c.2002).<sup>7</sup> It is unsurprising then that his sympathy and empathy reside with the labouring detectives and their immediate supervisors. Christopher P. Wilson (1997, p.730) describes *Homicide* as a “*labour-centred* account, focussing on the tension between the underpaid, overworked, but dedicated calling of the detective,” and a department that values quantity over quality.<sup>8</sup> A second, but equally important, consideration was a determination to move away from the “limited ... bloodless” coverage that reduces “life-size tragedies to easily digestible pieces” (Simon 1995a, p.36). The intention was to return to a style of journalistic storytelling he felt had been abandoned, and to restore the momentous nature of the destruction of human life.

In his foreword to a reissue of *Homicide*, novelist (and scriptwriter for *The Wire*) Richard Price grapples with the implications of such “embedding,” with a police force. He did something similar with the narcotics detectives and drug dealers of New Jersey for his 1992 novel, *Clockers* (p.xii). David Simon describes his own approach as “stand-around-and-watch reporting” (Harabin c.2006).<sup>9</sup> Price asks whether writers like himself and Simon are simply uncritical “police buffs” and admits that, “for whoever allows us to walk a mile in their shoes, on either side of the law, we do feel an unavoidable empathy – in essence we become “embedded.”<sup>10</sup> As a corrective, Price suggests it is for the writer to maintain sufficient distance to ensure that their subjects “dig [their] own grave” or “build [their] own monument” by being themselves (p.xiii). Simon is quite clear that his narrative is both monument and grave. Much of what he wrote was neither, “complimentary or ennobling”. The racism, sexism and class contempt for the

underclass that some detectives feel is periodically apparent. Nevertheless, it is these detectives themselves who were his intended audience, and theirs were “the only judgements that mattered” (p.637.). Similarly, Peter Moskos, who spent a year as a Baltimore police officer as part of his doctoral research, points out that while he tried to be fair to those he policed, “my empathy was toward my fellow officers,” who became friends (Moskos 2008, p.6).

As a consequence, *Homicide* is a work of narrative journalism that makes no attempt at balance, impartiality, or what its author refers to as “our feigned notion of objectivity” (Simon 1998a). Contrary to this approach blurring the boundaries of critical distance, he counter-intuitively insists that:

“Narrative demands that your subjects are given their voice; journalism demands that you tell the whole truth... You have to get emotionally involved to succeed in writing from another person's point of view. That doesn't mean that you have to be anything less than honest.” (Hoffman 1998, p.21)

This was Simon's first attempt to “write for the people living the event” rather than to any sense of feigned objectivity (Hornby 2007). Over the years such people have included not only cops but drug users and dealers, US marines, Hurricane Katrina survivors, and smaller groups and subcultures, from dockers to musicians. It is storytelling as advocacy, deciding “what to take in and what to exclude” (Rose, C. 1999) so that “The Truth” of the world is revealed (p.xiv).

While Simon was interning with the detectives, during the early years of the so-called war on drugs, the Baltimore police department was investigating approximately 240 murders a year (p.16). For the police officers, aside from their own self-perception as under- appreciated civil servants, the suggestion of a war raging, or being waged, is a recurring motif. Good patrol men are soldiers (p.18). Police ranks shadow those of military command with lieutenants, captains, majors and colonels. Richard Price describes the book as a war story with its theatre of engagement stretching from Baltimore to the Maryland state legislature in Annapolis (p.xiv). While the police never fully conceptualise their position as a fighting or occupying force, the “war” is invoked as a way to comprehend their own situation and to justify sacrifices made.

This is clearest during the inebriated aftermath of the trial of Butchie Frazier, convicted for shooting and blinding a police officer. Sergeant McLarney describes the blinded officer as “a war hero” and “a soldier who got shot... defending his country”. While its nature is not explained and neither is it clear against whom the war is being

fought, McLarney is clear that “there's this war going on in America” (p.310).<sup>11</sup> For the sergeant, the enemy is unidentifiable, existing in an indefinable place, but it nevertheless has the capacity to harm America. It is a narrative that has retained potency through various “red scares” and the cold war to the “war on terror”. The image of police officers as soldiers at war within their home country may be no more than another expression of this enduring popular narrative.<sup>12</sup> It is not irrelevant to note that Butchie Frazier was an African-American drug dealer, even though no direct reference is made to this fact by McLarney. It seems to be the first reference to the war against the American underclass itself, as David Simon has described the mutated nature of the war on drugs (Rothkerch, 2002). The threat for these soldiers is not external but internal. It raises questions about who this underclass is composed of, and of the border being policed, during the first significant period of economic contraction after the civil rights struggle.<sup>13</sup>

This period is a contradictory one, characterised by the turn towards what would later be understood as neoliberalism. Increased concentration of wealth at the top of society was combined with the deliberate diminution of employment, and of the palliative institutions of the state, like social security. The contradiction lies in the extent to which this coincided with the pyrrhic victory of the post-1967 transfer of political power “to a new generation of Black politicians” “in the decayed, fiscally-looted central cities,” as “ruling corporate ‘downtown interests’” transferred “their trust in the maintenance of law and order” (Davis 1986, p.223).

### RACE AND CLASS IN A BLACK CITY

These law and order labourers whose experience and perspective Simon wished to capture are exclusively male and overwhelmingly white. In the tv version, the squad is more diverse, initially in terms of race and later of gender. This reflected the growing diversity (by the mid 1990s) of actual police departments (Hoffman 1998, p.94), the evolving reality of policing and the changing expectations of audiences. By 1999 Peter Moskos could write that “elite colleges should envy the true racial and economic diversity of an urban police academy”. On the other hand police officers still tended toward the conservative in their politics, which views were usually in place long before they joined, and may have been a motivating factor (Moskos 2008, p.2).

In 1988 by contrast, “the homicide unit remained a bastion of male law

enforcement” and it is through these eyes that gender, race, and class politics are perceived. The one female detective in the homicide unit, if not in D'Addario's shift, is viewed as an exception doing nothing to disprove the rule that women police officers are “secretaries with guns” (p.47). Her name, Bertina, is even shortened to Bert (p.48) and she is supposedly judged solely on her abilities as a detective. Nevertheless, Bert is the one left to cajole and dress a drunken, reluctant witness during a house search (p.89). In another instance, Simon seems positively to relish the propriety stretching language of the detectives, as an elusive witness labelled “Lenore, the Mystery Whore” is variously referred to, in the space of one page of casual misogyny and contempt, as a “cocksucking bitch”, “a disease-ridden twenty-dollar-a-fuck junkie”, “junkie bitch”, and “a \$20 cockhound” (pp.563-564). It is a good illustration of Richard Price's maxim to allow the cops to dig their own grave or build their own monument in accordance with what comes out of their mouths.

One surprising aspect is the seeming absence of overt racism in the book.<sup>14</sup> This may be due to the fact that the detectives continued to watch their tongues around the liberal journalist, despite Simon's assertions to the contrary (p.625).<sup>15</sup> That racism exists is not denied, but it is usually engaged with in the abstract, as this pen portrait of Detective Donald Worden shows. It is also worth noting the implicit association of racism with a working class, non-college educated background. To be non-racist with such disadvantages seems by itself to be worthy of remark:

Unlike many of the cops he came on with ... he was no racist, though any kid raised in the white, working-class enclave of Hampden had ample opportunity to acquire the taste... There were cops twenty years younger who reacted to what they saw on the streets by crawling into a psychological cave, damning every nigger and liberal faggot to hell for screwing up the country. Yet somehow, with nothing more than a high school education and his Navy training, Worden grew with the job. His mother had something to do with that; she was not the kind of woman to bring prejudice into a house. His long partnership with [Detective] Grady also had good effect; he could not, on the one hand, respect and care for a black detective, then go dropping words like nigger and toad as if they meant nothing. (pp.257-258)

When it does emerge, racism is intertwined and fused with class prejudice, particularly hatred for the urban underclass and drug addicts/dealers. Examples cited later by Peter Moskos, from his own time as a police officer, indicate the slippage between race and class fuelled resentment:

When I half-jokingly accused my partner of just not liking black people,

he responded passionately, “I got nothing against black people. I just don't like *these* black people... If they were white people acting this way, I wouldn't like them any better. Hell, I'd probably like them worse.” (2008, p.41)

The (white) officer implies that it is somehow worse for white people to act as members of an underclass. When a black officer suggests that he would like to flood the whole of East Baltimore, Moskos suggests that this is an identical attitude to that of many white officers. The officer responds:

“Naw, I'm not like that because I'd let the good people build an ark and float out. Old people, working people, line 'em up, two by two. White cops will be standing on the walls with big poles, pushing people back in.” (ibid. p.40)

Similarly, in *Homicide* the cops reserve their contempt for the underclass, seemingly regardless of race. David Simon suggests that the hard-core hillbillies of south Baltimore are “generally regarded with as much disdain and humour as the hard-core ghetto culture” (p.415).<sup>16</sup> Another of Peter Moskos's colleagues defines the difference between the two as a child in the black ghetto “may not know who his father is, but half the time those [white] motherfuckers don't want to know” (2008, p.40). “What that thin blue line really separates,” Todd Hoffman suggests, “are the underclasses from the working and upper classes” (1998, p.179). In the most extreme example, the home of exclusively black suspects in a murder case is presented as a scene from hell:

Two dozen human beings have learned to leave food where it falls, to pile soiled clothes and diapers in a corner of the room, to lie strangely still when parasites crawl across the sheets, to empty a bottle of Mad Dog or T-Bird and then piss its contents into a plastic bucket at the edge of the bed... on Newington Avenue the rubicons of human existence have all been crossed. The struggle itself has been mocked, and the unconditional surrender of one generation presses hard upon the next. (p.131)

This level of squalor is greeted with disbelief that, even taking into account institutional societal and economic failings, any human being would live in this way. The house represents a state lower than unemployment, drug addiction or criminality. The contempt afforded the inhabitants, the narrator suggests, seems to come from neither hatred of race or poverty, but “from a deeper place, and it seems to insist on a standard, to say that some men are poor and some men are criminals, but even in the worst American slum, there are recognizable depths beyond which no one should ever

have to fall” (p.130).<sup>17</sup> While this dual perspective of simultaneously acknowledging structural and personal failings is here attributed to the detectives, it re-emerges in *The Wire* with authorial authority. In the fourth season narrative about the schoolchildren of the drug corner, the critique is not only of structural and systemic barriers to advancement, but of deficient and neglectful parenting.<sup>18</sup>

Informing the example in *Homicide* is a variation on the conservative belief that poverty is not socially determined, but that the poor are largely responsible for their own problems. In fact, it is here that the intersection between race and class becomes most apparent, as in this description of how black officers are assimilated into “the brotherhood of cops” (p.26):

To be a black detective in homicide required a special sense of balance ... a willingness ... to ignore the cynical assessments and barbed humour of men for whom black-on-black violence represented a natural order. To them, the black middle class was simply a myth. Edgerton, Requer, Eddie Brown ... were black ... but they proved nothing. They were cops and therefore, whether they knew it or not, they were all honorary Irishmen. That logic allowed the same detective who could comfortably partner with Eddie Brown to watch a black family move into the house next door, then go to the police computer the next day and run his new neighbours. (p.526)

By becoming honorary Irishmen, the detectives effectively cease to be black, perception confirmed in *The Wire*. The invented tradition of the police wake involves all officers, regardless of colour, singing along to The Pogues song, “The Body of an American” (3.03 “Dead Soldiers,” 2004).

The white officer cited by Moskos, who would like white people even “worse” for “acting this way” is expressing the belief that they are letting the side down.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, “acting this way” and “black-on-black violence” is, if not seen as culturally integral, not particularly surprising either. Blackness is something to be overcome, by individual self-improvement, and is commendable. Whiteness, on the contrary, is a positive and normative attribute to be squandered.

*Homicide* may be a narrative of white men chasing mostly black men, but it is not one of white hats and black hats. The strongest parts are those which point forward to David Simon's future concerns as a writer, as he abandons the “communal voice” to examine the wider context of policing in Baltimore. The book’s history of institutional racism in particular would significantly influence the tv series, with police actions and opinions often informed by these anecdotes and analysis. Up until the 1960s, the Baltimore police department was defined by racism and held in almost universal



contempt by black Baltimoreans, who were under-represented in its ranks (p.109). The appointment of the first black police sergeant in 1947 and the first black judge in 1957 were headline stories (Levy 2011, p.14). The presence of the police “was for generations merely another plague [for the black population] to endure: poverty, ignorance, despair, police.” These were the days before “heroin and cocaine ... became the predominant economy of the ghetto” (p.109). Organisational reform in the 1960s, spurred by the successes of the civil rights movement, did little to change the mentality of the mostly white police officers. Reforms were difficulties to be circumvented, particularly the one stipulating that brutality cases and “bad shootings” would be subject to internal oversight. From the perspective of police officers this meant making “bad shootings” look like good shootings. Some began carrying “drop pieces”, such as knives, to be dropped beside a dead or wounded suspect to make it look as though they had fired in self-defence (p.110). Simon brings two important insights to his account of this period.

The first is that years of accumulated systemic racism, verbal slights, bad shootings, and clouts with clubs, were fates lined up and ready to enact retribution at some future time. The example Simon chooses to illustrate this concerns one young man, shot and wounded by an off-duty officer, who mistook his cigarette lighter for a gun:

For the public, and the black community in particular, the shooting of Ja-Wan McGee become a long-awaited victory over a police department that had for generations devalued black life. It was, in that sense, the inevitable consequence of too much evil justified for too long. It made no difference that Scotty McCown [the officer] was neither incompetent nor racist; in Baltimore, as in other police departments nationwide, the sons would be made to pay for their fathers' crimes. (p.114)

The second insight leads from his argument that “a heavily armed nation prone to violence finds it only reasonable to give law officers weapons and the authority to use them”. His observation that “only a cop has the right to kill as an act of personal deliberation and action” (p.113), echoes the traditional marxist perspective on the state's “monopoly over institutionalised violence” (Harvey 1989, p.108). (This is, admittedly, a perspective that seems increasingly dated in an age of mercenaries and private security contractors.) He makes no attempt to either condemn or mitigate the consequences of this fact:

Three thousand ... men and women were sent out onto the streets of Baltimore with .38-calibre Smith & Wessons, for which they received several weeks of academy firearms training augmented by one trip to the

police firing range every year. Coupled with an individual officer's judgement, that is deemed expertise enough to make the right decision every time.

It is a lie.

It is a lie the police department tolerates because to do otherwise would shatter the myth of infallibility on which rests its authority for lethal force. (p.113)

In other words, notwithstanding racist or other malicious intent, armed police will inevitably, unnecessarily kill people, perhaps “haunted by memories of [other cops] who hesitated and lost” (p.115). It is a statistical certainty every bit as unavoidable as the one dictating that police department secretaries prepare and number homicide case files each Friday, before leaving for the weekend (p.168). David Simon reaches beyond a single event, like the shooting of J-Wan McGee to the wider context of structural violence that determines it. It is an early example of the “social determinism” underwriting the narrative of *The Wire* (Mills 2007a).

#### DETECTION AS DUTY, WORK AS FICTION, STATS AS REALITY.

*Homicide* may be perceived as the communal voice of the detectives, but it is also a book that changes tone regularly, mostly dependent on the nature of the cases being described. Homicide detection is explored as not simply a job, but as a duty, and a craft. Detective Rich Garvey copies sheets declaring “we work for God” (p.186) and, concluding the section on the job's petty bureaucratic annoyances, Simon points out that:

In a police department of about three thousand sworn souls, you are one of thirty-six investigators entrusted with the pursuit of that most extraordinary of crimes: the theft of a human life. You speak for the dead. (p.17)

Not all homicides in the book are treated equally, reflecting both the frequency of drug-related deaths, and the perspectives of the detectives toward different victims. Their attitude towards the daily killings of people of colour seems as formulaic and bloodless as that of the journalists Simon criticises (1995a, p.36). It is an ironic, and surely unintended, replication of the limited “bloodless” coverage he claimed to be trying to ditch. At the scene of the book's opening murder, West Baltimore is described as the “home of the misdemeanour homicide” (p.6). Some killings are pathetic: a drug dealer's

bodyguard shoots through the boss he is meant to be protecting, to get to his intended target (p.12). Some are farcical: an elderly woman called Geraldine Parrish marries multiple times, simply to have her many husbands killed so she can cash in on their insurance policies (pp.367-369).

Similarly, one of the only murders to make the front page of the *Baltimore Sun* during Simon's year in the homicide unit also forms the narrative spine of the book (Simon 1995a, p.40). This was the killing of eleven-year-old Latonya Wallace on her way home from the library. Its dramatisation would serve a similar function in the early episodes of the tv series. She is presented unapologetically, from the perspective of the communal narrator, as a "real" victim, unlike those adults who were shot through various drug-related misadventures.<sup>20</sup> The account of her body's discovery, at the beginning of the second chapter, shifts register constantly, as if to underline how unnatural her death is:<sup>21</sup>

It is the illusion of tears and nothing more, the rainwater that collects in small beads and runs to the hollows of her face. The dark brown eyes are fixed wide, staring across wet pavement; jet black braids of hair surround the deep brown skin, high cheekbones and a pert upturned nose. The lips are parted and curled in a slight, vague frown. She is beautiful, even now.

The tone becomes more descriptive and clinical, reminiscent of a crime scene report, before changing back to remind us that the corpse so coldly described is still a human being:

She is resting on her left hip, her head cocked to one side, her back arched, with one leg bent over the other. Her right arm rests above her head, her left arm is fully extended, with small, thin fingers reaching out across the asphalt for something, or someone, no longer there. (p.59)

Latonya is described as, "innocent as few of those murdered [in Baltimore] ever are" and "a monstrous sacrifice to an unmistakable evil" (p.60).<sup>22</sup>

By contrast, the chapter dealing with the peculiarities of the Baltimore summer is, in keeping with the book's title, a powerful evocation of the city as a foetid, stinking, slaughter house. The bright, hot days of summer are juxtaposed relentlessly with violent death, to the point where light disappears completely:

Summer is a ninety-minute backup in the Hopkins emergency room, an animal chorus of curses and pleas from the denizens of every district lockup, a nightly promise of yet another pool of blood on the dirty linoleum in yet another Federal Street carryout. Summer is a barroom cutting, up on Druid Hill, a ten minute gun battle in the Terrace ...

Summer is the season of motiveless murder, of broken-blade steak knives and bent tire irons; it's the time for truly dangerous living, the season of massive and immediate retaliation, the 96-degree natural habitat of the Argument That Will Be Won. (p.344)

Meanwhile, a summer pop song garners significance beyond its vacuity. It becomes the “theme song for a city that bleeds” (p.355), an ironic twist on former Baltimore mayor Kurt L. Schmoke's pro-education election slogan from 1987, “the city that reads” (Maestretti 2009).<sup>23</sup> The section's final line sums up the production line character of the detectives' labour, and the homicide investigation as work motif; “Another day's pay on the killing streets” (p.355).

On other occasions the tone turns darkly humorous. Towards the end of the book, an exhumation order for a murder victim in the Geraldine Parrish case leads to the unearthing of the wrong body. The manager of the cemetery is forced to admit he has no real idea where the correct body might be:

“You think if we dig where Eugene Dale is supposed to be, we're gonna find Gilliard?” [asks Detective Waltemeyer.]  
“Maybe.”  
“Why? They're buried a month apart.”  
“Maybe not,” the manager agrees. (p.547)

This visit to the cemetery serves a purpose aside from comic relief. In a book and tv series that treat death investigation as somebody's job, little consideration is given to what happens when the case is closed. As the detective searches for the right body, the file cards become a roll call of the year's homicide victims:

Birth, poverty, violent death, then an anonymous burial in the mud of Mount Zion. In life, the city could muster no purpose for these wasted souls; in death the city had lost them entirely. (p.549)

This resonates twenty years later in *The Wire*, as murder victims are hidden inside deserted houses, and an invented serial killer supposedly preys on Baltimore's poor and homeless.

This denial of narrative closure, both in fact and fiction is an important part of the tv adaptation's relative originality. The voice of the communal narrator gleefully debunks many of the misconceptions that abound in fictional police narratives. Much of this finds its way not only into *Homicide's* tv incarnation, but also into *The Wire*. These misconceptions have not only shaped the expectations of the consumers of detective fiction but influenced how real police investigations are understood. What is now

referred to as the “*CSI* effect”<sup>24</sup> is present in Simon’s book as the *Columbo* effect, as suggested by this excerpt from a hypothetical courtroom cross-examination:

“On *Columbo*, the in gun is always the liquor cabinet behind the vermouth. But you didn't check behind the defendant's vermouth, did you, detective? No, you don't have the murder weapon. Your honor, I move that we unshackle this poor innocent waif and send him back to his loving family.” (p.476)

Implausible though it may be that jurors are so simplistically manipulated, numerous examples are produced of fallacies that dominate popular television dramas. While the detectives in the book work together on different cases, they do not have the permanent buddy type partnerships portrayed on television (including on *Homicide* itself). These partnerships owe more to television's need for the back and forth banter of mismatched chalk and cheese, or salt-and-pepper<sup>25</sup> odd couples than they do to reality. For homicide detectives there are no high speed pursuits or running gun battles. Cases are not solved by the discovery of a stray hair on a blood soaked carpet. In the reality of *Homicide*, detectives arrive after the body has fallen and the violence concluded. Most cases are solved by “the killer's overwhelming disposition toward incompetence or, at the very least, gross error” (p.16).

Particular delight is taken in exploding the myth of infallible and incontrovertible forensic evidence. If anything, these sequences have acquired more resonance with the passing years, given the seeming omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence of forensics based dramas like *CSI* (CBS, 2000- ) and *Bones* (Fox, 2005- ). The underfunded, understaffed and under-resourced nature of forensic work described in the book and tv series of *Homicide* and *The Wire* act as a corrective to such chromium fantasies.<sup>26</sup>

Doubt is cast upon the integrity of evidence recovered from bodies in the medical examiner's office, where autopsies are performed in “a less than pristine environment”:

Hairs recovered ... could just as easily have come from the plastic wrap on the body litter or a towel used to clean the victim prior to internal examination. They may be hairs from the ME's (medical examiner) attendants and investigators, or the paramedics who pronounced the victim, or from the last body carted way on the body litter or laid out on the examination gurneys. (p.68)

In the *CSI* sub-genre, when a hair or a shred of fibre is plucked from the victim's body with a tweezers, it is almost an article of faith that it is a crucial piece of the puzzle. The

hair is where it is for no other reason than to progress or resolve the story. For David Simon, the story is more likely to be that of an underpaid, undervalued, and hungover lab technician who left a stray hair on an inadequately cleaned gurney.

These observations, even at a remove of two decades, serve not only to puncture the bubble of popular television. They also reveal, as with the contextualisation of policing in Baltimore, a tendency to look to the whole, to the wider world in which forensic investigation and autopsies take place:

A pathologist's death investigation is ... never an independent process; it exists in concert with everything the detective has already learned at the crime scene and in interviews. An assistant medical examiner who believes that cause and manner of death can be determined in all cases solely by the examination of the body is just asking for pain. The best pathologists begin by reading the police reports and looking at ... photos taken ... at the crime scene. Without that context, the postmortem examination is a meaningless exercise. (p.402)

In place of these misconceptions, ten rules of death investigation are introduced, reflecting the cynicism that develops after a long period in any bureaucracy. They further undermine the myth of the detective motivated by moral outrage or that “protect and serve nonsense” (Simon 2005). The first rule, for example, states that “everyone lies”, to wit: “murderers lie because they have to;” “witnesses ... because they think they have to;” and “everybody else lies for the sheer joy of it” (p.35). Rule number seven refers to the fact that cleared homicides are “a money tree” and that the wheels of this job, like any other, are lubricated by overtime:

In reference to the colour of money, and the colours by which open and solved murders are chronicled on the board, the rule states: First, they're red. Then they're green. Then they're black. (p.268)

Open and closed cases are listed on “the board,” a simplified version of which appears in both *Homicide* and *The Wire*. Its position in the former most closely replicates its importance in the real homicide unit; a whiteboard hanging in the office detailing the year's cases, and the officers assigned to them. Open cases are marked in red, and closed cases in black. Originally introduced to supposedly “promote cohesion and accountability” (p.41), the board instead introduced competition into murder investigation. In an environment where co-operation would seem essential, different homicide shifts are pitched against each other. A detective and, by extension, his shift are judged on their own clearances, whereas in the past these were credited to the entire homicide unit. As an emblem of the marketisation of the public sector, the promotion of

a particular type of individual accountability, and the triumph of perception driven policing, it is peerless. It reflects how, in the corporate sector, competition has become internalised (Harvey 1984, cited in Wayne 2003, p.63). Sergeant McLarney jokingly suggests to Lieutenant D'Addario that putting open cases in black and the closed ones in red would fool the bosses for a while (p.39), a classic bureaucratic fudge. In a book about violent death, the board remains an enduringly powerful image of modern workplace alienation, and of the destruction and disincentivising of productive activity.<sup>27</sup>

This process of bureaucratisation was well underway during the late 1980s when, simultaneous to a recruitment freeze among serving officers, command staff was increased by 20% (Simon 1994d). To conceal a decrease in effectiveness, however defined, the department relied on statistical indicators recognisable to anyone who has worked in a large corporate or state enterprise. These crime statistics, or “stats,” are introduced in *Homicide* as the principal means by which departmental performance is measured. The full, malevolent, self-perpetuating importance of the stats would be explored in *The Wire*, where they cease to be a way measure performance, but come to define reality. They are the opium of the bosses. The production of positive stats becomes the means to the end by which the chain of command reproduces itself, with “captains [becoming] majors who become colonels” (p.195).

One of the main problems with such a blunt tool is obvious. Some murders called “red balls” are perceived as more important than others. These are “murders that matter” (p.20), cases that “generate manpower assignments not from [their] intrinsic difficulty, but because of the potential headlines [they] will generate” (Wilson, 1997, p.724).<sup>28</sup> The cases have political significance because of their potential to make the city, the police department, or both, look bad and suffer financially. For example, red ball cases in *Homicide: life on the street* involved the adaptations of the Latonya Wallace case in the second episode (“A Ghost of a Chance” (H1.02, 1993)), the shooting of a police officer in “Son of a Gun” (H1.04, 1993), and of a tourist in David Simon's first co-written script, “Bop Gun” (H2.01, 1994). These cases retain their importance until the name changes from red to black, at which point they lose context and become simple stats again. From that perspective, a closed red ball means no more than a drug murder that barely warranted mention in the newspaper. A murder where the perpetrator is found standing over the victim with the gun in his hand means no more than a lengthy, labour-intensive investigation. Aside from differences between cases, they fail to take into account other reasons why clearance rates might fall. A rising

murder rate combined with a recruitment freeze simply means demand outstrips supply.<sup>29</sup> Yet, despite their obvious flaws, it is the “unrepentant worship of statistics that forms the true orthodoxy of any modern police department” (p.195).<sup>30</sup>

Even when a case is closed, successful conviction is hardly assured. The priorities of arrest stats (clearances) clash with the different reality of conviction stats.<sup>31</sup> Peter Moskos observes of drug prosecutions that the State's Attorney is so overworked that they are willing to prosecute only the most winnable cases (2008, p.129). Plea agreements, where a suspect admits to a lesser charge in exchange for a more lenient sentence are, according to Simon, a “structural necessity” to stop the entire criminal justice system grinding to a halt (p.478). Given the difficulty in successfully convicting the guilty, Simon suggests that miscarriages of justice are unlikely, except in the case of incompetent defence counsel (p.471). Wrongful convictions through the fabrication of evidence or deliberately charging an innocent person are also unlikely. This is, again, mostly because detectives do not care enough:

For a detective to falsify evidentiary material ... carries a risk far greater than the reward. How much does it matter – really matter – to the detective if any one suspect charged with any one murder goes to prison? He does fourteen of these guys in a year, a couple hundred in a career. For what reason is he going to start believing that the world ends when he doesn't win a case? (p.481)

Simon suggests that “some corners might be cut” for the shooting of a police officer, or for someone the detective knows, but disappointingly no more details are given (ibid.). Moskos, writing almost twenty years later in the context of more general graft and corruption, also suggests that one deterrent from bad behaviour is simply the risk to an officer's career (2008, p.184). The financial rewards are generally not worth risking a pension over. Elsewhere, he suggests that “there is no culture of corruption or brutality among Baltimore patrol officers” (Moskos 2008, p.9), in contrast for example, to the 1960s (Simon 1994c). Of course, risk and reward are relative concepts. Some years later, David Simon suggested that many questionable drug possession cases are partly motivated by court pay that officers can earn, even though the cases are usually thrown straight out of court (1994b). Moskos suggests much the same, that part of the motivation in these situations, as with the homicide detectives, is court and overtime pay, so-called “collars [arrests] for dollars” (2008, p.185). In an arrest based culture, satisfactory performance and career prospects are measured by the number of arrests made. Consistent failure to reach an “arrest quota” can lead to disciplinary action (ibid.



p.154). Such an environment encourages arrests based on weak evidence, for financial gain and career advancement. Leaving aside obvious manifestations of corruption, such as brutality, embezzlement, or theft, a police department governed by “the unrepentant worship of statistics” *is* systemically corrupt.<sup>32</sup>

## CONCLUSION

An unresolved contradiction runs through David Simon’s description of the nature of work in the Baltimore homicide department, and beyond. Christopher P. Wilson includes *Homicide* under the umbrella of police populist narratives that are “progressive and reactionary, liberal and authoritarian all at once”<sup>33</sup>. They “represent policing as the labour of ... dedicated, hard-bitten knight[s] of the city” (1997, p.721).<sup>34</sup> The detectives in *Homicide* are presented as a contradictory mixture of “mostly white working class [men] ... solving crimes ... by shoe leather, hard work, and often tedious procedures” (Wilson, 1997, p.721), and as “professional white collar labourers” (ibid. p.729). However, as Stephen Shapiro suggests in the context of *The Shield* (FX, 2002-2008), this seeming contradiction is resolved if police officers are understood as members of the petit-bourgeoisie. In other words, if they are understood as those members of the working class “that seek to escape from purely manual labour by going a step upward on the social ladder through inclusion within the more physically active lower echelons of state civil service, such as the police” (Shapiro 2012, ch.10, para.14). This insight, perceiving the police as overseers and supervisors within the wider social order is also central to Jennifer Klein’s more recent article on *The Wire*:

The police have the power of coercion and violence and yet are powerless politically. In a sense, they might be the man (or woman) “in the middle”, as Nelson Lichtenstein called foremen, during the era when they came up from the shop floor and identified with the workers but were taking on the role of front-line management. (Klein 2013, p.36)

Richard Seymour (2010) suggests that even left-leaning authors tend to glamorise the police, whom he describes as “administrators skilfully applying violence to resolve bureaucratic dilemmas”. In 1970, Egon Bittner described the police as “distributors of coercive force” (cited in Moskos 2008, p.184). David Simon, in the communal voice of the detective, is more succinct; “Police work has always been brutal; good police work, discreetly so” (p.638). He describes himself as someone who

“admired good police work,” but this admiration is not uncritical (Glenny 2008). His admiration seems directed most unconditionally to the homicide detectives who, on an individual basis, escape his ire. It also applies to the complex wire-tap cases undertaken against the drug gangs by his future writing partner, Ed Burns. The drug war is the ultimate institutional expression of the state regime, even though, as suggested in *The Wire*, good police work can still take place within it. Burns and Simon would co-author *The Corner*, a more sustained engagement with the drug war, and the product of more “stand around and watch” journalism. Field research on the street corners of West Baltimore was already under way when the early episodes of *Homicide* aired on NBC in 1993.<sup>35</sup>

The detectives lack personal investment in the crimes they investigate. In all but the most extreme cases, like the murder of Latonya Wallace, there is little sign of the traditional crusading avenger of crime fiction. Passion and commitment appears to stem from the intellectual challenge of crime investigation. “To a good homicide detective,” according to Simon, “the murder is an affront to his intellectual vanity”:

‘This fucker did this murder, I caught it, and he thinks he's fucking better than me. Fuck him. He's about to find out.’ That's a good cop. He could be class-conscious, racist, sexist, homophobic and still wanna solve that murder. (Rothkerch 2002)

This deconstruction of the myth of the archetypal detective was built on in *Homicide*'s television incarnation. Yet, for all that this suggests a craft like, artisanal approach to their labour they remain defined by the bureaucratic norms of the department. Regardless of the skill each detective brings to an investigation, its successful outcome is still bureaucratically defined, by a name turning from red to black on the homicide board.

The narrative voice of the communal detective places labour at the centre of the narrative, and places the reader into a position of identification with the forces of law and order. Later, Simon's scripts for *Homicide: Life on the Street* would feature police wrongdoing and corruption so regularly that they seem to represent the repressed narrative of the book. Yet, in terms of his perception of police and criminals in systemic terms, he comes down, albeit with a certain ambivalence, on the side of the thin blue line. He posits a hypothetical detective investigating a drug dealer:

“I'm a cop and I'm trying to do this wire-tap case against a guy who's doing illegal things.” The chance that he's going to be societally as

destructive as a gangster is pretty minimal, though he may have incredibly cynical and destructive moments, personally and professionally. (Mills 2007a)

Despite their coercive role, police officers have traditionally been identified in television drama, in a relatively unproblematic way, as members of the working class. Their working lives are regimented by shifts, and they seem increasingly subject to similar structures of control and supervision as other workers. This identification is central to the book, and I would argue, plays a wider ideological role in engineering the consent necessary for the police to operate coercively. The difference between *Homicide* and other cop dramas, including those like *Hill Street Blues* and *NYPD Blue*, is that in the latter cases the office hierarchy tends to terminate with the shift commander. It is Captain Frank Furillo or Lieutenant Arthur Fancy respectively, who is responsible for cracking the whip and setting the boundaries for recalcitrant or maverick officers. By contrast, Al Giardello is more often presented as a buffer between his detectives and the upper chain of command, the classic, decent middle manager. He is based on the shift commander in the real homicide unit, Lieutenant Gary D'Addario, described as one “whose loyalties ran down before up” (Hoffman 1998, p.53). This twist, combined with the social and institutional critique from the book, and injected with a dose of genre disrupting realism, distances *Homicide* from its tv contemporaries. Simon’s book is a “cop shop” narrative that presents homicide detection as labour, rather than a crusade by urban knights errant. It would be adapted into a workplace drama about people whose work happens to be the investigation of murders.

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Hoffman suggests Joseph Wambaugh's debut novel *The Centurions* (1970) as a precedent in terms of realism (Hoffman 1998, p.16). Peter Billingham on the other hand describes Simon's style as reminiscent of Ed McBain (2000, p.158). It is a book that changes tone regularly, often effectively, sometimes jarringly. It begins with two quotes, one from the bible and another from a textbook on gunshot wounds and ballistics that place homicide investigation in a sweeping historical context. It suggests a truncated version of Herman Melville's sprawling contextualisation of the figure of the whale in human history at the beginning of *Moby Dick*. The book's journalistic realism is further undermined by the introduction of the detectives as “The Players”, as with a stage play.

<sup>2</sup> It is here that the photocopier lie detector trick is first described (Simon 2006a, p.213). It would be used in both series as a means to psychologically manipulate reluctant witnesses, in the *Homicide* episode “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” (H1.09, 1993) and *The Wire* episode “More with Less” (W5.01, 2008). It is here also that the tale of Snot Boogie, crap game thief and posthumous star of *The Wire*'s opening scene (W1.01, 2002), is recounted almost word for word (Simon 2006a, pp.562-563). Even semi-attentive readers will stumble across other examples.

<sup>3</sup> As it would prove cumbersome to consistently refer to *Homicide: a year on the killing streets* and *Homicide: life on the street* in full, I will refer to both under the shorthand of *Homicide* unless the context seems likely to produce confusion.

<sup>4</sup> From this point on in this chapter, I will refer to *Homicide: a year on the killing streets* by page number only, given its centrality to this chapter.

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<sup>5</sup> Hall et. al. further point out that police and court reporting is so permanent and routine that it is regularly assigned to young reporters as something they can move on from, should they prove capable. (1978, p.67).

<sup>6</sup> This was in the course of a Christmas Eve that David Simon spent with the homicide detectives, published on December 26 1985 (Simon 1985b). See Appendix A for a copy of this article from the *Baltimore Sun* digital archive.

<sup>7</sup> The website that hosts this interview does not give a date, but the interview seems to have taken place between the first and second seasons of *The Wire*, therefore presumably some time during 2002.

<sup>8</sup> From a different perspective, Kerrane and Yagoda (1997, p.16) include Simon alongside George Orwell and John Steinbeck for his experiments in structure, chronology and syntax. In the context of its impact and importance for the television drama of the same name, Peter Billingham describes it as a “unique, primary source social document of policing within the environment of a contemporary American city” (2000, p.158).

<sup>9</sup> The website that hosts this interview does not give a date, but given that it makes reference to a forthcoming United States reissue of *Homicide: a year on the killing streets*, this dates it to 2006.

<sup>10</sup> This answer mirrors that of Michael Kozoll, co-creator (with Steven Bochco) of *Hill Street Blues*, an earlier NBC cop show and precedent for the visual and narrative style of *Homicide*. Denying that they were “cop lovers”, Kozoll concedes to “a kind of compassion for the hopeless situation that ... [the police] are in” (Gitlin 1994, p.306).

<sup>11</sup> Despite the perception, often perpetuated by David Simon himself, that his departure from the *Baltimore Sun* was of the burned bridges variety, he returns from time to time to write feature articles. The most recent was a feature about the cop who was blinded by Frazier, Gene Cassidy, who in 2012 was looking for a liver transplant (Simon 2012c).

<sup>12</sup> It may also plausibly be an expression of the general presentation of a “war against crime,” and the authority afforded to police voices as a consequence. Hall et. al. observe that “many professional groups have contact with crime, but it is only the police who claim a *professional* expertise in the ‘war against crime’, based on daily, *personal* experience” (Hall et al. 1978, p.68).

<sup>13</sup> This example raises questions as to Simon's omnipresence and omniscience as a narrator, especially given the impracticality of recording everything that went on. (Many of the longer interrogations in the book are summarised and paraphrased, as it was impossible to write everything down (Simon 1998a).) The account of the Frazier trial stretches a full twenty four hours through closing statements, jury deliberations, conviction, the bars of Baltimore, after hours drinking in an abandoned lot and ending up in a detective's house to examine the account of the case in the morning papers (p.312). The image of the intrepid journalist faithfully transcribing all of this seems heroic but impractical, and in terms of the “truth” of the situation, irrelevant. It does not matter whether it is part direct transcription, partly remembered, part third party account and part surmise. The revelatory kernel at the centre of the story is that the criminal justice system works, insofar as it does, not because it is built that way, but almost incidentally, through small accidents. The suspect in this case, was found guilty not on the strength of the evidence, but because the jury “wanted to go home” (p.305).

<sup>14</sup> The sense of racial difference is also evoked in a different way. At one point during the account of the Latonya Wallace case, Detective Pellegrini is described as conceding to himself that “maybe there was distance because he was white and the little girl was black” (p.241). The point is not that he cared less because of this but that it was “a crime of the city”, of a ghetto “to which he had no ties”. This reluctant admission of distance, while framed in terms of racial difference, seems just as indicative of class difference, with the evocation of the city and ghetto as signifiers of a poverty that he did not understand.

<sup>15</sup> *Homicide* took far longer to produce than the year spent following the detectives (and the time spent writing it). Beforehand “it was three years of knowing the detectives ... and two years of staying with them” afterwards (Simon 1998a). Another reason for the lengthy time investment was that people “perform” when they are aware of being watched, homicide detectives no less. In this context he quotes the example of documentary film maker Frederick Wiseman who would place a camera without film in a room for four months until his subjects learned to ignore it (Simon 1998a). This anecdote would later be placed in the mouth of aspiring documentary maker Brodie, in the *Homicide* episode “Bad Medicine” (H5.04). In Simon's case he also had to contend with understandable opposition, on the part of many detectives, to being observed at all. Within a month however, most detectives had reverted to type, because “you can't really play false with your life for any length of time” (Hoffman 1998, p.20). Wiseman's 1969 documentary *Law and Order* followed officers of the Kansas City police department. Interestingly, from Simon's perspective of allowing the police speak for themselves is Wiseman's observation “that he went to Kansas City looking for ‘the pigs,’ but that police brutality

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turned out to be ‘part of a more generally shared violence and not something isolated and unique’” (Benson and Anderson 1989, p.147).

<sup>16</sup> However, there seems to be an indulgence toward this subculture, absent from the attitude shown the ghetto. It is an indulgence that seems to cut both ways. The hillbillies talk to the cops, maybe because the “Baltimore billy never managed to incorporate lying as an art form”. The other explanation, that they talk because “the cops have a little good ol’ boy in them” (p.416), suggests it is because they are both white. The sense of indulgence exhibited by the police may simply originate from the fact that, despite all of their faults, hillbillies provide information. Despite possibly sincere protestations to the contrary, these examples suggests that while poor and black is “po’ black,” poor and white is still, in a certain way, white.

<sup>17</sup> This description is echoed by observations made by Peter Moskos more than ten years later. While acknowledging the presence of much that transcended the ghetto stereotype, he also describes “living conditions [that] are worse than those of third-world shantytowns: children in filthy apartments without plumbing or electricity, entire homes put out on eviction day, forty-five-year-old great-grandparents, junkies not raising their kids, drug dealers, and everywhere signs of violence and despair” (Moskos 2008, p.16).

<sup>18</sup> This dual perspective is dealt with in more detail in chapter seven.

<sup>19</sup> This is essentially the same attitude expressed by the conservative English historian David Starkey. In August 2010 he suggested that white involvement in recent riots was attributable to the fact that “the whites [had] become black” (Quinn 2011).

<sup>20</sup> While presumably unintentional, the name Latonya Wallace echoes through to *The Wire*, where the ill-fated character of Wallace in the first season filled the role of the nearest thing to a real victim.

<sup>21</sup> This passage has also been discussed at length by other critics, notably Thomas Mascaró (2005, p.63) and Jason P. Vest (2011, pp.88-89).

<sup>22</sup> The case is never closed, on page or screen, and its lack of resolution is emblematic of “how the world works, or doesn’t” (p.628). For its primary investigator, Detective Tom Pellegrini, it becomes the “Case Without Pity” and takes on mythic significance, at least from the author’s perspective (p.248). For his “obsessively rational pursuit of the answer” (p.578), Simon compares Pellegrini to Sisyphus with his rock, de Leon with his fountain of youth (p.249) and Ahab with his whale (p.588).

<sup>23</sup> “The City That Bleeds” was also the title of a third season episode of *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (3.13, 1995), which saw the shooting and wounding of three detectives. Schmoke was Democratic mayor of Baltimore in December 1992, when the murder rate reached 331 for the first time. He insisted, correctly, that the root of the problem lay with the economic and social policies of the federal government:

We are reaping what’s been sown the last twelve years in Washington – the seeds of indifference... There is a real sense of anxiety in the streets, the neighborhoods. For this trend to be reversed, our citizens need hope, self-respect, a career.” (Simon: 1992b)

Of course these same indifferent neoliberal policies would be pursued with comparable enthusiasm by Schmoke’s own party. By the time of Barack Obama’s election in 2008, the citizens of the United States would simply have to make do with “Hope.”

<sup>24</sup> The “CSI effect” is the belief that jurors are led to have unrealistic expectations of the capacities and integrity of forensic evidence as a consequence of watching the various *CSI* tv series. A study from Kimberlianne Podlas study (2007) concludes that the existence of such an effect is as much a fiction as the tv show.

<sup>25</sup> White and black detectives working together are referred to as “salt-and-pepper” partnerships (p.30).

<sup>26</sup> A body is left at a crime scene on a hot summer day waiting for a lab technician to arrive from the other side of town, an incident that finds its way into an early episode of *The Wire* (p.383).

<sup>27</sup> In 1994, in reference to declining morale and standards within the Baltimore police department, one veteran detective would complain “police work used to be a calling. Now it’s just a job” (Simon 1994c).

<sup>28</sup> David P. Kalat suggests that, although the origins of the term are ambiguous, it may be derived from the way American railways used to identify “a train that takes priority in access to rail lines” (1998, p.112).

<sup>29</sup> Simon suggests that “close to half of Baltimore’s murders were believed [in the 1980s] to be related to the use or sale of narcotics” (p.55). Peter Moskos points out that during his police training in 1999, homicides in Baltimore were 80-85% drug related (Moskos 2008, p.28). In 1988 the total body count was

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234 (Simon 2006a, p.618), by the end of 1992 it had climbed to 331, almost exclusively as a result of the drug trade (Simon 1992b).

<sup>30</sup> The focus leads to theoretical absurdities. For example, open cases carried over from one year into the next count towards the new year's crime clearance statistics when they are closed: "Theoretically therefore, an American homicide unit can solve 90 of 100 fresh murders, then clear twenty cases from previous years and post a clearance rate of 110 percent" (p.196).

<sup>31</sup> Of the statistics that Simon cites for 1988, of the 200 suspects charged with the crime of homicide, 111 will actually be convicted (pp.470-471). By factoring in the number of unsolved cases, he further calculates that the chances of conviction for homicide in Baltimore in 1988 are somewhere in the region of 40% (p.472).

<sup>32</sup> The alternative to such a culture is one of targeted investigations focussed on the most violent repeat killers. This means targeting the drug organisations. The nature of these investigations places them outside the scope of the homicide unit. They are lengthy, involving surveillance and intelligence gathering and are undertaken in partnership in conjunction with federal agencies like the FBI. Two investigations of this type are referred to in *Homicide*. One is from 1986, with the second ongoing in 1988. They are tangential to the book and mentioned primarily in relation to detective Edgerton, who had been seconded to an investigation but sent back due to budgetary issues (pp.55-56). Assigned to both investigations was Ed Burns, Simon's future writing partner, a detective at the time. He is absent from the unit for the writer's entire tenure as police intern. The bones of *The Wire* are apparent in these references to undervalued and underfunded career criminals units (p. 316) and, lengthy investigations in housing projects (p. 360). The lack of institutional support would also remain a feature.

<sup>33</sup> David Simon does not see other true crime narratives as a precedent for his own. His cited influences deal with the Vietnam war (*Dispatches* by Michael Herr), the Great Depression (*Let us now praise famous men* by James Agee and Walker Evans) and baseball (*Ball four* by Jim Bouton) (Harabin c.2006).

<sup>34</sup> Admittedly, Wilson was writing in 1997 prior to the latter book and series and unaware that *Homicide: a year on the killing streets* was simply the first element in what would become an expansive social critique.

<sup>35</sup> In December 1992, Simon was present with two detectives, when the annual body count reached 331 for the first time. Murders have become so commonplace at this point as to barely elicit attention from onlookers:

There has always been something cold and vacant about the scene of an inner-city drug murder, something that defies the basic human instincts. But even in the worst neighborhoods, a homicide detective could look up from a body and rely on some shard of community, some sense among the onlookers that what was taking place was a murder – an extraordinary event. No longer. In this, the most violent and deadly year in Baltimore, even the residual emotion has been drained. (Simon 1992b)

## CHAPTER TWO

### **“LET THE ROUGHNESS SHOW”: FROM DEATH ON THE STREETS TO A HALF-LIFE ON SCREEN.<sup>1</sup>**

Networks generate ideology mostly indirectly and unintentionally, by trying to read popular sentiment and tailoring their schedules toward what they think the cardboard people they've conjured up want to see and hear.

- Todd Gitlin *Inside Prime Time* (1994, p.203).

*Homicide* is a dense narrative, and places significant demands on its readers, as it jumps between different cases and characters. Its, more or less, strict chronology means that investigations disappear and re-emerge as leads peter out or new evidence is gleaned. In other words, cases are presented not as self-contained narratives but as ongoing stories which come and go in the working lives of the detectives. Sometimes the cases do not end well, or at all. Beyond this, there is far more to the book, thematically, than an account of the daily activities of a city homicide department. As the previous chapter explores, it also engages with the historical racism of the police department, and, more briefly, its current manifestation as a war on the underclass. This underclass may be predominantly African-American, but Simon's exploration of the porous line between race and class politics suggests that this is not essential to its existence. He also explores the nature of police work, as labour, and in particular how this work was changing during the 1980s as the murder rate increased as a result of the drug trade and the war upon it.

In spite of its relative thematic richness, some of which seem inimical to adaptation for network television, the book underwent a relatively successful transition from page to screen. Many cases served as narrative raw material for the television narratives, but broader themes around crime, race, class and work emerge consistently throughout its run. Somewhat surprisingly, given the multiple narrative threads and dense narrative, the initial intention was to sell the book as an option for a movie. The idea to send it to Baltimore film director Barry Levinson (*Diner* (1982), *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987), *Rain Man* (1988)) originally came from David Simon:

My agents were peddling the book for a movie. It wasn't selling. I said, ignorantly, "Why not send it to Barry Levinson? He's from Baltimore"

(Jordan c.2002).

Levinson himself initially planned to develop the book as a movie, but in 1991 he was in the early stages of developing a tv series for NBC (Kalat 1998, p.97). The idea of returning to Baltimore, a city “representative of urban struggle”, appealed to him (Hoffman 1998, p.30). Simon turned down an offer to write the pilot on the basis that they “should get someone who knew what he was doing” (Simon 2006a, p.631).<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, he was keen for the show “to get attention because [he] wanted to sell books” (Rothkerch 2002).

*Homicide: Life on the Street* almost did not make it to the small screen at all. Warner Brothers had agreed to produce a pilot called *Polish Hill*, written by John Wells, a writer for the late 1980s series *China Beach* (ABC, 1988-1991), who would later serve as show runner for *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009) and *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006) (Warner Bros. Studios 2008). A script for *Polish Hill*, sent to Levinson, contained whole sections of dialogue lifted directly from Simon's book, including as a central concept, the homicide case board. From Simon's perspective it was a particularly galling form of plagiarism. He had “spent three years on this book... some guy comes along, reads it, goes to his processor, and steals it” (Hoffman 1998, pp.88-89). Warners eventually agreed to remove and re-edit most of the offending portions of their pilot and, renamed *Angel Street*, the show lasted for only three episodes in late 1992 (ibid.).<sup>3</sup> Its name and location harked back to the placeless, if not timeless, character of *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), which was set in a nameless east coast city. On the other hand, *Homicide's* sense of place, in Baltimore, was crucial to its identity: as were its darker narratives, telegenically unconventional actors, and unique visual style. The presence of both Levinson and Mary Tyler Moore Productions alumnus Tom Fontana (*St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982-1988), *Oz* (HBO, 1997-2003)) also imbued *Homicide* with markers of television quality (Thompson 1997, p.75).

Todd Gitlin once observed that networks are not in the business of creating “purposeful or coherent or true or beautiful shows, but audiences” (1994, p.56). When *Homicide* premiered on January 31st 1993 following American football's Superbowl, NBC was a struggling network, in third place behind ABC and CBS (Kalat 1998, p.108). Historically, in an attempt to increase audience share, it had a tendency to take risks when in that position (Thompson 1997, p.44). In *Homicide's* case these risks were calculatedly limited. Its first and second seasons aired with nine and four episodes respectively, and were replacements for shows already cancelled or on hiatus (Kalat



1998, p.125).<sup>4</sup> Aside from the occasional isolated peak, *Homicide* would struggle for ratings throughout its existence and, apart from two awards during its first season was mostly ignored by the Emmys (Hoffman 1988, p.88).<sup>5</sup>

Rather like Simon approaching HBO with *The Wire* a decade later, Levinson was not interested in making a standard cop show. It would not be “every week we solve a crime and isn't life wonderful?” (Levinson 2003). Sometimes the detectives would not solve a crime at all. The detectives were not heroes, flawed or otherwise, but working people living from one case to the next. *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005) may have pushed the envelope in other areas, but as David Kalat argues, despite its liberal use of nudity and “adult” language it was, ultimately, a buddy-cop drama (1998, p.23)<sup>6</sup>. *Homicide* was, stylistically and thematically, the riskier show. A friend of Tom Fontana once described *NYPD Blue* as the television version of *Homicide* (Kalat 1998, p.129). Likewise, writer James Yoshimura (2004) would speak of feeling cheated during *Homicide's* crossover episodes with *Law and Order* (NBC, 1990-2010), mostly because *Homicide* was the more complicated drama. Nevertheless, all of these shows possessed ambiguity enough to elide classification as traditional, ideologically unproblematic cop shows which, as Gitlin argues, were effectively finished by the early 1980s, ever before *Hill Street Blues* (1994, p.213).

This is not to suggest an absence of continuities between *Homicide* and its predecessors. In terms of its large ensemble cast and multi-episode story lines, its most obvious forerunner is *Hill Street Blues* (Thompson 1997, pp.69-70). Jonathan Nichols-Pethick argues that it “emerged at a time when network television was looking for ways to distinguish itself amidst the challenges of cable, and the series producers were initially encouraged to build on some of the innovations of series like *Hill Street Blues*” (2012, p.77). Both series attempted to frustrate the expectations of audiences accustomed to tidily resolved narratives, and common to the visual style of both was a deliberate grittiness. In fact, Tom Fontana was initially reluctant to work on *Homicide* precisely because he felt that *Hill Street Blues* could not be bettered (Hoffman 1998, p.17).

*Homicide* deliberately cultivated a mannered roughness, utilising a single camera for long takes to “better reflect real life”, and encourage more natural performances (Hoffman 1998, p.84). Clark Johnson, who played detective Meldrick Lewis, and who is also a director,<sup>7</sup> compared the presence of the camera on set to that of David Simon among the detectives in the book:

“I’m used to knowing exactly where the camera is at... but this camera is just everywhere... I just stopped worrying about where it was. My job was to go about my business and the camera would do what had to be done to capture it properly.” (Hoffman 1998, p.85)<sup>8</sup>

There was also an economic reason for shooting in long takes with a single 16mm camera. It kept costs down (Kalat 1998, p.104). This is a consideration that would have appealed to NBC and undoubtedly assisted *Homicide* in its regular struggles against cancellation. The results were most notable in the deliberate use of jump-cuts and repeating shots, both guaranteed to jar with television audiences used to a more conventional shooting style.<sup>9</sup> The second device, the repeating shot, was a more deliberate inclusion. According to Kalat (1998, p.107), Levinson simply liked the effect, which was drawn from Jean-Luc Godard's 1959 film *À Bout de Souffle*. In early seasons it was used to emphasise the importance of particular statements or actions. In a third season episode, Detective Pembleton salutes the coffin of dead detective Crosetti, several times in succession, giving the impression of the honour guard Crosetti was denied owing to his death by suicide (H3.04 “Crosetti”, 1994). The technique would be parodied in the fifth season episode “The Documentary” (H5.11, 1997), with the detectives accusing film-maker Brodie of leaving a mistake in his documentary about the homicide unit.

Despite these markers of cinematic quality, it is not difficult to understand the ongoing frustrations of NBC.<sup>10</sup> It is apparent that they never really understood that *Homicide* was a show more about the moral ambiguity of policing rather than crime solving (Billingham 2000, p.179). They may have been looking for another *Hill Street Blues*, but they received a drama that extended that earlier show’s practice “of transposing the narrative of the police drama from weekly resolution of individual crimes to a complex discourse about the social, economic, and political policies that sometimes foster crime in the first place” (Nichols-Pethick 2012, p.76). This deepening contextualisation was undoubtedly facilitated by the nature of the source material. *Homicide* was arguably one of the great network tv cop shows by explicitly attempting to be something else. It may reasonably be argued that NBC’s response to the challenges of cable was a show that anticipated the development of what is now understood as cable drama. *Homicide* tried to, with reasonable success, to balance the desire to tell nuanced, complex stories, with the compromises requested by NBC. It seems probable that were Barry Levinson to be sent David Simon's book today, a more

obvious home would be a cable network, like HBO (*The Corner* (2000), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007)) or AMC (*Mad Men* (2007- ), *Breaking Bad* (2008- )).

### THE TRANSITION FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

*Homicide* feels familiar and alien, like every cop show you've ever seen, and none, something signalled by its almost complete lack of a theme tune.<sup>11</sup> All of the expected elements are present but slightly askew. The interrogation room is called the box [Fig. 2], although it does not appear by that name in the book, and has the demeanour of a public convenience. The supervisor, Lieutenant Giardello (Yaphet Kotto), is a black Italian-American whose temper is more often directed at the bosses than his subordinates. The renegade detective is not a Dirty Harry or even an Andy Sipowicz (*NYPD Blue*), but a Jesuit educated, cerebral loner, Detective Frank Pembleton (Andre Braugher). There is one female detective who, unlike her contemporary Dana Scully from *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993-2002), never finds herself in mortal danger awaiting rescue by a male colleague.



Fig. 2: The box.

Detective Tim Bayliss, the rookie detective who joins the unit in the first episode, allows the viewer to navigate this world while experiencing Bayliss's own sense of disorientation. He has no desk. When pointed towards Giardello, he mistakenly stretches his hand out to bald and white Detective Steve Crosetti (Jon Polito). These elements combine with a regular lack of narrative resolution to create a drama that does

not reassure its audience (Kalat 1998, p.24). Almost twenty years after its initial broadcast, the experience of the first episode still feels like arriving at a party as a stranger who knows nobody. Conversations have already started, are about things of which you know nothing, and they seem to change subject every time you try to join in.

The sense of dislocation comes from the fact that *Homicide*, unlike many other cop shows, possesses a definite sense of place. The skyline of Manhattan may be indelibly printed on people's minds from countless establishing shots, but these versions of New York remain virtual and unreal. Think of a generic, dysfunctional urban location populated by non-whites and some version of New York or Los Angeles invariably springs to mind. Baltimore in the 1990s did not, at that time, exert the same hold on popular perceptions. To be sure, *Homicide* has its gritty urban locales in states of disrepair where people seem to end up dead for no good reason. After a while one row-house or darkened alley looks like another, but in the background lurk markers that this drama is anchored in a place where real people actually work, live, and struggle. In early episodes this sense of place seems quite deliberately self-conscious. In the first episode, detectives lunch on crab, a regional speciality [Fig. 3]. In a later episode, Detective Stanley Bolander takes his date to Fort McHenry, the attack on which inspired the song that would become the United States national anthem (H1.08, "And the Rockets Dead Glare," 1993). An establishing shot features the plaque on the house of Baltimore essayist and satirist, HL Mencken (H1.09, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," 1993). Celebrated Baltimore film director, John Waters (*Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Hairspray* (1988)), appears in cameo in the same episode.<sup>12</sup> Mayor of Baltimore, Kurt L. Schmoke guest stars in the season five finale, "Strangers and Other Partners" (H5.22, 1997). Second season episode "Bop Gun" (H2.04, 1994) sees a tourist shot dead near Camden Yards, home of the Baltimore Orioles baseball team. The decision to shoot in Baltimore had other effects. Being so far from the centre of the Hollywood mainstream, actors needed to physically relocate to the city for the duration of shooting (Hoffman 1998, p.31). Like David Simon, they were forced into prolonged contact with that which they purported to represent, immersing themselves in the community and becoming invisible. The one area in which the drive for realism was partially relinquished was in choice of locations. Despite the number of drug-related killings in the series, very little shooting (in the film sense) took place in the troubled areas where most of those killings tended to occur; East and West Baltimore (Simon 2006b).

Early episodes therefore often seem more concerned with establishing the location, and the detective/hero characters than in the resolution of pending cases. Eight detectives are introduced in the first episode, all with distinct personality quirks. Most have partners, but not of the typical buddy-cop friendship variety. The sense is that these are simply work colleagues, much like any other. They do not cover each other while busting down doors or rolling under parked cars. Neither do they scream out for vengeance over dead bodies. They talk. They have the seemingly random, discursive, rambling conversations characteristic of people thrown together for long periods, but not by choice. They are usually more involved than pleasantries about the weather, but less intimate than discussions about family or relationships.<sup>13</sup> Moving away from the bedside of the victims of an attempted murder in the first episode, Detective Steve Crosetti, based on the Irish-American Sergeant Terry McLarney, launches into the latest instalment of his Lincoln assassination conspiracy theory. This has evidently been a continuing obsession in the detective's back story, and his worldview lays out something of a manifesto for the series. He tells Detective Lewis that life is about looking and never finding, because the search is the most important thing, in contrast to his actual job as a homicide detective. Death is easy by comparison, as homicide investigations can be closed. "That's the problem with this job," he explains. "It's got nothing to do with life" (H1.01, 1993).

No episode illustrates *Homicide's* iconoclasm toward the conventions of police drama than the third, "Night of the Dead Living" (H1.03, 1993). It takes place on a particularly slow night shift, in the middle of a heat wave. David P. Kalat cites a contemporary reviewer who praised the episode as a minimalist drama evoking the spirit of David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1998, p.123). In fact, the episode approaches anti-drama. No crimes are committed. Detective Munch makes up with his unseen girlfriend at the beginning of the episode only to break up with her again by the end.<sup>14</sup> Crosetti's attempts to solve the Lincoln assassination are revealed to be partly driven by the lack of control he exercises in his personal life, particularly over his family. This sense of lost control and irrelevance foreshadows the character's death by suicide in the third season. Detective Stanley Bolander, based on Detective Donald Worden, agonises over whether or not he should call the medical examiner for a date.<sup>15</sup> A couple of contrived incidents involving a suicidal Santa and an abandoned baby give the episode a misplaced seasonal feel. They are easily resolved. This is another reality of police work. It can be boring.

The imitation documentary style created by the use of handheld cameras, location shooting and the foregrounding of Baltimore's regional specificities, help establish *Homicide* as visually unique. Furthermore, despite Barry Levinson's initial injunction to Fontana to toss the book aside (Hoffman 1998, p.18), the effect of these innovations is to mimic the perspective of Simon's book. The free-roaming camera, which Clark Johnson compares to David Simon's presence, flits from detective to detective, story to story, like the collective narrator of the book. The sense of place in Baltimore not only provides useful regional colour but, as with the book, makes the real histories of that city part of its back-story. David Simon (2012g) would later remark that "Cheap motels, broken rowhouses, projects, street corners - the same rotted Rustbelt terrain that had yielded all those stunted news briefs suddenly became a studio backlot."<sup>16</sup> As a figurative indication of the book's importance, Tom Fontana would later suggest that they had pretty much "sucked every comma and question mark out of it before the end of the series (Fontana and Levinson 2003).

Aside from the case board and the interrogation "box", the glass fronted waiting area known as the aquarium was also recreated, with its name slightly adjusted to the fish bowl [Figs. 4 and 5]. In many ways, the box and the board came to define the series (Overmyer and Yoshimura 2004), with close-ups of the board as names were changed from red (open) to black (closed) becoming a recurring motif. Jonathan Nichols-Pethick argues that this places the victim at the centre of the narrative, balancing the generic impulse to "identify with the detective/hero" (2012, p.79). This centrality is a cornerstone of how the series would place their "lives and deaths in the larger context of a society at odds", drawing on Simon's own misgivings about how these, mostly non-white, deaths were habitually reported (ibid.). The effect of the board is arguably therefore the opposite of that originally suggested by the author, which was as a crude statistical aid. Through their names, the victims themselves become present, an often reproachful reminder in red marker that someone needs to speak for them.

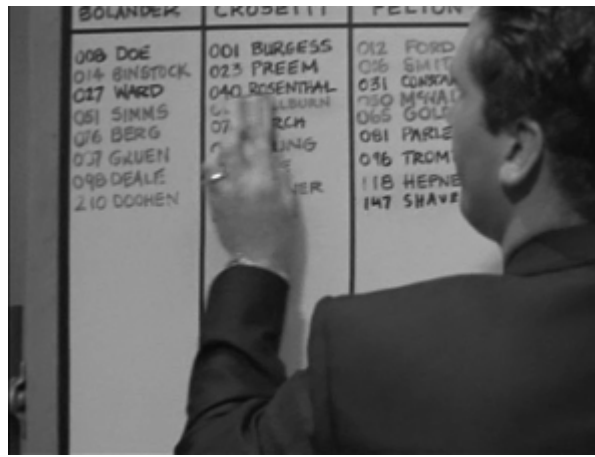


Fig. 3: The board



Fig.4: The fish bowl.

### RACE AND CLASS IN BALTIMORE: SUBTEXT BECOMES TEXT

As with the book, in spite of stories told about victims of “misdemeanour homicides” whose deaths barely merit a mention, the case that dominates the first season is that of a “real victim”. The emblematic case linking both book and series is that of Latonya Wallace, renamed Adena Watson in the tv adaptation. The initial investigation spreads over several episodes, but returns periodically as a presence in other cases, over the entire seven season run. The series ended with the case still unsolved, as in the book, a lack of resolution which Jason P. Vest described as the drama's strongest rebuke to cop show convention (2011, p.83). Tim Bayliss is based on Detective Tom Pellegrini, the primary detective on the Wallace case. Bayliss reprises his role as a proxy for the viewer (Hoffman 1998, p.87) who sees the reality of a “red ball”

investigation unfold through his eyes. The chain of command interferes, contrives stunts to appease the media and give the illusion of progress, while the detective becomes ill through overwork.

The case of Adena Watson is important for reasons other than her status as a “real victim”, sexually abused before her death. In contrast to the squalidness of the alley where she is discovered [Fig. 6], when Bayliss and Detective Frank Pembleton visit her home they find it to be clean and well looked after. Unlike many other homicide victims the scene suggests that she is from a family that will miss her and, intentionally or otherwise, underlines that she is somehow more worthy of justice. This is how David Simon describes the small apartment where Latonya Wallace lived, in the book:

The furnishings are spare, the furniture mismatched, and the living room sofa, worn around the edges. But the place is well-kept and clean – very clean, in fact. Edgerton notices that most of the shelf space is devoted to family photographs. In the kitchen, a child's painting – big house, blue sky, smiling child, smiling dog – is taped to the refrigerator door. On the wall is a mimeographed list of school events and parent association meetings. Poverty, perhaps, but not desperation. Latonya Wallace lived in a home. (2006a, p.62)

The case manages a more realistic representation of working poverty than is usually presented on mainstream US television. Adena's family seems stable and anchored, and attempting to live a productive, structured life. They live in an unprepossessing two-storey house as opposed to an apartment. The detectives arrive with news of her killing just as breakfast is being put on the table. By contrast the main suspect, Risley Tucker (Moses Gunn), is an old man, and an arabber: a street vendor who moves between neighbourhoods selling fruit. Through encroaching poverty and alcoholism he seems to be circling ever closer to the underclass. In the original Latonya Wallace case, the main suspect owns a fish shop and is more anchored in the community. This subtle redrawing of class location accentuates the gulf between Adena's clean orderly life, and the semi-indigent alcoholic existence of the arabber.

“Three Men and Adena” (H1.06, 1993), the climax of the Adena Watson storyline, is the first time the arabber appears, even though he has been the chief suspect throughout. This is a ticking clock narrative, set almost entirely in the box, with Pembleton, Bayliss and the suspect, Risley Tucker. The detectives have twelve hours to extract a confession, as anything acquired after that time will be ruled inadmissible. The episode was written by Tom Fontana, with both David Simon and Detective Tom



Pellegrini acting as advisers (Fontana et al. 2004). The interrogation is loosely based on two lengthy interviews with the Fish Man, recounted in the book (Simon 2006a, pp.172-175 and pp.588-604).



Fig. 5: *Homicide's* defining case.

The questions range far beyond the assumption, and repeated assertions, of Tucker's guilt, extending to intertwining issues of race and class, within and without urban Baltimore. Notwithstanding the claustrophobic atmosphere in the box, the outside world feels clearly present. It is a world of economic hardship and the grinding down of human resilience, a world of loneliness and abandonment. In the book David Simon describes the Fish Man's clothing as "a statement of quiet surrender" (Simon 2006a, p.588). The arabber's quasi-underclass position is also expressed sartorially. His clothes are mismatched and barely thought about, but he still manages a defiant tilt of the head as he is brought in [Fig. 7]. He explains that arabbers are perceived as vagrants because they travel between neighbourhoods, pointing out that because of the economy more people are selling on the street, increasing competition.<sup>17</sup> The episode takes place during the recession of the early 1990s, and was broadcast in 1993, the first year of the Bill Clinton presidency. Clinton famously beat incumbent President George H.W. Bush with a campaign partially anchored on the message "the economy, stupid." Tucker's own economic precariousness is humorously underlined in his answer to Bayliss's questions about why Adena Watson stopped working for him: "[My] horse died... my barn burned down... I stopped being an arabber... there was no more job". About two thirds of the way through the episode the detectives confuse Tucker to the point where he admits not knowing whether he killed the girl or not. This is not the prelude to resolution, justice, closure, or a confession, but it is, in the conventional sense the climax of the episode,

and the closest the detectives come to a confession. With Pembleton and Bayliss in different postures of exhaustion, Tucker assumes the role of interrogator. He turns his attention first to Pembleton, picking up his New York accent and labelling him a “500”, black people with money who look down on those like Tucker. The name is presumably a play on the annual “500” rich list published in *Fortune* magazine:

“Yeh, you could be one of them 500s. You got the chin of a 500, and the way you narrow your eyes at me, like right now. Yeh, you got it. You don't like niggers like me 'cause of who we are. 'Cause we ain't reached out. 'Cause we ain't grabbed hold of that dream. Not Doctor King's dream! The white dream... You hate niggers like me, because you hate being a nigger. You hate being who you really are.”

This is a far more vicious and pointed version of the jibes endured in the book by Detective Harry Edgerton, on whom Pembleton is based. Harry is deemed inauthentic, according to the white detectives, because he listens to Emmylou Harris and wears pink shirts. He does not sound “like a black guy,” to people whose definition of a black guy is framed purely through the limited perspective of the ghetto (Simon 2006a, p.55). The cosmopolitanism of Edgerton/Pembleton therefore represents a lack of authenticity, where blackness is equated with some form of past or present urban poverty.<sup>18</sup> For Tucker, the black middle class represented by Edgerton have sold out King’s dream of collective emancipation, for a “white dream” of individual social mobility. He likewise inverts what he assumes is the superiority of the white detective, Bayliss, who he denounces as an “inbred” “amateur”.



Fig. 6: The arabber, Rislely Tucker.

Tucker comes across as neither a monster nor an innocent caught up in an investigation he knows nothing about, but as a sad, pathetic, lonely, alcoholic, poor old

man. He may well have been capable of seeking affection or sexual gratification with a twelve year old girl, but it is hard to view him with anything other than pity. His fiancée, job, purpose, and beleaguered sense of dignity have slipped away from him. The police, as Simon suggested in the context of black Baltimoreans generally, are simply something else to be endured (2006a, p.109). The episode is less about the search for Adena Watson's killer than it is about a man, Risley Tucker, who is less angry at being a murder suspect than with the accumulated frustrations of his life. It also draws to the surface the contradictory class and race location of a black officer like Pembleton, who would deliberately play up his non-existent poor (po') blackness in a second season episode.

"Three Men and Adena" indicates early on how the history of the black community in Baltimore helps contextualise narrative throughout the series. For example, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and the community's relationship with the police during that period are recurring themes. The assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968 was followed by weeks of rioting in cities across the US, including Baltimore.<sup>19</sup> The period is referred to on multiple occasions as a pivotal one in the city's history.

"Black and Blue" (H2.02, 1994) is about the police shooting of a black suspect. The storyline provoked the anger of Baltimore police officers, with twenty two detectives signing a letter of protest to Levinson, describing the portrayal of police officers as dishonest (Kalat 1998, p.131). The episode draws on Simon's critique of police firearms training, and the inevitability of people being shot, referred to in the previous chapter. Pembleton observes that when someone has been shot dead it makes sense to start with the people carrying guns, in this case the police. The unsubtle title speaks of the choice Pembleton feels forced to make between the contesting claims of loyalty to community and institutional, workplace loyalty. Giardello speaks of being forced to make a similar choice on the night of the Martin Luther King assassination when, forced to choose sides as a young police officer, he chose the law.<sup>20</sup> The difference this time is that the conflict is between the police and the law they are supposed to uphold, as the shooting was an illegal one.

Pembleton initially seems to choose the brotherhood of cops, out of loyalty to Giardello. He psychologically coerces a confession from a black suspect by engaging with him, not as a detective, but as a fellow African-American. Pembleton draws on the history of slavery, referring to the suspect as "boy", deliberately using a racially loaded

term. He affects an increasingly resonant and pronounced drawl throughout the interrogation, mimicking the accent associated with slave owning southern states. Generations of abuse from racist, white police officers seems to re-emerge in the confines of the box, where confessions were beaten from black suspects. Pembleton's actions suggest that he, as a black officer, are acting no differently to the white officers of the past. His actions are a direct challenge to Giardello, watching through a two-way mirror. Pembleton is also drawing, in a negative way, on an argument implicit in Simon's book. Good police work, as an individual craft, exists beyond the race, class, or gender and sexuality based prejudices of the individual officer. By contrast, bad police work is driven by such prejudice and by unquestioning loyalty to fellow police officers, as Giardello seems to be in this case. Bad police work coerces confessions from the person whose face fits, because they are a poor, petty criminal, in this case, or a poor black, petty criminal as in the past.

A contradiction emerges in the narrative, and is expressed quite powerfully in this scene. The belief that a more racially inclusive police force is a corrective to racism seems to collide with the role, which that force plays in policing and containing the underclass. In Pembleton's interaction with the suspect is the mirror image of Risley Tucker's contempt for him. Pembleton derides the corner boy's bravado as destructive to the black community, a seemingly homogeneous entity in the detective's mind. By erasing differences in class and opportunity the suspect's behaviour is framed as something which simply drags all of them down. (He is eventually reduced to tears, and confesses to a crime he did not commit, rather like a child (or "boy") who wants to please his disappointed father.) As a result, the idealism expressed by Pembleton about his decision to become a police officer, "for the community... for our community", rings hollow:

"Shut up, boy, I'm talking now. I didn't want there to be that same old, same old. When the white cops took the brothers in the back of a paddy wagon, and beat a confession out of them. Huh? We know those days, don't we? We know those stories, don't we? There's a real history of that, isn't there? Just get a confession out of one of us. By any means necessary."

The final line is a deliberate inversion of Malcolm X, undergoing a revival as a significant presence in popular culture at the time, due to Spike Lee's 1992 biopic. It is also a reminder that the Civil Rights struggle referenced by Tucker was never solely about "Doctor King's dream." It was characterised by strategic disagreements that ran

the spectrum from non-violent protests demanding reform, to militant challenges to systemic racism from groups like the Black Panthers. Giardello's 1968 decision to side with the law suggests a version of the former perspective, a belief that equality was achievable through making existing power structures more representative. Pembleton's perspective is not an endorsement of militancy, but it does, as Simon's history of policing does recognise the systemic nature of racism and the intersection of racial and class oppression. Where the series runs ahead of the book, even at this early stage, is in the tentative recognition that all police work is contextual. There is no such thing as pure police work that leaves racial and class antagonisms at the door.

Todd Gitlin argued, with some justification, that *Hill Street Blues*, in its early days, "honoured the everyday sense of race without sliding into race-baiting" (1994, p.275). *Homicide* goes further in avoiding lazy, stereotyped views of the ghetto. Baltimore is a majority black city but the murders and drug dealing are never presented as the actions of an undifferentiated, lumpen underclass. The streets of Baltimore, as presented in *Homicide*, are not simply places of suffering, but of struggle; places where an embattled sense of social solidarity and activism still endures. In a third season episode, "A Model Citizen" (H3.06, 1994), an old friend of Giardello's runs a campaigning newspaper and spearheads a "toys for guns" initiative. He is shot dead for the most banal of reasons, by a teenager who simply wants money for a new bike. In "Scene of the Crime" (H4.21, 1996), the Nation of Islam assumes responsibility for security in a housing project. The murder rate falls, and the drug dealers are pushed out. When the Nation of Islam leave after their contract is revoked, the drug dealers return.

However, the focus on wrongdoing is not limited to the street. Anticipating *The Wire*, "Cradle to Grave" (H3.11, 1995), explores the corrupt politicking of police headquarters and city hall. The episode adapts a case recounted in the book, about an investigation by white detective Donald Worden, into the alleged abduction of a white state senator. This dynamic is changed onscreen, as the black police commissioner, Harris, charges Pembleton with the same task.<sup>21</sup> When the abduction is revealed as bogus, Pembleton drops the case, rather than prosecute the white senator for a false claim that would reveal his homosexuality. In doing so he believes he has the tacit support of Harris, who denies all knowledge when the incident comes to light. The realities of political and class power become clear to Pembleton, who had expected loyalty from the commissioner, not only as a superior, but as an act of communal solidarity. In one scene, the extent of the change in Baltimore policing has changed

since the 1960s is made clear. It is a striking image of a new black elite, illustrating what Earl Ofari described as the transformation of “the once expressive (and potentially revolutionary) cry of the black masses for black control of black communities into *black capitalist control of the black communities*” (cited in Leiman 1993, p.269). Three representatives of the police hierarchy are present alongside Pembleton; commissioner, colonel, and lieutenant (Giardello). Each is black, and each concerned with institutional and/or self-preservation in the midst of a media frenzy. As Andre Braugher (Pembleton), would later put it: “I realised that it was the first time I'd ever been in a room with three other African American actors and the scene wasn't about us” (Kalat 1998, p.157). His comment recognises not only that the portrayal of an African-American command structure in Baltimore is a credible reflection of reality. It also recognises that the racial composition of the scene is not as important as its critique on the endurance of particular structures of power, no matter who is in command. Pembleton expects loyalty from a fellow black police officer. Harris cynically abuses Pembleton’s sense of communal loyalty to grant a political favour, in the interests of a model of black advancement that does nothing to challenge systemic racism.

As the foregoing examples imply, both book and series pretend to a strong sense not only of place, in Baltimore, but of history. *Homicide: life on the street* borrows heavily from African-American history, particularly of the civil rights era (Mascaro 2004, p.10). It also engages critically, through interactions between the detectives, with the overt and coded racism of the white working class, as personified by white detectives. The conflicts that emerge in choices that black detectives feel forced to make between loyalty to the police department and their community become a recurring theme. Significantly, these conflicts never confront white officers in the same way, as there is no apparent contradiction between being white, or white working class, and being a police officer. An early example is in the relationship between the black, middle class, Pembleton and the white, working class Beau Felton. Throughout the series, white detectives like Felton, are prone to racist assumptions and outbursts. In latter seasons Felton’s role would be filled by Detectives Stu Gharty (Peter Gerety) and Mike Kellerman (Reed Diamond). In the first episode, Pembleton, the urbane, Jesuit educated New Yorker, accuses Felton of resenting him as a reminder that neither of them is better than the other.

Felton is white and working class from South Baltimore. Pembleton detects a racial slight in Felton’s use of a major thoroughfare’s old name, Fremont, even though it

has long been renamed Martin Luther King Boulevard (H1.05 “A Shot in the Dark”, 1993). A trip in Pembleton's company becomes an opportunity for Felton to elaborate his theories on meritocracy and affirmative action. From his perspective, hostile to the idea of racial privilege, the comments he makes are not racist, simply opinions on history and culture. Felton’s seemingly amicable cluelessness assumes a parity of experience between himself and Pembleton, which neatly erases centuries of specifically race-based oppression. Therefore, in Felton’s view, affirmative action means one group getting something for nothing. The world is unfair in general, and nobody gets what they deserve, so why should African-Americans be any different? His questions are underwritten with a defusing humour, as he seems genuinely unable to see a difference between his experiences and those of Pembleton, as an African American. In fact, racial antipathy in this case is also clearly suffused with resentment for the cultured, middle-class Pembleton. Notwithstanding the latter’s current class background, paths of advancement open to the white working class, like the police force, were effectively closed to black people for generations. Felton wonders why black people suddenly want to be called African-American. He wonders why they have to “claim the whole continent”, Felton exposing a presumption still rooted in a sense of racial privilege, about who gets to “name”. The right to self-name is a hard won victory for African-Americans, who had previously been “named” by the dominant group, what Felton calls the “Anglo-Saxon American.”



Fig. 7: The chain of command.

## CONCLUSION

According to Christopher Campbell, *Homicide's* cancellation in 1999 left television audiences “without a fictional prime-time TV show that regularly challenged them to think about the state of race relations in the United States”. It was a show that “routinely included references to the race of characters and how their race affected their work, their lives, their perceptions” (Campbell 2000, p.23). More specifically, the breadth of characterisations meant that they ceased to be tokenistic symbols of diversity, but were capable of expressing different class, political and philosophical positions. Despite its predominantly white production and writing team, *Homicide* did this without simply attempting to make race invisible. Campbell contrasts it with contemporaries like *NYPD Blue*, *Law and Order* and *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009) where black characters occasionally confront racism, but mostly “live in a world where race is not much of a factor” (2000, p.24). In *Homicide*, race is not simply one of a number of issues, like class or gender, which exist as benchmarks to measure white tolerance or bigotry. It is part of the fabric of the social order in a narrative where racism and expressions of racial difference still exist, if not always overtly.

As suggested in the scenes cited above, the impact of these expressions varies, depending on the context of the interactions between different characters. The tone of Pembleton's relatively light-hearted conversational banter with Felton is markedly different from his interactions with fellow African-Americans. Each example asserts the reality of a history of racial oppression, and each is also inflected with tensions around class. Felton's perception of Pembleton's middle class superiority clashes with what Pembleton perceives as Felton's racism. In the interrogation scene, Pembleton uses authority as a police officer, but also his superior class position, to browbeat a suspect into tearful confession to a crime he did not commit. By contrast, in the company of the police command structure Pembleton, for all of his skill as a detective, is sacrificed in the interests of self-perpetuating structural and political power. The domination of this scene by African-Americans is largely incidental. It reveals the nature of the command structure explained anecdotally by David Simon, defined by “fecal gravity” (2006a, p.46), and institutional self-preservation. While still recognisably a cop show, *Homicide* places considerations of individual and institutional power at the centre of its narrative. There is little sense of a shared purpose within the police department. The most pronounced tensions in the series are not those between detectives and suspects, or



between black and white detectives. The real antagonisms are generated by interference and obstruction by “the bosses”, and the stats regime and command structure imported into the series from Simon’s book.

Just as *The Wire* would, in later years be criticised for its bleakness, NBC were concerned about the relative darkness of the narratives in *Homicide*. David Simon later joked that the producers answered NBC's concern about the lack of life-affirming moments and “places where the viewers could hope,” by reminding them that the show was called *Homicide* (Rothkerch 2002). On the other hand the show is rarely unremittingly dark. There is darkness here but it is not the bludgeoning nihilism of novels like James Ellroy's “L.A. Quartet” or David Peace's “Red Riding Quartet”, or even the unremitting bleakness of Tom Fontana's HBO prison drama, *Oz*. The problem with these examples is that the absence of shade or nuance means that the darkness is never thrown into relief, and is rendered devoid of context or comparison. Corruption, violence and cruelty are presented as all pervasive, and the world as a place where the innocent suffer and become corrupted too. The prison in *Oz*, by definition, is a place of limited opportunity and that acts as an amplifier of cruelty and corruption. Writing about James Ellroy in 1990, Mike Davis observed that:

In his pitch blackness there is no light left to cast shadows and evil becomes a forensic banality. The result feels very much like the actual moral texture of the Reagan-Bush era: a supersaturation of corruption that fails any longer to outrage or even interest. (2006, p.45)

To paraphrase Detective Steve Crosetti in *Homicide*'s first episode, the trouble with these narratives is that they have nothing to do with life. In *Homicide* the relative darkness of the cases is often leavened by the use of comic material. The case of the missing corpse referred to in the previous chapter is adapted and deliberately played for its macabre humour (H1.04, 1993). Mostly, with Crosetti's Lincoln assassination obsession, Bolander's lack of a love life and Munch's support for drug legalisation, the lighter moments come from the commentary of the detectives.

This equation of unremitting darkness and corruption with the Reagan era echoes Michael Pollan's estimation of the latter seasons of *Hill Street Blues*. Pollan identified a “post-liberal, shading to neo-conservative” drift, informed by Reagan era pessimism and scorn toward the possibility of reform (cited in Thompson 1997, p.71). While not so extreme an example, there is a sense in which shows like *Hill Street Blues* and *NYPD Blue* endorse, in Davis's words, “the emergence of *homo reaganus*” (2006,

p.45). The portrayal of the urban environment, from *Hill Street Blues* onwards, is one where violence is no longer a containable aberration. It has become an inevitable and intrinsic part of urban existence, with cities functioning as “irredeemably lawless and savage” “landscapes of fear” (Macek cited in Clandfield 2009, pp.37-38). There may be a context, or facile explanation of sorts in poverty, drugs or gang warfare but where these problems came from is never explained either. The context itself is largely de-contextualised.

By contrast, historical and economic context is central to *Homicide*. Murders take place in an urban environment shaped by choices made and paths taken, at both a personal and institutional level, over many years. The detectives in the book spurn the search for motive. By contrast, the tv adaptation often focuses on the “why”, and the historical and social context afforded by David Simon’s writing supplements a broadly left-liberal dramatic narrative. During the first three seasons, apart from the narrative raw material of the murder cases, this contextualisation constituted David Simon’s principal contribution to the drama adapted from his book. His only direct contribution was one co-written episode in the second season. Yet during later years, from season four onwards, David Simon became increasingly involved, both as a script writer and story editor. The following chapter explores the beginnings of his career as a television dramatist. In particular, it examines how his contributions, from 1996 onwards build upon a book that was originally researched during the late 1980s.

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<sup>1</sup> A comment by Barry Levinson in a featurette included with the first season DVD release (Levinson 2003).

<sup>2</sup> In the event, screenwriter Paul Attanasio was commissioned to write the pilot, which meant that he would be credited as the series creator for its entire run. He later wrote the successful movies *Quiz Show* (Redford 1994) and *Donnie Brasco* (Newell 1997).

<sup>3</sup> As Todd Hoffman (1998, pp.88-89) recounts the incident, Simon and Levinson were less concerned with the quality of Wells’s adaptation than with the inclusion of the board. With *Angel Street* airing before *Homicide*, the latter show would appear imitative regardless of the board’s provenance. Given *Homicide*’s more or less permanent ratings challenged status, competition from a superficially similar show with a few month’s seniority may have curtailed its existence.

<sup>4</sup> The short second season would be scheduled as a temporary replacement for *LA Law* (Thompson 1997, p.187).

<sup>5</sup> It won numerous other awards, including three Peabody awards for writing (Hoffman 1988, p.88).

<sup>6</sup> By the 1990s, the censorship of adult content on the networks was breaking down, partly due to budgetary constraints that saw network standards departments cut back. It simply became easier to push things through (Gitlin 1994, p.viii).

<sup>7</sup> Clark Johnson would direct six episodes of *Homicide* and, among others, the first episode of *The Wire*.

<sup>8</sup> The filming technique was parodied in the fifth season episode “The Documentary”, scripted by Tom Fontana. The character of Max Brodie, introduced to visually document crime scenes, is an evident doppelganger for David Simon. In an earlier episode, “Bad Medicine” (5.01, 1996) Brodie explained that one of his influences was documentary film-maker Frederick Wiseman. Wiseman would, Brodie explained, not put film in his camera for the first few weeks of a shoot so his subjects would become accustomed to the camera. Likewise, David Simon did much the same, hanging around the detectives

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without really taking notes, until they too became accustomed to him. He also admitted learning a lot from the work of Wiseman and other documentary makers (Simon 2006c).

<sup>9</sup> As it was neither possible, nor desirable, to film long takes in the same way each time there was an inevitable jump as different takes were edited together. Sometimes this would take the form of an actor suddenly standing in a slightly different part of the shot, or dialogue would seem to overlap. Such jump cuts quickly became integral to the show's visual style.

<sup>10</sup> The cinematic dimension is also evident in the number of guest directors the show attracted from the big screen. Bruce Paltrow, who directed David Simon's first co-written episode "Bop Gun" (H2.04, 1004) described *Homicide* as being "to television what abstract expressionism is to art" (Kalat 1998, p.116). Other guest spots were filled by Kathy Bates, Tim Hunter, Michael Lehmann, Barbara Kopple and Kathryn Bigelow. Such contributions undoubtedly added to the prestige of the show and likely had a positive, if marginal, effect on ratings.

<sup>11</sup> The *Homicide* credit sequence sounds like a mash-up of minimalist percussive music, extraneous radio chatter and street noise. This is combined with grainy footage of Baltimore, pictures of case files, seemingly random shots and high contrast black and white shots of the actors. It all adds to the impression of an imperfect work in progress, part of Levinson's desire for the show "to be rough and let the roughness show." (Levinson 2003). The music was taken, almost as an afterthought, from an actor's showreel, specifically because it did not sound like a theme tune (Fontana and Levinson 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Waters appears again, as a Baltimore native extradited from New York to serve time for a murder in Baltimore. The scene features some humorous regional one-upmanship between Waters' character, Detective Frank Pembleton and *Law and Order's* Detective Mike Logan.

<sup>13</sup> Conversations range from the merits of former Maryland Governor and US vice-President Spiro T. Agnew (H1.04, 1993), to the stupidity of the Irish who starved to death on an island surrounded by fish (H1.01, 1993). The final episode of the first season revolves partly around attempts by Detectives Kay Howard and Tim Bayliss to quit smoking, and contains numerous paeans to the joy of the cigarette. One of these is rudely interrupted by the appearance of an actual murder suspect (H1.09, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Munch owes more to Richard Belzer, the actor who plays him, than he does to his inspiration, Sergeant Jay Landsman. His backstory contains numerous references to a questionable past as a hippy and drug user, probably drawn from real-life Detective Harry Edgerton, who is jokingly perceived as a communist due to his unusual taste in music and clothes (Simon 2006a, p.55). Munch seems more of an exemplar for a cynical and jaded postmodernism. When Bolander complains of a suspect's acquittal on a technicality, Munch snaps, "Society's based on technicalities. It's the hallmark of late capitalism, Stanley. Figure it out!" On another occasion he decides that there is "no point trying to do anything. Trying is the ultimate act of delusion." Most tellingly, while his opinions on the drug war are undercut by his status in the department, they seem to echo those of David Simon: "Half the killings in this city are from drugs. If you cut out that, if you legalised drugs...you don't get a whole lot of street killings over a Marlboro Light" (H1.08 "And the Rockets Dead Glare", 1993). He later opines that drug busts are counterproductive and lead to more deaths by reducing supply on the streets (H1.09 "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes", 1993). The character of John Munch has become something of a visual catchphrase in US television. He went from *Homicide* to a regular role in *Law and Order: SVU*. He has also appeared in cameo, as Munch, in *The Wire* (W5.07, "Took," 2008), *The X-Files*, *Arrested Development*, and *30 Rock*, among other shows.

<sup>15</sup> The departure of both actors would change the dynamic of the fictional department, skewing the average age downward and depriving it of experience. Jon Polito (Crosetti) left after the second season as the network considered him telegenically unappealing (Kalat 1998, p.75). Ned Beatty left in frustration at the repeated cancellation threats (Kalat 1998, p.35).

<sup>16</sup> This is taken from a 1997 article for *New Republic*, but which was reprinted on Simon's own blog in 2012. I use the later date for my citation.

<sup>17</sup> In "A Dog and Pony Show" (H1.07, 1993), a murder suspect called Pony responds to the accusation that he deals drugs by responding:

In today's economy? You bet. When there's seven percent unemployment in your white collar lace-hangers up in Montgomery County. Now if the white collar boys are being tapped out, what's up for me? A round of golf at the country club? Right. Man, I'd be carrying the bags and for what? Three bucks a hour? In times like these, jail doesn't scare me or anyone else. (H1.07 "A Dog and Pony Show", 1993)

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<sup>18</sup> Ironically, as Simon observes, the detective who chides Edgerton for not being “po”, drives a car “the size of a small container ship” (2006a, p.55). In the context of other behaviours described as not properly “black,” Jewell Chambers (2011, p.35) and Chaddha and Wilson (2011, p.183), describe the antagonistic attitude among some black schoolchildren that equates educational success with “acting white.”

<sup>19</sup> In contrast to other US cities, rioting in Baltimore did not begin until two days after King's death (Csicsek 2011, p.71).

<sup>20</sup> Derek Strange, the protagonist in George Pelecanos's novel *Hard Revolution* (2004) is a young police officer who faces a similar choice during the riots in Washington in the same period. He makes the opposite choice to Giardello, and leaves the police force.

<sup>21</sup> The top ranking police officer in Baltimore at the time of the April 1968 riots was also called Harris (Levy 2011, p.15).

### CHAPTER THREE

#### **“DON’T GIVE THE VIEWER THE SATISFACTION”: INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL ORDER IN *HOMICIDE*.<sup>1</sup>**

The early episodes of *Homicide*, discussed in the previous chapter, helped define a visual style for the show. They also established themes around class, race and political and social history that would endure through most of its run. David Simon, who turned down the opportunity to write the pilot episode because he felt he lacked the competence, nevertheless suggested that he would take another story “when a template for the show was established” (Simon 2006a, p.631). This script, co-written with his college friend David Mills, was based on a story idea by Tom Fontana and was “so depressing that NBC didn't want to film it” (Jordan, c.2002). Initially intended to close *Homicide's* second mini-season of four episodes, NBC decided to air “Bop Gun” (2.04, 1994) first, to exploit the stature of guest star Robin Williams. The episode received high ratings (Kalat 1998, p.129), and won a Writers' Guild of America award, prompting David Mills to move to Los Angeles where he started writing for *NYPD Blue* (Simon 2006a, p.631).<sup>2</sup> Simon was still employed by the *Baltimore Sun*, and researching his second book, *The Corner*.<sup>3</sup> He saw the episode as little more than “an amusing sidelight”, rather than a potential career choice (Mills 2007b), and it was his only direct contribution to *Homicide* until its fourth season.

Form the fourth season onwards, Simon’s contributions become increasingly important. He joined the series on a full-time basis after taking voluntary redundancy from the *Baltimore Sun*, first as a writer, and later as both story editor and producer. Focus in this chapter is mostly limited to those episodes where he receives an onscreen writing credit, split between “teleplay” and “story”. The former refers to the actual script for the episode, while the latter credit is for the basic narrative situation from which the script is constructed. The Simon scripted episodes are considered most important, although those for which he contributed the story idea are referred to where they seem thematically relevant. The themes that emerge are quite consistent, and tend towards explorations of race and class and how these intersect with a deteriorating urban environment in the context of the war on drugs. While these themes are pursued across multiple episodes, five stories are considered especially important, in terms of how Simon’s narrative concerns, and the worldview expressed through them, evolve.

These are episodes where his contributions are substantial and verifiable through the on-screen credits and extra-textual reference to the episodes. They are “Bop Gun”, “Scene of the Crime” (H4.21, 1996), “Bad Medicine” (H5.04), and the three-part story, “Blood Ties” (H6.01-H6.03, 1997). The fifth story is a usually overlooked script for an *NYPD Blue* episode called “Hollie and the Blowfish” (N3.17, 1996), written before he joined *Homicide* on a full-time basis.<sup>4</sup> They engage with themes that would become central to later dramas; the intersection of race and class in the war on drugs, the changing contours of racism in Baltimore, and systemic and social determinism. With the exception of “Bop Gun”, all of these episodes were written and filmed after the completion of field research for *The Corner*, which was published in 1997. The impact of Simon’s (and Ed Burns) first-hand experience of the drug war is apparent in many narrative choices and characterisations. There also emerges a more general and enduring commitment to stories routed in regional and historical context, and which defy easy resolution. This remains evident, despite certain concessions to NBC’s desire for a more conventional cop show.

#### “BOP GUN” AND SOCIAL DETERMINISM IN BALTIMORE

“Bop Gun” is another ‘real victim’ narrative, the “red ball” murder of a white tourist, Catherine Ellison. The episode features prominently, as a narrative thread, the exploration of socially and institutionally determined outcomes. While David Simon co-wrote the episode, it is noteworthy that his first script for television introduces themes that would prove so important in *The Wire*. As the first chapter makes clear, these ideas of social determinism and institutional fate are apparent as elements in David Simon’s worldview relatively early on, in his first book. They are present in the consequences of institutional racism, and the inevitability of an armed police force killing people (Simon 2006a, p.115). They are present in the image of police secretaries preparing case files for those who will be killed over the coming weekend (Simon 2006a, p.168). The episode also highlights the political and economic priorities of the city, by contrasting the attention given this case compared to others. As a “red ball”, the Catherine Ellison murder case is closed quickly. Giardello, concerned by the speed, and worried about a possible miscarriage of justice, points out to Kay Howard:

“We had a red ball going full throttle. But if instead Catherine Ellison's name was Louella Jones of the 1200 block of Calhoun Street, would [Detective] Beau [Felton] have gotten an hour of overtime?”

The implication that the hypothetical Louella is poor and black, as opposed to the white, middle-class tourist, underlines the latter's status as a real victim. Beau Felton earlier comments gleefully that he is “going to rack up the overtime on this one”, again by virtue of the victim's identity. The murder of Louella Jones, it is implied, would not have been worth a single cent of overtime pay. David Simon later proudly described this moment in the narrative as a “remarkably pure” one, and Felton's comment as recognisable to real homicide detectives (Simon 1998b). That the comment is made in earshot of the victim's husband is perhaps less plausible, but it allows Giardello to contextualise Felton's gallows humour. He explains some of the cases Felton has dealt with recently, dead children, bodies dumped in alleyways etc. Ellison should not want Felton to care. He should want him to close the case.

The episode is also noteworthy by virtue of its much longer narrative time frame, which extends over what appears to be a number of months. The case is followed from red (open) to black (closed), and into court and prison. Detective Kay Howard shares Giardello's scepticism about the guilt of the suspect, Vaughan Perkins, mainly because of how senseless the act seems. Her obsessive pursuit of the “why” is driven by a comment Perkins makes in a letter written to the victim's husband.<sup>5</sup> It contains the line, “I had the power but forgot who I was”. So, who was he? When Howard visits him in prison he tells her:

“I wanted to hold the gun because I wanted the power. Then everyone would be safe and then nothing would happen.”

In conventional terms, resolution is provided by the incarceration of Vaughan Perkins, but the narrative also promises to provide some deeper reason for what has happened. No such reason is forthcoming. Ellison's husband describes the sequence of events as, “the gun, cold lips, cops laughing, me all alone”. The more information Howard uncovers, the more resistant the case becomes to the imposition of any kind of sense. The killer's aunt raised him in a stable environment. She accepts that he is guilty but is at a loss to explain how or why. She is contrasted with his mother, a recovering drug addict, who simply refuses to believe in his guilt. She speaks derisively of the stable, middle-class upbringing his aunt gave him: “singing in church, going fishing down the boon docks... what has that got to do with my Vaughan?”

The answer to who Vaughan Perkins was is suggested in the montage sequence that constitutes the pre-credit teaser scene. Against the soundtrack of the song “Killer” by Seal, the events leading up to Catherine Ellison’s shooting unfold. Vaughan and his friends are playing basketball. Howard and Felton are similarly killing time in the Homicide office tossing paper balls into a bin. A match cut links the two activities [Fig. 8]. The Ellisons are sightseeing around Baltimore. The geography suggested by the images is one where the gap between tourist friendly Baltimore and the ghetto is almost non-existent. The sequence led to some concern at the implication that Camden Yards stadium was literally next to a “run-down residential neighbourhood” (Hoffman 1998, pp.38-39).<sup>6</sup> The Ellisons find themselves in danger simply by stepping over an invisible demarcation line. The function of the images in this instance is more figurative than literal. They show two completely different worlds existing within the same urban space, a not unusual consequence of urban gentrification. At this point it is also apparent that Vaughan is not holding the gun. In an effective if unsubtle shot, the basketball is discarded as the teenagers move toward the tourists. The screen goes black.



Fig. 8: Matching baskets.

The sequence of images suggests a troubling equation: white tourists + black urban youth = inevitable homicide. It seems a clear example of the representation of a non-white urban area as a lawless landscape of fear (Clandfield 2009, pp.37-38). Yet this is challenged in the narrative, which argues that it is not the introduction of white people into the ghetto so much as the presence of the gun that determines Catherine Ellison's fate.

If the montage is considered as a straightforward linear timeline, the detectives' place in the sequence is worthy of attention. Felton is shown reading a computer print-



out, which is presumably a report of the shooting.<sup>7</sup> Following more shots of the youths and the sightseeing Ellisons, Kay Howard retrieves her gun from her locker. She and Felton take a car and are next seen en route to an undisclosed destination. All of this happens before the Ellisons encounter Vaughan Perkins and the others [Fig. 9]. The detectives are travelling to a homicide that has not happened. Yet, immediately after the credits, the detectives arrive at the crime scene.<sup>8</sup>

What the detectives seem to realise before anyone else does, is that Catherine Ellison's death is a statistical certainty, as is the lifelong incarceration of Vaughan Perkins. The episode treads a fine line between presenting the tourist's killing as a fated inevitability and an act of free will, but comes down on the side of the former. Whatever decisions Perkins makes, the narrative argues, the wider contours of his life as a black youth in Baltimore have already been determined. This is who he is. His mistake did not lie in picking up the gun, but in the belief that he "had the power" to control what happened when he did. In a phrase resonant with mythic retribution, he tells Kay Howard how he was holding the gun, and then "the sky fell in" on top of him. The irony at the heart of Howard's quest for motive and reason is that when she eventually finds out, the killing seems even more senseless. In fact, the narrative is so over-determined that Vaughan becomes almost blameless, and completely devoid of personal responsibility. David Simon argued, in the context of the police, that if you arm thousands of people and put them on the street, somebody is going to get shot. This is just as inevitable in the case of other firearms that find their way onto the street.



Fig. 9: The Ellisons cross a line.

In later discussions about *The Wire*, Simon refers to postmodern, Olympian institutions which operate in their own interests regardless of the interests of people they

serve, or who serve them. There is freedom of choice and action, within certain parameters, with the nature and range of choices dependent on what your relation is to the particular institution. However, these institutions are not supernatural, and their activity or inertia is determined by precedent, and previous choices and actions, which as allegory for the wider social order. Political and economic choices made over a period of thirty years in the interests of what Simon describes as “unencumbered capitalism” (Hughes 2007), have inevitable consequences. These are unemployment, drug addiction, drug dealing, violence and death. The choices of those dealing with the consequences of these decisions by definition become limited, stunted and curtailed. In this sense, the metanarrative determines the parameters of the narrative. The example of Vaughan Perkins is of course a figurative rather than a literal illustration. In statistical terms, as both W.J. Wilson (1997, p.21) and Lawrence Lanahan (2007) argue, there are few potential positive outcomes for a young African-American male in West Baltimore who picks up a gun.<sup>9</sup>

This early intimation of a “rigged game”, as it would later be characterised in *The Wire*, is also apparent in the third season episode, “Every Mother's Son” (H3.10, 1994). It was a story David Simon (2003) later cited as a factor in his decision to join the show as a writer, and deals with another senseless, “accidental” murder. A thirteen year old boy is mistakenly shot dead by a fourteen year old, Ronnie Sayers, who believes that because it was a mistake, there is no crime and he wants to go home. The mothers of each boy meet in the waiting area, “both victims of violence, momentarily ignorant of their connection” (Mascaro 2005, p.60) [Fig. 10].<sup>10</sup> By the end, the prospect of a fourteen year old boy, even though he is guilty, spending the rest of his life locked in state prison is so chilling that it disturbs even the usually detached Pembleton. David Simon (2003) observed that:

“[The episode] takes you full circle. You are absolutely with the victim, as you would be, [with] any kid who was killed. And you are ready for vengeance at the beginning of that episode. And by the end there is nothing you can feel but despair and fear for that killer going to prison.

Like Vaughan Perkins, Ronnie Sayers believed he was in control and freely chooses to shoot another child because of a perceived threat. However, he is so utterly uncomprehending of the world around him that he fails to understand the gravity of what he has actually done. Both exercise choice, but while Vaughan speaks of having “the power”, there is a clear gulf between the two. Power is that which determines the

contours of the lives of two boys who will now spend the rest of those lives behind bars. As in “Bop Gun”, it seems unaccountable, absent and yet all-determining.

The portrayal of Ronnie Sayers resonated with David Simon’s own experiences as a journalist. “[The portrayal] of that kid... rang so true to so many young men and adolescents that I had reported on, encountered, been surprised by, and at points been charmed by in years of reporting in Baltimore” (2003). His observations on the emotional punch delivered by the episode are accurate enough, but also unintentionally highlight the gulf between “Every Mother’s Son” and “Bop Gun.” The latter was inflected with markers of realism in its depiction of a “real victim”, and Felton’s jubilation about high levels of overtime pay. It suggested equivalence between the destruction of Catherine Ellison’s life, and that of Vaughan Perkins, who was defeated by the large forces that determined his life chances. It managed to evoke empathy for both the victim’s family and the perpetrator. The latter episode covers similar terrain, but it exceeds “Bop Gun” in confronting the viewer with the reality of what it actually means to try a child as an adult, for a crime with a life sentence. The portrayal of Ronnie Sayers may have rung true with Simon, but its nuance also underlined the extent to which *Homicide* was moving beyond the book upon which it was based.



Fig. 10: Two mothers, two victims.

#### “HOLLIE AND THE BLOWFISH” AND “SCENE OF THE CRIME”: DE-MYTHIFYING THE DETECTIVE HERO

David Simon claimed that the success of *Homicide* made his job as a professional journalist harder. Instead of people telling him what he needed for a story, he would have “twenty minutes with this judge, or that prosecutor, or this cop about last

Friday's episode" (Simon and Yoshimura 2004). At the *Baltimore Sun* this period in the early nineties was also, in his words, characterised by "Pulitzer Fever", an obsession with winning prizes for reports full of "simplistic outrages and even more simplistic solutions" (Simon 2006a, p.632).<sup>11</sup> Returning to the paper after researching *The Corner*, he claimed to tire of "the braggadacio, [and] all that big, we're-really-having-an-impact-talk" (Rose, C. 1999). However, as Roger Sabin points out, while Simon gives the impression of a permanent schism developing with the *Baltimore Sun*, the truth is somewhat different:

It is true that he jumped ship from *The Sun* to TV in 1995. But for a decade after he was still being invited back to the paper to write short pieces about *The Wire* – essentially puff pieces – and was being treated as a minor Baltimore celebrity. (2011, p.149)

Regardless of the nature or permanence of the schism, Simon evidently felt unable to continue with the type of journalism that interested him, at the *Baltimore Sun*. A fifth season episode of *Homicide* "Wu's on First" (H5.15, 1997), co-written by David Simon is the story of a crime journalist betrayed by her own bosses and the police brass. It is an obvious forerunner to the themes explored in the fifth season of *The Wire*. Elizabeth Wu (Joan Chen) is the new crime reporter with the *Baltimore Sun*, and originally intended to be a recurring character (Kalat 1998, p.248).

Aside from the main plot, the episode suggests numerous insights into the priorities of Wu's newspaper, a fictionalised *Baltimore Sun*. Wu, like Simon, sees crime reporting as a "window onto the sociology of the city" (Talbot 2007):

Journalist: Good story today, you won't be covering cops long.  
Wu: I like covering cops.  
Journalist: It's not a career.

However, the newspaper seems more interested in the type of high impact journalism that he claimed to be tired of. The episode contains some early score settling against Bill Marimow and John Carroll, "the carpetbaggers from Philadelphia" (Simon 2006a, p.631), whom Simon partly blamed for destroying the real *Baltimore Sun*:

Editor: In Philadelphia they taught me how to have impact. They taught me how to keep a story out front, by printing everything I knew. The facts stay until we fix it up the next day. And I don't need to tell you how many Pulitzers we brought home to Philly.

Wu is not portrayed as an idealised paragon of journalistic virtue. She makes mistakes, fails to protect a witness, leads the police to him, and is demoted. At the same time she is clearly a talented reporter who is betrayed and ill-served by the institution she works for.

David Mills urged Simon to move to Los Angeles (Talbot 2007) and he was offered, but declined, a full-time writing job on *NYPD Blue* (Rose, C. 1999). In 1996, the Steven Bochco and David Milch drama was at the height of its envelope pushing popularity, and Simon co-developed the storyline and wrote the teleplay for an episode entitled “Hollie and the Blowfish”. It is the story of a federally funded drug investigation unit and the snitch-cum-stickup artist who helps them damage a major drug organisation. As such, and notwithstanding any rewrites or edits, it anticipates many of the themes that would emerge years later. More than anything Simon would devise or write for *Homicide*, the kernel of at least the surface narrative of *The Wire* is discernible in this script. The HIDA (High Intensity Drug Area) task force featured in the episode is a obvious precursor of the wire-tap unit in *The Wire*.<sup>12</sup> (There is a sub-plot involving the murder of a hex throwing Mexican priest, but it seems clear which part of the storyline Simon was responsible for.) The task force commander is Ray Kahlins, an officer who peddles a fine line in petty corruption, via inflated overtime claims rather than taking bribes or stealing evidence. This is what motivates his application for a wire-tap authorisation. The criminal justice system as “a rusting old machine and overtime pay is a necessary lubricant”. *NYPD Blue* regular Detective Bobby Simone describes him as someone who “looks for reasons not to do his job”. In the space of a few minutes screen time, Simon sets out his definition of bad police work, and how it is enabled by the drug war. Significantly, Kahlins operates as a contrast to the relatively good homicide detectives, Andy Sipowicz and Simone. The episode is as much an exploration of good and bad police work, as it is an account of a drug investigation.

The episode also introduces Simon’s take on the criminal with a moral code. Ferdinand Hollie is best described as an amalgam of the police informant Bubbles and the stick-up artist Omar from *The Wire*<sup>13</sup> [Fig. 11]. He resembles the former, but has the moral code of the latter. The death of a ten-year-old girl during a shoot-out between drug gangs prompts Holly, on principle, to help the homicide detectives and Kahlins to take down the dealers responsible:

“Back in the day, player walk up, put the gun to the back of the guy's head. Make sure he hit the right nigger. Now you got fools, fifteen to a clip semi-auto, spraying a whole damn street.”

Hollie's information leads directly to the drugs. Kahlins, the bad cop, casually and callously reveals his identity to one of the arrested dealers. Hollie is shot dead as a result. (Dying from gunshot wounds, he refuses to let anyone touch him as he is HIV positive, which admittedly is gilding the lily slightly in underlining his personal integrity.)

Hollie is no jive talking descendant of Huggy Bear from *Starsky and Hutch* (ABC, 1975-1979). He is neither demonised as a junky, nor is his portrayal a patronising or indulgent portrait of the underclass. His narrative and life are given agency and relevance, on their own terms, without being valorised. In the same way that the detectives in *Homicide* are presented as skilled workers, rather than cops with a mission to clean up the streets, Hollie's pride in his work is defined by his code. This correlation between different types of labour recurs regularly in both *The Corner* and *The Wire*. When Sipowicz complains that he is no different to any other criminal, Bobby Simone says that no innocent bystander has ever been killed or injured in one of Hollie's stick-up operations. Comparing him with Kahlins, Sipowicz ultimately concedes that “the world is on its ass when a stick-up guy is more stand-up than somebody you're working with.”

Simon was undoubtedly limited in what he could introduce to a show where the main characters were so well established. He contents himself by creating the contrasting, and counter-intuitive pairing, of the honourable, skilled Hollie with the venal, corrupt and mediocre Kahlins. Possibly of more importance is the fact that Hollie's character seemingly owes much to Simon's time on the drug corner. Research for *The Corner* placed him in close proximity to people he would previously have seen through the perspective of police work. The marked difference between Hollie and Vaughan Perkins in “Bop Gun” reflects this, even bearing in mind their different dramatic functions and Simon's relative inexperience as a writer. Both Perkins and Hollie are the victims of forces beyond their control, with the latter in particular despatched because of Kahlins' betrayal, carried out on a whim, because he can. Kahlins' actions have the character of the vengeful capricious deity about them, as he feels belittled by what can only be described as Hollie's professionalism. By contrast, Vaughan Perkins seems more like an empty cipher than a character, created to make a point, in comparison with the nuance, in terms of personal philosophy and history

projected by Hollie. Both exist for a single episode of their respective shows, and both occupy a comparable amount of screen time.



Fig. 11: Ferdinand Hollie, the proto-Bubbles.

David Simon accepted Tom Fontana's offer to write for *Homicide*, and from its fourth season onwards became a permanent fixture (Hornby 2007).<sup>14</sup> After three years of instability, season four was the first year *Homicide* received a full season order of twenty two episodes from NBC.<sup>15</sup> This was partly due to NBC buying into the show to become co-producers (Kalat 1998, p.126), giving them the potential for future earnings from any syndication deals (Thompson: 1997, 191). Later, when NBC regained its position as the dominant network *Homicide* was renewed for two full seasons, five and six, (Kalat 1998, p.219). According to network President Warren Littlefield, "*Homicide* is excellent tv, it's as simple as that" (Hoffman 2008, p.91). He also boasted that "our success allows us to pick some of our favourites and commit to them, allowing time to truly be a success" (Kalat 1998, p.219). In other words, *Homicide* was a critical favourite that enhanced NBC's cultural capital, and the network's market dominance permitted such expressions of largesse.<sup>16</sup>

Simon's reaction to "Every Mother's Son", combined with what he perceived as *Homicide*'s humanist, unheroic approach to its characters suggested that it was moving beyond its source material (Fontana et al. 2004). While elements of this approach were drawn from his book, they contrasted with how he felt detectives were normally portrayed in fiction:

"I was sort of interested in the idea of the 'de-mythification' of the American detective. He's become a sort of mythic character in fiction.

The great lie in dramatic tv is the cop who stands over a body, pulls up the sheet and mutters “damn”, and looks down sadly.” (Simon 1998b)

Of course, this is not strictly true. Tv cops like those described by Simon had become increasingly scarce by the 1990s, replaced by less noble and more cynical examples. In spite of this, even iconic figures like *NYPD Blue*'s Sipowicz, or a more extreme later example like *The Shield*'s (FX, 2002-2008) Vic Mackey are motivated by their self-perception as the personification of the thin blue line. Part of the “de-mythification” Simon describes in *Homicide* involved the portrayal of detectives as ordinary workers doing a job in an environment defined by petty bureaucratic tyrannies. At most, as in the case of McNulty and Freamon from *The Wire*, they were motivated by professional pride. As noted briefly in chapter one, by marked contrast with the book, David Simon's scripts for *Homicide*, tended almost to overcompensation in their focus on bad police work, and corruption. His contributions to season four, “Justice, Part Two” (H4.15, 1996) and “Scene of the Crime” (H4.21, 1996) respectively, engage with both personal and institutional corruption and dysfunction.

While the episodes unquestionably belong to a project of de-mythification, “Justice, Part Two” is the second in a two-part story that relies on a motif of vengeance gone askew. In contrast to “Bop Gun” (H2.04) Simon claimed that this script was filmed with few changes (2006a, p.631). In “Justice, Part Two” (H4.15, 1996), a suspect in the murder of a retired police officer is acquitted because the jury wants to go home.<sup>17</sup> The suspect, Kenny Damon, is later found dead and the evidence points inescapably to the dead officer's son, Jake Rodzinski, a friend of Detective Meldrick Lewis. Lewis finds himself torn between loyalty to the police brotherhood and his responsibility to the law. He comes down on the side of the latter. Even by the standards of *Homicide*, it is an exceptionally bleak episode, as it transpires that Damon has been abducted and premeditatedly killed by Jake Rodzinski and his partner. The investigation turns on the discovery that the murder suspect was killed with a small derringer pistol. The riots following the death of Martin Luther King are once more evoked as a turning point in the city's history when it is revealed that pistols of this type carried by officers for additional protection. Rodzinski's father was one of those officers.

Lewis is repeatedly told by the dead officer's former partner that he resembles a cop called Jimmy Paulson who, it transpires, also betrayed the brotherhood of cops. Giardello explains the mores of old style policing by drawing from a passage in Simon's book (2006a, p.111). Until the early 1970s it had been unofficial procedure that a cop



killer would be shot on the street, rather than arrested. The aforementioned Jimmy Paulson violated this code by adhering to the law, and bringing the suspect to the station. Giardello seems ambivalent about the change, but in a heavily telegraphed monologue, he describes what happened to that suspect the night he was brought to the station:

“One of my worst memories would be back in the north-west [district]. Standing in the parking lot and listening to those cops beat that prisoner in his cell, and hearing him scream for justice. Just screaming for justice. And I remember this Sergeant, laughing and saying, ‘there ain't no justice here. It's just us.’ But nowadays, thinking about this case... It makes me wonder about [*beat*] us.”

Detective Mike Kellerman simply describes Paulson and Jake Rodzinski as cops who were born at the wrong time.

“Scene of the Crime” (H4.21, 1996), with a teleplay by David Simon and Anya Epstein, is another episode of de-mythification that introduces a critique of policing explicitly rooted in race and class.<sup>18</sup> It is a significant precursor of the wider systemic themes that would emerge later in *The Wire*. The episode opens with a ghetto murder scene on the brink of a riot. Lewis and Kellerman are the principle targets as thrown words escalate into hurled missiles. An off-screen voice critiques urban policing priorities: “Downtown suits! Only come across the boulevard when the nigger falls,” and “Never see no badges when the drama starts.”<sup>19</sup> Responding to the white Kellerman's observation that “we” are not wanted in the projects, Lewis quotes the punchline from the famous Lone Ranger joke: “What do you mean ‘we’, paleface?” The patrol officer, in the spirit of counterparts both real and fictional, suggests that the only way to police the projects is with napalm. The situation calms only when the Nation of Islam's private security firm arrives.

The story is based on the granting of a number of contracts to the Nation of Islam to provide security in Baltimore's housing projects in the 1990s. They initially claimed to have reduced crime in the projects by forty-four per cent (James 1995). The police are almost uniformly hostile to their presence, which is a challenge to their monopoly on the use of coercive force. It is also an admission that they are incapable of maintaining order in the housing projects, aside from the quasi-military occupation approach of the war on drugs. Lewis is alone in adopting a more ambivalent attitude towards them. Like “Black and Blue” and “Justice, Part Two”, the episode tests the loyalties of detectives, as explored through the deteriorating relationship of Lewis and

Kellerman. Kellerman resents the Nation of Islam partly through professional pride and partly hostility to what he perceives as their racism.<sup>20</sup> When Kellerman describes them as thugs, Lewis contrasts the projects to wealthy white neighbourhoods with private security. Using the collective noun, he wonders why when “we decide to police our own” it is suddenly perceived as a threat. The narrative argues that black self-policing has been prompted as much by police fear and apathy, as by the black community’s fear of police brutality. Lewis points an accusatory finger at Kellerman:

“I’m talking about you! I’m talking about you! I don’t see you up there walking foot up in the towers, huh? I don’t see you volunteering to police *that* neighbourhood.”

The second plotline further explores why black communities may look to an alternative model of policing. Officer Stu Gharty is a fifty four year old white patrol officer sitting in his car next to another project building when shots are reported nearby. Gharty remains in his car until the shooting stops and two young men, aged fourteen and eighteen, are dead. He denies any racial element in his decision to leave two young men to shoot each other to death, but was “not going to risk getting shot for the sake of a couple of ‘mopes’ nobody cares about.” Throughout the episode similar language is used by different people up and down the chain of command, making it difficult to identify where racism melds into class hatred, or cowardice into apathy. When Giardello points out to Gharty’s white commanding officer that he had sat back while two children died, he receives the answer that “they were drug dealers. There’s a difference.” The African-American Colonel Barnfather, thinking about how the incident will be perceived, says exactly the same thing.

Neither storyline is resolved in a traditional way. It transpires that the Nation of Islam let the killer in the opening murder go free. Their leader Ishmael, a former drug dealer, justifies the action by telling Lewis, “I’ve seen your prisons: one black man more or less will not matter.” Surveying the projects he continues, “This is the handiwork of the world’s most affluent country. This, Brother Lewis, is how they want it to be.” While David Simon would probably take issue with Ishmael’s earlier characterisation of the drug problem as a CIA plot, he is undoubtedly speaking with the author’s voice in this instance. There is no attempt at conventional narrative closure, with the final montage instead suggesting dissolution. This is the war on the underclass, the discarding of a large proportion of a working population who are deemed obsolete. Gharty gets his badge back. The shootings continue. Giardello reads about them in the *Baltimore Sun*.

The shootings continue. The Nation of Islam loses its contract, as it did in reality (James 1995). The drug dealing in the projects returns, now unimpeded.<sup>21</sup> Lewis looks on. Nobody cares.

Therefore, examples of “bad policing” abound in “Hollie and the Blowfish” (N3.17), “Justice, Part Two” (H4.15), and “Scene of the Crime” (H4.21), but each time balanced by contrasting examples of “good policing.” Good policing is usually characterised, not simply by adherence to the rule of law, but by a tendency to do the job well. With the *NYPD Blue*, where the main characters were well established, the integrity of Vernon Hollie is contrasted against the venality of the narcotics officer, Kahlins. Jake Rodzinski takes a judicial short cut, exacting retribution on his father’s killer. By contrast, while Lewis loudly expresses outrage at being expected to investigate a fellow police officer, he does so, right to its macabre conclusion. The third example goes further, suggesting systemic impediments to police work, with a seemingly direct evocation of the housing projects as “lawless and savage” “landscapes of fear” (Macek cited in Clandfield 2009, pp.37-38). Both Gharty and the Ishmael represent examples of bad policing, but in an environment becoming increasingly detached from the societal mainstream. It represents the introduction of the war imagery, and the image of the city itself as a war zone, explored in the first chapter. The end of episode montage also contains the first intimations of David Simon’s polemical engagement with the “war on drugs” as an unwinnable and unjust war on the underclass.

#### “BAD MEDICINE”: TOWARDS A SYSTEMIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE DRUG WAR

This engagement is, however, relatively primitive in comparison with the complex polemic that emerges in *The Wire* five years later. The reasons for this are worth recounting briefly. By its fifth season, *Homicide* was a well established drama about “murder police”. Numerous storylines spread over multiple episodes, but as traditional two- and three-part narratives, and it remained essentially a workplace drama. Its narrative focus remained firmly with the police themselves, unlike in *The Wire*, where multiple narrative perspectives were fundamental to its form of storytelling. Nevertheless, *Homicide* incorporates insights into the structure of the corner economy, and the lives of its inhabitants, that were gleaned from research for *The Corner*. Clearly

discernible within the fifth season “Luther Mahoney” storyline is a critique of the drug war and the drug trade itself, as linked components in a wider systemic assault against the poor.

Elements of *The Wire*'s comparisons with the wider capitalist social order are evident, but in place of the corporate structure of the drug organisation stands a conventionally villainous drug dealer. Luther Mahoney (Erik Todd Dellums) is introduced towards the end of season four in “The Damage Done” (H4.19, 1996), and represents a departure from the criminals usually portrayed on *Homicide*. He is a seemingly untouchable mastermind who becomes the suspect in a series of drug-related murders when Kellerman investigates four separate killings as a single case. This is itself a significant departure from how the Homicide unit usually worked, and is closer to the focussed drug cases pursued by Ed Burns. Simon would later describe Mahoney as a wholly fictional creation, “not resembling the drug traffickers I knew in Baltimore in any sense” but “interesting in the sense of this wonderful character who was almost a Shakespearean villain” (Simon and Yoshimura 2004).

David Simon claims that “Bad Medicine” (H5.01, 1996) was the first script he was allowed to write without interference (Fontana et al. 2004), suggesting it was not subject to edits or re-writes.<sup>22</sup> It features a joint investigation between the Homicide and Narcotics units, and is based on the real case of a batch of poisoned heroin that caused a number of deaths in Baltimore in the 1990s (Kalat 1998, p.231). An opening montage tracks a series of presumed overdoses crossing class and race lines, moving from the street, through suburbia and up to the penthouses [Figs. 12-15].<sup>23</sup> The drugs are in small plastic packets marked with “double stars”, Luther Mahoney's trademark. As Detective Stivers from the Narcotics unit points out:

“You go by the bullet or the blade... you got a shot at being avenged. You go by the blast? You're just gone.”

The introduction of the Narcotics unit implies the possibility of integrated investigation, but instead reveals conflicts of interest between the two units and their competing statistical priorities. Lewis wants to solve a murder connected with the poisoned heroin, while Stivers is more interested in getting the bad drugs off the street and finding whoever is responsible. Both are motivated by wanting to do good police work, but a cleared drug case is no use to Lewis, and a cleared homicide is useless to Stivers. The contradiction is heightened when Lewis's murder witness turns out to be Stivers' paid informant, whose name needs to be kept away from the investigation.

The witness/informant, Vernon Troy, is a self-aware if un-romanticised drug addict. He explains that in an attempt to corner market share, the murder victim Bo-Jack Reed had been attempting to damage Mahoney's business:

“There's enough profit out there for everybody. What got Luther mad is when Bojack started putting out another package in double star bags... Bojack was telling people Mahoney was serving them poison, trying to push them over to his own product... Didn't work like he thought though. The fiends? They start chasing the *poison*! A true [indecipherable] dope fiend hears that a package is knocking other addicts off their ass? He runs right towards the stuff. He's thinking it's the righteous high only he can handle.”

Peter Moskos confirms something similar from his own experience, and similar logic is apparent later on in *The Corner*. Overdoses are good for business. “People come in and say ‘So-and-so OD'd!’ And the drug dealers just laugh...’ See that's good shit” (Moskos 2008, p.69).

The themes emerging here would become familiar in David Simon's later dramas. There is an explicit understanding of the drug trade in economic rather than moral terms, the darkly humorous gap between intended and actual consequences, and a character felled by hubris. The character of Luther Mahoney himself however, while seeming to point forward to the sociopathic Marlo Stanfield of *The Wire* is a fairly standard “intellectualised villain” (Fontana et al. 2004). As broadcast, the interrogation of Luther Mahoney is a standard battle of wits between Luther and the detectives, until Mahoney implicates himself with a verbal slip.<sup>24</sup> He is later released for lack of evidence. Simon claimed that his model for Mahoney was Richard III, and that the original draft of the script actually contained lines from Shakespeare's play (ibid.). Despite Simon's description of Mahoney as a fictional creation, the character seems to have indirect associations with a real Baltimore drug dealer called Linwood “Rudy” Williams. In 1992 David Simon wrote a lengthy article about Williams, infamous for his arbitrary use of violence, which rather tortuously compared him to Shakespeare's king.<sup>25</sup> It is interesting primarily for how it exposes the limits of a model of individual evil as a means to understand the complexity of the current model of the drug trade:

In our world, the war that rages is not between different royal factions, but among ourselves. For money and not for crown, the bodies still fall in West Baltimore, the medic sirens still wail, and the \$10 capsule remains the cornerstone of our secret economy. True, Linwood Williams has passed [into prison] – and that, given the damage he caused, is notable. But others already stand on his corners.

“If you do sweat to put a tyrant down,” Richmond tells his soldiers on the battle's eve, “you sleep in peace, the tyrant being slain.”  
But not here. Not now. (Simon 1992a)

Williams is presented as a uniquely vicious, seemingly sociopathic individual, but it is also clear that his removal changes nothing. He will be replaced by somebody else with the same lack of self-awareness. The evil tyrant is no longer a psychological conundrum driven by internal demons, but as the character of Marlo Stanfield in *The Wire* suggests, is socially determined and driven by economics.



Fig. 12: Corner overdose.



Fig. 13: Working man overdose.

Luther Mahoney appears in three more episodes, before being killed at the end of “Deception” (5.19, 1997), at the network’s insistence (Simon and Yoshimura 2004).<sup>26</sup> While Simon receives no on-screen credit for the episode, Lewis’s conversation with the drug dealer seems clearly influenced in spirit and substance by *The Corner*; published in

the same year. Similarly, his arguments point forward to those made in *The Wire*, by figures as diverse as Detective Jimmy McNulty, D'Angelo Barksdale and Stringer Bell:

“I've been a cop for a long time. The drugs out there? We ain't gonna win that. There's a hundred open-air drug markets in this city. And there's 50,000 drug fiends out there. And we are taking on human desire with lawyers, and jail houses, and lock-ups, and you and I both know the human desire is kicking us in the ass. So, what I need to know Luther, why couldn't you be happy with just the packages, huh? If it were just slinging drugs, you and me we wouldn't be here, would we? But the bodies, what about the bodies, Luther? What is up with that?”

This is not so much an argument for legalisation as a plea for the acknowledgement of reality. Throughout the story arc the implicit motive in drug killings is that they are drug killings; as if no other explanation were needed. This is the first time that anyone asks why. The board is used to powerful effect, punctuating Lewis's monologue with numerous split-second testimonies to the rising body count.

The Mahoney storyline shows the limitations of the crime genre's tendency to project wider social dysfunction onto an individual villain. Monologues like that from Detective Lewis and Vernon Troy's explanation of the competitive market also hint at the wider concerns of *The Wire*. Notwithstanding these innovations however, the limitations of the format intervene in the network's insistence that Mahoney is subject to retribution. For all that he is intellectualised Luther makes the mistakes he needs to make in order to be caught. In his final episode, he is provoked into a self-implicating outburst on the phone after the police intercept a drug shipment. Nevertheless, this is a storyline more likely to leave the viewer feeling troubled and questioning, than either fearful or vindicated.



Fig. 14: Suburban overdose.



Fig. 15: Penthouse overdose.

### “BLOOD TIES”: RACE, CLASS, AND COLOUR BLIND JUSTICE

The final episode of the fifth season uses a genuine procedural change in the Baltimore police department to introduce new detectives into the fictional Homicide Unit. In 1994, a rule was introduced stipulating that members of “elite” units, like Homicide, would be “rotated” out after a maximum period of four years (Hoffman 1998, pp.47-48). Todd Hoffman cites detectives who felt that this was a direct result of the department’s increased visibility, a consequence of both Simon’s book, and the subsequent tv series (ibid.). As a result, four new homicide detectives are introduced in season six, although only one, Laura Ballard, is a new character. The others had appeared in previous episodes, including Terry Stivers from “Bad Medicine” (H5.04), and Stu Gharty, the cop charged with dereliction of duty in “Scene of the Crime” (H4.21). This element of Gharty's back story would hang over his character.<sup>27</sup> Gharty (Peter Gerety) re-introduced an older, more experienced, presence to the squad room, something that had been missing since the departure of Crosetti (Jon Polito) and Bolander (Ned Beatty) in season three. The impact on the realism of the series had been of particular concern to David Simon (Kalat 1998, p.52), credited as a producer for the first time at the beginning of season six.

The season begins with “Blood Ties” (1997), a three-part dissection of class and race power and their evolution over thirty years in Baltimore. It represents a dramatic and conceptual high water mark for the series, and is worth engaging with in detail. David Simon is credited as teleplay writer for the second two episodes. When a Haitian



maid is found murdered, suspicion falls on her employers, the Wilsons, Baltimore's most prominent African-American family. Felix Wilson is a wealthy purveyor of snack foods, and is loosely based on the cookie manufacturer, 'Famous Amos' (Kalat 1998, p.270). He is a renowned philanthropist who gives generously to less privileged citizens in Baltimore. His is the classic bootstraps to riches story of somebody who pulled himself up from the ghetto, and an exemplar of what Melvin Leiman describes as the 'new' black capitalist. That is, contrary to the "old black capitalist" who "operated within a segregated atmosphere with an almost exclusively black clientele," Wilson represents those who have broken through to a majority white clientele (Leiman 1993, p.262). Consequently, Pembleton is offended when Gharty and Ballard refer offhandedly to Wilson as "the snack cake guy" ("Blood Ties, Part One" H6.01, 1997). To Pembleton, Felix Wilson is a symbol of mainstream progress and economic empowerment. To Giardello, the Wilsons are friends whom he knew growing up in segregated Baltimore. The episode revisits many of the themes first addressed in "Cradle to Grave" (H3.11), particularly with regard to the ways in which community loyalty becomes an alibi for the exercise of naked class power. In contrast to that previous episode however, on this occasion class power is not mediated through political institutions, but asserted crudely and directly through the economic clout of the Wilsons. While it does not approach the complexity of the systemic critique in *The Wire*, the episode makes an argument that privilege is a function of class more than race. It does so primarily through drawing parallels with another murder in Baltimore, in 1963.

Hattie Carroll was a fifty-one-year old waitress with eleven children, who died of a stroke after being hit with a toy cane carried by William Zantzinger, a twenty-four-year old tobacco farmer. Notoriously, after being charged with manslaughter, Zantzinger was sentenced to only six months in prison. Bob Dylan wrote one of his most celebrated songs, "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," after reading about the incident in a newspaper. Felix Wilson refers to the case in the first episode, and returns to it at the end of the final episode, on that occasion quoting directly from Dylan's song. Using the case of Hattie Carroll as a framing device prompts the viewer to consider the case of the Haitian maid, Melea Briere, in light of how race and class politics have evolved since the 1960s.

With regard to the song itself, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that it misrepresents the facts of the case slightly. After Zantzinger died in January 2009,

David Simon wrote about an attempt to interview the former tobacco farmer, twenty five years after the death of Carroll (Simon 2009a).<sup>28</sup> He tells Zantzinger, now a real estate agent, how he found a note in the original case file referring to correspondence “from... a folk-singer in New York” looking for information. This was months after the release of the song. Simon concludes it was the reaction of a worried young man, trying to correct some of the liberties he had taken with the truth:

Hattie Carroll was not “slain by a cane” that was “doomed and determined to destroy all the gentle,” as Dylan wrote. No physical injury was done to her, nor was there any evidence to suggest lethal intent... Nor did Zantzinger have “high office relations in the politics of Maryland” to influence the case, as Dylan implied. (ibid.)

Nevertheless, and strangely for someone dubbed “non-fiction boy” by Tom Fontana (Simon 2006a, p.630), Simon suggests that this does not detract from its expression of a deeper systemic truth. He cites Picasso’s dictum that “art is the lie that shows us the truth, and that’s how Dylan and his ballad should probably be judged” (ibid.). The song may not be factually accurate, but it reveals structural realities about a time when the odds were stacked against a black, working class waitress, in favour of a white plantation owner. Zantzinger’s relatively light sentence may not literally have been bought with money or political influence, but it was a consequence of engrained racism, and white privilege.

“Blood Ties” relocates the case to the 1990s, but reconfigures the racial dynamic more explicitly into one of class, recognising the shift in political, and economic, power that has occurred in Baltimore. It is more nuanced than Dylan’s song was, or needed to be. The second episode of the three (H6.02), with a teleplay written by David Simon, explores these shifting boundaries of race, class and power. By the 1990s, the Wilsons are representatives of the wealthy and powerful black elite in Baltimore. The victim is also black, but she is a poor refugee from Haiti. She is introduced as a dead body and consequently is reliant on other people to speak on her behalf throughout. Rarely in *Homicide* has the dictum “you speak for the dead” (Simon 2006a, p.17) emerged so forcefully. She is found dead at a social function being held in honour of this prominent black family, by whom she is employed. The circumstances, combined with the later discovery that she had sex with a man shortly before her death, ensure that the investigation becomes a conduit for latent racist tensions. The refusal of Pembleton to request DNA samples from the Felix Wilson and his son becomes the main source of conflict within the narrative. Pembleton claims that requesting samples

is a capitulation to the most atavistic prejudices about sexually voracious black men. By contrast, Gharty and Ballard claim that it makes investigative sense to obtain samples from men they know were close to the victim. Nevertheless, throughout all three episodes, resentments driven by both class and race tensions intertwine to the extent that their mutually reinforcement becomes apparent. This is especially apparent as frustrations emerge when the investigation stalls. The scene is worth quoting at length:

Gharty: No hard questions for some rich swanks, right Pembleton?  
Bayliss: Hey Gharty. Whose house are you in?  
Gharty: This is his house? I'm a guest?  
Pembleton: The Wilsons have done nothing but good for this city. But then again, why should that matter to you two? [Gharty and Ballard.]  
Gharty: They're black, they're rich. So all bets are off. Anyone else would be in the box, sweating.  
Pembleton: So what's your evidence, huh? You have none. Melea Briere was a beautiful woman? That she worked for the Wilsons? That she had sex on the night she was murdered? That connects all the dots for you?  
Ballard: That much is enough to put them in the middle until we can eliminate them as suspects.  
Pembleton: Because we all know that black men can't control themselves when it comes to loose shoes and tight ----  
Bayliss: Hey, Frank, Frank. No-one is saying that.  
Ballard: What I'm saying is that these people ----  
Pembleton: *These people?*  
Ballard: Black, white or blue, Pembleton.  
Pembleton: So you can prove once again that you can take the nigger out of the ghetto, but not the ghetto out of the nigger, is that it?  
.....  
Gharty: Hey, this is Baltimore. They're black, successful. That's the deal, end of story. This is your city, Pembleton: your house, your department, your rules.  
Pembleton: So it wasn't that way when the Italians ran it, or when the Irish owned it? How many favours have been called in, in the name of the Knights of Columbus, or the St Michael's society?

Numerous themes emerge in this exchange, with the focus firmly on the shifting locations of power in Baltimore. It is now perceived as a “black city”, and not simply in the crude demographic sense. The expression of political and class power becomes indistinguishable from the expression of racial dominance. The seemingly reasonable aspiration that all should be treated equally before the law is transformed into a racially loaded attack from white police officers. Bayliss's reminder to Gharty that this is Pembleton's “house” is also transformed during the exchange. It initially appears an assertion of Pembleton’s seniority as the department's most successful detective. By the

end, it re-emerges as a reminder that the department is Pembleton's "house" in the communalist, political sense.

Gharty, explaining the reality of Baltimore to Seattle native Ballard, refers to Giardello and Pembleton covering Wilson's ass because it is the same colour as theirs. Ballard takes offence, and calls him out on what she perceives as dog-whistle racism:

"You know, when I told people from back home where I was headed, everyone said the same thing. They all went, 'Ooh, Baltimore. Tough town. Baltimore's hard core. It's the big time.' But I knew what they meant... Baltimore is black."

At the same time, Gharty's critique seems as rooted in wealth and privilege, as in what he dismisses as "the racial stuff". He tells Ballard that she would not be able to work the case any differently to Pembleton because of who the Wilsons are. Yet in the attentive viewer's mind, Gharty's comments are inevitably tainted by his previous behaviour; he is a white cop who does not seem to care much for black people, albeit poor, black people.

It becomes clear that Pembleton's loyalty to the Wilsons stems from more than a defensive reaction to what he perceives as the racism of Gharty and Ballard. Gharty is both right and wrong. The Wilsons represent a positive model of African-American advancement because, Pembleton argues contrasting them with Luther Mahoney, they have become successful "playing by the rules". In contrast to his seeming ambivalence about the politics of liberal equality in "Black and Blue" (H2.02), on this occasion Pembleton stands consistently with Giardello. The Wilsons need to be defended because they are an example of black self-improvement that cuts against stereotypes of laziness and criminality. Therefore, the suspicion of sexual impropriety would not only vindicate the racist opinions of a significant minority in Baltimore. It would also represent a collective fall from grace, in a way that William Zantzinger's crime did not, and for much the same reason. The latent racism that sees violence and criminality as innate in African Americans tends to see view the same actions, in wealthy white people at least, as individual aberrations. In this sense then, Gharty is wrong. Giardello and Pembleton are protecting their own asses as much as the Wilsons.

However, that this episode is intended to be an exploration of class more so than race is underlined when Felix Wilson admits to sleeping with the victim. His fear that he will simply become another black accused is underlined and undermined by the arrival of his team of elite criminal lawyers. The final part of the story (H6.03), co-written by

Simon and Anya Epstein, further accentuates this gulf between the Wilsons and the other accused in Baltimore. Their wealth assures them access to the media, and in an attempt to forestall negative media scrutiny, they appear on television to give their side of the story. Giardello suggests to Regina Wilson that this makes it look as though they have something to hide, she answers: “You and I both know how the system treats black men.” The strategy backfires. Colonel Barnfather appears, demanding that the system *does* treat Felix Wilson as it would any other black man, on the grounds that he does not “like hearing media innuendo that we're protecting potential suspects because they're rich or because they're black.”

While lack of resolution, and crimes unsolved, had been a regular feature throughout the series, these had normally come courtesy of a lack of investigative leads or irregularities. “Blood Ties” is the first time a murderer escapes justice by virtue of who he is. Lacking enough evidence for a charge Pembleton, simply to satisfy his own curiosity, speaks to Felix Wilson and his son Hal. He does not advise them of their rights, so none of what they say is legally admissible. Hal confesses to the murder, committed in a fit of jealous rage when he found out that Melea was sleeping with his father. Again, Melea exists simply as an object that men fight over. The comparison with William Zantzinger emerges, in terms of assumed privilege, this time as an expression of wealth. Zantzinger and Hal were, as Felix Wilson explains it; “two privileged young men raised to believe that the world has no right to deny them anything.” Pembleton instead expresses the popular perception that Zantzinger “got off because of wealth and influence”. In reality, he received a light sentence less because of who he was, than because of who Hattie Carroll was not. Wilson makes clear that his son will escape for the same reason, and they leave Baltimore. After hollowly reciting the final verse of “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,”<sup>29</sup> Wilson makes it quite clear that his son will escape justice for much the same reason. Regina Wilson tells Giardello that “the business, the charities [and Baltimore] will have to do without the Wilsons and their money.”

“Blood Ties” was broadcast in 1997, barely two years after OJ Simpson was found not guilty of murdering his wife, Nicole. Polls at the time suggested a division along racial lines with both sides believing that “justice is not colourblind and justice can be bought” (Morin 1995, p.A31). Whites tended to believe Simpson had gotten away with murder, while many African Americans celebrated the defeat of what was perceived as a political trial (Carlin 1995, p.11). Felix Wilson’s arrival in the Homicide

Unit, accompanied by a team of elite lawyers prompts associations with Simpson's legal team. More negatively, the storyline draws attention to how "the system treats black men" who cannot afford such high-powered representation. Therefore, while the storyline explores the legacy of racism, it is the endurance of class power, as expressed through ownership of wealth and property that emerges as the dominant determining factor.

Nevertheless, the "racial stuff", as Gharty refers to it, is waiting just below the surface. Race and class would endure as recurring knotty themes, resistance to untangling, throughout the series. As examples of this, it is worth briefly considering two episodes from *Homicide's* seventh, and final, season. "Shades of Gray" (H7.10, 1999), was written by crime journalist TJ English, with the story credit split between David Simon and Julie Martin.<sup>30</sup> When a white bus driver, McCusker, is beaten to death in a riot after accidentally running over a pregnant woman,<sup>31</sup> Gharty instinctively divines a racial motive:

"White man drives bus into black pregnant woman. Black crowd beats white man to death. Torches bus. Am I missing something?"

When Stivers and Falsone visit the home of the dead woman, it prompts a didactic conversation about their mutual preconceptions of the other. For Stivers, Italian is Italian. For Falsone, black is black. According to Stivers, West Indians feel superior to anyone from "the Carolina backwoods," suggesting poor whites. Northern Italians look down on Sicilians, Falsone points out. Similarly, in an inversion of white anxieties about black encroachment (Nix and Weiner 2011, pp.196-197), an African-American woman complains that West Indians with their "island music" (reggae) "move in and change the neighbourhood."

The racial motives in the driver's killing become entwined with the fact that he was, personally, deeply disliked. His job as a bus driver meant that he worked in a majority black area, in a position of non-coercive authority that historically had been the preserve of whites (Shopes 2011, p.27).<sup>32</sup> An argument between Gharty and Giardello's federal agent son, Mike, is a stand-off between Gharty's perception that blacks just like to riot, and Giardello's insistence on a structural cause. Giardello is proved right, but the immediate cause of the riot is so minor, echoing the cause of the killing in "Bop Gun", as to explain nothing.<sup>33</sup> Marx and Engels' conception of the "muck of ages" hangs heavily over his elaborate coda:

“It's all right there waiting. Just below the surface. I mean a radio, an accident, those are just excuses. Those people didn't like McCusker, because he was McCusker. He gave them a hard way to go and he was angry at that. That's what started this. But those passengers also didn't like that he was white. That's what finished things... Sometimes I get the feeling this city has grown subtle on me. Not better, just subtle.”

In “Self Defense” (1999, 7.18), written by Yaphet Kotto (Lieutenant Al Giardello), from a story by Eric Overmyer and David Simon, the focus returns to more powerful class interests.<sup>34</sup> More particularly it moves to those class interests served by the judiciary. When, in the opening scene, Falsone arrives at the home of a wealthy, dead, white man, he tells Stivers that rich people getting killed appeals to his sense of “cosmic justice”:

“Why does it always got to be some west side mope shooting an east side mope over a ten dollar drug debt? ...a rich guy gets whacked it kind of makes the world a little less lopsided.”

The killer is the victim's ex-wife, a State's Attorney, who receives unquestioning support from the police chain of command, the judiciary, and the political establishment. The only dissenting voice is a black judge, who remands her in custody, and inadvertently exposes the double standard in play:

“Funny, usually a judge, especially a black judge takes heat for being too lenient... Me? I'm the darling of the conservatives. A political establishment poster boy because I believe in the law. And as long as I'm dropping the hammer on corner boys and hillbilly drug dealers I'm everybody's favourite minority judge. But in a case like Eleanor Burke? Now I'm in the jackpot for standing firm!”

The judge's incredulity appears to speak back across the seasons to Pembleton's strained loyalties in “Black and Blue” (2.02) and “Cradle to Grave (3.11), both of which were adapted from incidents in Simon's book. Yet, in this instance the conflict between community loyalty, adherence to the law, and loyalty to a workplace collective is expressed as something qualitatively different. This is loyalty to an entire institutional structure that spans the coercive, judicial and executive arms of the state. Its representatives also seem to admit openly, throughout the episode, that Eleanor Burke is to be treated differently because she is wealthy, politically connected, and one of their own. The fact that she is white seems to be incidental.

Other problematising cop shows like *Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blue* and *The Shield* suggested, from varied ideological perspectives, that justice was blind to neither

class nor colour. *Homicide* was unique, at least until the advent of *The Wire*, in adding to this an attempted systemic critique as to why this should be the case by portraying the intersections of poverty and racism. *Homicide*, as Christopher Campbell (2000, p.24) argues, was not a show where generally “race is not much of a factor,” or where racism consists of isolated slights from racist individuals. It is always there; just below the surface, as Mike Giardello observes in “Shades of Grey”. Less attention has been paid to the show’s treatment of class, which by virtue of its being set in a majority black city guarantees that it intersects with race. Furthermore, as a cop show, *Homicide* also tends to engage, with the poor in particular, as either the victims or perpetrators of crime. Again, this is a function of a show about homicide detectives where the death toll tends to fall disproportionately on poor, black, males. “Blood Ties”, “Shades of Grey”, “Self-Defense” are examples, most relevant to a study of David Simon, that explore both race and class not as discreet entities but as part of wider systemic inequality. What characterises these episode, and the series as a whole, is a resistance to glib resolutions. More characteristic is a tendency to explore the inequality and corruption engendered by racism and poverty, followed by acceptance of their seeming intractability. This acceptance, whether defined as realism or pessimism, emerges strongly in Simon’s later work.

#### CONCLUSION: FROM THE STREET TO THE CORNER

*Homicide: life on the street* ran for seven seasons, of varying lengths, from 1993 and 1999 virtually bookmarking the presidency of Bill Clinton.<sup>35</sup> The overarching narrative of the series, characterised by a critical engagement with police and the criminal justice system, can reasonably be described as socially liberal. The optimism engendered by Clinton’s election, after three successive Republican terms, proved ill-placed as his administration did nothing to roll back the economic policies of the previous decade. David Simon identifies himself, if not always enthusiastically, as a Democrat (Simon, D. 2012h). He was critical of the Clinton era welfare-reforms which exacerbated an already unstable situation in Baltimore by removing large numbers of people from the welfare rolls (Lanahan 2008). Peter Billingham, writing in the context of a sixth season episode, “Something Sacred” (6.12, 1998) refers to its enactment of a dialectical debate between “liberal, human-rights centred values” and “the reactionary pragmatism of the Homicide” unit (2000, p.177). This is a good description of the series



as a whole because, as vehicles for the expression of liberal or left-liberal social critique, cop shows inevitably run into a contradiction. Those charged, within the narrative, with delivering justice are also central and necessary components in an exploitative social order that denies justice as a matter of course. While *Homicide* undoubtedly occupies “one of the higher rungs of episodic television” (Mills 2007b), it too discovered tensions in its attempts to deal with societal injustices.

Attempts to incorporate what Richard Price, in his introduction to *Homicide*, described as “big ticket social issues” are prominent in the episode mentioned above (Simon 2006a, p.xv). “Something Sacred” is the two part story of Guatemalan refugees suspected of murdering a priest. More interesting in the context of David Simon’s development as a television dramatist is the subplot in the second episode (H6.13, 1998), which he wrote. In its treatment of a corner boy whose aspirations and perception have been stunted by structural poverty it refers back to the story of Vaughan Perkins in “Bop Gun.” Additionally, it anticipates HBO’s adaptation of *The Corner*, and further ahead, *The Wire*.

It is also significant in that it attempts to provide a resolution that goes beyond the “nothing changes” pessimism at the end of “Blood Ties” or “Shades of Grey.” Whether this was a response to pressure from NBC for more positive endings, an attempt to mitigate the bleakness of the main plot resolution, or a genuine attempt to conceive a solution, is unclear. The murder investigation turns toward a corner boy known as Rock-Rock. He is particularly hardened and unintimidated by the detectives, and unafraid of jail. In this, he expresses a worldview derived from some of the boys followed by Simon and Burns in *The Corner*. His outlook concedes no sense of commonality or point of convergence with those of Ballard, Gharty and Pembleton:

“Be for real. I'm down McHenry and Gilmore. I'm hustling. I'm getting it done. Come the end of the day I ain't got no cash money in my pocket. No one, not you, not no priest, not no God's gonna step up for me and mine. Just once, I'd like to see his heavenly ass down on the west side, taking his chances with the rest of us niggers. Tell God to watch out for his own crew.”

This is not atheism, so much as an aggressive refusal to recognise an absentee entity, so far removed from Rock-Rock’s experience, as to be just another suit, another cop, another sell-out. Ballard and Pembleton’s initial attempts to scare Rock-Rock out of his alienation from the world involve a histrionic trip to the Medical Examiner's office, to

effectively scare him straight. They take him to the Chesapeake Bay shore, where Ballard gives her prognosis of the teenager's prospects:

“You're seventeen years old, and you sell drugs in west Baltimore. You might be dead, or locked up, six months from now.”

Pembleton asks him:

“While you were alive, while you were living, and breathing, and taking up space, who were you?”

The question has echoes of Vaughan Perkins repeating “I forgot who I was”, in “Bop Gun”, but these rather glib attempts at a pep talk have less of an impact than Chesapeake Bay itself. It is evidently the biggest expanse of water Rock-Rock has ever seen, as he mistakes it for the ocean [Fig. 16]. In one sense this attempt to prompt him into informing on his friends by teaching him the value of life is successful, because he give them up. In a dramatic sense, this attempt to bridge the gulf between the myopic perspective of the corner and the seeming possibilities of the societal mainstream is a failure. Ballard and Pembleton are pitching platitudes against their own recognition that everything Rock-Rock has experienced in his life makes them out to be liars. It takes more than words of encouragement and a Chesapeake Bay conversion to deal with the underlying gulf of opportunity and comprehension that stops from moving out and up. It seems like the type of feel-good liberal resolution characteristic of those shows *Homicide* was trying really hard not to be. A far more effective subtext in the episode is the ironic play on the United States as the land of opportunity. The Guatemalans, right up to the point where they are deported, believe in the American dream. Rock-Rock, born in the same country, but denied opportunity, sees no future.

Nevertheless, the Rock-Rock plotline is significant, and prescient, for numerous reasons. Almost ten years later, in the final season of *The Wire*, Dukie Weams expresses the same seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the drug corner and mainstream society with the question, “How do you get from here to the rest of the world?” (W5.05, “React Quotes,” 2008). He receives no useful answer. After a decade’s dramatic writing about structural poverty in Baltimore, the narrative limit is still reached by recognising the seemingly intractable gap between the corner and the mainstream. David Simon’s representation of the intergenerational permanence of poverty and lack of opportunity is impressive. However, it is also worth noting that the solutions to this recognition of systemic dysfunction, a consequence of giving free rein to capitalism,

lack any comparable systemic dimension. In fact, it seems that they are pointedly intended not to possess one. In *The Wire*, Dukie's friend Namond is rescued from the corner by the rather Dickensian device of rescue by a kindly former police officer ("Final Grades" W4.13, 2006). In Rock-Rock's case he is brought to the shore, to show him how big the world is. Pembleton additionally tells him that "what we do... is everything." These are solutions for individuals, and it is clear that for those left behind nothing will change. They also link forward into a theme of personal responsibility that runs through *The Wire's* fourth season, particularly in the context of what David Simon describes as the "abysmal parenting" (Mills 2007a). In the context of that season he also argues that no matter how many structural and systemic obstacles confront you "that does not absolve you ... from exercising your own demand for dignity and existential purpose" (ibid.).<sup>36</sup> Of course, this relationship between the structural and the personal first emerges much earlier on, in the communal voice of the homicide detective. As recounted in the first chapter, the home of drug addicts searched during the Latonya Wallace murder investigation is in such a bad state that the detectives reach the limits of tolerance. It reveals the insistence on "a standard", that "even in the worst American slum, there are recognizable depths beyond which no one should ever have to fall" (Simon 2006a, p.130). This represents a recognisable and recurring tendency in Simon's writing. That is, the recognition of seemingly insoluble societal dysfunction, to which the only plausible response is the assertion of individual self-worth and personal responsibility.



Fig. 16: Pembleton and "Rock-Rock" at the 'ocean'.

While the sample of episodes I have focussed on in this chapter is necessarily selective and limited, they are largely representative of the whole. *Homicide* used David

Simon's account of the working life of homicide detectives in 1988, as the basis for a drama that explored the nature of the United States in the 1990s. The book and its television adaptation also foreground an understanding that inequality and racism are endemic to the social order, rather than a consequence of personal failing or communal animosity. In terms that would later be applied to *The Wire*, Todd Hoffman describes *Homicide* as "quintessentially American and strikingly universal" (1998, p.180). Tom Fontana, speaking in 2004, suggested that the more specifically they made it "about Baltimore, the more universal it became about any American city" (Fontana et al., 2004). While there are elements of truth buried in the cliché of universality, what *Homicide* clearly lacked was a clear analysis of the economic system that determines the social order.

David Simon's contribution to *Homicide* is a substantial one. He admits to pride at much of the work he did, describing the show as "one of the higher rungs of episodic television" (Mills 2007b), while also making the point that, as a network show, it could never reach the vision of the book (Rose, C. 1999). This may be true, but the gap between publication of the book in 1991, and the end of the television series in 1999 is a significant one. His writing matures from what sometimes appeared the over-enthusiasm of the communal voice into the more nuanced and critical perspective of his own dramatic voice. Bad policing, defined by brutality, corruption, or laziness comes to define the police department just as much as good policing ("Hollie and the Blowfish", "Justice, Part Two", "Scene of the Crime"). What Simon would later describe as "social determinism" (Mills 2007a) is also already apparent, in the limits placed on people's actions and opportunities by the social order itself ("Bop Gun" "Shades of Grey", "Something Sacred"). Connected to this insight is the emergent critique of the drug war, which shows it to be inextricably linked with structural poverty, an assault on those trapped in the underclass, and also clearly unwinnable ("Scene of the Crime", "Bad Medicine" "Deception"). (A critique of the drug war's wider representation is also present in the characterisation of Luther Mahoney, as the classic master criminal. The limits of this portrayal indicate the difficulty of dramatising the institutional and organisational nature of the drug trade in the context of episodic network tv drama.) Most importantly, the recognition of economic power, and of race and class inequality as mutually reproduced, is marbled through the entire narrative structure of the drama ("Scene of the Crime", "Blood Ties," "Shades of Grey", "Self Defense").

Of course *Homicide* never aimed for *The Wire's* all encompassing societal critique or scope, and given its specific focus on the police it would have been incapable of it. It is one part of a bigger picture, which was expanded during Simon's second sojourn on the streets of Baltimore, in the early 1990s, as the Republicans yielded the White House to the Democrats. In *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (1997), the self-defeating, socially destructive nature of both drug war and drug trade become apparent. Its portrait of the lives, deaths and struggles of those at the receiving end of the policing effort is qualitatively different from *Homicide's* representation of working men. Intertwined with accounts of lives discarded at the margins of society is an argument about how and why the drug corner came into existence. It would be glib to describe it as the missing part of the picture, but as even its limited influence on *Homicide* makes clear, it is nonetheless an important part.

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<sup>1</sup> David Simon, quoted at a panel discussion held to publicise the release of *Homicide's* fifth season on DVD (Fontana et al 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Tom Fontana offered Simon the chance to write the third season episode, "From Cradle to Grave", that dealt with Pembleton's investigation of the state senator's bogus abduction (Kalat 1998, p.156). He passed it on to David Mills to write solo, as Mills was trying to establish himself as a writer in Hollywood (Jordan c.2002).

<sup>3</sup> The episode was filmed while David Simon and Ed Burns were researching *The Corner*. In article for *The New Republic* in 1997, David Simon wrote about recruiting some of the youngsters he was following in West Baltimore as extras for a scene where the police raid a drug corner. He recounts the difficulties caused by the fact that even *Homicide*, praised for its realism, needed the corner boys to run when the police came, rather than simply toss their drugs in the gutter or stay where they were (Simon 2012g).

<sup>4</sup> In this case I am indebted to Linda Speidel of Roehampton University for alerting me to its existence.

<sup>5</sup> This anticipates a similar scene in *The Wire's* first season where D'Angelo Barksdale writes to the children of a murder victim trying to explain and apologize (W1.02, "The Detail," 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Camden Yards is also used as a location in "Blood Ties, Part Two" (1997) when a New York Yankees fan is murdered at a baseball game. It is another 'red ball' case with the potential to harm tourist revenue. When Munch arrives at the ground he tells Kellerman that: "Right now, the governor's screaming at the mayor, who's berating the commissioner, who's abusing Barnfather, who's torturing Gaffney, who's kicking it all over Gee's shoes." This time, it turns out that the Yankees fan has been killed by a fellow New Yorker. It is difficult to see this as anything other than Simon thumbing his nose at those worried about the city's image. The baseball ground is the location for a violent murder, but it is a murder that can in no way reflect badly on the city as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> I am assuming that this is a report of the shooting, although the detectives are usually informed by a phone call. A shot of one of the detectives picking up a phone would have been just as effective.

<sup>8</sup> During its first broadcast on NBC, the episode would have broken for commercials immediately after the opening credit, thus heightening the impression that something had happened between the end of the episode teaser and Howard and Felton's arrival at the crime scene.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson's *When Work Disappears* explores the decline of work in black neighbourhoods in Chicago. Lanahan's article for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, cites arrest, poverty and unemployment figures for Baltimore.

<sup>10</sup> As a further example of how *Homicide* tended to deviate from the traditional detective-centred drama, Jonathan Nichols-Pethick draws attention to how the episode focuses less attention on the case than on the relationship between the two mothers (2012, p.91).

<sup>11</sup> In characteristically colourful language he also described how the paper had been "taken over by a couple of shitheads from Philly [Bill Marimow and John Carroll], real self-aggrandizing hacks who were doing a lot of harm to the place and chasing a lot of the talent out" (Jordan, c.2002).

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<sup>12</sup> It is also an example of the multi-agency investigations that Detectives Harry Edgerton and Ed Burns worked with (Simon 2006a, pp.55-56).

<sup>13</sup> Hollie is played by Giancarlo Esposito, who would go on to play Al Giardello's son, Mike, in the final season of *Homicide*.

<sup>14</sup> He later expressed a debt to Fontana, for advising him that becoming a producer was the only way to protect his writing (Simon and Yoshimura 2004). His enthusiasm for television as a collaborative medium is also apparent in a seeming lack of preciousness he exhibits towards his own work, referring to how, "you're going to have to justify your writing":

"You've got to keep an open mind 'cause if you're wedded to the absolute image that came out of your typewriter, or your computer, you may miss something that somebody else brings to it. It is collaborative." (Simon 1998b)

This perception of writing as a collaborative process, in the context of *Homicide* where he was a staff writer, presents an interesting contrast with *The Wire*, where he possessed final control over the direction of the narrative. George Pelecanos described how, while conversations in between the writers were robust, the final decision always lay with Simon. They use the expression "you give it up" to describe the process of allowing parts of your script to be cut (Talbot 2007).

<sup>15</sup> For season three, the show's original commission was for thirteen episodes and it was moved to Fridays at 10pm, airing just after Fox's zeitgeist defining *The X-Files* (Kalat 1998, p.140).

<sup>16</sup> The show's longevity, despite patchy ratings performance seems attributable to the fact that NBC, third placed network when *Homicide* began in 1993, had regained first place within three years. This was largely due to the success of shows like *Friends* (1994-2004), *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), *Frasier* (1993-2004) and *ER* (1994-2009). Impressive though this commitment seems, there was nevertheless a move toward more self-contained story lines, more telegenic actors, and more focus on the detectives' personal lives.

<sup>17</sup> The episode recycles the conclusion from the trial of Butchie Frazier, mentioned briefly in the first chapter. In that case, he was convicted because the jury wanted to go home (Simon 2006a, p.305).

<sup>18</sup> The teleplay is based on a story by Tom Fontana, Henry Bromell and Barry Levinson.

<sup>19</sup> Whether intentional, or as a result of overdubbing, the voice seems to come not simply from off-screen, but from outside of the narrative completely.

<sup>20</sup> In *Homicide: life on the street* Kellerman's character becomes a means to explore latent racism. Kellerman is identified early on as a member of the Irish-American working class. His character trajectory has him moving towards dismissal from the police force, as a result of his "bad shooting" of an African-American drug dealer. His deterioration is marked by an increasing level of semi-racist contempt mixed with a visceral hatred of the underclass. In "Full Court Press" (6.18, 1998) he is photographed while crouching beside a murder victim, with his thumbs up (Fig). The photograph is strangely prescient in light of what would emerge from Abu Ghraib prison almost a decade later. He refers to himself as a garbage man who every day has to "drive to some corner and pick up a fresh piece of garbage". Later in the same episode he dismisses the fears of project residents in talking to the police: "This is their neighbourhood. They don't want to do anything to make it better? Why should I care?"

<sup>21</sup> Again, elements that would later become familiar in *The Wire*, are already present here. The corner boys call out the name of the product: "Red tops. Red tops make you sparkle."

<sup>22</sup> The teleplay was by Simon, from a story idea by Tom Fontana and Julie Martin.

<sup>23</sup> In another anticipation of *The Wire*, which used the Tom Waits song "Way Down in the Hole" for its opening credits, this montage is accompanied "'Til the Money Runs Out," from Waits's 1978 album *Heartattack and Vine*. The final montage features "Cold, Cold, Ground" from the 1987 album *Frank's Wild Years*, which also features "Way Down in the Hole."

<sup>24</sup> David Simon a professional criminal would say nothing and simply call for his lawyer (Fontana et al. 2004). Tom Fontana, not particularly kindly, referred to him as "non-fiction boy" because of his tendency to point out things that simply would not happen in a real criminal investigation (Simon 2006a, p.630). When Mahoney trips himself up, Lewis walks away with a traditional tv detective victory, having outwitted his opponent. At this point "non-fiction boy" steps in. The intellectually superior detective tripping up the suspect in a lie may be sufficient to gain an indictment in most cop dramas, but not in this one. Assistant State's Attorney Danvers refuses to take the case forward through lack of evidence. He dismisses Mahoney's self-implication as hearsay knowledge he could have picked up from numerous sources.

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<sup>25</sup> Within the Baltimore drug trade, Williams was considered unstable, and this is initially how Simon draws the connection between the dealer and Richard III, before concluding that, as a real villain Williams is not as self-aware:

On the night before the battle in the Bosworth Swamp, the ghosts of Richard's victims visit his tent, urging his despair and death: "Is there a murderer here?" asks the villain king, awaking. "No. Yes, I am. Then fly. What, from myself... Alack, I love myself." Perhaps there were ghosts who visited Rudy Williams before last week's sentencing, but if they did, it's fair to suggest their curses had little effect. Rudy Williams, too, loves himself, but like most real-life villains, he lacks the strange self-awareness of Shakespeare's dark character. (Simon 1992a)

There is a tension between the need to compare Williams with something beyond the norms of the drug trade, and the knowledge that such comparisons are insufficient.

<sup>26</sup> By the end of "Control" (H5.09, 1996), and "Have a Conscience" (H5.13, 1997), Simon felt that they had written themselves into a corner, with a situation akin to "a bad western," as the network insisted that Luther be killed (Simon and Yoshimura 2004). Seemingly to frustrate the network and deny viewers the satisfaction of a straightforward killing, the writers decided to make it a "bad shooting" (ibid.). Therefore, in "Deception" (5.19, 1997) Mahoney is shot by Kellerman when the former's gun is lowered; a "bad shooting."

<sup>27</sup> Actors Callie Thorne (Ballard) and the fourth new addition, Jon Seda (Detective Paul Falsone) brought a more conventionally telegenic presence to the screen.

<sup>28</sup> This places the interview in 1988, the same year that his internship with the homicide unit gave him unrestricted access to old case files (Simon 2006, p.625). Finding Zantzinger a reluctant interviewee, Simon attempted to curry favour by, in his own words, "trashing Dylan":

"That son of a bitch libelled you. You could've sued his ass for what he did."  
Zantzinger smiled. "We were going to sue him big time. Scared that boy good!" he said. "That song was a lie. Just a damned lie." (Simon 2009a)

<sup>29</sup> In the courtroom of honour, the judge pounded his gavel / To show that all's equal and that the courts are on the level / And that the strings in the books ain't pulled and persuaded / And that even the nobles get properly handled.

<sup>30</sup> English has written extensively about Irish-American gangsters in books including *Paddy Whacked* (2005) and *The Westies* (1990).

<sup>31</sup> In the sub-plot, Lewis and Sheppard are investigating the death of a drug dealer at the hands of a white police officer called Hellriegel. The same officer had been tangentially involved in the police shooting in the second season episode, "Black and Blue" (H2.02). During the investigation Sheppard is beaten and loses her gun, a double humiliation for a black, female officer. Lewis visits a club in the area, and demands the gun's return. He refers to Shepherd as a sister, who was beaten while investigating the murder of a black man, possibly by a police officer. The gun comes back and Hellriegel is charged with the dealer's killing.

<sup>32</sup> In this citation, Jewell Chambers describes the situation in Baltimore in the 1960s: "I am in no ways apologizing. You had nasty bus drivers. You did not see black people driving buses. Milk was delivered by either Cloverland Dairy or Greenspring Dairy; there were no black milkmen. Bread was delivered by whites. Even the Good Humor man was white."

<sup>33</sup> Manetta Manley was from Jamaica, where traffic drives on the left, and simply looked in the wrong direction before crossing the road.

<sup>34</sup> Overmeyer would later co-create *Treme* with David Simon.

<sup>35</sup> David Simon's contributions to this final season are relatively minor, as his production responsibilities increased following the departure of Tom Fontana to HBO and his prison drama, *Oz*. Thomas Mascaro suggests that by this point *Homicide* was closer to *NYPD Blue* than to its original incarnation (2005, p.65). Neither of the two episodes Simon wrote for the season are particularly noteworthy. The first, "The Twenty Percent Solution" (H7.04, 1998), foregrounds the more humorous elements in his writing, and is a film noir-spy story spoof, most noteworthy for its subplot of a burglar with a code. When an old woman collapsed of fright after finding him in her house, he made her comfortable and called an ambulance before leaving:

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“I'm a wrongdoing guy for this type of stuff [burglary]. But even I draw the line for myself. For instance, I'll make a silverware set disappear in a heartbeat, but people is people. You know what I'm saying? People is all that matter in this world.”

His final script of the series is the second part of a two part crossover episode with *Law and Order*, called “Sideshow” (H7.15, 1999), a story of conspiratorial wrongdoing at the White House. It was contemporaneous with the attempted impeachment of Bill Clinton, and aired seven days after his acquittal (Vest 2011, p.107). Despite its qualities, David Simon includes *Homicide* with *NYPD Blue* and *Police Story*, as a show “where the arrest matters” and suggests he would put a gun to his head if he had to write another one (O'Rourke 2006).

<sup>36</sup> The quote relates specifically to parents and their children: “All of these societal hypocrisies may be true, and all of their reduced expectations and reduced need for these kids from West Baltimore in terms of the greater economy, the greater society, may be true. And we may be marginalizing them from birth. That does not absolve you, in the sense of being parents with personal responsibility, personal choice, from exercising your own demand for dignity and existential purpose and relevance for you and your kids. We were saying both simultaneously” (Mills, 2007a).



## CHAPTER FOUR

### **WASTELAND OF THE FREE: IMAGES OF LABOUR IN THE ALTERNATIVE ECONOMY.**

“If these kids are getting up in the morning and their main concern is nicking a hair dryer from Boots to get some heroin, it stops them from saying ‘Why have I got no job?’ and ‘Why have I got no education?’ I put that together. It was pretty sinister.”

- Former Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr on heroin use in Manchester, England during the 1980s. (Fletcher 2012, p.182)

While *Homicide* was perceptive, particularly in its later years, about the nature of the drug war, the same could not be said for its portrayal of drug addicts. Insofar as they appeared at all they were lacking agency, usually witnesses to a crime and desperate for a fix: a fact used by the detectives in their own quest for information. By contrast *The Corner*, and later *The Wire* “strive to give dignity and a voice to even the most abject” (Shapiro 2012, ch. 10, para, 11), by refusing “the drug-addict-as-unwitting-victim trope” (Vest 2011, p.129).

Aside from illustrating that endemic drug addiction was not unique to the United States, Marr’s comment nails the self-serving lie in official political abhorrence of drug addiction. Chemical stupefaction and the need to fund the next fix may create, but those so afflicted are unlikely to reflect on their predicament in numbers large enough to threaten the social order. Engaging with the moralising tone of the Nancy Reagan “Just Say No” abstention campaign from the 1980s, David Simon asks what exactly people in West Baltimore are “supposed to say yes to” (Simon and Burns 1997, p.160).<sup>1</sup> There is little need to indulge in conspiracy theories to accept, as the Muslim Ishmael does in “Scene of the Crime” (H4.21, 1996), that at a certain level “this is how they want it to be”.

Aside from portraying addicts as individuals with their own voices and stories, another important addition to Simon’s dramatic palate is how *The Corner* confronts anti-drug rhetoric. It starts not by asking why people take drugs, but by asking why, given their life prospects, they would not take them. While neither valorised, nor seen as sensible, addiction seems in many ways to be an understandable, rational response to the reality laid out in over 600 pages, and six hours of television. Where *Homicide* hints

of, and refers to, a city in decline, *The Corner* lays its skeleton bare; decently paid jobs have dried up, former homes operate as shooting galleries for drug addicts, the public school system pretends to educate, the neighbourhood is an occupied zone in the war on drugs. It is a neighbourhood in which a fundamental, sustaining way of life rooted in structured work, has ceased to exist. As Stuart Hall et al., argued in 1978:

The workaday world of work, and the formal and informal values associated with it, seem in many ways coterminous with the definition of “reality” itself. And this, though endowed with extremely powerful ideological content reflects a material fact: without work, the material basis of our lives would vanish overnight. (Hall et al 1978, p.141)

However, in West Baltimore, another means of material subsistence has emerged in its place. *The Corner* explores the culture of work in an environment where joblessness seems endemic, but where drug addiction is nonetheless described as “the hardest job in America” (“Everyman’s Blues” C.06, 2000). It also engages, in exceptionally forceful terms, with the nature of the war on drugs as a war on the underclass, invoking images of the Holocaust to do so. These themes occupy central positions in both of *The Corner*’s incarnations. Their treatment constitutes a significant expansion of David Simon’s worldview, particularly in terms of how the crisis in Baltimore is understood in systemic terms. The roots of the drug trade in intergenerational unemployment, urban segregation, racism and the battering of the working class is implicit throughout.

#### THE ORIGINS: TAKING SIDES WITH THE VOICES “TOO RARELY HEARD”<sup>2</sup>

*The Corner: a year in the life of an inner-city neighbourhood* (1997) explores the lives of West Baltimore addicts and minor dealers sympathetically, if unsentimentally, with particular emphasis on the “extended [and] drug involved” McCullough family (Hornby 2007). Two previous books, which were also significant attempts to engage with marginalised lives on their own terms, are cited as precedents. The first is *Tally’s Corner* (1967) by Elliott Liebow, a study of the street culture of African-American men in 1960s Washington D.C., before the drug culture represented in *The Corner* fully took hold. Liebow’s approach also provided ground rules for how David Simon Simon and Ed Burns interacted with those they met during their own

research; in terms of assistance given, financial or otherwise.<sup>3</sup> The second book cited as an influence is James Agee and Walker Evans' "seminal American ethnography" (p.542), *Let us now praise famous men* (1941), an account of the lives of poor sharecroppers during the 1930s depression. Simon later described it as the book that demanded he grew up, a book of "caution and nuance", and Agee as someone who "attempts to represent the love, fear, and sadness of real lives" (Simon 2012a). Nevertheless, as Jason P. Vest points out, *The Corner* is also notable for its novelistic qualities, and its subjects are effectively characters whose inner thoughts are represented as interior monologues. While Vest argues that this raises questions about its authenticity (p.116), acknowledgement of the book's artifice does not detract from its argument. Rather like *Homicide*, *The Corner* is probably best classified as a popular ethnography. It combines the specifically defined place and period of ethnography; Fayette Street, Baltimore, 1993, with the ambitious narrative thrust of a sprawling realist novel. It has numerous characters, but a central core family, capable of reflecting on their situation, around whom the narrative revolves. It also has the structure of a four volume novel, divided by season, and with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end.

Some of the detectives who had cooperated on *Homicide* saw *The Corner's* critique of the drug war as legitimate but others perceived it as a betrayal (Simon 2006a, p.632), and felt Simon had "switched sides" (Rose, C. 1999).<sup>4</sup> In *Homicide*, detectives like Terry McLarney saw their role as that of soldiers on the front line,<sup>5</sup> and such perceptions are amplified by framing a law enforcement policy as a war in the first instance. By implication it turns entire areas into war zones. Simon argues in the context of the drug war that, "once you have a war you have an enemy. Once you have an enemy, you can do what you want" (Rothkerch 2002). His actions were the equivalent of hanging out with Vietnamese peasants and the Vietcong in their midst. In *The Corner*, an explicit analogy is drawn between the strategies used in the war on drugs and the war in Vietnam, with the assertion that "this war, like the last one, will not be won" (p.475).<sup>6</sup>

One former homicide detective, who did not feel that Simon had defected, was Ed Burns, who is also a veteran of the war in Vietnam. David Simon (2005) would later quip that Burns "fought two losing wars. He fought Vietnam and he fought the drug war as a Baltimore police officer for twenty years." Burns accompanied the journalist, not as a guide but as a collaborator, and ultimately as co-author. He had been a homicide detective during the 1980s, but was absent from *Homicide: a year on the killing streets*

through secondment to an FBI drug investigation (Simon 2006a, p.56). In 1992, he was persuaded by the journalist to defer his post-retirement teaching career, and spend a year on a drug corner (Simon 2004), learning “its day-to-day rhythms and dramas” (Williams 2011, p.211). Burns’ contribution to the book is significant, most markedly through his analysis of the futility of the drug war, and his contribution of the “paper bag” analogy (Simon, 2006c). This compared the inefficacy of drug prohibition with the open container laws prohibiting consumption of alcohol on the street. Generations of Americans circumvented this prohibition simply by placing the beer bottle in a brown paper bag. The observation that “the paper bag does not exist for drugs” (Simon and Burns 1997, p.158) forms the starting point for a drug legalisation storyline in *The Wire*’s third season.

Life on the drug corner requires more explanation than life in a Homicide unit. What motivates a drug addict to steal aluminium siding needs may seem self-explanatory, but it still requires more context than why a detective investigates a murder. The focus in *Homicide* is primarily on homicide detection as labour, and the detectives’ lives as structured by their jobs. Inevitably, the nature of their working environment, if not their work, has a certain air of familiarity not only for Simon, but his readership. It also fits, however imperfectly, into an existing genre of true crime stories. By contrast, *The Corner* introduces a world with no apparent comparative claims on the culture of work. The analytic digressions in *Homicide* tend to explore the nature and characteristics of the detective’s job, alongside the changing historical context for policing in Baltimore. *The Corner* explains a subculture whose structures are largely determined by unemployment, drug dependency and consequent petty crime, to an assumed readership with no real frame of reference. As a consequence, the depth, detail and range of its analytical segments surpass those in the earlier book.

The corner had always been a place for unemployed and underemployed men to gather, and their numbers increased in the 1960s, as Baltimore bucked the national trend and saw employment levels fall (Durr 1998 cited in Agar and Reisinger 2002, p.217). This decline was most pronounced in the manufacturing sector, where blacks were “disproportionately represented”, despite the “heavy demand for defence-related goods due to the escalation of the Vietnam war” (Levy 2011, pp.13-14).<sup>7</sup> As the diminution of American manufacturing continued through the 1970s and 1980s, unemployment became intergenerational. From a high of eighty per cent in 1945, black male participation in the labour force had, by 1986, fallen to “barely sixty per cent” (Davis

1986, p.207).<sup>8</sup> The lack of self-esteem associated with unemployment meant that many men simply left, leaving women to raise children alone (Agar and Reisinger 2002, p.217).

By 1993, the “Fayette Street strip” was one of approximately 100 open-air drug markets (p.537) operating in Baltimore, a city with a population of less than 700,000 (p.57).<sup>9</sup> Fayette Street is a predominantly black neighbourhood in America’s “most northern southern city” (p.89), the first city in the United States to introduce housing segregation, in 1910 (Pietila 2010, p.x). Simon and Burns chose it, almost at random, when they began research for the book in September 1992. Burns was remembered by many from his days as a homicide detective, and they were initially greeted with suspicion, as “snitches or plainclothesmen or worse” (p.537). Part of the effort to win hearts and minds involved handing out dozens of copies of *Homicide: a year on the killing streets*, to prove that they “really were writers trying to put together a book” (p.538).

This was the previous book’s principal contribution to the new project. For *Homicide*, Simon was granted unprecedented access to the working lives of Baltimore’s homicide detectives. *The Corner* required that he and Burns be granted “extraordinary access” to the often blighted existences of their subjects, principally the McCullough family. They write of the contradictory mix of “professional pride and personal shame” this engendered (p.542). This represented a further step in Simon’s evolution as a writer, who wrote for those living the event (Hornby 2007). “In dispassion, there are statistics”, the authors argue in the 2009 edition, but “the missing element is, of course, the ordinary and intimate humanity of those struggling” (Simon and Burns 2009a, p.778). David Mills later praised Simon’s achievement in having “leapt a chasm few white people cross” to write about “black addicts not through a microscope but by sitting next to them” (Scott 2000).

One potential pitfall in this approach is that writers risk becoming actors instead of observers, especially in an environment where people are struggling on a daily basis. The authors, citing Liebow in *Tally’s Corner*, concede that a certain amount of intervention was unavoidable. Liebow argued that he “usually tried to limit money or other favours to what I thought each would have gotten from another friend had he the same resources as I” (Liebow 2003, p.164-165). On a Baltimore drug corner in 1993, human need often presented itself with a real and visceral urgency:

A guy spends three hours with you and you're sitting on a bench in Union Square and he's a drug addict and he hasn't been in the game, you've taken him out of his game and now he starts to get sick, physically sick. If he wasn't talking to a reporter for three hours, he'd have \$10. But now he looks at you and you can see the guy's getting nauseous. I gave him \$10. I didn't think twice. (Simon 1998a)

Despite these concessions, both authors are invisible within the main narrative, and *The Corner* focuses on the stories of those it represents. However, unlike the that of the communal detective in *Homicide*, their perspective remains that of one visiting the corner, rather than the communal addict or resident. At one point, they are the objects of a robbery, but are referred to simply as “white boys” and Gary McCullough’s “white companions” (p.541). Simply put, it is more interesting for people to “feel what Gary McCullough or DeAndre McCullough feels” than what David Simon feels (Simon 1998a). He claims that both his journalism and television fiction are informed by the conviction that “if you write something ... so credible that the insider will stay with you then the outsider will follow as well” (Hornby 2007). *The Corner*, like *Homicide* before it, is a travelogue that takes readers and viewers to places they otherwise could (or would) not go.

*Homicide* referenced Baltimore’s industrial decline and the city’s worsening drug problem, but displayed “little interest in the social clues” underlying the spiralling murder rate (Wilson 1997, p.732). By contrast, the drug corners of the “Fayette Street strip” (p.537), are directly linked to the “unresolved disaster of the American rust-belt, in the slow, seismic shift that is shutting down the assembly lines, devaluing physical labour, and undercutting the union pay scale” (p.59). According to Simon, liberals were appalled by its critique of welfare, and conservatives by its “ennobling [of] terrible people” (Rose, C. 1999). Welfare is described as a bribe for its recipients to “shut up [and] stay put until next month when there will be more of the same” (p.374). It is a bribe to ensure urban peace for ten or twelve days of the month, until the money runs out, and “the incredible thing is that such a small amount can purchase so much silence and apathy” (ibid.). Similar iconoclastic scorn is poured onto conventional debates around teenage pregnancy. The same combination of “social determinism” and assertion for purpose (Mills 2007a), which Simon later argued informs the worldview of *The Wire* is apparent:

It isn't about the welfare check. It never was. It isn't about sexual permissiveness, or personal morality, or failure in parenting, or lack of family planning. All of these are inherent in the disaster, but the purposefulness with which babies make babies in places like West Baltimore goes far beyond accident and chance, circumstance and misunderstanding... On Fayette Street, the babies are born simply because they can be born, because life in this place cannot and will not be lived in the future tense. (p.230)

*The Corner* is about the terminus of American history, where “the pretence of salvaging human beings has been gradually reduced to a string of elemental transactions” (ibid.). It is where unwanted labour, young and old, goes to die, quickly or slowly.

In its printed incarnation *The Corner* explores the social forces that drew drug corners into existence, and attempts to capture the lives, and lived experience of its inhabitants. The HBO miniseries concentrates more explicitly on the latter, rooting itself in the everyday struggles of individual characters. Yet each episode is far more closely associated with the book than was the case with *Homicide* and in substance and tone is a more faithful adaptation.

Precedents for a miniseries similar to *The Corner* (HBO, 2000) in the United States are thin on the ground. African Americans, the working class, and the poor in general, have not usually been considered as worthy subjects for serious drama in their own right.<sup>10</sup> They have all been the subject of many situation comedies, but there is rarely any sense of an overlap in terms of experience and opinions between them.<sup>11</sup> Aside from the prominence of African-Americans in *Homicide* another rare exception is *Roc* (Fox 1991-1994), a socially conscious comedy about a Baltimore garbage collector played by Charles S. Dutton, director of *The Corner*. While some early dramas from 1950s suggested a different path of development, the most relevant precedents are to be found in British television dramas.<sup>12</sup>

Thematically, *The Corner* is as original in its portrayal of drug addicts and the marginally employed, as the depiction of the lives of working class English women in *Up the Junction* (Loach 1965). Although *The Corner*'s linear narrative contrasts with the Ken Loach drama's fragmented and experimental storytelling. It also evokes the sense of inevitability in Jim Allen's *The Spongers* (Joffe 1978), where a single mother and her special needs child are abandoned by the social services meant to protect them. The menacing, yet farcical pub-based violence of the final part of Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC, 1982), presciently suggests long-term unemployment leads to

social dissolution. *The Corner* leaves us in no doubt. As a HBO mini-series, it lacked the focussed impact of the BBC dramas, broadcast to a mass audience, in prime time, on a public service channel.

Nevertheless, it sought to intervene in a similar fashion to the British dramas, in what its creators saw as a matter of public urgency, the war on drugs. A contemporary review by Tom Shales in the Washington Post described it as “an act of enlightenment” (cited in Scott 2000). Its impact may have been confined to a limited HBO audience on initial broadcast in April and May 2000, but it has achieved significant belated attention thanks to the critical success of *The Wire*. A contemporary DVD review cites *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (Edel 1989) and *Requiem for a Dream* (Aronofsky 2000) as points of comparison (cited in Vest 2011, p.124). Both films are pessimistic depictions of urban life bordering on the nihilistic, and the latter also deals with drug addiction and the drug trade. The need to fall back on precedent setting cinematic representations underlines the lack of any real dramatic frame of reference for *The Corner* in American television. On the other hand, in the area of documentary HBO had been exploring the lesser seen areas of US society since the 1980s with “a series of brash and gritty reality based programmes” like the Oscar winning *Down and Out in America* (1986), and the Emmy winning *Dear American: Letters Home from Vietnam* (1987) (Edgerton 2008, p.9).

Despite referring to the adaptations of *Homicide* and *The Corner* as “stepchildren” (Simon, 2006d), David Simon was centrally involved in the latter drama’s onscreen incarnation. The experience he gained as both writer and producer on *Homicide* enabled him to approach HBO with *The Corner* alone (Hornby 2007). He was preceded to the cable channel by former *Homicide* producer Tom Fontana, whose bleak and violent prison drama, *Oz* (HBO, 1997-2003), began in 1997. Fontana contrasted the “meddlesome refinements” of NBC with the “laid-back” attitude of HBO, and relished the freedom afforded by the latter to deal with more “mature ideas” (Kalat 1998, p.263). *Oz*’s success suggested to Simon that HBO might provide a suitable home for *The Corner*, which was inconceivable as a network drama (Simon, 2006d).

For their part, HBO were concerned at potential accusations of exploitation, given both *The Corner*’s subject matter, and its white authors. Despite Simon’s confidence in his depiction (Vest 2011, p.118), they suggested a black co-writer for the adaptation (Simon 2004, p.15). Simon co-opted his “Bop Gun” (H2.04, 1994) co-writer David Mills, who had gone on to pursue a successful television writing career, notably on *NYPD Blue* (Scott 2000). Four of the six episodes of *The Corner* are co-written by



Simon and Mills.<sup>13</sup> In addition, HBO chief executive Chris Albrecht approached actor and director Charles S. Dutton (ibid.), who had grown up in east Baltimore, to direct the series. Dutton was admired and respected locally (Simon, 2006b), and had appeared in the fifth season *Homicide* episode, “Prison Riot” (H5.03, 1996).<sup>14</sup> For HBO, hiring a black co-writer and director was about more than pre-empting charges of exploitation and racism. There were also commercial considerations. Albrecht was looking to produce something credible with HBO’s black subscribers, who made up over twenty percent of its audience, and maybe garner an Emmy nomination (Scott 2000). It is ironic that the type of awards culture that Simon so deplores in relation to the newspaper industry should be partly responsible for the commissioning of his first HBO drama. HBO had always had a relatively large “African-American subscriber base, in large part due to its sports programming and inclusion of black comics in its stand-up specials” (Mittell 2012, p.17). *The Corner* was eventually nominated for four Emmys, and won three.<sup>15</sup> Arguably, HBO were defusing charges of crude exploitation to allow for more credible commercial exploitation of the material.

Dutton’s concerns about the racial composition of the crew far surpassed those of HBO. He demanded that they “bring in more black members from out-of [Baltimore] state”. The result was probably the most representative film crew Baltimore had ever seen.<sup>16</sup> Simon later suggested the producers were delighted that Dutton possessed the gravitas to force the issue in the way he did (Simon 2006b), but his evident respect and admiration for Dutton were not initially reciprocated. Janny Scott (2000) describes Dutton’s general suspicion that Simon was “taking somebody else’s misery and making a dollar off of it”. This distrust partially broke down as filming progressed.<sup>17</sup>

Dutton appears as himself, at the beginning of the series, to speak about what he calls the “contradiction” of the corner (C0.01, “Gary’s Blues,” 2000).<sup>18</sup> He describes how it “pulsates with life, the energy of human beings trying to make it to the next day”, but how it is also a place of death, whether by “the slow death of addiction, or the suddenness of gunshots.” It is the daily struggle to survive that predominates in the series, especially in the trio of main characters; Gary McCullough, his former partner Fran Boyd, and their son, DeAndre. They are, literally and figuratively, at the centre of *The Corner*. Their experiences form the spine of the narrative, as they live in the middle of an open-air drug market on Fayette Street. Superficially, their stories suggest the stereotype of endemic, intergenerational welfare and drug dependency. At the same time their individual stories of addiction and attempted recovery do not evoke the image

of a lazy and feckless underclass. Gary in particular defies cliché; an asthmatic, formerly successful small businessman who started using drugs at the age of thirty. He is also effectively the central character, even though each member of the McCullough receives a similar amount of screen time. Gary personifies the decline of a male, black, working class into addiction, and is also the conduit for the expression of many of the book's arguments about the drug war.

### FLASHBACKS: THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

The series uses flashbacks to accentuate the contrast between a relatively structured past and the dissolute present. This was another point of contention between Dutton and the writers and producers. He objected to the use of flashbacks, asserting that, “three percent work. The other ninety seven percent don’t” (Scott 2000). They also function as echoes of an older story intruding into the present, and possess a dreamlike quality, heightened by vivid colours that contrast with the washed-out quality of the present. Their vividness works to highlight the gulf between then and now, while suggesting the compensatory perfection of fading memory. They are also suggestive of David Simon’s own frequent invocation of New Deal era America, which often seem like evocations of a golden age. One example in the first episode is triggered as Gary looks across the street at a child who turns into a younger version of himself. He stands on the step of the corner shop, in a bright and sunny version of the past, which makes the present seem dystopian by comparison. This is a past full of clean, freshly painted houses, with couples sitting outside in the sun [Fig. 17]. There are men on the corner, but they are singing an acappella version of a Curtis Mayfield song<sup>19</sup>. Adult Gary continues along his side of the street, tracking the progress of his younger self. Eventually the shot of young Gary cuts to DeAndre McCullough in dreadlocks and hooded top, very definitely living in the present. Most importantly, it evokes of the world of order, and regular employment replaced by the “wasted lives”, produced by global capitalism, of those on the drug corners (Kim 2012, p.4).

Therefore, the contrast between past and present suggests a deeper and more fundamental change than the fall of DeAndre’s parents’ into addiction. The extent of Gary’s fall is especially apparent. When DeAndre is temporarily evicted by Fran, he seeks temporary refuge in their semi-derelict former home. Looking around, he hears

his mother's voice enthusing at the height of the ceilings, before the scene switches to show his parents walking through the house. The perception of two completely different worlds occupying the same space is heightened by the presence of recognisable reference points, and yet the house seems larger in the past. Gary points admiringly to the Victorian banisters, his admiration primarily motivated by their monetary value. He tells Fran that "there's money here, baby", as he taps the banister post. He made a similar observation to his friend Tony during the first episode, but the monetary worth of banisters carries a different significance for a drug addict than a homeowner. This ascent is interrupted by a match cut of Gary in the present, still climbing the stairs, but looking for a place to shoot up. Earlier, daydreaming during one of his few excursions into the classroom DeAndre recalls being taken to a house in Baltimore County, which had a backyard swing set for him to play on. Again, the colours are vivid and the sun shines in an affluent suburb that defines social mobility and suburban flight [Fig. 18]. Fran looks around disdainfully and makes it clear that "ain't none of this me." She will not be "twirling 'round the kitchen baking cookies."

Fran's own descent from recreational drug user to addict is also tracked by flashbacks, as are the beginnings of her ascent from the bottom. These snapshots of her previous life are among the most effective in the series, tracking a fall from employed, sociable, drug-fuelled partygoer, to a single parent existing on welfare payments. An early morning wake-up call from her brother prompts a flashback to an earlier attempt by Gary's to wake her after a night's partying with the warning that she risks losing her job. She dismisses his concerns by telling him that "it's a union job, nobody get fired". She was wrong:

Sick in the mornings and missing work, or happily indifferent and openly cursing her supervisors, Fran kept messing up until the phone company fired her; the union did precious little to prevent it. (p.50)

When she offers to make a sandwich for DeAndre as a reward for competing in an oration contest, this unexceptional offer is contrasted with another flashback. Gary arrives home from work to find DeAndre sitting in the kitchen, hungry, and with no food in the refrigerator. Fran is passed out on the bed. The contrast marks her descent into full-blown addiction against the suggestion that she is now starting to assert for herself as a functioning human being again. The second suggests the start of an ascent from its bottom. Fran's entry to the rehabilitation centre is preceded by a final party

containing the episode's most graphic contrast between past and present. The past shows a house full of people, all of whom are young, vibrant, well-dressed, and drugged-up versions of their older selves [Fig 19]. The pre-rehab party is a pale imitation [Fig. 20]. Party dresses have been replaced by faded shorts and t-shirts, and the brightly decorated house by one that looks dull and decrepit. The only constant is the mirror strewn with white powder.



Fig. 17: Young Gary in more optimistic times.



Fig. 18: "Ain't none of this me."



Fig. 19: The Boyds in happier times.



Fig. 20: A pale imitation.

### THE UNENDING LABOUR OF THE CAPER

Gary McCullough graduated with honours from a vocational school “where they teach you how to earn a living, but not how to live,” and is a former property developer and self-taught stock market speculator. He was also an early affirmative action hire at Bethlehem Steel, rising to a supervisory role (p.96). His first childhood job was in the local corner shop when it was owned by a Jewish family. “I watched this place burn down during the riots,” he says, standing outside. Similar observations and flashbacks recur throughout the series, and help to restore a sense of historical place to Fayette Street, a past often denied by the tyrannical immediacy of its present. His remark is almost an afterthought, and its passive construction implies no blame. Yet it directly

links Fayette Street to a pivotal moment in Baltimore and U.S., history and a related fundamental change in the culture of the corner.

In the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Jewish owned businesses suffered disproportionately from opportunistic looting. This was not so much attributable to instinctive anti-Semitism as to the large number of Jewish owned businesses in the neighbourhoods where rioting occurred (Nix and Weiner 2011, p.190).<sup>20</sup> The origins for the riots lay much deeper than the King assassination, in decades of institutional racism, and a systemically racist public policy which declared black neighbourhoods disposable. In 1968, according to Emily Lieb, “the rioters treated [those neighbourhoods] accordingly” (2011, p.52).<sup>21</sup> The legacy of vacant buildings left by departing business owners was the emergence of “a quiet but persistent heroin trade” on the deserted corners (p.95). In the first episode’s closing interview a local drug tout, Fat Curt, attributes the major change to the advent of cheap cocaine (“Gary’s Blues” C0.01).

Fittingly for the free market 1980s, this amounted to the deregulation of the drug trade, as “the open market made the concept of territory irrelevant” (p.63). Crack cocaine was a lethal addition to the combination of poverty and long-term unemployment. The book describes how the drug “battered the hard-rock foundation of the urban black family” by bringing women out to the corner “in numbers previously unthinkable” (p.64). The result was the brutalisation of childhood itself and the appropriation of children as the corner’s labour force. It became an environment where the “normal cruelties and aggressions” (p.206) of childhood are amplified, and subject to little or no “countervailing argument” or adult supervision (p.207).<sup>22</sup> This suggests not so much lawlessness, as a society where even the most basic consensual rules have ceased to have meaning.<sup>23</sup>

The first episode introduces another contradiction of the drug corner, and a theme that underpins the entire series. The drug addicts who inhabit it are predominantly unemployed, yet they are rarely idle. Gary's pursuit of the drug blast by means of various “capers”, which form the material basis of the drug addict existence, is the defining characteristic of his portrayal. Capers are usually unambiguous thefts, self-servingly considered distinguishable from real crimes on the grounds that nobody gets hurt:

Breaking into a house where honest-to-God taxpayers are sleeping is definitely a crime. Breaking into parked cars and liberating cassette tape players is nothing more than caper. (p.11)

Sometimes, the line between caper and crime is crossed and its self-serving definition becomes apparent. Gary and his friend Tony break into an apartment belonging to a working man, “or something close to a working man anyway” (p.186). When a neighbour sees them, they promise to keep quiet in return for a share of the drug proceeds. Gary is offended by the mentality, but unaware of his own absurd double standard. As Gary and Tony roll the working man's refrigerator, filled with other stolen items, down the street, the police drive past uninterested. Over the course of the series, a refrigerator being rolled past in the background becomes a motif for the endless activity of the corner, and the pursuit of money for a drug blast.

Stripping metal from buildings is the most popular, and least risky, caper. The practice is so widespread that the perpetrators form their own subculture. They are referred to as “harvesters” (p.307), “metal men” (Simon 1995b), and more disparagingly, as “ants” and “insects” (p.190). Ease of theft means that metal is stolen not only from derelict and abandoned houses, but also from public and non-profit housing under construction (Simon 1995b). The caper may not result in physical harm, but neither can it be classified as a victimless crime. David Simon’s description, as part of an article written between the book’s research and publication, evokes the inescapably racialised image of the “ant”, “insect”, or even termite. It also highlights their ultimately marginalised status, “stumbling at the fringe of city life”:

For \$10 or \$20 or \$25 a run, they’re out there every day, breaking apart the housing stock and ripping through the old warehouses, tearing the city down in slow motion, cannibalizing block after block for a few dollars more. You see them struggling in the slow lanes, stumbling at the fringe of city life, a step or two from oblivion. (ibid.)

Bill Marimow, Simon’s editor at the *Baltimore Sun*, saw the subjects of the article as thieves “who were stripping the city of its infrastructure.” He felt it was irrelevant whether or not “the subjects recognised the truth of their lives on the page”, and he believed Simon was “ennobling” them (Lanahan 2008). But where Marimow sees parasites, Simon sees people who are part of a much larger process, and asks that we “grant them ... some small due for creating wealth by destroying wealth” (Simon 1995b). They are effectively asset stripping entrepreneurs, one link in a much larger

process of wealth expropriation, and closer to the capitalist mainstream than is ever acknowledged. Caper acquired metal disappears into the maw of legitimate capitalism, Baltimore's scrap yards, which feign convenient ignorance as to its origin. Gary McCullough imagines a high living "Metal King" who is, in reality, a multinational company based in Holland with no connection to the city it is helping to dismantle (Simon 1995b).<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in an example illustrating less obvious connections between shadow economy and mainstream, the city council started issuing "no-bid contracts" to try and reduce the length of time houses lay empty. This inevitably led to corruption in the form of payments for work not done and nepotistic contract awards as contracts were hand out to the private sector with minimal oversight (ibid).

The example of the metal-men is the first suggestion that narco-capitalism and its parasitic offshoots are not a reflection of mainstream capitalism, so much as its extension. Supposedly irredeemably removed from the labour force, drug addicts continue to work, and continue to have their labour exploited. Just as much as street dealers and their bosses, addicts are themselves an integral part of the ecology of the drug trade, what Marshall and Potter (2009, p.8) refer to as a "capitalism of the disenfranchised." Being a dope fiend, it is suggested in the final episode, is the "hardest job in America" ("Everyman's Blues" C0.06). In another context, this type of repetitive, unending, alienated labour would be called work. Motivated by physical need, they work, all day every day, to feed their addiction. In doing so, they dismantle the physical world around them, for the benefit of an insatiable economic engine. They are effective proxies, not only for drug organisations, but for more respectable forms of wealth accumulation. The depiction of slow-motion urban destruction illustrated in *The Wire* is not simply dramatic figuration, but the representation of a readily observable reality.

### THE WAR ON DRUGS AS A SLOW-MOTION HOLOCAUST

The story returns to Gary McCullough for the David Simon scripted "Dope Fiend Blues" (C0.04, 2000), which tries to underline how much he diverges from the stereotyped depiction of the dope fiend. He reads philosophy and books about religion, but aside from an inconveniently trusting and credulous disposition it is unclear exactly what he takes from them. In some respects, he is a precursor to *The Wire*'s Stringer Bell, who believed that the formal rules of capitalism, learned in community college, are



amenable to navigation. When talk turns to Gary's previous prosperity, he explains the "science" of the stock market, and the "stock earnings ratio". His attitude to capitalism seems to correspond with his attitude towards his addiction. He naively believes that both of them are amenable to navigation and control, and fundamentally fails to understand how circumscribed his power is in both instances. In this episode Gary finds a real job that allows him to keep away from the corner and its attendant capers, so that he visits only when he needs to buy. As a consequence, he is no longer definable solely as a "junkie" or "fiend", but as a taxpayer whose "thoughts are free to roam beyond the confines of the game" (p.353).

Gary's pessimism about his community, laid low through decades of racism, unemployment, poverty and drug use emerges in his workplace, the local crab house. Looking at the shellfish scrabbling over each other in the barrel he observes to his brother:

"The minute one of them try to break free, the others just snatch him right back down. All of them, in that mess together. All of them, just thinking about themselves. They get to thinking... they might see that they gonna rise up, all together".

He compares this to his own experience, suggesting that people resented his success, despite his generosity to those "with their little hard-luck stories". When his brother protests that people were proud of him, Gary replies:

"They was talking about how much money I had, how much money I was making, but there was no real pride. There was no real love. I thought when I fell, that people would like me more."

It is the nearest the narrative comes to an explanation of Gary's fall into addiction, which up to this point seems as senseless as the murder of Catherine Ellison in the *Homicide* episode "Bop Gun" (H2.04, 1994). The book suggests that "when he couldn't find a future in Fran, Gary, too, began to lose himself on Fayette Street" (p.50). Yet this scene, and his entire depiction, suggests a wider disappointment than the grief and heartbreak of a failed relationship. It suggests disillusionment at the defeat of the idea that people could "rise up, all together". The optimism of the civil rights and black power movements is a thing of the past, destroyed by the political and economic backlash of the 1970s and 1980s. Simultaneously, Gary feels betrayed that the

community has no pride in his own entrepreneurship. He strikes a paradoxical figure, trying to express a collective impulse through his own individual achievements.

This is a contradiction that re-emerges in *The Wire* with its privileging of doomed individual craft over the collective struggle of mass labour, particular in its second season. In Gary's case, it is a contradiction that has been largely forced upon him. In an earlier scene, a white co-worker chides his high productivity, claiming that he is making the "rest of [them] look lazy." This prompts a flashback to a similar exchange during his time in quality control at Bethlehem Steel. Two white co-workers are angry when Gary reports a production problem to management, and tell him that his job "is to look out for the people that you work with, not to make more work for the guys that share your union hall".

This anger at a lack of solidarity, expressed in class terms, is realistic, but intentionally or not, it speaks to a deeper and more structurally loaded historical reality. This was the failure on behalf of the AFL-CIO (American trades union federation) to properly integrate black workers into the unionised workforce, a consequence of the sometimes "overt racism" of conservative elements within the union federation leadership (Davis 1986, p.210), expressed in certain unions by opposition to wider black control of institutions like schools and the police (Davis 1986, p.211). By the time Gary started work, the gains of the 1960s were unravelling. His trajectory reflects that of much of the black working class, who were put "onto the blue-collar road to the middle class just when the on-ramp shut down" (Marcellus Andrews, cited in Lanahan 2008).

Similarly, while Gary's work ethic and entrepreneurial skill suggest Reagan era aspirational individualism, there is an implicit colour bar to his enjoyment of that success:

Back then, all his money and standing didn't matter to the sales clerks and security guards, who would follow him around stores. The world was no different when he drove his Mercedes – bought and paid for with Beth Steel paychecks and tech-stock dividends – and suffered through dozens of police stops and registration checks. (p.356)

As he put it in a later rumination on *Schindler's List*, he was "still a nigger", spurned by the racism of the dominant culture. With inter-racial class mobility also closed off to him, he vainly instead seeks validation and pride from within his own community. Here, he comes up against the harsher, more fundamental inequities of capitalism.

Gary's attempts to remain in legitimate work fail as the crab house lets him go at the end of the summer season. He tries a building site, but is rebuffed, despite his experience with house renovations. Pondering his options he sees another addict on a caper go past pulling a train of shopping trolleys filled with scrap metal. The connection this prompts inspires what Gary's most ingenious caper yet, and he enlists the help of another addict. They intend to tow away unwanted cars with the owners' permission, to be broken down for scrap. They will take a commission from the insurance payment and keep the proceeds from the scrap. It appears that Gary has rewritten "the game," by finding a new, seemingly inexhaustible source of income. Unfortunately, as Gary is later telling Scalio about it, his partner drives by towing another car. "But that's my caper," shouts Gary, outraged. The response from Scalio, which does not appear in the book, appears to have been written especially as a pithy illustration of Gary's incomprehension of capitalist power relations. In spirit, it anticipates a scene in *The Wire* where mid-level drug dealer D'Angelo explains to his crew that the guy who invented the chicken nugget did not necessarily get rich on the back of it (W1.02, "The Detail," 2002). "Well, Gary," reasons Scalio, "you the nigger with the ideas, he the nigger with the truck."

His legitimate income also allows Gary to roam beyond the corner in the physical sense, and he goes to see Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). Around the time of *The Corner's* publication, Ed Burns referred to what was happening in American's cities as "a holocaust in slow motion" (Hoffman 1998, p.107). The comment echoes observations made by Gary after Spielberg's 1993 film, which forced him to reflect on the "slow motion murder of thousands" in his own city (p.355). Sitting with his fellow addicts after a drug blast, one of whom asks "what kind of dope fiend goes to the goddamn movies," Gary explains the film as he understands it:

Gary: The Germans decided that they [the Jews] weren't human no more. They just said "no, you ain't human like we human". And when they said that... it just got easier for them to do all kinds of dirt. By the end, all the Germans could do was, like, get rid of them, you know? Like, kill 'em all. Because...they couldn't see them for being anything better than rats or bugs.

Rita: That sounds like a miserable ass movie.

Gary: Yeh, but it was real, all right? And I'm sitting there watching this movie, and I'm realising that it's happening again.

Curt: How you mean, Gary?

Gary: We sitting here day after day, making ourselves a little bit less human. And the world's happy to see it. It seems like they're happy to see it,

man. I mean, when I was making money? Like, it didn't matter. 'Cos I was still a nigger. And now that I'm sitting up here getting high with y'all? It's still the same... The Germans made the Jews into niggers... and that's what this is here. Except we doing it to ourselves. Seems like the world just can't wait for us to finish. Until we all end up dead.

Scalio: Man, just shut up and shoot dope. (C0.04, 2000)<sup>25</sup>

The idea that dehumanisation made it easier for the Germans to kill, echoes Simon's argument about the drug war that "once you have an enemy you can do what you want." It also confirms the existence of an entire section of society which has "been shrugged aside by the vagaries of unrestrained capitalism" (Simon 2004, p.12), who are simply not needed in the same numbers as they once were:

On Fayette Street, life had become a slow process of taking black boys and girls, black men and women, and breaking them down, turning them into less. It happened without camps and barbed wire, without cattle cars or crematoriums or dictatorial intent. But it happened nonetheless, quietly, hour by wasted hour. (p.355)

The theme returns, inverted, at the end of the episode, during an interview with Gary's father, W.M. McCullough. When the subject switches to the drug dealing taking place just metres from his front door, he, like Gary, does not blame the police and government for the problem. He blames the men and women on the corner, who "didn't understand life the way he did". The solution he offers is extreme, but it appears rooted in sorrow, rather than anger:

"If it was up to me, I'd get rid of all of this. Stop it cold... All these people selling these drugs? I'd get them down at the penitentiary, all of 'em. And I'd run that gas chamber 'til all this here stopped."

He looks back helplessly as the interviewer presses him on the seriousness of the proposal. In the book, W.M. is described as a man who "had never really understood the forces arrayed against him" (p.99). By contrast Gary appears to learn a significant amount about the forces confronting him in this episode. He sees the atomised, selfish behaviour of his fellow African-Americans in the instinctive scrabble for survival of the selfish. He also comes to understand that no help is forthcoming either from inside or outside of the community. They are surplus, they are unwanted, and they will probably be allowed to destroy themselves.

## ASSERTING FOR DIGNITY AND PURPOSE

David Mills holds the sole writing credit for “Fran’s Blues” (C0.03, 2000), an episode which lacks much of the contextual nuance that characterises the others. In a 2007 interview conducted with David Simon for his own blog, he observes that while Simon “has always been on the Left,” Mills has “lately slid towards the Right” (Mills 2007a). Whether this trajectory was already in evidence during the writing of *The Corner* is impossible to gauge, but “Fran’s Blues” has a more personal, rather than a systemic focus. It is also through Fran’s character that the trope of personal responsibility set against the idea “that people are often complicit in degrading themselves” emerges again (ibid.). Mills’ script recounts Fran’s journey towards the rehabilitation clinic which is, by definition, a rather solitary and lonely one. In the book, Fran is described as a “hardened wraith” (Simon and Burns 2009a, p.782), and comes across on screen as an unenthusiastic interviewee. She seethes with barely contained resentment and contempt. As with Gary, her past is compressed into a few questions, making clear that drugs were a part of her formative environment in a way they were not part of his. She also attempts to try and distance herself from Gary, who barely functions as a parent:

My sons ain’t never been without a place to lay their heads, and they ain’t never gone hungry neither. Not like a lot of these little kids you see out here, just running totally - I have been there for DeAndre, OK? At every school meeting, and every juvenile hearing downtown. I been there. And yeh, I likes to get high, OK? But I have been a mother to that boy, and to DeRodd [her second son].

Unlike Gary, Fran repeatedly recognises and acknowledges that the environment she inhabits is not normal, with variations on the phrase that “this shit don’t make no sense.” This is likely because, also unlike Gary, who has no real responsibility beyond himself and his next blast, the burden of feeding, clothing and housing her children falls upon her. She grew up in a difficult family environment where her father beat her mother, in the midst of the corner milieu of “gangsters, players and users” (p.49), where drugs played a recreational role. Her slide into addiction was unintentional, if predictable, compared to Gary’s seemingly conscious attempt to lose himself. Yet, however problematically, she is aware that she has fallen, and remains connected to more sustainable structures of life.

To keep her place on the waiting list for the drug rehabilitation centre, and to demonstrate her commitment, Fran checks in by phone each week.<sup>26</sup> The phone calls are placed at significant points throughout the episode which is a dramatically compressed rendering of a process which, in the book, is gradual and incremental. Formulating a plan to help herself and her family, amidst the endemic short-termism of the corner seems a significant achievement in itself. Throughout the episode, psychological lines are crossed, and limits reached as the senseless nature of the world she inhabits comes into focus. Another addict is beaten for stealing seven vials of cocaine, but the silver lining is that at least the dealer never asked for the vials back. When an arabber street trader's horse urinates on another drug stash, the dealer throws a brick at the horse and beats the owner. Fran appears to reach the bottom when she arrives home to find the entire family facing eviction because the rent money has been spent on drugs:

“How do people have days like this and stay straight?” she asks. “We some low bottom dope fiends, that's all we about. How we look trying to raise children up in the middle of this craziness? This shit has got to end.”

The book describes Fran as beneficiary of “the vestiges of morality that her mother planted inside her” (p.45), and this beleaguered sense of morality as the only “weakness in Fran's game.” The increasing awareness that impels her towards rehab is its dramatised expression. Nevertheless, in a conclusion that reflects both Fran's lived reality and her character's presumption in asserting for purpose, she arrives to the centre to be told that there is no place for her.

This contrasts with the conclusion to “DeAndre's Blues” (C0.02) which has an ending that more conventional dramas would consider happy. On the eve of her younger son's birthday, Fran is forced to shoplift presents due to lack of money. Her expedition ends when a store detective becomes suspicious. She returns home dejected and empty handed, but enters her bedroom to see the bed covered in presents bought by DeAndre with drug money. The scene suggests a reversal of roles common to the corner with DeAndre asserting himself, through the only employment available to him, and adopting the role of breadwinner.

Yet this role which has been forced upon him is one he also, understandably, attempts to reject. After all, as David Simon remarked some years later, “A fourteen-year-old drug dealer is still a fourteen-year-old” (Simon 2005). DeAndre and his friends style themselves the CMB, after the Crenshaw Mafia Brothers, the Los Angeles gang

featured in *Boyz in the Hood* (Singleton 1991). The affectation seems like a fantasy self-image that would ordinarily be left behind as the children grow to adulthood and DeAndre laughs when asked if he considers himself a gangster. Yet, Chaddha and Wilson (2011, p.185) cite a study suggesting that in areas where violence is prevalent, young people “seek protection by developing more neighbourhood based bonds” for self-protection. Reaching adulthood is potentially an achievement in itself, in a context where selling drugs is one of the few viable, if foreshortened, career paths, and sixty per cent of black males in employment “are concentrated in the spectrum of the lowest paid jobs” (Davis 1986, p.208). This engagement with the reality of menial, low-wage employment is explored through the experiences of both DeAndre and Fran.

### THE CORNER EVERYMAN: EXPANDING DEFINITIONS OF LABOUR

In *The Corner*, “the other America” that would prove central to *The Wire* is explored for the first time, as a “new and peculiar universe” (p.60). It is a world of high unemployment, but more importantly it is one where unemployment has become intergenerational. Memories of lives structured by regular work have disappeared, to be replaced, not by idleness, but by different forms of economic activity:

In neighbourhoods where no other wealth exists, they have constructed an economic engine so powerful that they’ll readily sacrifice everything to it. And make no mistake: that engine is humming. No slacking profit margins, no recessions, no bad quarterly reports, no layoffs, no naturalized unemployment rate... The men and women who live the corner life are redefining themselves at incredible cost, cultivating meaning in a world that has declared them irrelevant. At Monroe and Fayette, and in drug markets in cities across the nation, lives without any obvious justification are given definition through a simple, self-sustaining capitalism. (p.58)

Seen from another perspective, these men and women are the lumpenproletariat of Marx and Engels, “that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society” (1848, p.14). They are the “rough” working class, no longer subject to the discipline of labour (Hall et al 1978, p.141), and are perceived to be acquiring “by speed, stealth, fraudulent or shorthand methods what the great majority of law-abiding citizens can only come by through arduous toil, routine, expenditure of time, and the postponement of pleasure” (ibid, p.142).

The distinction between the “rough” and the “respectable” working classes, Hall et al suggest, while “though in no sense an accurate sociological or historical one, remains an extremely important *moral* distinction.” They argue that “in the working class... it is *work*, above all, which is the guarantee of respectability”:

Loss of respectability is therefore associated with loss of occupation and with poverty. *Poverty* is the trap which marks the slide away from respectability back into the 'lower depths'. (ibid, p.141)

*The Corner* unpicks this moral distinction, and explores these lower depths, by inverting the commonly understood nature of what happens in a place like Fayette Street. The recognition that “without work, the material basis of our lives would vanish overnight” (ibid, p.141) ultimately means that, without a material basis, life also ceases. The corner world provides such a basis, and meets the different material needs of addicts and dealers. The authors suggest that those “excluded from making a living through the dominant system create their own alternative” (Sheehan and Sweeney 2009). Unsurprisingly, this alternative redefines commonly accepted definitions of lawlessness. Criminal acquisition becomes a means to fulfil basic needs. Selling drugs on a street corner is redefined as work, structurally comparable to legitimate employment, and possessed of its own sense of respectability. The corner provides a sense of purpose, assuring addicts that “daily relevance can be found at the fine point of a disposable needle” (p.58), while cursing young dealers with “the lie that says they finally have a stake in something” (p.59).

Both claims on the material and existential well-being of Fayette Street’s inhabitants are ultimately fraudulent. They are also completely compatible with the propaganda of consumer capitalism. As Fat Curt puts it in a startlingly incisive description of commodity fetishism:

Ain’t been no good dope out here worth a goddamn for ten years. It’s all just chemicals now. Back in the day that shit would drop a nigger. Now we down to bullshit. We ain’t even addicted to drugs. We’re addicted to the needle. (C0.01, 2000)

The tagline for the final episode claims that there “ain’t no harder job in America”, than being so addicted. Most directly, this refers to addicts like Gary, constantly on the lookout for a new caper, living from moment to moment to feed their addiction:



Every day you start with nothing, and every day you come up with what you need to survive. And day after goddamn day, you swallow the pain and the self-loathing, go out into the street and get what has to be got. Who else but a dope fiend can go to sleep at night with not a dime to his name, with not a friend in the world, and actually think up a way, come morning, to acquire the day's first ten? It's twenty-four, seven out here. (p.193)

As the episode title, "Everyman's Blues", suggests, it refers to the struggles of all who live on Fayette Street, and whose lives are shaped and defined by the open-air drug market in their midst. It also includes those with no direct involvement in the drug trade, either as supplier or consumer. Gary's brother Cardy, on the way to visit his mother, is stopped and strip-searched on the street, to the anger of assembled addicts, outraged at the harassment of a proper "working man".

The tagline includes DeAndre, in his search for an alternative to drug dealing, the closest he can find to well-paid, stable employment. He arrives on screen in the second episode as brash, aggressive, intelligent, self-aware, and of changeable mood ("DeAndre's Blues," C0.02, 2000).<sup>27</sup> He adopts a self-mocking tone to point out that it's "hard work selling drugs in the Baltimore ghetto: hard work being a black man in America." The image of hard work, in an environment where supposedly none exists, reasserts itself at the other end of the buyer/user divide. When asked how he feels about selling drugs, "knowing what heroin has done to [his] father," he matter-of-factly falls back on the arms dealer's defence. "People who use, they're gonna use, they're gonna buy it from somebody somewheres. It might as well be me." As he explained in 1997:

For some, the drug market meant money. If that meant money to them, are you going to offer them jobs? ... If you want to take that from them, you are going to have to offer them something in return. (Democracy Now 1997)

In a description of the life of touts who advertise the product on the corner, the book says:

Rain or snow or gloom of night, he's out there on a double shift for three or four blasts a day and, if he's lucky, ten or twenty or thirty dollars in cash. No health benefits. No supplemental life. No pension. As much as any working man, the drug-corner tout is a soul in desperate need of a union" (p.68).

It is a theme David Simon returned to in 2011, during a lecture at the University of North Carolina, arguing “if you tolerate the drug war you are tolerating imprisoning people for doing the only job they’ll ever get,” and that:

It’s like telling a steelworker in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1946, don’t associate with steelworkers, and God forbid, don’t be making no steel... Hey, sit on your steps and starve. (Honors Carolina 2011)

Much of what DeAndre makes finds its way back into the mainstream economy, spent on trips to the cinema with his girlfriend Tyreeka, or on beer, clothing and footwear. When he tries to enter the legitimate labour market via the local crab-house, the manager’s praise of his father’s work ethic prompts a memory of Gary tucking money into DeAndre’s clothes, explaining that “this money comes from your Daddy working hard every day.” He later suggests that his father pacified him with 100 dollar bills (C0.06, 2000). These flashbacks suggest a time of optimism, when people like Gary and Fran could make a good living by working legitimately. In DeAndre’s case working hard and legitimately every day, means “sweeping up crab shit for \$4.10 an hour” (C0.02). His lack of “allegiance to the dominant culture” (p.304) of work is shaped by the knowledge that, in his mind, drug dealing offers many times the wages of legitimate employment; “seven or eight hundred [dollars] on a good night” (p.26).<sup>28</sup> He also runs his own crew, and has a measure of control over his own labour, and that of others. By contrast, Peter Moskos, writing over a decade later, suggests that a low level drug dealer would earn more working at McDonalds, and that drug dealing is mainly a supplement to more conventional jobs (2008, pp.72-73).

He eventually finds work in a fast-food restaurant, clearing tables, but leaves following a disagreement with the manager over a roster mix-up. A fellow employee, a former gang member, tries to reason with him. He tells DeAndre that he needs to “carry things different” in a normal workplace, and swallow disrespect in a way that would be unthinkable on the corner. DeAndre replies that he “ain’t kissing ... ass for no minimum wage” (C.06, 2000). When he later interviews for a job clearing tables in a restaurant, things look promising until he sees a man older than his own father, who is still clearing tables and visibly struggling to do so. Again, he walks away.

The limited prospects are underlined when Fran leaves rehab and also looks for work, in addition to attending NA (Narcotics Anonymous) meetings and enrolling in community college. After initially impressing interviewer in a clothing store, another

employee recognises Fran as someone barred from the store for shoplifting. She eventually finds a job in Baltimore County, packing cosmetics boxes. This does not last long:

“Two and a half hours on the bus to stand there and pack boxes all day long for minimum wage? Uh huh. I can do better than that.”  
 (“Everyman’s Blues” C0.06).

Even so, her brief period of employment reveals a world almost forgotten in the narrative focus on the corner’s drug subculture. When Fran arrives at the bus-stop at six o’clock in the morning, she is shocked to find a queue of people already there, while the drug fiends and dealers are nowhere to be seen. This is the emerging, primarily female, working class of the 1990s; commuting long hours to low-paid jobs out in the suburbs.

Objectively, Gary, Fran, and DeAndre are criminals. Between them they buy, sell and use drugs, and steal to support their habits. Yet despite the rhetoric of the war on drugs their actions seem only rarely to acquire the potential for legal consequences. This tends to be when they venture outside of the immediate neighbourhood. Gary and Tony roll a stolen refrigerator down the street without fear of molestation by the police. When Gary is charged with shoplifting, it is in Baltimore county, where “petty capers once again turn into crimes” (p.313). This suggests that the drug war is more about containing disorder within particular geographic areas, rather than genuinely attempting to eradicate illegal drug use. David Simon explicitly argues that the war on drugs has become a “permanent war of attrition against the underclass”, in neighbourhoods that have been divested from the rest of America (Rothkerch 2002). Peter Moskos (2008, p.180) expresses it in even starker terms, stating that, “Even if crack cocaine laws and mandatory minimum sentencing were not racist in their original intentions, the war on drugs is a de facto war against poor blacks.”

Recognising that the drug war is one of containment also helps to explain one of the most curious aspects of a series ostensibly about the failure of that war; the relatively minor role of the police. This is partly explained by the choice to make the inhabitants of the corner the subjects of the drama. But it is also a comment on the futile nature of a drug war that is being fought against a collection of highly mobile open-air drug markets. The police behave like an army of occupation, arriving without warning to scoop up a few minor players. This disrupts the trade only for as long as it takes them to leave, and in the series these raids seem to have acquired the ritualistic quality of a

game to which everybody knows the rules. The police are merely one more thing to contend with, alongside the drug addiction, poverty and unemployment that constitute the tapestry of existence. Chaddha and Wilson (2011, p.174) argue that some parts of the city are now so socially isolated that often the only contact that inhabitants have with people from outside of the area is with the police. Equally, the effective designation of Fayette Street as an occupied zone means that, from the perspective of the police, everybody who lives there becomes a potential suspect. There are few hints that the police exist as anything but a coercive force.

The narrative is careful not to simply ascribe police excesses to racism. In one scene, a white officer intervenes when a black officer punches DeAndre without provocation (C0.03, 2000). Its significance lies not in the commonplace that black officers need to be overly vicious to prove themselves, but in illustrating that racism alone is insufficient to explain the often arbitrary violence. The authors observe that “a white patrolman has to at least take into account the racial imagery, to acknowledge the fact that he is messing with black folks in a majority black city” (p.165). The same does not apply to his black counterparts. There is also a second element, which is arguably and ironically a legacy of the historical domination of the Baltimore police department by white officers. Unlike white police officer Bob Brown, who saw the neighbourhood change, the younger black officers “see these people and figure they always were junkies” (C0.03, “Fran’s Blues,” 2000). Like the officers cited by Peter Moskos,<sup>29</sup> the younger patrolmen see only an addicted and drug dealing underclass, proving how “alienating the drug war has become, and how class-consciousness more than race has propelled the city’s street police toward absolute contempt for the men and women of the corner” (p.165).

### CONCLUSION: THE OTHER(ED) AMERICA

In a significant nod to Dutton’s onscreen role as interviewer, acting as a proxy for Simon and Burns, Fran asks him in the final episode how he thinks DeAndre will turn out as a father. It is an acknowledgment of the role of the authors, whose involvement ultimately went beyond providing the occasional ten dollars for a blast, or lift to a clinic. Both developed relationships with their subjects that, especially in Simon’s case, endured beyond the end of the book. His evident closeness to some of the

surviving inhabitants of Fayette Street was another factor in softening Charles S. Dutton's suspicions of exploitation (Scott 2000). Fran is shown stumbling back into drug use before the end of the narrative for numerous reasons, including her lack of success in finding a job and resuming her education. There are also additional difficulties caused by DeAndre's using and dealing, and a new boyfriend who relapses into crack addiction. Reversing her progression toward rehab, the gradual backslide described in the book is rendered as sudden and dramatic on screen.

The final episode features a postscript filmed on the same corner where Dutton had stood at the beginning of the series. This time he is joined by the real Fran, Tyreeka, DeAndre, and George "Blue" Epps, another survivor. All are hopeful that the drama will help to humanise drug addicts, and give hope to others struggling. Fran and Blue are clean, and determined to remain so. Tyreeka has stayed in school and gone to college, while raising a child alone.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, DeAndre is more circumspect, and still evidently struggling to move forward. He would eventually succumb, like his father, to a drug overdose in 2012 (Simon 2012b). Gary died in 1996 in his parents' house.<sup>31</sup> David Simon later admitted that the death "almost broke" him, and Ed Burns confirmed the profound effect Gary's death had on his co-author:

"It's sort of like being told about vampires but never meeting one. Then one day, boom, you're in a castle and there's a vampire. This is what the corner is. It's a monster." (Rose, C. 1999)

Therefore, two of the more positive outcomes belong to women. In each case it is their socially expected roles as primary care provider that provides the initial impetus and structure to break free from the corner. Both later pursue successful careers in hospital administration (Tyreeka) and drug counselling (Fran) (Simon and Burns 2009a, pp.781-782). Of course, there are numerous examples in the series of parents of both genders who abandon their children, physically and emotionally, through the ravages of addiction. Another significant female character is Ella Thompson, custodian of the local recreation centre which provides a safe space to keep children away from the corners. Her presence is a tangible link back to *Homicide*, and her community work is presented as an attempt to remain rooted in the place where her daughter, Andrea Perry, was murdered in 1988. The case featured in the previous book as another "red ball", and its successful investigation provided a counterpoint to the unsolved Latonya Wallace case (Simon 2006a, p.459).<sup>32</sup>

While the corner subculture itself is never presented as benign, viable or productive the actions of its inhabitants are presented as valid responses to life on Fayette Street. By contrast, Andrea Perry's killing is described as, not a "crime of the corner," but a crime enabled by it:

Vial by vial this part of West Baltimore had been stripped down past the point of social legitimacy, until it served no human connections beyond those required to buy and sell drugs. Those lost to the corner might not themselves use and destroy a young girl, but over time they had created the ideal world for anyone who could. (p.497)

Her death is the most extreme example of a corner-enabled act of violence that, to paraphrase Fran Boyd, makes no sense. When her perspective begins to change, she begins asking "what shooting people [has] to do with selling drugs" (p.331), echoing Lewis in *Homicide*, and pre-empting McNulty in *The Wire*. The book presents violence, neglect, and the desperation of addiction as structural to the corner's existence. In one sense, the drug trade appears permanent and self-sustaining, but it is nevertheless destroying the environment in which it operates. This is one of the contradictions at its heart, a contradiction that renders more convincing its status as a stand-in for legitimate capitalism, in *The Wire*.

*The Corner* may not possess the wide-ranging political critique that underpins the later series, but its argument against the drug war is clear in its choice of narrative perspective. It is precisely because Gary, Fran, and DeAndre are real people that they are able to bear the weight of a history of social decline and immiseration that works itself out through their lives. The choices they make serve not so much to underline their own culpability or powerlessness as to show how circumscribed their options for mobility have become. More generally, the drug war frames the narrative of *The Corner* in the same way that capitalism frames that of *The Wire*. Life on Fayette Street goes on within its cracks. Dealing happens between police shift changes. Theft is not a priority and goes unpunished. Those with no prospects and nothing to do, risk violent death or incarceration, for doing the only thing available to them. Ordinary working citizens are harassed for living in the wrong neighbourhood.

Contrary to David Simon's suggestion that the "war on drugs" has morphed into a "war on the underclass", in some respects the latter was always implicit in the former. Its escalation from the 1970s onwards coincides with the destruction of the industrial and manufacturing base in the United States. Notwithstanding any direct causal link, it

seems clear that many at the receiving end of the drug war are the first and second generations of those “shrugged aside by the vagaries of unrestrained capitalism” (Simon 2004, p.12). The “war on drugs”, stated noble intentions aside, is demonstrably a means to try and contain the human consequences of deindustrialisation:

Down on the corner, some of the walking wounded used to make steel, but Sparrows Point isn't hiring the way it once did. And some used to load the container ships at Seagirt and Locust Point, but the port isn't what she used to be either. Others worked at Koppers, American Standard, or Armco, but those plants are gone now. (pp.59-60)

The gradual and insidious nature of industrial decline is not so prominent in the series, where the flashbacks provide abrupt contrasts between a time of cohesion and employment, and one of dissolution. But the juxtaposition of the two suggests that the corner is what remains after suburban flight, managed decline, and deindustrialisation have hollowed out the urban landscape.

The intense focus on life within such a limited geographical area often makes the narrative feel claustrophobic and myopic. Fortunately, it never descends into a sentimental fascination with the exotic. The narrative does not present Fayette Street as a static aberration, deserving of sympathy and horror. Dutton points out that it is merely one of thousands of drug corners in the United States (C0.01).<sup>33</sup> It also manages to integrate some of the book's critiques of the drug war, welfare system and death of work in a naturalistic way. They are folded into the characters own stories and, to a lesser extent, incorporated into the interviews that bookend each episode. *The Corner* attempts to win its argument against the drug war through largely conventional dramatic means, by eliciting empathy and sympathy for those at its receiving end.

*The Corner* supplies a narrative dimension missing from *The Wire*, where drug fiends primarily exist as an inexhaustible consumer base, mostly devoid of personal history. There is no equivalent to Gary or Fran, although echoes of the former's entrepreneurial bent, and the latter's determination, are present in the character of Bubbles. Superficially, the influence on *The Wire* of David Simon's first book seems more apparent than that of the second. *Homicide* provided anecdotes of cop and criminal life, the board, the beginnings of an institutional critique, and it gave the police an original narrative voice. The influence of *The Corner* is less obvious, but arguably more substantial. Its digressions on the nature of the drug trade and policing, the school

system, and inexorable industrial decline are central to *The Wire's* five season narrative.<sup>34</sup>

Its evocation of the alternative economic engine of the drug economy goes beyond an account of the vast amounts to be made drug dealing. (Higher level dealers are absent from the narrative, except peripherally.) Drug dealing is simply the cornerstone of an economic engine which has numerous subsidiary and dependent economic activities leading away from it. These are the “capers”, which display a certain innovative flair, and admiration for their creativity and craft is apparent. *The Corner* also establishes deeper connections, through a network of financial transactions where money from the drug economy is recycled back into the mainstream. In many cases this money has found its way to the corner in the first place in the form of a welfare payment (p.375). While the book describes welfare as “something akin to foreign aid” (p.374), it is clear that these payments are actually form part of the link between alternative and mainstream economies. This is before the laundering of drug money itself is considered.

Woven around these major themes are explorations of family breakdown, the limits of personal motivation and responsibility, and evocations of past community cohesion. Similarly, the narrative intimacy is also a function of how isolated this other(ed) “America” has become, while remaining essential to how the mainstream constructs itself. However polemically convincing Gary’s comparison with the Holocaust, it fails to acknowledge that their area does actually serve a purpose for the rest of America. This purpose is primarily ideological, in the context of a drug war that constructs poor blacks as a racially defined threat and large urban areas as “landscapes of fear” (Clandfield 2009, p.37).

*The Corner* marks the emergence of a systemic analysis only hinted at in the previous book. In *Homicide*, the changing nature of police work was mostly considered on a discrete institutional level. The wider social origins and the implications of increased bureaucratisation and perception led policing went largely unexplored. *The Corner* describes the destruction of a neighbourhood, not only in the context of a futile policing strategy, but of failed social policy. This failure, however, “could only be implied with something so intimate,” rather than explained (Simon 2004, p.18). David Simon would later argue that “the why is the only thing that actually matters” (2009c). Relative narrative intimacy aside, the thematic scope of *The Corner* remains impressive. Most importantly it adds to the exploration of urban decline begun in *Homicide* a



suspicion that insofar as there is a co-ordinated systemic response to mass joblessness, the war on drugs is it. *The Wire* would take that suspicion and confirm it, by arguing that war on drugs is part of a wider war being waged against labour right across the economy. It represents an attempt to provide the “why” to *The Corner*’s “what”.

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<sup>1</sup> From this point *The Corner* will be referred to only by page number, due to its prominence in the chapter.

<sup>2</sup> In his onscreen introduction, director Charles S. Dutton refers to the stories of those on the corner as being “too rarely heard” (“Gary’s Blues” C0.01).

<sup>3</sup> Elliott Liebow wrote: “The people I was observing knew I was observing them. Some exploited me, not as an outsider, but rather as one who, as a rule, had more resources than they did. When one of them came up with resources – money or a car, for example – he too was exploited in the same way. I usually tried to limit money or other favours to what I thought each would have gotten from another friend had he the same resources as I. I tried to meet requests as best I could without becoming conspicuous” (2003, p.164-165).

<sup>4</sup> “Most accepted *The Corner* as a legitimate story, fairly told... other detectives regarded the second book as something of a betrayal – a narrative written not from the point of view of stalwart Baltimore police but in the voice of those they were chasing” (Simon 2006a, p.632).

<sup>5</sup> See chapter one.

<sup>6</sup> Despite these comparisons, *The Corner* is not itself presented as a piece of war journalism and, in 2002 David Simon rejected the idea that he is “some fucking war correspondent.” Even so, the dvd release describes it as the story of a family “caught in the crossfire”, “on the front line of America’s drug wars”.

<sup>7</sup> Melvin Leiman, drawing from Baran and Sweezy, argues that this was due to the paradox occasioned by the advent of new manufacturing technologies. Manufacturing jobs that may previously have been described as unskilled were re-designated as skilled work. As African-American workers tended to be unskilled, they tended to lose out as the dual labour market for skilled and unskilled labour disappeared in favour of skilled manufacturing labour, dominated by whites (Leiman 1993, p.149 & p.160).

<sup>8</sup> This is a process described by Loïc Wacquant (2008) as “racialised deproletarianisation” (cited in Toscano and Kinkle 2009)

<sup>9</sup> Detective Meldrick Lewis referred to this fact when confronting Luther Mahoney in the *Homicide* episode, “Deception” (5.16, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Obvious exceptions include ABC’s *Roots* (1977), a “national purgation” and “expiation” on the history of slavery (Gitlin 1994, p.162), and the short-lived working class drama *American Dream* (ABC 1981) (Gitlin 1994, pp.86-112).

<sup>11</sup> Typical framing for African Americans was usually non-threatening upper middle-class respectability as exemplified by *The Cosby Show* (NBC 1984-1992), or *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC 1990-1996), which revolved around the humorous conflicts between a wealthy family and their poorer nephew from the housing projects of Philadelphia. Comedy depictions of the white working class range from *All in the Family* (CBS 1971-1979), itself a remake of the BBC sitcom *Til Death Us Do Part* (1966-1975), to the white-trash slovens of *Married with Children* (Fox 1987-1997) and the more nuanced and insightful comedy of *Roseanne* (ABC 1998-1997) and *Malcolm in the Middle* (Fox 2000-2006). The latter occasionally made comedy mileage from the contrast between the unnamed white working class central family and their wealthier African-American friends.

<sup>12</sup> Superficially, Paddy Chayefsky’s *Marty* (NBC 1953) told the story of a browbeaten Italian butcher looking for love, but also evoked the structures of working class life in 1950s New York. *Patterns* (NBC 1955), by Rod Serling, provided a glimpse of corporate bloodletting, but its real significance lay in suggesting that an audience existed for relatively complex and nuanced storytelling. Similarly *The Defenders* (CBS, 1961-1965), an anthology series from the period of “New Frontier” drama, broadcast stories about anti-communist blacklisting, capital punishment, euthanasia, and abortion (Thompson 1996, p.28).<sup>12</sup> Of course, during this period, African Americans are usually conspicuous by their absence. *The Defenders* trod similar topical and socially engaged ground to the *Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today* series in Britain

<sup>13</sup> Of the remaining two, one, “Fran’s Blues”, is written by David Mills, and the other, “Dope Fiend Blues” by David Simon.

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<sup>14</sup> "Prison Riot" is a very obvious precursor for *Oz*, which went into production around the same time (Kalat 1998, p.262). It is also a good example of the limits of network drama. The episode begins with a stabbing in a prison cafeteria, followed by a riot and its suppression by the prison guards. Central to the narrative is Elijah Sanborn, played by Charles S. Dutton.

<sup>15</sup> Best miniseries, best directing in a miniseries, and best writing in a miniseries (Emmys television gold 2012).

<sup>16</sup> "In the following weeks, they hired a black script supervisor, hairdresser, director's assistant and production assistant, all of them from out of town. The Teamsters came up with three black drivers. By the end of production, the shooting crew consisted of 41 white people and 33 black people, by [producer Nina] Noble's count." (Scott 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Relations improved to the point where, towards the end of the series, Simon and Dutton discussed possible collaboration on another project about a Baltimore drug dealer (Scott 2000).

<sup>18</sup> His introduction is separated from the body of the series, appearing not only before the credits, but before the (now) iconic burst of visual and aural static that is HBO's trademark. This was HBO's attempt to give context to the drama, and to capitalise on Dutton's gravitas and credibility within the black community (Scott 2000).

<sup>19</sup> The suggestion that this is an idealised memory rather than a genuine narrative flashback is enhanced by the knowledge that Curtis Mayfield is Gary's favourite singer (p.15).

<sup>20</sup> Real estate succession in racially segregated Baltimore "usually happened in the following order: [white] non-Jewish to Jewish to African American" (Pietila 2010, p.xi). While many Jewish businesses left, as black families moved into a neighbourhood, others remained and adapted to serve their new customers (Nix and Weiner 2011, p.197).

<sup>21</sup> Simon and Burns describe how "city planners rammed I-170 [interstate highway] through West Baltimore, knocking down blocks of rowhomes just north of Franklin Square, forcing ever more refugees into the worst of the rental properties" (p.94).

<sup>22</sup> In 1992, a psychologist interviewed by David Simon suggested that many children exhibited symptoms more commonly associated with war zones, such as sleep interference and hypervigilance (Simon 1992b).

<sup>23</sup> As Gary tells his story, a child behind him gazes with disinterest towards the camera. In the following scene, the same child distractedly smashes bottles against a wall. Shots like this form a backdrop to the main narrative, but provide it with texture and testify to a world whose structures have been turned completely upside down.

<sup>24</sup> In a 1995 feature for the *Baltimore Sun*, Gary also spoke of capers that left him genuinely ashamed; like tearing out "the boiler in [a] school for \$70 in copper. For \$70, we did like \$10,000 in damage" (Simon 1995).

<sup>25</sup> In another echo of *Schindler's List*, in the final episode, Gary shakes his head in disbelief as a trolley full of items stolen from a cemetery rolls past (C0.06, 2000). In the film, the paving in the labour camp was made of headstones from a Jewish cemetery.

<sup>26</sup> The receptionist in the centre is played by the real Fran Boyd. Jason P. Vest (2011, p. ) describes the significance of the scene, where she is both subject and object, looking at a version of her younger self. Simon gave small roles to many of the subjects of the book, including DeAndre and his former girlfriend, Tyreeka Freamon. David Simon himself appears on two occasions; once as a racist caller to a talk radio show (C0.01, 2000), and again as a plain clothes police officer in a court room scene (C0.04, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> DeAndre is played by Sean Nelson, who portrayed the teenage murderer, Ronnie Sayers, in the *Homicide* episode "Every Mother's Son" (H3.10).

<sup>28</sup> As Melvin Leiman (1993, p.270) argues:

The problem is not convincing individuals of the relative advantages of work in the regular economy, or even appraising them of the high social cost of participation in the irregular economy, but rather changing the institutional structure in which an irregular economy develops as a thoroughly reasonable response to ghetto life.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapters one and three.

<sup>30</sup> When in college, Tyreeka suffered the embarrassment of discovering that one of the set texts for her sociology class was *The Corner: a year in the life of an inner-city neighbourhood* (Simon and Burns 2009a, p.782).

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<sup>31</sup> His brother did not call an ambulance until after he had physically dragged Gary to another address (p.531). Gary's final appearance in *The Corner* suggests his death and, as Jason P. Vest (2011, p.132) suggests, marks the most significant diversion from the book, in a deliberate act of dramatic kindness. He dies peacefully in his mother's basement, with The Impressions' civil rights spiritual, "People Get Ready" playing on the radio.

<sup>32</sup> The case was adapted for the tv version of *Homicide*, in the episode "Requiem for Adena" (4.18), starring comedian Chris Rock as the murderer, and with Pembleton as the sole investigator.

<sup>33</sup> The stories of those "who lived and struggled on Fayette Street in 1993" are treated as consequential, in a way that has rarely been the case outside of social realist tradition in British television. While its focus is on a discarded underclass, *The Corner* succeeds similarly to the 1965 BBC adaptation of *Up the Junction*, where Ken Loach suggested that:

"The aim was to create a sense of authenticity and find working-classes voices in the drama and acknowledge that they were central to it; they weren't the peripheral figures of maids and taxi drivers." (Hayward 2005, p.54)

<sup>34</sup> One scene from *The Corner* also illustrates how a commitment to portraying life on the corner as recognisable to its subjects provides a further narrative voice. Despite having no direct equivalent within the book, it nevertheless provides the raw material for the corner boys to explain their own environment, in something approximating their own voice:

DeAndre:            You see him there? That nigger with the key chain? He running the crew. But he ain't never gonna touch a vial. Won't go near that shit. So the police know what he about, but can't fuck with him... The gat's over there, on the back tyre of that car. And that other nigger 'cross the street? He muscle too. Why else you think he holding an aluminium bat one o'clock in the morning? Motherfucker ain't Babe Ruth.

Boo:                 They might come and lock him up then?

DeAndre:            For what? A bat? Ain't no law against baseball, right? See, it might not seem like there's a lot of thought to this shit. But that's because most motherfuckers don't think. These boys; "Death Row", "Diamond in the Raw"... they got most of Fayette, 'cause they're smart. (C0.02, 2000)

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ***THE WIRE: INTRODUCING THE OTHER AMERICA.***

There is a familiar America. It is celebrated in speeches and advertised on television and in the magazines. It has the highest mass standard of living the world has ever known.

In the 1950s this America worried about itself, yet even its anxieties were products of abundance. The title of a brilliant book was widely misinterpreted, and the familiar America began to call itself “the affluent society.” There was introspection about Madison Avenue and tail fins; there was discussion of the emotional suffering taking place in the suburbs. In all this, there was an implicit assumption that the basic grinding economic problems had been solved in the United States. In this theory the nation’s problems were no longer a matter of basic human needs, of food, shelter, and clothing. Now they were seen as qualitative, a question of learning to live decently amid luxury.

While this discussion was carried on, there existed another America. In it dwelt somewhere between 40,000,000 and 50,000,000 citizens of this land. They were poor. They still are.

- Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (1962).

Nothing sums up the distance between the “other America” of *The Wire*, and the mainstream of US television than the contrast between two orange couches, on two different patches of grass [Figs. 21 and 22]. Both are instantly recognisable, but are laden with completely different associations. In the first instance, the couch is part of the manic opening sequence of *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), its presence in a field next to a fountain testimony to the studied wackiness within. *Friends* was a ratings juggernaut, which dominated prime time television throughout the 1990s. Its all-white principal cast lived comfortable, aspirational lives despite their seeming financial precariousness, and their existences were tainted only by their own personal angst. The markers of class distinction between the characters rarely rose to the level of anything resembling an issue. The strongest narcotic it featured was caffeine. *The Wire* also has a couch, at least in its first season. Unlike its counterpart in the NBC comedy, it is a soiled and decrepit article, and its external location is a realistic, rather than a comedic element. In both instances, they act as social focal points. In *Friends* the couch also sits in the coffee shop where the friends meet. In *The Wire* it sits in the centre of a low-rise housing project, a vantage point from which lower and middle level drug dealers can monitor their business and watch out for the police. In the “familiar America” of

*Friends* it represents leisure, family and friendship. In *The Wire* it is a place of work, inextricably linked to Harrington’s “other America,” and its workers descended from those who accounted for a significant portion of the poor of the 1960s.

It is also a place of struggle, and the focus of a war on drugs perceived as largely valid and noble from the perspective of that “familiar America”. *The Wire* is overtly about “the policy failure that is the [American] drug war”, one that “could not be spoken to” within the more limited canvas of *The Corner* (Simon 2007a). Yet this is largely a surface narrative for a deeper engagement with much wider urban, social and economic dysfunction. This depiction of systemic failure assumed eerie prescience in 2008, as the sub-prime mortgage collapse of 2007 seemed to morph into a crisis of capitalism itself. For some, the drama became part of the vocabulary through which the crisis was understood, with its portrayal of rigged games, unaccountable institutions and expendable human beings.



Figs. 21 & 22: A tale of two settees.

While much online commentary gloried in gobbets of wisdom from favoured characters like Omar Little and Clay Davis, some engaged with the narrative at a different level. Representative of this latter tendency was Britain's *The Guardian* newspaper, which ran a dedicated feedback blog throughout *The Wire*'s first free-to-air transmission on BBC2. The best of these comments were published in 2009 as *The Wire Re-Up*. Commentary ranged widely across economic, political, race and gender issues. In a representative quote, Marlo Stanfield is considered not simply as a drug dealer, but as someone systemically generated by the "organisational machinery" of the drug trade itself (Busfield and Owen 2009, p.195). In university social science, media and English departments, *The Wire* became a way in which not only inequality and urban decay, but capitalism and wider society was understood.<sup>1</sup> During the occupy movement of 2011-2012, the "Occupy University" project in the Dublin camp included a lecture on the drama. It cropped up repeatedly as a frame of reference in other talks, on subjects as diverse as the role of the media, shadow banking systems, and the nature of the political left.

Paul Mason, economics editor for BBC's *Newsnight*, wrote the following from Greece in 2012:

Here at the foot of the Acropolis you are reminded that human beings do remarkably similar things from one historical epoch to the next. People in Shakespeare behave in much the same way as they behave in Aristophanes, and in *The Wire*.

They form elites. They launch overweening projects fuelled by the perception of unchallengeable power. They stride around proclaiming a project's permanence, oblivious to the shadow of catastrophe that looms behind them.

They crash empires and are gone. (Mason 2012)

Greece, whose dramatic tradition informs much of the worldview in *The Wire*, is by 2012 slowly disintegrating at the hands of the "unencumbered capitalism" portrayed in the series. Social provision is dismantled, mass unemployment is policy, and authoritarian state power increases, all in the interest of unaccountable and seemingly invisible financial interests. Specific differences aside, Greece's fate in 2012 seems like a more brutally pure and concentrated version of the gradual diminution of Baltimore described in Simon's Baltimore dramas.

In this context, the grafting of the fated structures of Greek tragedy and the indifferent gods of Olympus onto institutions of post-industrial capitalism is a telling

one. David Simon apparently read the entire canon of Greek tragedy during *The Wire*'s first two seasons (Love 2010, p.487).<sup>2</sup> One of its undoubted strengths has been its dramatisation of an increasingly bureaucratised model of capitalism. It has done so largely by avoiding the temptation to displace systemic failings onto conveniently demonised individuals and corporate entities (Beggs 2008). David Simon argues that *The Wire* itself is a tragedy, which lends it a cyclical quality; "that is the nature of the tragedy, it just keeps going on" (Simon and Noble 2008). This cyclical structure lends itself to a thematic and chronological analysis of how various themes are introduced, developed, and returned to over its five seasons. Each season introduces a specific theme, while the overall narrative advances in a cumulative way. Given its scope, the analysis presented here is split into three sections tracking the broad thematic and narrative developments within the series.

The remainder of this chapter examines the origins of *The Wire* and the dramatic context within which its narrative plays out. In common with previous chapters the focus is primarily on representations of race and class, the nature of work, and the political and economic order in Baltimore. The following chapter examines two central thematic threads in early seasons; the death of the (white) working class, and the limits of political and economic reform. The final chapter engages with the implications of the impossibility of reform, which are dramatised in seasons four and five. These are deeply pessimistic narratives that seem to disallow any possibility of a challenge to the ravages of "unencumbered capitalism." Whole swathes of the urban population are denied opportunity and have effectively been abandoned to the drug trade. An education system that fails to teach and a media that fails to inform, act as stand-ins for *The Wire*'s wider arguments about institutional failure.<sup>3</sup>

## ORIGINS OF THE HBO COP SHOW

A logical progression between David Simon's three Baltimore dramas is not immediately apparent. Leaving aside their relative qualities, all three are very different and, arguably, unique shows. The conceptual clarity of *The Wire*, in terms of its narrative scope, and the coherence of its argument, constitutes not so much a progression as a leap. Throughout its seven year run, *Homicide* pushed at the limits of what was possible within the confines of a network cop show. But it was still largely

recognisable as such. *The Corner* illuminated the drug culture of an eviscerated American inner city, but with a beam of light so tightly focussed, that it rarely illuminated much more. David Simon called it straight “reporting”, in contrast to the polemical “op-ed” that *The Wire* became (Beilenson and McGuire 2012, p.xi). He described the relationship between the three shows as follows:

*Homicide* was about the culture of violence, *The Corner* about the culture of drugs within a certain area of Baltimore. *The Wire* is about both things and the failure of American institutions as well. (Jordan, c.2002)

It is this depiction of economic, political, and generalised institutional and social dysfunction that marks *The Wire* as arguably unique in television drama.

*The Wire*'s origins with HBO owe no small amount to the Emmy success of *The Corner*, but it reached the air in part due to a campaign of begging by its primary creator. In a memo to Chris Albrecht, chief executive of HBO, Simon outlined how *The Wire* would allow the cable channel to turn the cop show, a staple of network television, on its head (Simon 2004, p.19). *The Wire* carries much of *Homicide* within it, but freed from the shackles of NBC's desire for narrative closure. Detectives do not find specific clues, but instead discover lots of information to be sifted through (Simon 2005). Neither are they motivated by moral outrage, or that “protect and serve nonsense”, but by professional vanity, to show they are smarter than the criminals (ibid.). In another deliberate departure from *Homicide*, the semi-gothic tumbledown police headquarters is replaced by a “corporate [and] institutional, police department” (ibid.). As a consequence, *The Wire* cannot really be considered as a cop drama at all, in many of the ways that the genre is generally understood. What appear as transgressions and refinements of generic conventions, as described above, are components of a drama rooted in the realist tradition, that happens to include police work. Even higher end crime novels like those by the show's occasional writers, George Pelecanos, Dennis Lehane and Richard Price, hew reasonably closely to the conventions of the genre. They feature one or two central characters, on either side of the policing divide, a case that forms the spine of the narrative, and which leads to some explosive conclusion or other.

Despite its undoubted, if not unconditional, commitment to high quality drama that puts artistic intention first, HBO is different from traditional networks in other ways. David Simon (2005) proudly claims that the show was made on location in Baltimore with 100% union labour, but with “some preference given to African-



American union members” to offset the whiteness of the Baltimore locals (Simon 2006b). Such a commitment contradicts HBO’s own model, which is the epitome of the neoliberal media institution. Part of its commercial success comes from cutting production costs by avoiding “the tight nexus that broadcast television had with a unionised workforce and job security”, relying “on a wide variety of workers, many of whom do not have tenure or benefits [and] who are employed by small companies” (Miller 2008, p.x). It is to the credit of David Simon’s own production company, Blown Deadline, that it created a seeming oasis of unionised employment in this environment. A further irony, given the focus of the fifth season, is that HBO is a subsidiary of Time Warner, responsible for many of the newspaper buyouts that Simon rails against (Sabin 2011, p.148).

David Simon claims that the HBO model gave him space to “crawl in” and make television, while respecting his “original intent” on walking into the *Baltimore Sun* (Mills 2007b). Another former *Baltimore Sun* journalist and writer on *The Wire*, William F. Zorzi, praised the unique way that characters in *The Wire* always served the story, rather than the other way round (2009, p.252). It became, as Rebecca Corbett described David Simon’s early journalism, a way to understand the larger city through narratives about crime (Talbot 2007). Beneath an overarching story of an entire city, each season of *The Wire* functions as a self-contained narrative. This is partly explicable by its perennially fraught relationship with ratings, with each season threatening to be the last. The third season in particular appears to have been written with the possibility of cancellation in mind. Producer Carolyn Strauss felt that it had a natural feeling of finality to it, and wondered if they should go on (cited in Rose B.G. 2008, p.89).<sup>4</sup> Despite the apparently wide latitude afforded by the HBO model, *The Wire* consistently struggled with ratings considered low, even for a premium cable channel. It averaged a relatively small four million viewers (ibid.), despite HBO’s broadcast model of showing the same episode multiple times during its first week of broadcast (Simon 2005). By contrast *The Sopranos*, at the height of its popularity, was regularly drawing audiences of fifteen million (Edgerton 2008, p.12).

While the industrial context of its production is noteworthy, David Simon insists that HBO provided them with enough space to tell the story (Sepinwall 2008). He later suggested that it was the increase in DVD sales following the end of the fourth season, as word of mouth recommendations spread, that enabled the fifth season (Beilenson and McGuire 2012, p.xiii). When more than ten episodes were required for that final season:

They asked if I wanted eleven, and I said ‘no, I need ten and a half’. If I said I needed twelve halfway through the season... I could have gotten it. (Sepinwall 2008)

There is no reason to second guess either Simon or HBO, but it is clear apparent that some narrative compression occurs in the fifth season. These are gaps of nuance rather than plot, which lend the final season a less complete feel than the previous four. The story of a fictionalised version of the *Baltimore Sun* in particular feels strangely colourless and overly didactic. This may be due to the personalised drum that Simon was beating in his portrayal of certain characters, like the managing editor. Or it may lie in his later description of the fifth season as “a coda to the main piece” (Beilenson and McGuire 2012, p.xiii). None of the characters seem to breathe in the same way as those on the drug corners, in Baltimore port or in city hall. Ed Burns also admits in a fifth season dvd commentary that “some of the subtleties that the extra two or three episodes would have given us were stripped away” (Burns and Thorson 2008).<sup>5</sup>

Aside from its argument against the drug war, *The Wire* was also conceived as a show in which an enduring American myth is shown to be a lie. This is the promise that if “you get up every day and work your ass off and be a citizen... you will not be betrayed” (Simon 2004, p.6). It is a story whose star is the city of Baltimore itself. It is an engagement with the “other America”, a term stretching back to 1962, and Michael Harrington’s book of the same name, allegedly an influence on Lyndon Johnson’s “war on poverty”, “which sought to incorporate the ‘Other America’ within the mainstream of the domestic high wage economy” (Davis 1986, p.201).<sup>6</sup>

More generally, *The Wire* was “trying to pick a fight” (Simon 2004, p.4), by arguing that:

In this Postmodern world of ours, human beings - all of us - are worth less. We're worth less every day, despite the fact that some of us are achieving more and more. It's the triumph of capitalism. (O'Rourke 2006)

Engagement with this reality, in the form of fiction, has the potential to illustrate “the interconnectedness of systemic urban inequality in a way which is difficult in scholarly works [which] tend to focus on many of these issues in relative isolation” (Chaddha and Wilson 2011, p.166). As a work of fiction *The Wire* is, in words attributed by Simon to Pablo Picasso, in the context of Bob Dylan’s *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*, “the lie that reveals the truth” (Simon 2009a).

## MEMORIES OF THE PAST IN A PRESENT WITH NO FUTURE

The political system in Baltimore is dominated by the Democrats, a fact underlined when their primary poll for the mayoral nomination is treated as the actual election. The Republicans, who hold power at state level, are worthy only of a flippant mention at Carcetti's victory rally ("Margin of Error," W4.06, 2006). The political establishment is normalised as black, an example of the post-civil rights political settlement that transferred political power in "fiscally looted central cities" to a new African-American establishment (Davis 1986, p.223). This transfer of political power also underlines the decline in economic importance of cities like Baltimore, a consequence of accelerated deindustrialisation from the Reagan era onwards. As jobs go, taxes, public services, and social cohesion go too. The new black political establishment administers a city in terminal decline, with a depleted population, and a growing alternative economy. In such a context, systemic corruption becomes almost inevitable. As Police Commissioner Irving Burrell describes it, there is a "thin line between campaign contributions and [police] photo arrays" (W1.07, 2002). Its existence draws negative attention to the marginalisation of political activism, and the "dismaying, inverse law [that] seemed to prevail between the collapse of grassroots mobilisation in the ghettos and the rise of the first wave of black political patronage in the inner cities" (Davis 1986, p.257).

The normalisation of African-American political power contrasts with the representation of a more fractious reality away from the corridors of power. Councilman Tommy Carcetti argues with other white Democrats against the ambitious "poor immigrant" stereotype that erases systemic inequality by suggesting anyone can make it if they work hard ("Amsterdam" W3.04, 2004). In an illustrative scene, the snitch Bubbles and his white companion embark on a caper that involves inducing a man on a ladder to throw down his wallet, lest they pull the ladder away. Bubbles points out that, as the man is white, he had better be the bad guy so as not to confuse him (W3.05, 2004). Detective McNulty attempts to appeal to the presumed racism of a police officer in Baltimore County, only for it to backfire when it turns out the man's wife is black ("Moral Midgetry," W3.08, 2004).

These are small, tangential vignettes that nevertheless build to a catastrophic climax when Detective Pryzbylewski accidentally shoots a black narcotics detective (“Slapstick,” W3.09, 2004). The incident echoes much of the historical and social determinism that informed the treatment of racism in *Homicide*. Numerous factors lead to Pryzbylewski pulling the trigger when he sees an armed African-American, even though his motivation may not have been consciously racist. Decades of assumptions grounded in the politics of racial supremacy, urban segregation, fear and resentment combine to make his pulling of the trigger inevitable. When two other African-American officers, Lester Freamon and Caroline Massey, are interviewed, they both deny any racism in Pryzbylewski’s character. At the same time they cannot avoid the realisation that had an armed white detective confronted Pryzbylewski, he would probably still be alive (“Reformation,” W3.10, 2004).

The past is evoked throughout season three, as in *The Corner*, as a time of relative stability. It is a more overt and sustained evocation than in previous seasons. Pondering the opening scene demolition of the Franklin Towers housing projects, Bodie and his workmate Poot discuss their differing perspectives. Bodie dismisses them as simply concrete and steel. Poot takes a different perspective, speaking about the lives and memories invested there. It is the first real reference, outside of the port and police narratives, to histories that do not involve drug dealing or addiction (“Time After Time,” W3.01, 2004). The history of black activism gets a skewed airing through the characters of Stringer Bell and Avon Barksdale. Avon chides Stringer over his past idealistic ambition to own a couple of grocery stores, and his embrace of that “black pride bullshit” (“Straight and True,” W3.05, 2004). In other examples, this history appears as a more unbidden presence. Brother Mouzone affects the suit, bowtie, and general demeanour of the Nation of Islam. A photograph of Malcolm X hangs, half hidden, in a bar owned by Butchie, a friend and confidant of Omar Little.

The most powerful evocation of an imperfect past which nonetheless possessed some form of structure and stability is expressed when Detective Bunk Moreland confronts stick-up artist Omar Little. In the commentary to “Dead Soldiers” (W3.03, 2004), David Simon describes the writers’ realisation that “something ugly was happening”, as the figure of Omar was elevated to heroic status (Simon 2007b). A deliberately pointed exchange was inserted into a later episode, with Bunk berating the stick-up artist for his complicity in the destruction of their neighbourhood. At the scene

of a gun battle, Bunk sees children play at being Omar. Bunk calls him out on his complicity in the destruction of their neighbourhood:

As rough as that neighbourhood could be, we had us a community. Nobody no victim, who didn't matter. And now, all we got is bodies, and predatory motherfuckers like you. And out where that girl fell, I saw kids acting like Omar, calling you by name. Glorifying your ass. Makes me sick motherfucker, how far we done fell. ("Homecoming," W3.06, 2004)

Bunk's admonition shakes Omar's self-image, as a stick-up artist with a code that includes not stealing from working people, or anyone not involved in the drug trade. He later comments that Bunk has given him "an itch he cannot scratch" ("Amsterdam," W3.04, 2004). Omar, like a traditional social bandit, sees himself as a defender of some version of a traditional social order (Hobsbawm 1972, p.26). Bunk's speech exposes this self-image as a self-serving delusion, and is addressed not only to the character of Omar but also to the wider viewing community.

A community meeting in the fourth episode reveals a real African-American working class community, invested in its neighbourhood, existing beneath the chaos of the drug war. These meetings also mark the introduction of the church as a community focal point. This is in contrast to the Polish Catholic church in season two, which served as catalyst for the conflict between Frank Sobotka and Major Stan Valchek. The cousin of William Gant speaks up. Gant was witness to a murder committed by D'Angelo Barksdale, and for which the latter was subsequently acquitted. When the violence reduction aspects of the Hamsterdam drug decriminalisation project become apparent later in the season, residents allow themselves to remember happier times. They talk of policemen who knew their names, and were part of the community, rather than as invaders arriving to snatch people up from street corners (W3.11, 2004). Towards the end of season four, former police major Bunny Colvin and imprisoned Barksdale enforcer Wee-Bey Brice also speak warmly about the "west-side" they once knew. Brice speaks of a "then and now," and the existence of a code on the streets ("Final Grades," W4.13, 2006). Similar conversations in season five around the death of the newspaper are part of the same type of elegy to the rituals of social continuity. While these seem to be intended as critical comparisons rather than a deliberate evocation of a golden age, it is impossible to avoid the suggestion of deterioration between then and now.<sup>7</sup>

This deterioration is principally apparent in the political realm, which seems to caricature the ideals of the civil rights era, from communal solidarity to cronyism and corruption. This sense of pervasive corruption provides the wider political context for the drug investigations during earlier seasons. In an early episode, Detectives Gregg and Carver stop the driver for State Senator Clay Davis, in possession of money he has collected from a known drug dealer (W1.08, 2002). Davis is established in the first series as a “mediating institution between formal and informal economies” (LaBerge 2010, p.553). The investigation’s first knocks on the door of the political establishment rattle a few cages, and lead to the return of a few suspect donations. Clay Davis implies that entire Democrat/political establishment is tainted (“Cleaning Up,” W1.12, 2002). When Frank Sobotka is advised by his lobbyist to make connections in black majority areas, he is introduced to Davis (W2.03, 2003). With Frank dead, the Senator appears in the closing montage of season two, turning the sod for a new condominium development on the site of the old grain pier (W2.12, 2003). The suggestion that drug money forms a significant portion of Democratic Party funds implies, at the very least, tacit collective knowledge.

From early on, McNulty, and later, Daniels, are keen to pursue the Barksdale investigation beyond the street. Daniels comments “if you follow the drugs, you get a drug case. Follow the money and you never know where you’ll end up” (W1.08, 2002). It is a declaration that could apply equally to the series itself, as it peels back layers of far reaching complicity and corruption. Where the spectre of corruption hangs over many tv narratives of drug investigation, it tends to be individualised and motivated solely by personal gain. While these considerations are also present in *The Wire*, they also serve a much wider narrative about the nature of, specifically, political power and how it is exercised.

Therefore, the pursuit of money “up the ladder” implies ingress into the political, rather than the economic realm. The investigative focus moves toward state officials rather than large business interests even though, as Toscano and Kinkle argue, the investigative move toward the “corridors of power brings the show closer to a confrontation with the challenge of registering the effects of capital accumulation” (Toscano and Kinkle 2009). *The Wire* acknowledges the state as an enabler of capital accumulation, through legislative means or the awarding of contracts, whether or not technically corrupt. However, the money trail seems to stop with elected and unelected state officials, implying this realm as a point beyond which the investigation cannot

progress. It also contains the erroneous implication, as Kennedy and Shapiro argue, “that corrupted institutions, rather than class exploitation, is the fundamental problem in contemporary America” (2012, p.159).

#### “COMSTAT”: THE WAR ON DRUGS BECOMES A WAR ON REALITY

The nature of these institutions as corrupt and locked into an unwinnable drug war is made clear through comparison with another unwinnable war. Analogies with the “war on terror” have been apparent since the first season, when McNulty asks a federal agent why “we don’t have enough love in our hearts for two wars” (W1.01, 2002). The comparisons between what Younghoom Kim (2012, p.8) refers to as two different “holy wars,” absurd in both ideology and practice, are unmistakable in season three. The federal shift from the drug war to the war on terror means a wiretap on Stringer Bell can be expedited only by pretending that his name is Ahmed (“Middle Ground,” W3.11, 2004). There is blowback from the Iraq war. Avon Barksdale’s escalating war against Marlo Stanfield is fuelled by military hardware, including grenades, brought back by returning soldiers. In an obvious reference to the Iraq war, Slim Charles argues for an assault on Marlo Stanfield by stating, “If it’s a lie, then we fight on that lie” (“Mission Accomplished, W3.12, 2004).

Most obviously demolition of the housing project towers in Franklin terrace, in the season’s opening scene, resonates with the attacks on New York in 2001. Kim observes that just as the attacks of September 11 2001, were attacks on a centre of global capitalism, this is an attack on the centre of an illegal capitalist enterprise (2012, p.6). The demolition of the Franklin towers housing project is a pivotal scene, not only because it acts as the catalyst for *The Wire*’s own “war on terror”. It also carries within it the possibility of reform. In a classic act of destroying the village in order to save it, such demolitions were intended to encourage the “deconcentration of poverty,” and the disruption of the drug trade (Chaddha and Wilson 2010, p.180).<sup>8</sup> The fictional Mayor Royce gives an appropriately platitudinous speech, speaking of new dawns and beginnings (W3.01, 2004). The idealistic and ambitious councilman Thomas Carcetti appropriates the same rhetoric upon his own elevation to mayoral office. The hollowness of Royce’s words quickly becomes apparent. By the end of the season, hitman for hire Brother Mouzone can survey the land where the towers stood and mock

the very idea of reform, seeing within it more opportunity (W3.10, 2004). By this point dealers from the towers have been herded into the drug decriminalisation experiment of Hamsterdam, which has descended into dystopian chaos.

A comment from Bodie provides the tagline for the first episode, and sets up the season premise; “don’t matter how many times you get burnt, you just keep doing the same” (W3.01, 2004). In the narrative this refers to an institutional refusal to learn, in this case in relation to the drug war. As with David Simon’s description of the triumph of neoliberal capitalism, this failure to learn seems to be presented as an unintended consequence. It is an inability, rather than an ideologically motivated refusal to understand, that the war on drugs is a war on the poor. What becomes apparent as the season progresses is that what Simon perceives as learning from mistakes would threaten the self-interest and survival of the institutions he critiques.

The institutional priorities of the police department are explored through Comstat meetings, which measure the level of crime throughout the city [Fig. 23]. The target-driven bureaucracy of Comstat is an impressive representation of how meaningless mainstream political, and administrative culture has become. The board in *Homicide* has warped into a monstrous caricature of accountability, and represents politically motivated perception management taken to its logical conclusion. There is little cumulative productivity, simply the short-term perception of it, quarter by quarter, equivalent to a stock market culture based on illusory quarterly earnings. The gap between presentation slides and spreadsheets and the reality on the streets is identical to that between the ideological self-image of capitalism and its reality. As Mark Fisher describes this process of marketisation:

What we have is not a direct comparison of workers’ performance or output, but a comparison between the audited *representation* of that performance of that output. Inevitably, a short-circuiting occurs, and work becomes geared towards the generation and massaging of representations rather than to the official goals of the work itself. (2009, p.42)

The strategy is not a particularly new one, and while Simon presciently describes its implications in *Homicide*, similar developments are also apparent in *Policing the Crisis* from 1978 (Hall et al 1978, p.38). “Comstat bullshit” (Moskos 2008, p.148) represents not only the internalisation of supposed corporate best practice. It is symptomatic of the intrusion of the priorities of neoliberalism into the functions of the



state itself, and the “combination of market imperatives with bureaucratically defined ‘targets’ is typical of the ‘market Stalinist’ initiatives which now regulate public services” (Fisher 2009, p.23). Statistics produced have little to do with the lived reality of people at West Baltimore community meetings. Perceptions that allow city administrators to limp from one term to another, trump actual quality of life. As one officer described it, “the major gets grilled if he goes downtown and they see a zero in any category. So now we can’t put zeros down for anything” (Moskos op. cit.). The arbitrary nature of statistics driven policing is underlined in the very first episode, when McNulty is berated by Rawls for bringing a “prior year case” to his desk (W1.01, 2002). Quarterly stats turn into annual stats, which are forgotten as the calendar page flips to a new year.

The worst part of institutional surveillance mechanisms like Comstat is, according to David Simon, the way “raw statistics have been substituted for more relevant evidence of good police work” (Simon 1994d). “Good police work” is a phrase he most unambiguously ascribes to the work of the Homicide unit, particularly to the lengthy investigations undertaken by Ed Burns. By contrast, as the social consequences of deindustrialisation outpace traditional policing, it degenerates into crowd control, and the job becomes deskilled and proletarianised.<sup>9</sup> In the absence of an effective and coherent strategy to counter violence, the police use arrests against street level dealers as a surrogate to show that something is being done. Comstat engenders a sense of alienation, from the top ranks down, with the bosses “joking the stats” to massage crime statistics and make them more favourable. Under pressure to show a crime reduction at the beginning of season three, numerous felonies are downgraded to misdemeanours. The only problem, Bunny Colvin points out presciently, is that actual murders cannot be made to disappear (W3.01, 2004).

The self-defeating and ineffectual nature of these modes of policing is apparent to Tommy Carcetti, who launches his campaign for mayor with a speech against the ineffectual nature of the drug war.<sup>10</sup> As written, the speech is intended to confirm the season’s central argument; doing the same thing over and over, in the hope of different results is a sign of institutional madness. David Simon suggests that this was the only time where viewer reaction so disturbed him that he felt compelled to comment that:

A great many viewers seemed to feel that Carcetti was speaking for the filmmakers in his political demagoguery at the end of season three. His eloquence, his effect on his audience, the camera gliding in on his face as he

achieves the crest of a political summit - all of this clearly indicates that it is his moment and he is ascendant. None of it was intended as a validation of his call to recommit to the drug war ... That many viewers thought so proves the power of get-tough-on-crime political showmanship. (Simon 2006c)

The point, though unintended, is a powerful one. In Carcetti's case his idealism collapses in the face of political pragmatism. Having spent the season demanding a reduction in crime, to bring tax payers back to Baltimore, he balks when faced with the political suicide such a path entails. He visits Hamsterdam with Bunny Colvin, and initially seems guardedly positive, but later appears in front of a tv camera denouncing the experiment (W3.12, 2004).



Fig. 23: Comstat, as seen from the hot seat.

This is where the contradiction between personal ambition and talent, and institutional priorities becomes most apparent. Those who serve institutions may be betrayed, but those who serve actual institutional priorities tend to prosper. Carcetti's desire to be mayor, where he believes he can affect change, demands that he betray African-American councilman, Tony Gray. The storyline speaks directly to the corrupting nature of institutions, and arguably to the nature of representative politics, especially in the context of Baltimore. To reach a position of power necessitates so many compromises that the person who attains it is often merely a shadow of their former idealistic self. "The tree that doesn't bend, breaks," Marla Daniels warns her former husband, Cedric, in the final season. "You bend too far, you're already broken," he answers (W5.10, 2008).

This is where David Simon's critique of neoliberalism, which he accurately describes as "unencumbered capitalism," is at its strongest (Hughes, 2007). Not only

does it show the priorities of the private and corporate sector invading the most basic functions of the state, it questions what those priorities really are. Simon argues that Comstat was created with good intentions, to promote accountability, but has become oppressive (2007b). Such a statement however, raises a more basic question about the nature of this accountability, and to whom the police department is accountable. In other words, which interests need to be appeased and impressed by reductions in crime? In theory, low crime rates reflect well on the city's self-image and encourage new investment, more jobs and subsequently new tax payers. In reality, the most visible investments in *The Wire* are in the areas of property development and urban gentrification, and seem to bring few benefits for the majority. The reductions in crime that the police department produces are those that look good at the end of a balance sheet or investment portfolio. They may appease voters who do not live in areas directly affected by the drug trade, but they bear no relation to the experiences of people in places like West Baltimore.

When a police officer stands up at a community meeting and points at impressively coloured charts to prove a declining murder rate, this distance is apparent (W3.04, 2004). It makes the shock and sense of the unsayable even more palpable when Bunny Colvin stands and tells the truth:

I apologise for giving you the wrong impression tonight. We mean no disrespect. I know what's going on in your neighbourhoods, I see it every day. Ma'am, it pains me that you cannot enter your own front door in safety and with dignity. The truth is, I can't promise you it's going to get any better. We can't lock up the thousands out there on the corners. There would be no place to put them, even if we could. We show you charts and statistics like they mean something. But, you going back to your homes tonight. We're gonna be in our patrol cars, and them boys still gonna be out there on them corners, deep in the game. This here is the world we got people, and it's about time all of us had the good sense to at least admit that much. (ibid.)

Bunny Colvin's storylinec introduces an element of truth-telling that, by definition, challenges the dominant and unquestionable narratives of the drug war. His intervention at the community meeting is an acknowledgement that policing strategy has been a failure, and that they should have the "good sense" to acknowledge it. The nod to the Italian marxist Antonio Gramsci is presumably unintended, but is appropriate in the context of a narrative that explicitly challenges the commonly accepted wisdom of a war against drugs.

For Gramsci, common sense is the “‘folklore,’ which is most likely to be interwoven with dominant ideologies past and present” (Wayne 2003, p.176). While it may contain much that is true it also “typically grounds consent” to the status quo (Harvey 2005, p.39). Obvious examples are the tendency to refer to capitalist entrepreneurs as “job creators,” or the still dominant idea that “there is no alternative” to neoliberal economic policy. They present the existing, capitalist, organisation of society as natural and help to naturalise the dominance of one particular class. The existence of a narrative around a war on drugs, which are “bad”, and which threaten social cohesion is a particularly potent example of a “common sense” narrative. Contrarily, Gramsci also posited an alternative “good sense,” which is constructed “out of critical engagement with the issues of the day” (ibid.), rooted in experience and often already present in common sense narratives. They are, in the words of David Forgacs, the truths that “people already ‘feel’, but do not ‘know’” (1988, p.323). This is what, presumably unwittingly, Bunny Colvin is expressing, as he confronts the reality that the drug war is a failure. It is a reality brought home to him forcibly when, driving past the drug corners in an unmarked car, a young hopper walks up to his window and offers to sell him drugs (W3.01, 2004).

The narrative challenge to common sense takes two paths. The first is Colvin’s self-admission that the drug war has failed, with the only option remaining to try and minimise the harm caused by the drug trade itself. The second is Stringer Bell’s belief that it is the killings associated with the drug trade, rather than the sale of drugs themselves that receive the bulk of police attention. Reducing the body count will lead to less disruption to business as usual. Stringer’s effort to mould the drug trade into a more advanced mode of accumulation, alongside East Baltimore’s Proposition Joe, is central to season three. It dovetails with Colvin’s attempt to reform the prosecution of the drug war. Stringer wants to remove the violence, so as to accumulate capital more efficiently. Colvin wants to reduce the harm done to the city that flows from the violence associated with the drug trade.

Peter Moskos attributes much violence in the Baltimore drug trade to the preponderance of relatively small gangs fighting for territory. He suggests that the advent of franchise gangs like The Crips or Bloods may paradoxically reduce violence, simply as a consequence of their size (Moskos 2008, p.76). This is what Stringer attempts with the drug co-op. David Simon argues, in relation to season three, that Bell “tried to reform the drug trade, [but] it doesn’t bear reform.” Likewise Colvin “tried to

reform the drug war, [but] it doesn't bear reform" (O'Rourke 2006). If the drug trade and drug war are symbolic representations of capitalism and state intervention, what does their resistance to change suggest about the current social order? They are both socially determined rigged games.

#### COPS AND DEALERS: DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS, SAME PRIORITIES

The "social determinism" of the contemporary capitalist social order as a rigged game is central to *The Wire*. As a descriptive term, the "game" has most immediacy in relation to the drug trade, serving to underline the extent to which its dynamics double for those of capitalism itself. In the oft-cited opening scene, Detective Jimmy McNulty asks a homicide witness why the victim, Snot Boogie, was allowed to play craps each week, despite his theft of the prize money. He receives the answer, self-evident to the witness, that, "you gotta let him in the game, this America, man" ("The Target" W1.01, 2002). This brief scene sets up the show's exploration of the American dream / experiment in microcosm.<sup>11</sup> Everybody is allowed to play, but most people will lose, in a game that is structurally loaded against the individual (Kennedy and Shapiro 2012, p.148). The scene is lifted, almost word for word, from a true story recounted in *Homicide: a year on the killing streets* (Simon 2006a, pp.562-563). A similar, more collective, sentiment is expressed in the second season by union leader Frank Sobotka. He tells of a shipment of a soft drink called "Tang", pilfered from Baltimore port, and supposedly the beverage of choice for astronauts. He tells a lobbyist that all of the children in the neighbourhood were drinking the stolen cargo. Except, he points out, nobody grew up to be an astronaut ("Backwash" W2.07, 2003). Both stories epitomise the gulf between the rhetoric of equal opportunity, and a structurally rigged reality that ensures its denial to the majority.

This reality is most substantially explored through the west Baltimore drug trade. Labour is strictly divided, with power resting in the hands of those lucky enough to have literally fought their way to the top. In another celebrated scene, mid-level drug boss D'Angelo Barksdale tries to explain the game of chess to two street level dealers, Wallace and Bodie [Fig. 24]. He explains the medieval power structures with reference to their own organisation. Avon Barksdale is the king, and his second in command, Stringer Bell, is the queen. In theory, a pawn can work its way up to be king, but the

reality is that the majority get “capped”, or killed, quickly (“The Buys” W1.03, 2002). The depiction of the trade seems fanciful, in the relatively well developed class consciousness of the workers, and the overt free market conceptualisation of their bosses. From a different perspective, the reality of criminal enterprise as a mirror of more legitimately accepted forms of wealth accumulation has precedent. As Eric Hobsbawm observes in *Bandits*, criminal societies have always replicated the mainstream social order, as a “bent” anti-society mirroring that of the “straight” (Hobsbawm 1972, p.38). Similarly, Ernest Mandel’s description of the evolution of mid-twentieth century organised crime syndicates anticipates the corporatisation of the Baltimore drug trade in *The Wire* (1984, p.32).



Fig. 24: “The king stay the king.”

By contrast, as the drug trade becomes more organised and integrated, the police counter effort in the war on drugs is characterised by its disjointed and piecemeal nature. With the exception of the titular wire-tap unit, there is little sense of a challenge to the drug organisations themselves, or even a coherent definition of what the drug trade actually is. The first drug bust of the series is motivated by the personal animosity of a drug dealer’s disenchanted girlfriend (W1.01, 2002). Similarly, the investigation of the longshoremen in season two is motivated by animosity between police major Stan Valchek and union leader Frank Sobotka (“Ebb Tide” W2.01, 2003). This lack of strategic clarity is exacerbated by competing inter-departmental priorities within the police force itself, first glimpsed in the *Homicide* episode, “Bad Medicine” (H5.04, 1996). Homicide detective Bunk Moreland and Narcotics detective Shakima Gregg find themselves investigating the same murder, entirely independently of each other, but

from different angles (“The Detail” W1.02, 2002). Later in the season, the commander of the homicide unit, Major Rawls, is prepared to destroy the Barksdale investigation to clear two unsolved murders (“The Wire” W1.06, 2002).

While capitalism, in its popularly understood guise of privately owned businesses operating for profit, is “largely invisible” (Sheehan and Sweeney 2009), the social order is a recognisably capitalist one. The depiction of the drug trade reflects, in an extreme way, the insecure reality of work under neoliberalism, but its reflection in the police department is more oblique. In the drug trade, the organisation of labour is comparable to that of a small to medium enterprise, but in the public sector of the police the bottom line is also relentlessly invoked. Those who require more resources or overtime to do their jobs are pitched against the ever shrinking budgets and performance targets imposed by their bosses. The police department operates according to the institutional logic of an increasingly bureaucratised, perception-orientated social order. Mark Fisher describes how, while:

With the triumph of neoliberalism, bureaucracy was supposed to have been made obsolete; a relic of an unlamented Stalinist past. Yet this is at odds with the experiences of most people working and living in late capitalism, for whom bureaucracy remains very much a part of everyday life. Instead of disappearing, bureaucracy has changed its form; and this new, decentralized, form has allowed it to proliferate. (2009, p.20)

He labels this development ‘market Stalinism,’ describing how “what late capitalism repeats from Stalinism is just this valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement” (2009, p.42-43).

Parallels and identifications, drawn across the different institutions, build into a coherent and recognisable depiction of modern working (and middle) class experience. It is an atypical depiction, focussing on groups not ordinarily considered representative of the proletariat; police, drug dealers, addicts, and armed robbers. It portrays workplace dynamics, conflicts and contradictions, but also the persistence of a more traditional work and craft ethic in the least likely places. The absence of more accepted working class voices and characters in police narratives is not, in itself, unusual. As Peter Moskos puts it, “in any account of police work, inevitably the non-criminal public, the routine, and the working folks all get short shrift” (2008, p.16). This is also the case with fictional crime narratives, which by their structure inevitably focus on the interaction between the police and a criminal class. The plot device introducing the

longshoremen of season two is their suspected criminal activities. In latter seasons, more conventional representations of the skilled working class emerge, through the introduction of teachers and journalists.

In terms of their bureaucratic organisation, the police and drug gangs mirror each other in more direct ways. As Simon explained in his initial memo to Albrecht, this inversion of the police and drug bureaucracies is deliberate (Simon 2009b, p.36). Scenes are played against each other, implicitly drawing attention to the similarities between the different institutions. It is apparent early on that some workers on both sides of the policing divide are unsuitable for their chosen, or imposed, professions. Both Detective Roland “Prez” Pryzbylewski and mid-level drug dealer D’Angelo Barksdale have reached their positions through familial patronage and pressure. The latter displays a sensitivity unfit for life on a drug corner, failing to punish a young dealer found stealing, and at other times claiming to be suffocated by the role forced upon him (“Sentencing” W1.13, 2002). Pryzbylewski, by contrast, while temperamentally unsuited to life as a street detective discovers an aptitude for code breaking and following financial paper trails. His return to the street ends disastrously in season three, with the killing of an African-American narcotics detective. He is dismissed from the force, to become a public school teacher. After some encounters between A young dealer, Bodie, and detectives Carver and Hauk, a grudging respect develops alongside sympathy for their respective institutional handicaps. This empathetic bond climaxes in the fourth season, when McNulty and Bodie share some fast food in an arboretum.<sup>12</sup> Bodie has come to the conclusion that “the game is rigged. We just like them little bitches [pawns] on the chess board” (“Final Grades” W4.13, 2006). It recalls the opening scene murder of Snot Boogie, and signifies the closing of a circle: from the naïve belief that everyone must be allowed to play, to the realisation that play as you will the game is rigged against you. Later in the same episode, Bodie suffers the same fate as Snot.

The trials faced by the police in carrying out their jobs are more recognisably those of the conventional workplace. Their underfunded department finds its crime scene investigators co-opted by a city councilman whose lawn chairs have been stolen (W1.06, 2002). The crime laboratory goes down due to underfunding (“Old Cases” W1.04, 2002). In the final season, a temporary employee destroys evidence from numerous outstanding murder cases, because she did not understand the phrase ‘et al’ on the evidence packets (“The Dickensian Aspect” W5.06, 2008). Detectives attempt to



do their jobs, not only in the face of institutional antipathy and obstruction, but also dissolution. *Cop in the Hood* describes how “Baltimore police trainees learned more about surviving in a dysfunctional organisation – low standards, leaky roofs, shortages of paper and forms, arbitrary punishment – than about policing the community” (Moskos 2008, p.22).

In such an institutional context, the wire-tap detail offers space for real, productive work, albeit carried out by an assortment of malcontents, time servers, and misfits. Frederic Jameson describes it as a “conspiratorial collective”, where effective police work takes place within the institutional cracks (2010, p.363). For Jameson, Lester Freamon is the ultimate hero of *The Wire*,<sup>13</sup> displacing some of the mystery and detective interest onto a fascination with problem solving (ibid.). Lester shows most clearly the contrast between the craft and skill of supposedly real police work, and the institutional priorities of the police department as a whole. As Kennedy and Shapiro argue, he represents “the idealisation of individualised craft’s dedication to use-value, rather than the institution’s pursuit of exchange value” (2012, p.154). His priorities are those of the artisan, as against a police department that seeks to turn the perception of achievement into a commodity.

The tension between an alienating institutional logic and the productive dividend of good work recurs across the series in all sectors. McNulty handsomely pays the informant Bubbles for information with the comment, “respect the work”.<sup>14</sup> The valorisation of artisanal craft over institutional self-interest also lends itself to a conflation of good work with the instinct towards entrepreneurialism. In the case of Bubbles, the entrepreneurial ingenuity he brings to his capers often leads straight back to the cannibalistic salvage operations represented by the metalmen of *The Corner*. In a scene weighted with more of an implicit negative judgement than any comparable scene in *The Corner*, Bubbles and Johnny steal copper pipe from a truck. They sell it to a contractor refurbishing houses with the intention of stealing it back out of the house later on (W1.06, 2002). The scene prefigures Frank Sobotka’s devastating summation of contemporary capitalism in the second season; “we used to make shit in this country, build shit. Now we just stick our hand in the next guy’s pocket” (“Bad Dreams” W2.11, 2003).

Even lower on the productive chain than Bubbles is “stick-up” artist Omar Little, whose business is stealing money and drugs from drug dealers at gunpoint. Both Omar and Bubbles were conceived as critical entities within the narrative, with the

former in particular operating as “a perversely moral force and a bridge between the police and street worlds” (Simon 2006c). As David Simon describes him, Omar alone is “un beholden to the institutions that leave everyone else in the show debased and destroyed” (ibid.). He is a far more troubling presence than Bubbles, and quickly acquired the status of bogeyman and folk hero both within and without the narrative. Omar is not Robin Hood, but his armed robberies of drug dealers “who themselves are stealing the lifeblood” from the city elevate him to the status of hero (W2.06).

In his history of social banditry, Eric Hobsbawm describes how common robbers, like Dick Turpin, were imbued with the attributes of Robin Hoods, “especially when they concentrated on holding up merchants, rich travellers, and others who enjoyed no great sympathy among the poor” (1972, p.39). In this respect, the perception of Omar is more important than the reality, and David Simon later claimed that the writers were disturbed by the perception some viewers had of him (Simon 2007a). It is arguable that they did not help matters by showing Omar handing a free drug blast to an addicted young mother, in an early, character establishing scene (W1.04, 2002). It is the only time Omar is seen redistributing the spoils of his endeavours in such a way. He is a hero, largely because of who steals from, rather than from any instinct to alleviate the tribulations of the poor. He feeds both into and from the resentment people feel towards those who exploit them, fulfilling a quasi-vigilante role.

When lawyer Maurice Levy describes Omar as a parasite feeding on the drug culture that has ravaged Baltimore, he is not wrong (W2.06, 2003).<sup>15</sup> But if Levy is right about Omar, then Omar is equally correct about Levy, when he interrupts the lawyer’s moralising with a “same as you, man.” Both feed off the drug culture and the rivulets of destruction it sends trickling through the city. The only difference, Omar points out, is that he has the gun, and Levy has the briefcase, but “it’s all in the game”. As middle school student Zenobia puts it in season four, “we got our thing, but it’s all part of the big thing” (“Corner Boys” W4.08, 2006). Both exchanges reveal the wider canvas on which the drug war is fought, its relationship to the wider economic life of the city, and why it is unwinnable. The drug trade may represent an alternative wealth producing engine to mainstream capitalism, but it is not a discreet, self-contained entity. As argued in the previous chapter, it is linked in numerous, mostly concealed ways, to the legitimate economy. However, Levy is one of the conduits by which money from the drug trade is protected and laundered into clean finance capital. Pursuing the proceeds

of drug sales from the corner to its ultimate destination is beyond the capabilities of a police department focussed on street arrests.

The depiction of the drug trade in *The Wire* seems realistic, yet the evolution it represents in five seasons, in reality took decades. It dramatises a history recounted in detail in *The Corner*, and shows a drug trade that developed from a “fringe hustle played out in basements” (Simon and Burns 1997, p.61), to become the economic engine of the ghetto, with “open-air bazaars with half a dozen crews... barking the name of their product” (Simon and Burns 1997, p.65). The increasing violence emanating from the trade prompted intermittent investigations targeted on those gangs responsible for the majority of the deaths. Both their length and labour intensive nature proved incompatible with a department focused on the production of positive crime statistics.<sup>16</sup> The discord between the two approaches is illustrated by Major Rawls, who upbraids McNulty for drawing attention to unsolved cases from the previous investigative year. In the same episode a parallel scene between D’Angelo Barksdale and his uncle Avon draws out the similarities between both organisations (W1.01, 2002). The effort to resolve the problem caused by D’Angelo’s unsanctioned murder of somebody who disrespected him costs money. Maverick behaviour creates perception problems for the police department, and financial problems for the Barksdale drug organisation.

The comparison between the positions of labour in each organisation sometimes acquires a dark humour. Labour discipline in the Barksdale drug gang is enforced with the simple injunction that if the “count be wrong, they fuck you up” (“Lessons” W1.08, 2002). Later in the same season, Ellis Carver observes to his partner Thomas “Herc” Hauk, that the police will never win because when the dealers “fuck up, they get beat, when we fuck up they give us pensions” (“Sentencing” W1.13, 2002). In the final season, Herc makes a similar observation on seeing that Marlo Stanfield’s version of disability benefit is to make the injured party do a stretch in prison, for money (“Late Editions” W5.09, 2008). Sometimes, the comparisons seem to stretch credibility, as when some redundant street dealers press Bodie for severance pay (“Duck and Cover” W2.08, 2003). While many of these specific comparisons are undoubtedly fictional creations in service of a wider argument, Ed Burns confesses to being impressed by the “organisational ethos” of the drug trade (Simon 2004, p.14). Chaddha and Wilson refer to the behaviour of drug gangs in the United States as a “business model” (2011, p.171). In a chapter titled “The Corner: life on the streets”, a seemingly deliberate titular

conflation, Peter Moskos gives an account of the trade that echoes much of what appears in *The Wire* (2008, pp.64-88).

## CONCLUSION

Throughout its early seasons, *The Wire* reveals continuities and parallels between mainstream and narco-capitalism. Trusted dealers are offered “points on the package,” an incentive-based form of profit sharing. In a time of declining sales, Bodie suggests competition between different Barksdale drug crews to improve productivity (W2.05, 2003). This becomes a reality of sorts when Stringer Bell agrees to share territory with the east Baltimore organisation run by Proposition Joe, to gain access to the good “product” (“Stray Rounds,” W2.09, 2003). These continuities become more pronounced in the third season, as Stringer attempts to transform the Barksdale drug organisation into “B&B Enterprises”, a property developer.

Also in the third season, the wider allegorical themes suggested by the critique of the war on drugs become subject to a more direct and sustained engagement. The larger context for the narrative is the seemingly irreversible victory of capital over labour, but with a sense of distance from these wider economic forces. Arguments against the primacy of capital and the diminution of a social compact are instead spun into the institutional settings of the police and government. The season also sees the introduction of two counterintuitive, intricate, connected storylines about drug decriminalisation and drug-related violence reduction. One features a senior police officer who sets up a “free zone” for the sale of illegal drugs, and the other a high level drug dealer who tries to remove the violence from the drug trade. They take place against a background of legislative and policing institutions crippled by inertia and politically locked into a war on drugs that they are losing.

Referring to the longshoremen of the second season, Linkon, Russo and Russo (2012, p.256) argue that, “The interests that have contributed to the decline of shipping in Baltimore harbour are ... distant, though their presence is reflected in scenes with developers and signs announcing new condos in former industrial sites”. This gap between penthouse and drug corner is the space where the realities of capitalism play out. The property development meetings and the advertising hoardings suggest a narrative of renewal, advancement and gentrification. The material conditions apparent

in West Baltimore, the port, and other parts of the city expose the lie within these fictions. As Jason Read points out, these fictions serve an ideological purpose (2009, p.123), and operate to support very real social relations and material inequality, mostly by obscuring them.

*The Corner* characterises the war on drugs as one against human desire itself. It is, more obviously, a war against an alternative model of capitalism, which developed organically in the absence of mainstream opportunity. This model, as Briana Barksdale reminds her son, is the alternative to scrabbling in the housing projects (W1.13, 2002). More importantly it is a model of capitalism devoid of those “ideas and values that, for social reasons, repress their true social conditions of existence” (Wayne 2003, p.122). It is the means of survival in a city where work has disappeared, especially for unskilled and blue collar workers. This is the fate that has already befallen the African-American working class and, the season two narrative argues, is the fate that awaits the white working class.

How the “triumph of capitalism” is characterised is central to *The Wire*. It is a depiction drawn from years of accumulated observations and writings about the police stations, courtrooms and the drug corners of Baltimore. This is a world in which:

labour has been marginalised, and monied interests have purchased enough political infrastructure to prevent reform. It is a world in which the rules and values of the free market and maximised profit have been mistaken for a social framework, a world where institutions are paramount and every day human beings matter less. (Simon 2009b, p.36)

It is at the very least arguable, whether or not the neoliberal “free market” has been “mistaken for a social framework”, rather than adopted in a deliberate attempt to obliterate one. David Simon speaks of the ways “in which product ceases to matter”, when “institutions themselves become predominant over their purpose” (Rothkerch 2002). Both conceptions are suggestive of passive, almost unintended consequence, rather than the effects of a “*political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites,” after the economic stagnation of the 1970s (Harvey 2005, p.19). These assumptions about the nature of the neoliberal model of capitalism seem to underwrite the critique presented in *The Wire*, even if they do not undermine its central argument.

*The Wire* is a powerful illustration of what the triumph of capital looks like, but provides few real clues as to how it won in the first place. This is not to detract from the

achievement of David Simon, Ed Burns and their co-writers in presenting a nameable and recognisable image of capitalism. It is the grand narrative that determines the fates of cops, drug addicts and dealers, longshoremen, teachers, schoolchildren, trafficked women and journalists. Contradictions emerge within the drama, which reflect those of the economic system itself. These contradictions may be displaced onto supposedly postmodern versions of Greek gods, but they are no less material for that. Elsewhere Simon has observed that *The Wire* is more interested in “social determinism”, than in the fraudulent idea of individuals triumphing over institutions (Mills 2007a). These socially determined outcomes, already apparent in both *Homicide* and *The Corner* mimic the indifference of Greek gods. Similarly, the filmic template is claimed to be Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory* (1957), which Simon has described as “the most important political film of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Sepinwall 2008). Like *The Wire*, its sympathies lie with the troops/workers on the ground, and an honourable member of middle management, Colonel Dax. The parallels with *The Wire* are obvious. The French army, an institution obsessed with its own self-preservation, executes its own troops, who are accused of cowardice for refusing to march to certain death.

In addition to its debt to the Greeks, much has been made of the drama’s structural similarities to the realist novel, particularly to Dickens and Balzac (Beggs 2008). Simon himself has drawn comparisons with the digressive narrative of *Moby Dick* (2004, p.25). Richard Price described *The Wire*’s drawing together of Simon’s previous journalistic concerns, as similar to the “artificial shapeliness” of a Russian novel (Simon 2006a, p.xv). However, *The Wire*’s realism is best considered, in the words of Raymond Williams, not as “a particular artistic method” but as “a particular attitude towards what is called ‘reality’” (1989, p.226).

Fredric Jameson, in his essay on the series, writes of how police inability to “know” the city, creates space for “ever-newer realisms [that] constantly have to be invented to trace new social dynamics” (2010, p.362). Echoing Williams’ conception of a particular attitude to “reality”, he argues that *The Wire* ceases “to replicate a static reality,” moving instead to show society subject to deliberate processes of transformation (ibid.). It portrays Baltimore as “not a closed world but [one which] merely conveys the conviction that nothing exists outside it” (ibid.). The paradox is that this specificity, combined with the transformations common to cities globally, transforms Baltimore into the Everycity of neoliberalism. For all that it contains cultural flourishes that mean nothing to outsiders, the wide focus on the “politics, sociology and

macroeconomics” of the city, renders *The Wire*’s story universal (Simon 2004, p.8). *The Wire* also exhibits, as Jameson (2010) suggests, moments of utopian imagination, which push at the limits of its socially determined narrative. Whether characterised as attempts at reform, or actions that contain within them the seeds of a more fundamental challenge to the social order, they all fail. However, their presence at least implies alternatives that the narrative’s social determinism seems to disavow.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Wire* formed a central component in a course on urban inequality at Harvard university (Chaddha and Wilson 2010). This author spoke at an inter-disciplinary conference on ‘*The Wire* as social science fiction’, organised Conference for Research on Socio-Cultural Change in Leeds, United Kingdom, November 2009: [http://www.archive.cresc.ac.uk/events/wire\\_programme.html](http://www.archive.cresc.ac.uk/events/wire_programme.html).

<sup>2</sup> Love further argues that the epigraphs in *The Wire* serve a similar function to those in Greek tragedy. They prefigure future events, while pointing back to past ones, and highlighting the characters’ ignorance of the wider narrative (Love 2010, p.493).

<sup>3</sup> This schema is loosely based on the narrative structure suggested by David Simon: “First season: the dysfunction of the drug war and the general continuing theme of self-sustaining postmodern institutions devouring the individuals they are supposed to serve or who serve them. Second season: the death of work and the destruction of the American working class in the postindustrial era ... Third season: the political process and the possibility of reform ... Fourth season: equal opportunity ... The fifth and final season will be about the media and our capacity to recognize and address our own realities.” (Hornby 2007)

<sup>4</sup> This sense of imminent closure is reinforced by the fates of several central characters. Drug dealer Stringer Bell is shot dead. Detective Jimmy McNulty is dismissed from the major crimes unit, and sent back to a foot beat in West Baltimore. The Barksdale drug organisation is destroyed, and replaced by the even more brutal Marlo Stanfield.

<sup>5</sup> “The main storylines would have had no more or no less work done on them. We said what we wanted to say on them. We would have had more time to service characters who at that point had become peripheral but were favorites of the writers. But at the same time, we talked about it, the writers, and we realized Prez has reached his stasis, as has Cutty. What redemption there has been for them has been achieved, and that’s where we want to leave them anyway” (Simon cited in Sepinwall, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> The term also has dramatic precedent in Barney Rosenweig’s short-lived *American Dream*, a 1981 series about working class America, where the neighbourhood was the star (Gitlin 1994, pp.91-92).

<sup>7</sup> Something similar is apparent in an interview between Simon and Burns and former drug dealer, Melvin Williams, who plays The Deacon in *The Wire*, as they explain the difference between the game in Williams’ day and today (Simon and Burns 2009b, p.101) and how “murders meant something” (p.102).

<sup>8</sup> Lexington Terrace the housing project on which Franklin Towers was based, was demolished on 27 July 1996 (Alff 2009, p.23).

<sup>9</sup> In 1994, referring to declining morale and standards within the Baltimore police department, one veteran detective would complain, “police work used to be a calling. Now it’s just a job” (Simon 1994a).

<sup>10</sup> A readily available real life counterpart to Tommy Carcetti is Democrat Governor of Maryland, and former Baltimore mayor, Martin O’Malley. David Simon denies that Carcetti is meant to be O’Malley, but acknowledges that he was one of several inspirations (Rosenfeld 2006).

<sup>11</sup> The term “American experiment” is used by Sergeant Jay Landsman at a wake for a deceased police detective, in the third season episode, “Dead Soldiers” (W3.03, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> This scene seems like a deliberate revisiting of the Pembleton/Roc-Roc scene in *Homicide* (H6.13 “Something Sacred, Part Two,” 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Lester’s sojourn in the pawnshop unit replicates the fate enjoyed by Harry Edgerton from *Homicide* (Hoffman 1998, p.81).

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<sup>14</sup> The character of Bubbles was based on a real police informant called Possum (Simon, 1992c), who conceived the hat trick employed by Bubbles to identify members of the Barksdale drug organisation in "The Detail" (W1.02, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> The fact that the Barksdale lawyer is Jewish, leaves *The Wire* open to accusations of stereotyping. In his defence, Simon points out that "three of biggest drug lawyers when I was reporting in Baltimore were Jewish" (Simon and Noble 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Mark Fisher draws a similar contrast with the National Health Service in the U.K., who concentrate on "routine procedures instead of a few serious, urgent operations, because this allows them to hit the targets they are assessed on ... more effectively" (2009, p.44).



## CHAPTER SIX

### **BALTIMORE UTOPIA? THE LIMITS OF REFORM IN THE WAR ON LABOUR AND THE WAR ON DRUGS.**

The decline of the unionised working class is central to the second season, but the death of labour hangs heavy over the entire series.<sup>1</sup> Recurring images of “rotting piers and rusting factories” (Simon 2004, p.29), along with the season two final montage are credited by David Simon to producer Robert F. Colesberry (Simon 2004, p.32). When Bodie meets Stringer Bell to discuss Bunny Colvin’s third season drug legalisation experiment, Hamsterdam, it is at Baltimore’s museum of industry (“Straight and True” W3.05, 2004). An iconic Domino Sugars sign appears periodically throughout the series, including in the final season montage [Fig. 25]. In a third season commentary, Simon refers to these as “industrial vestiges” (Simon 2007b). They are relics of a long departed, productive past. In the final season, the U.S. flag outside the museum of industry appears to be at half mast, testimony to Simon’s lament for the American working class (“30” W5.10, 2008). The high point of American industry may be past, but, to paraphrase David Harvey (cited in Clandfield 2009, p.38) there is a sense of premature obsolescence about these vestiges. They represent wasted productive potential in a city where people struggle daily at the level of subsistence.<sup>2</sup>

The second season of *The Wire* is based on William Julius Wilson’s *When Work Disappears* (1996),<sup>3</sup> which argues that inner-city problems are inextricably linked to the decline in blue-collar jobs. It had not originally been intended to base this narrative in the port of Baltimore. Two, more appropriately symptomatic, possibilities were General Motors and Bethlehem Steel. General Motors were not amenable to the idea. Bethlehem Steel was bankrupt. The next choice was the port (O’Rourke 2006), where the working class itself is suffering premature obsolescence. They are a relic of the past, like much of the industrial plant that occupies the visual background, and their death is highlighted in numerous ways. The idle elevator at the grain pier, the reactivation of which occupies so much of Frank Sobotka’s time, dominates every shot in which it appears [Fig. 26]. It looms large, not only in the narrative, but physically over the locales of the Polish-American working class. It forms a tombstone like backdrop to numerous conversations about a future of productive work that will never come to pass. It appears ominously in

the brief montage that accompanies a pub-rock performance of “Sixteen Tons”, the 1946 paean to blue collar debt.

The port and harbour location offers a panoramic view of Baltimore’s past, and a narrative link to traditions of labour outside of the drug trade and police force. In the first scene McNulty, assigned to harbour patrol, sails around a mostly deserted industrial waterfront. In a thematic prefiguring of the bank bailouts of 2008, they tow a broken down party boat called “Capitol Gains” away from the shipping lanes [Fig. 27]. Passing the still barely operational Bethlehem Steel mill, he and his partner both observe that their fathers used to work there. This is an indication of the importance of a steel mill which at its peak in 1959 had a labour force of 40,000 (Rudacille 2010, p.6).<sup>4</sup> Sons of former workers now labour to contain the societal fallout of the mill’s diminution.



Fig. 25: Industrial vestige, Domino Sugars.



Fig. 26: Industrial vestige, grain elevator.



Fig. 27: Workers bail out the wealthy.

### THE WHITE WORKING CLASS: A RELIC OF ITS OWN PAST

Ironically, where Wilson's book studies the effects of joblessness on African-Americans in Chicago, the focus of season two narrative is the white working class. In particular, it focuses on a cargo checkers local, dominated by white Polish-Americans, "subtly suggesting persistent racial inequalities" (Cole 2013, p.14). Cargo checking is less dangerous than cargo handling, the local for which has a mixed membership and a black president, Nat Coxson (ibid.). More generally, the depiction of community among the Polish-American working class contrasts with its seeming lack among African-Americans. They retain communalist links and loyalties that the latter, as represented, no longer seem to possess. This emphasises in an oblique way the extent to which social ties have disintegrated alongside the destruction of lives structured by regular work. It is apparent that, as well as attempting to save jobs, Frank Sobotka is also protecting a strained cohesion typically portrayed through family and community, rather than class. For older members of the Polish-American working class, the Catholic Church seems central to their identity.<sup>5</sup> It is the one-upmanship between police major Stan Valchek and Frank Sobotka over their respective contributions of stained glass windows that provides the plot catalyst [Figs. 27-28]. Although it is worth noting, as Peter Cole does, that one of the longshoremen depicted in the window, is actually African-American (2013, p.13).

Tempting as it is to see the former's experience of impending joblessness as the untold backstory of the black working class, it is impossible to conflate the experiences of each group. The early effects of deindustrialisation, in the 1970s, were

disproportionately felt by black workers, who tended to be concentrated in unskilled jobs, without union representation (Wilson, 1996, pp.28-29). The long-term legacy of this disparity means, for example, that in present day Chicago, even the poorest whites have higher average incomes than the average African-American neighbourhood (Chaddha and Wilson 2011, p.176). In the context of *The Wire* the key reason for this disparity appears to be the residual culture of work and union organisation within the white working class (ibid.), and retention of “fundamental advantages in social capital and access to political institutions that are not similarly available to their African-American counterparts” (Chaddha and Wilson 2011, p.178). While this power now appears largely useless and residual, it is power that the black working class, as part of the working class, never really had access to. What Jefferson Cowie describes as the “silent white privilege” of “occupational segregation” and “segregated housing patterns” retains a symbolic relevance (2010, p.5). This is in spite of the fact that such “privilege” was at best relative, or worse, evidently counter to the long term interests of the entire labour movement.<sup>6</sup>

The acceleration of deindustrialisation during the 1980s was devastating for the working class in general.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Baltimore, between 1970 and 1992, the city “lost more than ten per cent of its jobs,” with those remaining “increasingly held by commuters” (Harvey 2001, p.140). The stevedores union finds itself in the same position as a significant portion of the African-American working class, forced into criminality simply to survive. Yet even the manner in which this criminality is presented highlights the different experiences and expectations of the two groups. Despite their precarious position, Frank Sobotka remains committed to the union, and the goal of full-time employment for all. The money made through smuggling is funnelled to political lobbyists, in the vain hope that they will dredge the shipping canal, and bring the grain pier and full employment back.<sup>8</sup> The motivations may be different but Frank, like the drug dealers in latter seasons, is attempting to launder money earned illegally into legitimate capital.

Nevertheless, the second season of *The Wire* is the first time that the working class, as popularly understood, is properly visible. This is less a depiction of waged labour, than a presentation of a highly ethnicised, mostly white, male working class culture that seems like a throwback to the 1970s. Such an ethnicised portrayal raises potentially troubling questions. Hamilton Carroll (2012) in particular questions what seems to be a valorisation of a specifically white, male, working class culture on the

part of David Simon and Ed Burns. Peter Dreier and John Atlas (2009) also address the drama's neglect of the black working class. As they point out, in 2006, while 13.7% of black Baltimoreans were jobless, 86% were in employment, many of them working poor (2009, p.333).<sup>9</sup> This experience is mostly invisible. The majority of black workers we see, as police and court officers, teachers and so forth, are positioned within the drama to see the poor as mostly problems or clients (ibid.). As with a character like Pembleton in *Homicide*, there is little sense of class or racial solidarity between them.

Fredric Jameson argues that, as was the case with *Homicide*, African-American characters in *The Wire* are too varied to be considered in purely ethnic terms (2010, p.370). They are part of the power structure in a way the Polish-Americans no longer are, despite the latter's possession of residual privilege and the social capital associated with whiteness. This extends to the drug trade. Remarking on how easy it is to monitor Nicky Sobotka and his "Greek" confederates, Lester Freamon points out that "this isn't West Baltimore. They're on their phones because they don't expect us to be on them" (W2.08, 2003). Baltimore is, as we are constantly reminded, a black city. This produces contradictions that disempower both groups in different ways. The union has some residual political capital, but its collective power is broken. Similarly, while African-Americans control most administrative levers in the city, for the majority, the mass mobilisations of the 1960s that produced this shift are mere folklore. Their collective power has been, if not broken, then certainly demobilised. The respective positions occupied by both groups expose that the major fault lines in American society are based in class rather than in race. The common experience of both the mostly white union workers and (working) poor African-Americans is the dominance of class interests other than their own.

Despite the significant number of African-Americans in the stevedores union, engagement with the union's collective experience also focuses on its white ethnic component. Even their common culture seems largely white. They drink together at a bar, located in a predominantly white area close to the port, where the jukebox plays mostly country music. They sing along to The Nighthawks, a Washington based pub-rock band formed in 1972, which makes a guest appearance playing "Sixteen Tons." Two whiter musical genres have never existed. The question is whether there is a conscious valorisation of a "white" working class culture, at the expense of a "black" underclass. The answer would appear to be no. The white manual working class, as depicted in *The Wire*, is presented largely sympathetically, but also in a faintly pathetic

light. Their class consciousness is drawn in mostly cultural terms, rather than one rooted in mutual material self-interest. Like Gary McCullough and his father in *The Corner*, they seem to have no real understanding of the nature of the forces destroying them.



Fig. 28: Police in stained glass.



Fig. 29: Labour in stained glass.

Deborah Rudacille observes that the inhabitants of Dundalk, a white working class enclave close to Bethlehem Steel, were noted for their “extreme accents, hard dirty jobs, and retro taste in home décor... the mullet, stonewashed jeans, and dark wood panelling never went out of style in Dundalk” (2010, p.4). Similarly, the longshoremen of *The Wire* also seem curiously out of time, both in their style of dress, and cultural and social preferences. Their portrayal seems of a type with a particular expression of working class culture which, while grounded in a readily observable reality, seems to have changed little since the 1970s. While this portrayal is at times poignant, and even sentimental, it resonates far more as a resonant reflection of the point at which the

power of labour began to decline. The resultant contrast between a technologized port moving inexorably towards a minimal labour presence, and the union, seemingly paralysed and frozen in amber, is a striking one.

The way in which working class characters are presented as dated, and out of time, relies heavily on references to popular culture. Waking up at home, Nick Sobotka blares “Search and Destroy”, a Vietnam war-inspired 1973 track by The Stooges, the seminal white working class band from Michigan (W2.01, 2003). Nick also seems to correspond to the putative white working class voter visualised by the Republican Nixon strategy of the 1970s. Socially conservative, he makes his girlfriend leave through his parents’ basement after they spend the night together (“Hard Cases” W2.04, 2003), and he makes homophobic comments (“Hot Shots” W2.03, 2003). He gets on well with his black co-workers, but seems to have no problem using the “n” word when it comes to African-Americans he perceives more negatively. He can recognise common class interest regardless of colour, but only insofar as this is linked to a surviving structure of work. He sees no commonality of experience with those experiencing multi-generational joblessness, and who have developed their own alternative economic engine.

Nick’s younger cousin Ziggy, the son of Frank Sobotka, initially appears a little more in tune with the times. He is more tech-savvy than Nick, who seems mystified by the existence of digital cameras and the internet. However, he is constructed as a humorous amalgam of pop-culture references that he never gets quite right. Younger than Nick, he listens to “My Sharona”, a 1979 hit from The Knack, another band with roots in Michigan, but with far less critical credibility than The Stooges (W2.01, 2003). Similarly, returning to his car after his enraged and irrational shooting of two people, “Roadrunner,” a 1974 hit by The Modern Lovers, plays on the radio. But it is a cover version, rather than the original. Hamilton Carroll argues that Ziggy’s attempts to fit in with the drug dealing subculture rely on his appropriation of props from 1970s Blaxploitation movies (2012, p.273). His Italian leather jacket and his car, a Camaro, are respectively ridiculed, torn, and burned.<sup>10</sup> In prison, at the lowest point of his story arc he tells his father, Frank, that he got tired of “being the punchline to every joke” (W2.11, 2003).

Unable to fit into either world, he does not really exist. The world of unionised labour is almost gone, and he is unable to cross a seemingly insurmountable cultural gulf to find acceptance in the alternative drug economy. In a particularly pointed scene,

he engages with his father on what used to happen “back in the day” (ibid.). He recalls hearing his father and his friends talk about confronting scabs. However, it is described as though it were some sort of ritual, with no connection to the defence of employment rights, or wider struggles for social justice. As with Baltimore’s African-American majority relationship to the civil rights movement, he relates to this history of struggle as a largely folkloric one.<sup>11</sup>

The storyline depicts a labour movement in seemingly inexorable decline, with little left to defend. There is no sense of any meaningful resistance, apart from the smuggling and lobbying efforts of Frank Sobotka. Less understandably, for a storyline that parades the past so prominently, there is scant mention of real class struggle. Most stories are of workplace scams and industrial accidents that left people crippled or dead, the latter in particular an important reminder of the nature of their work. The real Baltimore stevedores objected to their union being depicted as “thugs and dummies” (Alvarez 2004, pp.138-139), and Peter Cole (2013, p.12) argues that “the show reinforces the flawed stereotype that unions, especially longshore unions, are corrupt”. However, the absence of struggle is curious for an occupation with a long history of militancy. In 1959, a strike by east coast longshoremen was only restrained by the invoking of the Taft-Hartley Act (Davis 1986, p.123).<sup>12</sup> As recently as November 2012, ports in Los Angeles and Long Beach, California were brought to a standstill during a strike by clerical staff from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (Mojaher and Tablon 2012). Other critics have pointed out that unions often refer back to labour history as an inspiration for more current struggles (Linkon, Russo and Russo 2012, p.243). Yet these stories are missing, even if only as wistful reminiscences over a beer. The history of the union, as summarised by Frank Sobotka in an outburst to Bunk Moreland, is simply one of surviving. He lists the litany of trials they have endured, through “Bobby Kennedy, Tricky Dick Nixon, Ronnie ‘the union buster’ Reagan, and half a dozen other sons of bitches” (W2.05, “Undertow,” 2003). Their biggest weapon is not the withdrawal of labour, but a reliance on the fifth-amendment against self-incrimination in the United States constitution.



## OTHER NARRATIVES, MISSING VOICES

The period evoked by the storyline represents a high water mark for organised labour in the United States, with 1972 marking “the apex of earnings for male workers” (Cowie 2010, p.12).<sup>13</sup> This peak was followed by a gradual and seemingly interminable decline. The paradox is that 1972, and the years either side of it, arguably represent the greatest miscalculation and blunder in the history of organised labour in the United States. This was its failure to properly organise and integrate two new emerging, confident, working class constituencies; African-Americans and women. As Mike Davis argues, the historical racism of the white industrial working class would remain the “Achilles heel of the CIO’s [Congress of Industrial Organisations] efforts to transform national politics” (1986, p.82), which “in the long run ... made the civil rights revolution incomparably more difficult and bloody, reinforced white working class racism, and forced black liberation into a more corporatist mould” (1986, p.97). The conservative attempt to unite white working class voters around a perceived common culture could not have worked without a vein of racist resentment waiting to be tapped.

However, the 1970s also saw significant counter-cultural currents within the labour movement. Many younger members, white, black, male, female, and all combinations thereof were influenced by wider cultural struggles around the war on Vietnam, feminism and civil rights (Cowie 2010). The recollection of this within *The Wire* would point to a more contested history, as the legacy of black power and economic empowerment hangs over conversations between Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell. The effect in the latter case is not only to provide context, but to reference a time when other possibilities existed, and were fought over. For those with an awareness of union militancy in the 1970s, Frank Sobotka resembles an older, more world-weary version of Ed Sadlowski [Fig. 29]. Sadlowski was leader of the Chicago district of the United Steelworkers, and ran for leadership of the entire union in 1977. His leadership of the Chicago district was characterised by his opposition to union accommodation to “speed up”, an equivalent to modern demands for “flexibility” and “reform” (Cowie 2010, p.40). He was also, more importantly, exceptionally vocal in his opposition to the white backlash against the civil rights movement:

“You can’t be a union man and a redneck. I just can’t handle that kind of shit. A guy will come up to me and say nigger this and nigger that and

I'll just unload on him... There's no way you can be a union man and a racist" (cited in Cowie 2010, p.41).<sup>14</sup>

The longer term consequence of the failure to build an inter-racial working class coalition was more damaging than a failed electoral alliance. Irving Howe observed ruefully that "the failure of the labour movement to ally itself with Blacks" enabled the New Right to enter its take-off phase (cited in Davis 1986, p.180).



Fig. 30: Ed Sadlowski. A younger Frank?

In popular (meaning white) parlance, white men were workers, "and black people and women were others - nonworkers, welfare recipients, or worse" (Cowie, op. cit.).<sup>15</sup> This sense of antipathy towards "others", who are not part of the working class as he understands it, is prominent in the character of Nick Sobotka. In an exchange with a drug dealing "wigga,"<sup>16</sup> Nick self-segregates from a white underclass that has turned to drug dealing by distinguishing himself as "not hang on the corner 'don't give a fuck white', but Locust Point, IBS Local 47 white" (W2.07, 2003). Of course, Nick is only on the corner as he perceives himself as being forced into the drug trade to make money. One telling scene in the second season sees Frank advocate for the reopening of the grain pier, because without work, he tells his black colleague, "we're all niggers". "Or Polacks," is the response from his black counterpart (W2.07, 2003). Simon (2007a) later claimed that, in this storyline, "there is an awful lot that is about class rather than race... commonality among the stevedores... that had to do with their status in society." Ironically, given the extent to which race and class are intertwined in Simon's dramas, this sense of commonality seems to be absent. Overall, the narrative fails to adequately convey a commonality of class interest, instead portraying, accurately, "two groups of

people who are poor and doomed and who have been thrown into the ring with each other” (Breslin cited in Cowie 2010, p.6). The historical problem in the United States, Cowie suggests, comes down to the fact that:

Class and race are fundamentally intertwined social identities, mutually constructing each other, marbled together into a sociological whole, but a whole that has proven to be one of the most elusive identities in American history.” (Cowie 2010, p.236)

The larger problem lies in the history of organised labour in the United States, divided against itself, along lines of colour, gender, and through successive waves of immigration. Therefore, while the seeming equation of the working class with whiteness is problematic, in the context of the decline of organised labour it stands in for a broader reality. It carries within it the truth that workplace segregation and ingrained racism not only betrayed the black working class but also eventually fails everyone. The effect is to depict a union that not only seems divided, but out of date, unfit for purpose, and unable to defend itself against the future.<sup>17</sup> There is no deliberate attempt to conflate the working class with whiteness, or further, to conflate the white working class with the left. However, insofar as a focus on class politics is concerned, the story, written from an avowedly left-liberal perspective, does little to challenge what Mike Davis refers to as the “implicit self-identification of the left as ‘white’” (1986, p.6).

The story shows union chickens of narrow self-interest, short-termism and political opportunism come home to roost in a catastrophic way. Frank Sobotka internalises the logic of competition, focussing on the relative advantages of the port of Baltimore as opposed to ports closer to the eastern seaboard (W2.04, 2003). His lobbying may seem incongruous for a local union leader, but is characteristic of AFL-CIO strategy from the New Deal onwards. This, ironically, is the period David Simon harks back to in his longing for a new New Deal (Sepinwall 2008).<sup>18</sup> Union militancy was subordinated to reliance “on backroom lobbies and campaign support for the Democrats [and] the CIO leadership willingly conceded the last vestiges of its political independence and demobilised the rank-and-file militancy that was the source of its own political leverage” (Davis 1986, p.99). In this context, unions are effectively reduced to another interest group, competing with property developers, and drug dealers, for political leverage. From this perspective capital, while still the defining narrative, becomes a mere competitor with labour in its attempts to subvert the political process.

The political establishment seems to stand aloof as the ultimate arbiter, although admittedly, as Simon argues, it is a political process that has effectively been bought. Yet it illustrates a flaw in his critique which, for all of its strengths, misunderstands capitalism as simply another “tool in the box” of social policy, rather than the box itself (Honors Carolina 2011). It also contradicts Simon’s own description of capitalism as the ultimate god in *The Wire*, capitalism as Zeus (Ducker 2006).

Equally catastrophic is a subplot that draws further attention to the 1970s labour movement, and its betrayal of marginalised, unprotected, and unrepresented workers. Fourteen women from Eastern Europe are murdered while being trafficked into forced prostitution. They are found in a container, on Frank Sobotka’s shift, by a female port officer, indirect victims of the stevedores’ alliance with organised criminals. The women are dead, but in a more figurative sense are discarded labour, and a bureaucratic problem to be dumped on the police jurisdiction least able to argue its corner [Fig. 30]. When the port officer, Beadie Russell, hears the conditions in which trafficked women typically work in their coerced roles, she remarks that “what they need is a union” (W2.03, 2003). The irony that, in reality, they were failed by a union in the first place passes unremarked. It is also a significant comment in its explicit suggestion that sex work is labour worthy of protection. Beadie is wrong, what they really need is emancipation. The account of their working conditions points to actual, rather than wage slavery. When Frank Sobotka is indicted, the term “white slavery” is part of the charge (W2.11, 2003). Immigration officials refer to the women as merchandise, and purely in terms of the financial implication their deaths hold for the traffickers. The significant investment they represent included breast implants for those who presumably did not conform to a specific, pre-defined aesthetic. Those ‘lucky’ enough to arrive alive are moved around to stop them developing sympathetic relationships, imitating practices in the American slave trade. Slaves newly arrived from Africa and who spoke the same language, were split up to keep them disoriented, making it difficult for them to communicate, and to organise themselves.

For once, the depiction of police work as motivated purely by professional pride seems cast to one side. McNulty embarks on what appears to be a noble crusade, to give a name to at least one of the “Jane Does.” Far less palatable is the way the storyline is unceremoniously dropped once it has served its purpose, which is to provide an investigative route into the larger smuggling operation. Laura Lippman refers to the dead women as “a veritable pile of double X chromosome mcguffins” (2004, p.56). One

particularly distasteful slapstick scene sees McNulty infiltrate a brothel, from which he needs to be “rescued” during the subsequent raid. He appears to have been semi-coerced into having sex with two giggling young women, who but for a quirk of fate might also have died of asphyxiation in a sea container. It is a jarring scene that provides nothing but a cheap laugh. It also wrecks a narrative thread with the potential to meaningfully explore a particularly marginalised form of labour, and sexual exploitation.

It would, however, be a distortion to suggest that the American labour movement was the primary the architect of its own decline. Beginning with the defeat of the air traffic controllers of PATCO during Reagan’s first presidential term in 1981 (Harvey 2005, p.25), American union membership witnessed “a decline in ... density ... that was unprecedented in the postwar experience of any OECD nation: the only comparable antecedent, apart from fascism in Europe, was the US Open Shop of the 1920s” (Davis 1986, p.145). David Simon also points to the mass sackings during the PATCO strike in 1981 as the pivotal moment at which labour began its seemingly unending decline (Honors Carolina 2011). There was also, as repeatedly referenced in *The Wire*, as part of the general Reaganite assault, another war, this time on union corruption. In the midst of a lost drug war, and a stalled war on terror, an FBI agent observes that “union racketeering is one thing the bureau does well” (“Storm Warnings,” W2.10, 2003). When confronted with a grand jury summons from Bunk Moreland, Frank reminds him that their financial records have been open to public scrutiny for years (W2.05, 2003). His outburst, when arrested and invited to come clean and help his union, puts the war against labour racketeering, and the reasons for it, into perspective:

Help my union? For twenty-five years we’ve been dying slow down there. Dry docks rusting. Piers standing empty. My friends and their kids, like we got the cancer. No lifeline got thrown all that time, nothing from nobody. And now you want to help us? Help me? (W2.11, 2003)

The language recalls Sidney Lumet’s *Dog Day Afternoon* from 1975, one of that decade’s most cogent explorations of the disintegration of working class identity. The catchphrase of its lead character Sonny, a hapless bank robber played by Al Pacino, is that “he cannot stand ‘the pressure’. ‘I am dying in here,’ and ‘we’re dying in here’ are the constant refrains” (Cowie 2010, p.202). Struggling for “self-exploration and self-understanding” (Cowie 2010, p.201) and with his on-the-edge demeanour, Sonny, the unemployed Vietnam veteran could also be an antecedent of Ziggy Sobotka.

For Frank, coming clean does not mean selling out his “union brothers” to local or federal law enforcement. In a heavily symbolic scene, he borrows a union card, saying “I need to get clean” (W2.11, 2003). What washes the filth of corruption from him is a re-connection with an honest sense of purpose, through the manual unloading of a container. It is a not too subtle invocation of how the union has lost its way, through mass unemployment, petty crime, drug dealing, lobbying, and the deaths in which it is implicated. The soul of the union is in labour, but it is a soul that has been lost as the power and importance of labour itself has been diminished. Even the stained glass window extolling the exertions of the longshoremen has been paid for with the proceeds of crime.

The ultimate, inevitable death of Frank Sobotka does not presage the final death of Baltimore port, which reappears occasionally as a background presence through the rest of the series. In season four, Thomas Carcetti claims credit through a campaign ad for having saved jobs in the port of Baltimore (“The Boys of Summer,” W4.01, 2006). A property developer later complains that the port at Locust Point is still a working enterprise (“Know Your Place,” W4.09, 2006). The issue of port traffic is discussed at a fifth season editorial meeting of the *Baltimore Sun* (“Unconfirmed Reports,” W5.02, 2008). Later still, Carcetti and property developer Krawczyk are heckled by Nick Sobotka and other surviving longshoremen. As Nick is hustled away by police, he yells “fuck you for tearing down the port of Baltimore and selling it to some yuppie asshole from Washington” (ibid.). Significantly, the object of his anger is the property developer rather than the politician, one of the few direct confrontations between labour and what Jennifer Klein (2013, p.43) describes as “above-the-ground-capitalists” in the entire series.<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 31: Free movement of labour.

## REFORM OR TRANSFORM?

The manner in which Frank seeks to purge himself speaks not only to an idealised image of labour, but to the impulse behind his attempt to reopen the grain pier and shipping canal. Frederic Jameson argues that this amounts to a strain of utopianism running through *The Wire*, which continues with the third season drug decriminalisation project. Frank's lobbying effort, he argues, is nothing less than a utopian project that "involves not an individual reform but rather a collective and historical reversal" of neoliberalism (Jameson 2010, p.14). Unlike many other characters, Frank understands the nature of the forces he contends with:

He understands history and knows that the labour movement and the whole society organised around it cannot continue to exist unless the port comes back. This is then his Utopian project, Utopian even in the stereotypical sense in which it is impractical and improbable – history never moving backwards in this way. (ibid.)

When Nick tells him that he may as well be banging his head against a brick wall in his efforts, Frank simply answers, "fuck the wall" (W2.05, 2003). His crusade may be doomed, but the existence of such impulses in *The Wire* points, however obliquely, toward alternatives that often appear to be missing. Simply put, if there is to be no way back, the inescapable implication is that the only way forward is through neoliberalism, and beyond. Frank's attempt to reopen the shipping canal, and grain pier amount to nothing less than a demand for a break with the priorities of capital accumulation. This is not a request for reform, but a demand that the needs of labour take precedence.<sup>20</sup>

The fact that such a project now seems to imply a utopian transformation of society illustrates how narrow the space for reform has become. In the era of the New Deal and the Great Society Frank's efforts would have seemed not only possible, but even sensible within the remit of a regulated economy. They also destroy the illusion that neoliberalism represents some kind of 'natural order', revealing "what is presented as necessary or inevitable to be a mere contingency ... what is currently called realistic was itself once 'impossible' (Fisher 2009, p.17).

Jameson may describe Frank's intention as utopian, but his strategy is distinguishable from other experiments throughout the series. It is easily an easily containable criminal act, which poses no wider institutional challenge. It does not seek

to change working practices, or the existing ownership structures in the port. It simply seeks to create and secure jobs. By contrast, the third season Hamsterdam drug legalisation experiment poses a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the drug war. Season four introduces two education experiments that challenge the priorities of the “No Child Left Behind” programme. In the fifth season, Jimmy McNulty invents a serial killer to try and prise funds from the department to investigate a series of drug killings.

In season two, the absence of a site of ideological struggle similar to these arguably speaks volumes about David Simon’s pessimism about prospects for union renewal. The fight back imagined is, if not quite individualised, then certainly atomised in terms of the small numbers involved, and isolated from any wider sense of trade union struggle. A presentation on the nightmare vision of automation is accepted fatalistically. While strike action or occupation, given the declining power of the union, may be doomed to failure, is it any less realistic than storylines of drug legalisation or a fictitious serial killer? The narrative choices of season two seem unusual, especially considering the lineage and perspectives of the drama’s principal writers. David Simon was “into all kinds of labour stuff” at the *Baltimore Sun* (Talbot 2007) including the prolonged strike that led to the leave of absence that produced *Homicide* (Rose, C. 1999). For his part, Ed Burns later spoke of making a drama about the Haymarket martyrs in Chicago, and the birth of the U.S. labour movement. He describes “how these stories have a power because it’s when men stood up” (Wilson, 2008). Season two suggests that “men” no longer stand up, or if they do, it is on their own, and only to be knocked back down again.

Writing about a 1968 BBC play called *The Big Flame* Raymond Williams expands on his definition of realism as a particular attitude toward reality. Fittingly in the context of *The Wire* the play, written by Jim Allen and directed by Ken Loach, dramatises a strike at Liverpool port. Dockers, the equivalent of longshoremen, occupy the port before attempting to reorganise its operations in the interests of labour. What Frank Sobotka was attempting to achieve through bribery, the dockers try through the overthrow of property relations. Predictably, they are defeated and the port is re-occupied by the army. Speaking in terms that could easily apply to storylines in later seasons of *The Wire*, Williams asks:



Having taken the action to that point in this recognisable place, a certain dramatic, but also political, hypothesis is established. What would happen if we went beyond the terms of this particular struggle against existing conditions and existing attempts to define or alter them? (1989, p.234)

These questions, in terms of hypotheses explored, are implicit in the final three seasons, which move beyond particular struggles and question the nature of the wider social order. Why is drug use treated as a criminal and not a public health issue? Why are children not educated in accordance with their needs, rather than with the pretence that they have a future of gainful employment? Why are all murders not treated with equal seriousness?

### FREE ZONES AND FREE MARKETS

In the second episode of the third season, Bunny Colvin stands in front of a shift of patrolmen and channels a passage originally from *The Corner*, and written by Ed Burns (W3.02, 2004).<sup>21</sup> He describes how the “paper bag” has never existed for drugs. The phrase is taken from long established open container laws prohibiting the consumption of alcohol on the street. It is a law that falls disproportionately on the poor, who traditionally bought beer from liquor stores and sat or stood on the corner; “the poor man’s lounge.”<sup>22</sup> Placing the bottle into a paper bag allows the drinker to have his beer, but also allows the police to leave them in peace, as the symbolic concealment acknowledges the police officer’s authority. The drug trade in *The Wire* is in many ways already de facto legal. Nothing shows the failure of prohibition as clearly as brand names echoing across the street, drug crews congregating on corners, or dealers trying to sell to senior police officers. In such a context, Hamsterdam is simply an attempt at “societal and political triage” (Simon 2007b), by engaging with things as they are.

Peter Clandfield suggests that, far from being an admission of defeat, Hamsterdam is an example of *The Wire*’s optimism, albeit one that depends on letting some areas rot (2009, p.43). It is a positive attempt at harm reduction, yet Colvin faces a lack of comprehension from those involved in the trade itself. A dealer for Marlo Stanfield asks one of the officers trying to move him to the new “free zone”, “Why you got to go fuck with the programme?” (W3.04, 2004) The norms of the drug trade are defined by the nature of the police effort against it, as much as policing has become

defined by attempts to control the drug trade. When Hamsterdam finally becomes established, the effects on the rest of the area are striking and seemingly immediate. Scenes of life returning to normal, with residents talking on the street and washing their doorsteps, recall the flashbacks in *The Corner*, but without the technicolour glare (W3.06, 2004) [Figs. 31-32].



Fig. 32 and 33: Life returns to the corner.

In the free zone itself, the situation is somewhat different. As Bubbles wheels his cart of consumer durables through its streets by night, the scene resembles a dystopian science fiction novel or an HBO vision of Dickensian London (“Back Burners,” W3.07, 2004). Addicts shoot up in plain sight, children fight or are abandoned to fend for themselves. Sexual favours are openly performed in return for drug money. For Bubbles, it is a vision of hell. For his former associate Johnny, on the other hand, it is a “soldiers’ paradise.” Colvin’s initiative may point a new way forward, but it is a problematic one, beset by the same lack of understanding as the policing effort he

challenges. It shows that far from being simply a destructive, anti-social malignity, the drug trade constitutes an alternative social order, albeit a deeply dysfunctional one. Hamsterdam was “made deliberately ugly, not presented as some easy liberal solution” (Simon and Thorson 2007).<sup>23</sup> It raises numerous questions, most notably as a critique of badly thought out reform, or even more radical alternatives.

The reality of the dysfunctional social contract implied by Hamsterdam is apparent in other ways. Dealers have complied with Colvin’s new laws, and taken their wares and their customers to a supposedly easily administered, defined area. They submit to the coercive force of the state, agreeing to keep the area gun free, and their dealing within the boundaries of the “free-zone”. Within the context of the inverted social order that is Hamsterdam, they become law abiding citizens, and the state owes them protection from those who are not, like stick-up artists. They demand this protection and, at first, the police provide it (W3.08, 2004). On the other side, Carver demands contributions from dealers for a rudimentary social security system, for the look-outs and runners, who have become redundant in a legalised trade (W3.07, 2004).

Yet, the wider effects of Colvin’s effort suggest something more benign hides beneath the seemingly “irredeemable toxic wasteland” of West Baltimore (Clandfield 2009, p.43). It reveals forces whose absence had earlier been noticeable but unremarked. The entrance of the local church, in the shape of the Deacon, highlights its previous absence. With the focus firmly on the coercive effort, in the shape of the police, the previous invisibility of public welfare groups only now becomes noticeable. They gravitate to Hamsterdam and offer health screenings, condoms, and needle exchanges, because what was once diffuse is now gathered in one place.

The inevitable discovery and dispersal of Hamsterdam is spun as the removal of an aberration that outrages basic precepts of law, order and public decency. Its existence amounts not only to an admission of defeat, but to the suspension of law and order in the heart of an American city. It is clear from the beginning that Hamsterdam will fail, but for a brief period crime figures drop, in reality, not just through the massage of statistics. As McNulty would later do in the fifth season, Colvin sets up a shadow police department. As with the wire tap unit, the implication is that real police work can only take place away from the constraints of bureaucracy.

While Carcetti is the immediate beneficiary of Hamsterdam, Mayor Royce’s reaction is most revealing. There are glimpses of ideals that may have motivated him at another time in his career. He sees the merits in Colvin’s project, even though it would

be political suicide for him to support it (W3.10, 2004). His response suggests that doing the same thing over and over is not an expression of institutional madness or an inability to learn, but of political pragmatism. He attempts to spin Hamsterdam as a form of harm reduction.<sup>24</sup> However, watching the police disperse the free zone live on television, Royce asks himself, “What the fuck was I thinking?” (W3.12, 2004). The reality of Hamsterdam, as opposed to what it represents, comes home to him. The narrative comes full circle from Bunny’s initial plea for “good sense” at the community meeting. The Hamsterdam storyline shows how the common sense of the drug war is in no sense natural, but spun to suit a particular political and ideological perspective.

The narrative of *The Wire* is an argument against the drug war, but the ideological nature of this war only really becomes apparent when a possible alternative is presented. As was already apparent in *The Corner*, this alternative suggests that David Simon’s assertion that the war on drugs has morphed into a war against the underclass is incorrect. It was always a war of containment, directed against the underclass. Colvin’s initiative makes that containment explicit, by attempting to salvage those parts of his district that are still salvageable. Police officers who later advocate the use of napalm and white phosphorous against mostly black neighbourhoods are not simply racist aberrations (“Unto Others,” W4.07, 2006). They are expressing the logic of a drug war that declares entire areas of the city figurative free-fire areas, logic apparent in phrases like “pre-indicted corner” and “drug-free zone.” “No justice, no peace,” McNulty shouts to patrolmen attempting to control an uncooperative group arrested for standing on an indicted corner (4.10).

Hamsterdam implies a different model for the drug war, implicit in arguments to legalise drugs and use the tax revenue raised to fund treatment programmes. It presents the drug problem as a public health, rather than a public order issue. This is how it had been viewed in the late nineteenth century, when drug use was largely limited to the wealthy (Moskos, 2008 p.173). By contrast, the war on drugs, with its focus on public order, posits the enemies of America as the poor, an implicitly racially defined underclass. This is what is obscured in the initial description, recounted in the chapter one, of America at war with an enemy within, which needs to be controlled (Simon, 2006a p.310).

In terms of Jameson’s (2010) argument, the utopian aspect of Hamsterdam lies in the threat its existence poses to a key ideological and coercive pillar of the existing social order. It implies a problem that can be fixed, but to do so means recognising the

war on drugs as a policy error. Therefore it implies an appeal similar to Frank Sobotka's lobbying request that the forces of capital accumulation change course. It poses an institutional and systemic challenge, even as it ostensibly seeks to eliminate specific social problems without fundamentally altering the social order that produces them. Historically, such reformist zeal would have belonged to classic positions of reforming liberalism or even of more left leaning social democratic perspectives. The example is also complicated by how deeply rooted the criminalising rhetoric of the war on drugs has become embedded. When a former mayor of Baltimore, Kurt Schmoke, tentatively suggested the possibility of legalisation, he was dubbed "the most dangerous man in America" (Zorzi, 2009 p.255). Nevertheless, it remains a credible attempt to think through the implications of a drug legalisation strategy. As with the failure of port rehabilitation in season two, the failure of Hamsterdam within the narrative is not necessarily a counsel of despair outside it. Arguing in the context of the failure of workers' self-organisation in *The Big Flame*, Raymond Williams argues that while, "the particular hypothesis is shown as defeated ... in terms of local action," it is not, "while it is retained as a hypothesis, defeated as an idea" (Williams, 1989 p.234). What this implies is that despite its defeat within the narrative, the function of Hamsterdam is not related to its success or lack of it, so much as to the fact that it existed at all.

Stringer Bell's attempt to remove the violence from street dealing represents, like Hamsterdam, an attempt to unilaterally disengage from the drug war. It is a similar attempt at reform within another institution incapable of it. The habitual arrest and release of expendable street dealers is an occupational reality that barely impinges on their ability to do business. The reality for higher level dealers like Bell, unlike those working the corners, is that the police presence only becomes problematic when there is a shooting. In a speech that deliberately parallels Bunny's paper bag speech, Stringer proposes a shift in business priorities to focus on physical product rather than physical territory. Both Stringer and Bunny state the obvious, but do so beyond the boundaries of acceptable language, challenging the imperatives of their respective organisations. The storylines most noticeably intersect in the attitude they take to the territorial and spatial aspects of the drug trade. Bunny wants to circumscribe the boundaries of the trade, and create a space where drugs can be sold, if not legally, then without impacting on the wider life of the city. Stringer effectively eschews the importance of territorial ownership, concentrating instead on the perceived quality of the product. Bunny creates a secure marketplace, underwritten by the coercive power of the state where drugs can,

in theory, be sold on the basis of that quality. Both overlook the fact that market expansion requires physical expansion into new territory.

If, as Jason Read argues, the ideological fictions of capitalism function by obscuring and repressing the reality of social inequality, the trajectory of Stringer Bell is particularly important. Bell is Avon Barksdale's deputy, and second-in-command of the Barksdale drug organisation. He exposes the "unstable nature of the border" that separates legitimate (property development) and illegitimate (drug dealing) forms of capital accumulation (Read 2009, p.123). Stringer Bell not only reveals how relative and porous this divide is, he inhabits it. This is the divide between the officially expressed social and moral values of capitalism, and "its measure of value, which is primarily if not exclusively economic, recognising only money" (Read 2009, p.127).

The drug organisations, at first, replicate the structures of small private sector companies, before adopting the structures of more corporate institutions. The depiction of capitalism in *The Wire* shows an evolution from primitive, to more advanced forms of accumulation (Sheehan and Sweeney 2009). The violence of primitive accumulation in particular is central to *The Wire's* allegory (Read 2009, p.124). D'Angelo, accepting the professed values of the dominant economic system, sees the difference with the drug trade primarily in terms of an apparent lack of violence. McNulty makes precisely this point to him in the second episode:

"Why can't you just sell the shit, and walk the fuck away? Everything else in this country gets sold without people shooting each other behind it?" (W1.02, 2002)

D'Angelo later passes this nugget of wisdom to a younger dealer, Wallace, who repeats it a few episodes later. The implicit irony in this statement goes unremarked each time.

When, in the first season, D'Angelo takes his girlfriend Donette to a restaurant he wonders if the other diners know how he makes his money. Donette, revealing a far greater understanding of capitalism's unexpressed values, tells him that it doesn't matter, that his money is as good anybody else's. It is no longer drug money, but laundered money that has figuratively had the stink of the street washed from it, and which now exists purely as a means of exchange.

The shift from primitive to advanced accumulation means only the concealment of overt violence, which becomes cloaked behind market ideology. A fiend is beaten for bad-mouthing the product (W2.05, 2003). A legitimate corporation would most likely

use the symbolic violence of the legal system were they to deem it necessary to punish such a transgression. Deaths at work, premature death due to illness and malnutrition, and the seizing of resources through imperial adventure represent a refining of violence, rather than its disappearance. McNulty's comment repeatedly echoes unbidden, notably in season two, with the asphyxiation of thirteen women, and the disabling of a longshoreman in an industrial accident.

While the port union is dying in season two, the drug trade is making its first advances towards a more efficient, corporate model. From the beginning, Stringer perceives the trade differently to other dealers, as is apparent when addresses D'Angelo's concerns over the quality of the product. If the product is bad, Stringer reasons, addicts simply buy more, and the dealers do better (W1.02). He also explains the concept of product elasticity to the workforce in the copy shop that operates as a money laundering front. They have an elastic product, which means that:

When people can go elsewhere and get their printing and copying done elsewhere, they're gonna do it. You're acting like we got an inelastic product, and we don't." (W1.08)

As it turns out, drugs also constitute an elastic, rather than an inelastic, product. As the quality of narcotics supplied by the Barksdale organisation deteriorates, addicts start to go elsewhere. Stringer accepts much of the propaganda of capitalism at face value. In the second season, he explains that the CEOs of major companies earn big salaries because they take the fall when things go wrong ("Stray Rounds" W2.09, 2003). At other times, he simply misunderstands what he observes. When he sees corner boys carrying more than one mobile phone, he wonders how the phone companies can operate at such a level of "market saturation" (W2.03). His question is answered in the third season, when the availability of cheap phones works to his organisation's advantage. Phones can be used for a short period and then thrown away. This makes it extremely difficult to put a wiretap on them.

Stringer misunderstands the significance of his own point about the decline of the American auto industry as consumers started to buy German and Japanese cars in the 1970s. He understands capitalism purely as a voluntary free market and, ironically for a drug dealer is unprepared for its more coercive elements. He attempts to buy his way on to the corners without realising, as Leigh Claire LaBerge points out, that there are limits to the use of money in the conquest of territory (2010 p.553). This also recalls

the comment by the neo-conservative commentator Thomas Friedman (1999) that “the hidden hand of the market will never flourish without a hidden fist – McDonald’s cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15.” To invert Stringer’s own observation; “product don’t mean shit if you’ve got nowhere to sell it.”<sup>25</sup> Avon, representing a model of capitalism still rooted in the necessities of primitive accumulation, understands this. The emerging dealer Marlo Stanfield, representing the most ruthless tendencies of globalised monopoly capitalism, understands it better than anybody. The latter’s perspective echoes David Harvey’s argument that the need for constant expansion eventually demands a reversion to primitive accumulation through conquest (Harvey, 2005a). The reality of globalisation is that markets which will not open themselves through bribery and political wrangling will be opened up by brute force.

Stringer only understands the classical models of economics taught in business school. His predicament is akin to inhabitants of former eastern bloc countries who were sold an ideological fiction of capitalism that bore no relation to the reality they were delivered. Stringer adopts the demeanour of the suited businessman looking to make huge profits from the gentrification of the city (3.04).<sup>26</sup> Through exploiting affirmative action legislation, Stringer Bell’s B&B Enterprises (presumably “Barksdale & Bell”) corruptly gains a contract for city light bulbs through the efforts of Clay Davis. The actual work will be carried out by a white contractor (W3.08, 2004). Pryzbylewski and Freamon quip that he is now worse than a drug dealer, as he is a property developer. Stringer not only believes he understands the rules, but that he can manipulate them to suit himself. Avon describes him as not hard enough for the drug game, but not smart enough for the legitimate economy.<sup>27</sup>

While *The Wire* does not engage with the sub-prime mortgage collapse of 2007, the speculative property bubble that precedes it is the default destination for laundered drug money. By the final season, members of the drug co-op are advising Marlo Stanfield to simply buy property and hold on to it until “some white folk turn up” (“Transitions” W5.04, 2008). From the perspective of legitimate capitalism, the greatest crime in the drug trade is the accumulation of vast amounts of wealth that cannot be invested openly. The laundering of money serves not only the interests of Stringer Bell and Marlo Stanfield, but those of property developers and speculators. Stringer believes that the invisible line between illegitimate and legitimate capital accumulation is one that he can cross at will. Money may, in marxist terms, be the ultimate commodity,



capable of denying its origin and moving from one world to the other. Unfortunately, it proves far easier for Stringer's money to cross this line than it does for him.

He finds himself in company far more corrupt than he is. He discovers that the drug world is more moral than he thought, and the business world more ruthless (Read, 2009 p.133). Clay Davis swindles him out of the money that will supposedly give him access to lucrative city contracts. He meets with property developers who have no illusions about where their money is coming from. At the same time as he attempts to cross the nebulous divide between the drug trade and legitimate capitalism, he is also firmly locked out. This is down to more than economic ineptitude, or bad choices in his business relationships. Because of the provenance of his wealth, Stringer lacks the political and social capital to excel, regardless of how laundered the money is. He discovers a bigger game, one in which he is at the bottom. Fittingly, he dies in front of one of his own B&B Enterprises billboards.<sup>28</sup> When McNulty and Moreland enter his apartment they discover Adam Smith's seminal text of classical economics, *The Wealth of Nations* [Fig. 33]. Whether or not the joke is intentional, it posthumously shows just how idealised Stringer's conception of a perfect free market actually was.



Fig. 34: "Who the fuck was I chasing?"

## CONCLUSION

Impediments to the reforms posited by Bunny and Stringer express the priorities of their respective institutions, although this is truer in Colvin's case than Bell's. A political administration motivated solely by its own institutional survival shuts down

Colvin's experiment in drug legalisation and harm reduction. His open challenge to the rhetoric and execution of the drug war undermines a central ideological plank of the existing social order. Drugs are not as big a menace to society, it suggests, as the war waged against them. Stringer's attempts at reform also fail, but in his case the conflict is between his corporate model, the primitive accumulation espoused by Avon, and Marlo Stanfield's variant on neoliberalism.

Both Stringer Bell and Frank Sobotka believe they can play by the rules of actually existing capitalism, and win. Stringer additionally believes that his lessons in macroeconomics, taken at the community college, and which he takes at face value, give him power. Both fail to realise that however they choose to play, within the narrative frame created by the series, the game is still rigged. Their respective fates show how the power of money by itself is limited, and goes only so far in facilitating access to the centres of power. They lack the social and political capital to play the game on their own terms and win. What proves to be their undoing is actually existing capitalism going about its business, and their failure to make the right political connections or be useful to the right political interests. From Simon's perspective they have been cut down for standing and daring to challenge the power of postmodern institutional gods.

While this image of the institutions of modern capitalism as capricious supernatural beings is extremely powerful, it renders spectral what are definable and identifiable processes. Nevertheless, it is a part of a rhetorical line that stretches back to Marx and Engels' characterisation of capitalism as the sorcerer who "is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells" (1848, p.8). Where Marx and Engels differ is in their simultaneous conviction that while capitalism is a system not amenable to direction by individuals, neither is it impervious to challenge. *The Wire* speaks about institutions, but in such a way that they appear to shed earthly shackles to become actually, rather than figuratively, phantasmal. As with the triumph of unencumbered capitalism itself, it implies a system that human beings have little choice but to endure. The perspective opened up, while not nihilistic, is pessimistic and fatalistic.<sup>29</sup> This pessimism informs the fates suffered by Stringer Bell, Bunny Colvin, and to a lesser extent, Democratic mayoral candidate, Tommy Carcetti.

In a contrived way, the evolution of the drug trade as presented in *The Wire* mirrors the history of capitalism. It shows a system of accumulation of increasing complexity, which is eventually supplanted by the emergence of a more ruthless model.

A relatively nuanced model, in which residual elements like honour, family and community co-exist, is replaced by Marlo Stanfield. Avon Barksdale, while willing to resort to violence to maintain territorial control, is possessed of a code not dissimilar to that of Omar Little. When Dennis “Cutty” Wise tells him he wishes to walk away, Avon allows it, without repercussions, something inconceivable in Marlo’s organisation (W3.06).<sup>30</sup> When Cutty asks for a donation to set up a neighbourhood boxing club, Avon bankrolls the whole enterprise with the indulgence of a feudal lord (W3.11). The incident also illustrates how much money is accumulating in the alternative economy, that Avon can hand over such a relatively small amount with a derisive laugh.

When Avon, who uses the word “businessman” with contempt, describes himself as “just a gangster, I suppose” (W3.06), it represents a deliberate inversion of conventional morality. When Stringer, the businessman, violates a long-standing Sunday truce in an attempt to kill Omar while the latter is taking his grandmother to church, Avon is outraged (3.09). It is Avon who understands that different games have different rules. When Stringer tries to take out a contract on Clay Davis, Avon points out the difference between murder and assassination (3.11). In place of Avon’s paternalistic feudalism rooted in territorial conquest and defence, Stringer desires what he thinks is the order of a classical free market based on consent. Marlo embodies the worst of both; he is the soldier and the ruthless businessman. He is the only dealer who refuses to enter Hamsterdam, and remains on the corners. When the free-zone is disbanded and large numbers of low level dealers are temporarily locked up, he becomes the dominant presence in West Baltimore.

The prosperity of those involved in the drug trade is at least predicated on the production and supply of a tangible commodity. However, access to markets where this can be sold is predicated on control of territory, and on the credible threat of the fist, hidden behind the invisible hand of the market. By contrast, what the police and political administrations in *The Wire* produce is their own authority, as guardians of the existing social order. In both institutions, authority rests on their credibility as a coercive force. Avon believes that Stringer’s strategy undermines the Barksdale organisation, and that any concessions granted to Marlo Stanfield make them look weak. Similarly, Officers Hauk and Colliccio are disgusted by what they see as Colvin’s weakness in capitulating to the drug gangs (W3.08). In particular, the survival of institutions essential to the maintenance of economy and state is inextricably linked with the survival of individuals within them. Sometimes venal and corrupt, the “bosses”

are simply bending with the wind, and attempting to survive and protect their own positions within a crumbling social order. An individual like Colvin may be sacrificed, but this has less to do with safeguarding the supposed effectiveness of the police department, than with protecting its credibility and authority.

The Greek gods were, of course, invented by the Greeks themselves as a means to make sense of, and survive in, an arbitrary and cruel material environment. *The Wire* suggests that modern institutions operate similarly. They are never more resistant to reform than when their own attempts to navigate contingent, constantly shifting priorities, in the name of institutional self-preservation, are threatened. *The Wire*'s third season presents two audacious and counterintuitive storylines that not only cut across societal, political, and ideological common sense, but present alternatives. They both fail, because they are attempts at reform that pay little heed to the social, economic and political context that determines them. They are utopian in that they oppose solutions rooted in 'good sense' to 'common sense' narratives that endure because they are important to the survival of institutions both legal and illegal. They are also utopian in the sense that the space for reform has become so narrow that anything beyond the most superficial and cosmetic policy changes are impossible. The final seasons explore the implications for the poor and disenfranchised of a social order defined purely by economic contingencies, without a trace of a social contract. They also move laterally to explore levels of complicity in this disenfranchisement, into both public and corporate institutions, education and journalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Producer Robert Colesberry wanted to include the images of rotting piers (Simon 2004, p.29) and was also also Colesberry author of season 2 montage (Simon 2004, p.32).

<sup>2</sup> The images echo those in Alan Bleasdale's "Boys From the Black Stuff", mentioned in the previous chapter as a precedent. In its final episode, a retired dockworker sits amidst the rusting cranes of a new deserted dock side and laments the death of his "class".

<sup>3</sup> See duPre (2009) and Bennett (2010).

<sup>4</sup> A predominantly white working class community grew up around the mill. From its beginnings the mill had also been a source of relatively well-paid employment for African-Americans. Sparrows Point was "the most racially diverse steel mill in the country – but in those days diversity meant native-born whites on top, immigrants and blacks on the bottom" (Rudacille 2010, p.5).

<sup>5</sup> Mike Davis (1986, p.90) points out that this reorientation of the ethnic eastern European working class toward the Catholic Church followed the Soviet occupation of eastern Europe following the second world war, and that "the Cold War dramatically strengthened the hegemony of Catholicism and right wing ethnic nationalism in broad sectors of the industrial working class" (1986, p.94).

<sup>6</sup> Melvin Leiman (1993, p.163) points out that areas where racism was a factor tended to have lower wages and lower union density than areas where it was not.

<sup>7</sup> A 2012 article in *Salon* describes the globalisation led downsizing of the period as "a locomotive," with the American working class tied to the tracks in its path (Leonard 2012).

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Sobotka's character is partly based on Walt Benewicz, a real-life longshoreman, who at the time was president of a Baltimore local of the International Longshoremen's Association (Alvarez 2004, p.133).

<sup>9</sup> However these total figures contrast markedly with those from Princeton sociologist Bruce Westergren, who in 2006 found that almost half of black males in Baltimore were unemployed (Westergren cited in Rose, B.G. 2008).

<sup>10</sup> His name most likely refers to the hapless comic strip character of the same name, who, like Ziggy Sobotka also had a pet duck. A second, period consistent, but less plausible reference is to Ziggy Stardust, David Bowie's musical alter ego from 1972.

<sup>11</sup> The choice of music in the union office is also consistent with the average age of its older members. White singers from the fifties and sixties like Lesley Gore and Connie Francis provide the soundtrack. Yet even when the musical palette is expanded beyond the recognisably white, it is to black music deemed most acceptable by white audiences of the 1960s and early 1970s. A practical joke to try and persuade Ziggy he is being sued for paternity has as its hook, the Supremes' Motown hit, "Love Child". Other white characters, like Pryzbylowski (W4.02, "Soft Eyes," 2006), and a port authority cop from the second season listen to country music (W2.12, "Port in a Storm," 2003).

<sup>12</sup> The Taft-Hartley Act was introduced in the United States in 1947 to limit the powers of labour unions, by banning secondary picketing, insisting that they declare themselves as anti-communist, barring supervisors from union activities etc.

<sup>13</sup> 1972 was also the year of The Nighthawks' formation (The Nighthawks, no date). The banner behind them as they play in the bar in episode 2.01 also proclaims "celebrating thirty years."

<sup>14</sup> Edward Sadlowski remains active in the labour movement and has a social media presence at: <https://www.facebook.com/edward.a.sadlowski> [Accessed 9 July 2012].

<sup>15</sup> (Even Ed Sadlowski, for all of his promotion of inter-racial class solidarity, seemed to embody many of the old sexist and patriarchal union stereotypes when it came to women (Cowie 2010, p.41).)

<sup>16</sup> Wigga is the equivalent of "nigga", used by wannabe white gangsters who have adopted the outward trappings of what they perceive as the African-American gangster culture.

<sup>17</sup> The concentration on a predominantly white group of characters was also arguably the reason why the second season had the highest viewing figures of the show's entire run: "It certainly helped. There are limits to empathy in this country" (O'Rourke 2006). Chaddha and Wilson cite studies that underpin the veracity of such a comment, showing high percentages who believe that African-Americans are to blame for their own problems (2011, p.165).

<sup>18</sup> According to Margaret Talbot, "the Simons were committed New Deal Democrats" (2007).

<sup>19</sup> "In season two", David Simon told Meghan O'Rourke:

We said if someone didn't fix the [grain pier](#), someone would come along and turn it into condos. At the time it was sitting idle. By the time we were working on Season three, they had sold it, and now there are condos over there. The bar where we had the stevedores hang out is being remodelled for a yuppie fern joint." (O'Rourke 2006)

<sup>20</sup> "In Season 2, we said if someone didn't fix the grain pier [a shipping facility on the Baltimore harbour], someone would come along and turn it into condos. At the time it was sitting idle. By the time we were working on Season 3, they had sold it, and now there are condos over there. The bar where we had the stevedores hang out is being remodeled for a yuppie fern joint" (O'Rourke 2006).

<sup>21</sup> "I am very proud of the paper-bag soliloquy from Colvin in season three. That was Richard Price, but he was channeling Ed Burns directly from *The Corner*" (Simon 2006c).

<sup>22</sup> Richard Price, who wrote this episode, uses the same term in *Clockers* (1992).

<sup>23</sup> Richard Price describes the season storyline as one in which "a utopia becomes a dystopia" (Price 2007).

<sup>24</sup> David Simon suggests that a town in Miami actually tried a similar approach (Simon and Thorson 2007).

<sup>25</sup> He really says, "territory don't mean shit if you haven't got the product."

<sup>26</sup> In season two, Nick Sobotka viewed a house that belonged to his aunt only to find it beyond his price range, in an area re-designated for higher income groups (2.05).

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<sup>27</sup> The corruption of the planning process as depicted is rooted in Baltimore's history. David Harvey refers to the siphoning of public funds earmarked for urban development to property developers instead of the people they were intended to benefit (2001 p.156).

<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the laundering of dirty drug money into clean capital is just as important for the corporate sector as it is for those like Stringer Bell and Marlo Stanfield. In 2011 David Simon related an anecdote concerning Felicia "Snoop" Pearson, who played an enforcer in Marlo's gang. When on bail for an alleged drugs-related charge she was required to wear an ankle bracelet which cost \$400 dollars a week, to be paid to a private company (Simon, 2011). While "Snoop" denied the charges it is not difficult to see how in other circumstances this would involve money from the drug economy going straight into the "legitimate" one.

<sup>29</sup> Descriptions of *The Wire* as nihilistic have come from both conservative and liberal critics. See (Coates 2008), (Salam 2008) and (Klein cited in Ackerman 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Cutty, like Proposition Joe, represents something of an older tradition. The stars and stripes hangs in the gym, an ironic touch in a country that has no use for him. Cutty's story is one of the few narratives of redemption. He starts work at a landscaping company, working with Mexican immigrants. His boss explains that if "you want to stay on the straight... there ain't no big reward, it's this right here" (3.04).

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE: UNENCUMBERED CAPITALISM AND THE WAR ON DRUGS.**

Season three explores the limits of reform, revealing a political and economic system where entrenched institutional priorities, specifically above middle management level, restrain meaningful change. The final seasons are ostensibly an exploration education and the media respectively, to explore how these institutional interests are sustained, materially and ideologically. More importantly, both representations are elements in the dramatisation of seemingly terminal social entropy in an advanced industrial country. In marxist terms this irresolvable conflict would be expressed as the contradiction between the forces of production (what is physically and technologically possible), and the relations of production (the controlling interests served by restraining those productive possibilities). While David Simon may not express it in these terms, this is what a social order that has reached the limits of reform looks like. Inertia fosters societal entropy as those institutions charged with serving the public become increasingly disengaged and retreat into perception management.

Continuing the theme of revealing parallels between different institutions, the first episode of the fourth season counterpoints a police counter-terrorism seminar with a teaching seminar. They share similar corporate style buzz words and slide presentations [Figs. 34-35]. A terrorist “soft target” becomes the “hot zone” in a classroom, where students congregate (W4.01, 2006). Cops and teachers react with cynicism and anger, asking how a teacher should react when a student throws textbooks through a window, or who would notice if a bomb were to explode in West Baltimore. As with the school system and the police, scene doubling illustrates the replication and overlapping of priorities between institutions. In the fifth season a journalist wonders what it would feel like to work for a real newspaper. McNulty wonders what it would feel like to work in a real police department (W5.01, 2008). The newspaper is the first depiction of a conventional private sector corporate environment, as opposed to one that is simply aping corporate systems and strategies. Meetings conducted by management are peppered with clichés. When the boss tells the staff that they will have to learn to do “more with less... moving forward” he is echoing the substance of what police officers have been told earlier (ibid.).

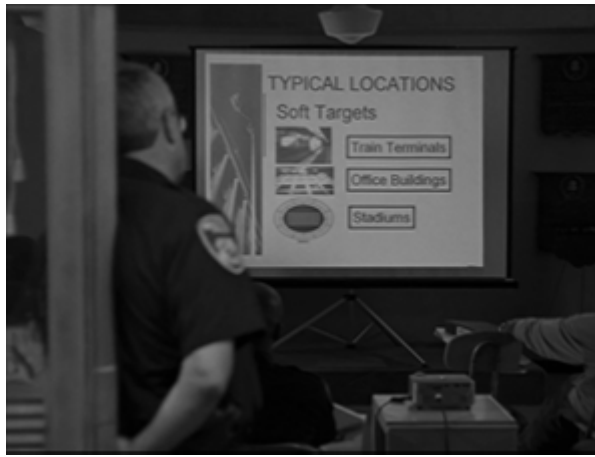


Fig. 35: "Soft targets."



Fig. 36: "Hot zones."

These parallels merge in two storylines where, Leigh Claire La Berge (2010, p.548) argues, “the production of representation itself is brought into view”. The first is McNulty’s invention of a serial killer to obtain funds to pursue Marlo Stanfield for a series of murders. The second is the *Baltimore Sun*’s enthusiastic embrace of this fiction, and how it is augmented by reporter Scott Templeton’s invention of phone calls from the non-existent killer. When McNulty’s ruse is revealed Carcetti’s aide, Norm Wilson, chuckles admiringly at how the police have co-opted strategies associated with the political establishment. “They manufacture an issue to get paid,” he says. “We manufacture an issue to get elected” (W5.10, 2008).

The comment also reveals how, even were the political establishment so inclined, the space for progressive political action has shrunk to empty ideological posturing. The police department has become so invested in perception management and performance measurement that it views homicides as procedural disruptions rather



than loss of life. The main newspaper has been so depleted by redundancies and cost cutting that it is incapable of adequately covering the city it is charged with explaining to its readers. All of these elements combine into an almost total institutional disconnect from the “other” America, which increasingly comes to resemble another country.

#### PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY: HOW DO YOU LEARN IF YOU NEVER LEARN?

The theme of education has, like the political context, been present throughout the series, with mentoring roles adopted by older and more experienced dealers, users and cops. In the first season, D’Angelo Barksdale schools younger dealers Wallace and Bodie as to the provenance of the chicken nugget. He dismisses Wallace’s outrage at the realisation that the person who invented the chicken nugget had not been paid for his idea. “It ain’t about right,” D’Angelo points out, “it’s about money” (W1.02, 2002). He explains the medieval power structures of chess in terms of the drug trade, with Avon as the king, Stringer as the queen, and the pawns as low level dealers (W1.03, 2002). The guy in McDonald’s is still in the basement, “thinking up new ways to make the fries taste better,” and most pawns will never get to be king. Proposition Joe makes reference to his attempts to school Marlo, who proves resistant (W4.08, 2006). Bubbles fulfils a mentoring role throughout, first with Johnny, who dies in Hamsterdam, and later with Sharrod. Sharrod joins “Bubbles’ depo” (a mobile shop operating from a shopping trolley) as an “intern”, learning the trade in bit-sized chunks of corporate jargon about glass ceilings (W4.02, 2006). In the police department Lester Freamon takes the misfit Pryzbylewski under his wing, and he becomes a public school teacher when he is sacked for shooting a black officer.<sup>1</sup>

“Kids are going to get educated, you can’t tell where,” according to Ed Burns (Simon and Noble 2008). The season draws heavily from his experiences as a public school teacher in Baltimore in the 1990s, and the depiction of the inner-city education system in *The Corner* (Simon and Burns 1997). In the first class he taught, thirteen of the 220 students had been shot, two of them twice (Wilson, 2008). In the season’s theme establishing opening scene, a shop assistant explains the finer points of a nail gun to Snoop, a member of Marlo Stanfield’s group. He is unaware of the macabre purpose for it is intended.

As a former detective, Pryzbylewski is an important link between the statistics driven police department and the public school system. He arrives to Edward Tilghman Middle School full of enthusiasm and self-belief. During a meeting about upcoming standardised tests, he is finally disabused of the notion that this institution is much different from the one he has just left. He turns to the teacher beside him and says “juking the stats.” When she looks confused, he explains that “you juke the stats and majors become colonels” (W4.09, 2006). The reality of the ‘No Child Left Behind’ programme is to create an illusion of progress, not for the sake of the children, but to secure federal school funding. “Teaching to the test” is the educational equivalent of “juking the stats,” where education is sacrificed to the imparting of a particular type of rote learning. In Baltimore, “they redefine failure as success” (Simon and Noble 2008a), in this case when a sufficient number of children are reading at two years below their ideal level. Pryzbylewski’s realisation that the standard curriculum is useless with the students prompts “experiments with computers and his repudiation of the exam evaluation system” (Jameson 2010, p.372). For Jameson, Pryzbylewski’s teaching methods represent another utopian endeavour, impossible within the current system (ibid.).

The education storyline, like the drug decriminalisation storyline of the previous season, challenges a sustaining fiction of the social order. On this occasion it is the conceit that the public school system exists primarily to educate its charges. Again, Bunny Colvin is the conduit for this challenge when he is recruited by researchers from Johns Hopkins’ University. “The college boys loved that [Hamsterdam] mess,” says the Deacon, acting as interpreter between Colvin and the academic, Parenti, as the latter explains a project that attempts to segregate and re-socialise troubled children (“Home Rooms,” W4.03, 2006). Unlike Pryzbylewski’s realisation of fundamental dysfunction, the study begins with the more compartmentalised assumption that learning is impeded by the presence of the disruptive students.

Again, larger determining factors are explored alongside more less obviously systemic ones, in this case the idea that if disruptive students could be removed then things would improve. Bunny draws a contrast between what he described as the obedient “stoop kids” and the disobedient “corner kids”. The former children stay on the front step when their parents tell them, the latter do not. Some of the latter suffer from conditions more common to war zones, including attention deficit disorder, post-traumatic stress, and clinical depression.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the innate intelligence of the

children slowly emerges, notably during a conversation about life on the drug corners. Namond Brice admonishes Colvin for hypocrisy, rather as Levy did with Omar, claiming that Colvin's livelihood as a police officer was dependent on the drug trade. He draws out the hypocrisy between the good behaviour expected of them, and bad behaviour in wider society, like the use of steroids in sport, and the Enron scandal. Another student, Zenobia Dawson, offers the insight that "we got our thing, but it's just part of the big thing" (W4.08, 2006), restatement of Omar's comment to Levy that "it's all in the game" (W2.06, 2003).

Both teaching experiments are sacrificed to "Teach to the Test". Like Hamsterdam, they are failures, but represent a direct challenge to the priorities of a school system that redefines failure as success. As with the temporary suspension of the drug war, the removal of troubled children from the classroom is an admission of failure, despite improvements in behaviour and academic achievement.

The fourth season follows four "corner kids", one of whom is part of the experimental programme. Namond Brice, the son of an imprisoned member of the now destroyed Barksdale organisation, inhabits a contradictory position. He plays with children of his own age, but as a child of the drug trade he has something approaching a defined career, social status, and more money than most. In the first episode, while doling out money for ice cream, he initially refuses to give any to Duquan "Dookie" Weems, the child of drug addicts. Relationships between the children expand the allegory of drug trade within capitalism, by revealing class relations between them as a negative reflection of the mainstream. The wealth of Namond and his mother rests on the exploitation of families like Dookie's. In the conventional economy, wages are used partly to raise the next generation of workers. In the drug trade, the poverty exacerbated by addiction guarantees another generation of addicts, or at the very least, a reserve pool of labour. The class distinctions between the children are far more visible in this context than in dramas that show children in more conventional class locations. Namond's mother, De'Londa, refuses to let the unkempt and uncared for Dookie into her house, even though her wealth rests on the addictions responsible for Dookie walking around in unwashed clothes.<sup>3</sup>

De'Londa seems like a younger version of Brianna Barksdale, who combined toughness engendered by a life in "the game" with old-fashioned loyalty to family and a criminal code. By contrast, De'Londa is the product of an environment where such refinements have been swept away. Acquisition and survival are the only

considerations, and it produces figures like Marlo Stanfield. She also seems to embody every negative stereotype of the ghetto matriarch, and represents a caricature of black parenting largely absent in previous seasons. In this context it needs to be acknowledged that African-American parental figures in general are absent from previous seasons. In an interview with David Mills, David Simon engaged with De'Londa's character explicitly from the perspective of parental responsibility. He describes the parenting in season four as "abysmal". He points out that the central argument in season four is that both the city and wider society in West Baltimore "really had no use for the class of African-American ... that they were pretending to educate" (Mills 2007a). He then follows this up by pointing out:

However, that people are often complicit in degrading *themselves* is also in *The Wire* at points. And in this very key season where we were looking at these kids, we were very careful to include the parenting. With the exception of Randy's foster mom – and telling you it's a foster mom – and ultimately Colvin and his wife, taking their empty nest and making a place for Namond, the parenting is abysmal...

All of these societal hypocrisies... and [the] ... reduced need for these kids from West Baltimore ... may be true. That does not absolve you, in the sense of being parents with personal responsibility, personal choice, from exercising your own demand for dignity and existential purpose and relevance for you and your kids. We were saying both simultaneously (ibid.).

This particular thread was informed by the old saw, attributed to numerous people that "the sign of a first-rate mind is the ability to hold two seemingly opposing ideas at the same time." Perhaps, but it is also a sign of cognitive dissonance. As pointed out in earlier chapters this is, in fact, not the first time this idea has appeared. A social order beyond reform and a political system that has bought by and which has adopted the priorities of finance capitalism has no use for large swathes of the population. The only thing that matters in the absence of a systemic challenge is how individuals react, by exerting for "existential purpose and relevance". What is new in this expression of it is the addition of what seems to be an explicitly moral exhortation, rooted in parental responsibility.

Elizabeth Ault takes issue with Simon, arguing that such appeals to "personal responsibility" are central to neoliberal appeals to morality (2012, p.7). She contrasts the depictions of De'Londa Brice and Michael Lee's mother, Raylene, with the relative

complexity of both Briana Barksdale and Donette, D'Angelo's girlfriend (2012, p.12).<sup>4</sup> The portrayal of Raylene in particular conforms to the most unreflective and ill-considered of drug fiend stereotypes. She is demanding, barely sentient, and sells groceries to feed her drug addiction.

Whether or not acceptance of this neoliberal truism is deliberate, it slips a favourite conservative alibi into a narrative largely about "social determinism" (Mills 2007a). However, the type of "personal responsibility," as expressed in *The Wire* is not unique to neoliberalism. A version of the same idea appears in season two, with Nick Sobotka's contempt for "wigga" drug dealers. It is also apparent in the division between the respectable and rough working class described in *Policing the Crisis* (Hall, et al. 1978).<sup>5</sup> This definition of personal responsibility is rooted less in prescriptions to social control than in a refusal to countenance activities that undermine community and class; petty thievery, vandalism, scabbing etc. It is an explicitly moral injunction not to make things worse than they are.

In addition, if *The Wire* is underpinned by the idea that the game is "rigged", then it is difficult, in pragmatic terms, to criticise those who try to play it in their own interests. Problematic as De'Londa's character is, especially as there is no countervailing parental figure, she is a woman who has lived her life in the midst of the drug trade. She has grown up in an environment defined by the constant scrabbling for survival, as Brianna Barksdale pointed out to her son, and which has morphed into a war of all against all. From this perspective, her character is less problematic than, for example, *The Sopranos'* Carmela, who intellectually denies the origin of her wealth, even as she enjoys its fruits.

The negative judgment implicit in the storyline presents a striking contrast to *The Corner*, which avoids taking a position on the lives of its subjects. It did so by deliberately and necessarily focussing on a family that remained functional and, most importantly, capable of communicating its predicament. The precedent of *The Corner* raises another curious omission. It is noteworthy that nowhere in *The Wire* is there an equivalent to Ella Thompson, a working woman who maintains a stable home, and whose surviving child avoids the corner culture. Simon admits that the only functioning parental models in the season are non-biological (Mills 2007a). Namond is removed from his mother in a way that seems to replicate the most worn out of Dickensian and liberal clichés. Bunny Colvin agrees to foster Namond after visiting the child's father in prison, a necessary act of deference to the patriarchal and macho culture of the corner.

Of course, being *The Wire* this rescue is immediately negated by the fate of another child, Randy Wagstaff. After his foster mother, another functional non-biological parent, is hospitalised, he is banished to a group foster home, Baltimore's equivalent of the Victorian orphanage (W4.13, 2006).<sup>6</sup>

Another contradiction that becomes clearer in *The Wire's* final seasons is between its expansive narrative, and the stunted, prematurely curtailed lives of those it tries to represent. This is particularly true in terms of the corner children. Two contrasting mentoring relationships are indicative of their restricted choices. In the first two seasons, both Wallace, a young dealer, and his middle management mentor, D'Angelo Barksdale, are murdered (W1.12, 2002 and W2.06, 2003). In the fourth season Pryzbylewski takes Dookie, the child of drug addicts, under his wing. Both survive, but despite Dookie's brief flourishing under his teacher's tutelage, he is last seen shooting up, cast adrift after his short period of stability. He is unsuited to the corner, but neither is he capable of moving beyond it. "How do you get from here to the rest of the world?" he asks former gang enforcer turned boxing coach, Dennis "Cutty" Wise. It is possibly the most incisive line of the entire series, capturing all of the invisible structural obstacles that constitute the rigged game announced with the death of Snot Boogie. It also underlines the gulf confronted by Pryzbylewski and Colvin in their respective attempts to break with an irrelevant curriculum. It is also a revisiting of the Rock-Rock storyline in *Homicide*, but without the unconvincing, network television inspired epiphany on the shore of Chesapeake Bay. The fates of many characters in *The Wire* recall Charles S. Dutton's preliminary description of the corner, as a place of death, whether from "the slow death of addiction, or the suddenness of gunshots" (C0.01, 2000).

Michael Lee starts working for Marlo, and repulsed by the latter's fondness for arbitrary killing, acquires a moral code similar to that possessed by Omar Little. When Dookie recalls a fun, childish caper from the previous summer, he claims to have no recollection (W5.09, 2008). It is unclear whether he genuinely cannot remember, or if he refuses to let the memory surface. Michael, a child of the corner, inhabits a permanent present, where his existence is permanently at risk. This "continuous present", Mark Fisher argues, drawing on Frederic Jameson, is a defining characteristic of the neoliberal age (2009, p.58). A further peculiarity of the age is a lack of stability and the impossibility of setting down roots.<sup>7</sup> Michael's position echoes *The Corner's* description of lives that refuse to be lived in the future (Simon and Burns 1997, p.230).

The tyrannical present erases the memory of childhood, just as the earlier killing of Proposition Joe destroys the memory of a different way of living. Michael's trajectory remains important however, despite his precarious existence. Like Omar, he expresses, if only residually a tradition resistance, and a rebuke against the dominant system. In the permanent present, nothing changes, for how can change be measured without a past or future to latch on to?

#### RENDERING VIOLENCE INVISIBLE: CAPITALISM IN ITS PUREST FORM

The lack of a future is expressed in a more visceral way in the disposability of poor, black males, and the invisibility of violence against them. Decomposing bodies, dumped in abandoned houses, are a lingering, silent presence in the background throughout season four. They also function as an unspoken answer to questions about what future awaits students when their inadequate, limited schooling has finished. The most chilling allegory in the entire series sees bodies boarded up inside empty row-houses, sealed in with the nail gun purchased in the season opener. When the bodies are finally recovered, they are laid out in the gymnasium of the school where Cedric Daniels received "a decent education" (W4.13, 2006). It now stores the bodies of those who were not so lucky.

In the third season, Landsman describes a female confederate of Omar's as dead in a zipcode that does not matter (W3.03, 2004). When the investigation into the row-house murders grinds to a halt for lack of funds, Bunk reminds McNulty that "this ain't Aruba, bitch." It is a reference to the murder of white teenager Natalee Holloway in Aruba, a killing that much exercised the US media. No such attention is paid to the ongoing killing of poor, mostly male, African-Americans. Antipathy rooted in class and race, towards poor and black victims of crime becomes a complicit, if unwitting, accessory to mass murder. Bunk later remarks that you can "go a long way killing black folks" in America, referring to the killing of black men in particular as "misdemeanour homicide" (W5.02, 2008).<sup>8</sup> The comment resonates far beyond the violence of the drug trade. It implicates a political system where "tough on crime" rhetoric of the type employed by Carcetti is often the thinly disguised dog whistle rhetoric of being tough on "black folks." Occupying the White House at the time was George W. Bush who, as

governor of Texas, had overseen executions of a disproportionate number of African-American and Hispanic men.

Where Stringer Bell saw reducing the number of murders as crucial in deflecting police attention, Marlo Stanfield shows a more fundamental understanding of how the police department works. Colvin's off-hand question from season three about how you make a body disappear re-emerges with the force of prophecy (W3.01, 2004). Marlo also understands capitalism better than Stringer, and realises that its systemic and figurative violence is never eliminated, but rendered invisible behind a cloak of ideology. Lester refers to the houses as Marlo's mausoleum, and at certain times they are shot in such a way as to resemble tombstones [Fig. 36]. Jefferson Cowie employs the same language, observing that "major industrial cities ... began to look like industrial mausoleums, and their housing stock was reduced to warehouses for unemployed African-Americans" (2010, p.35). This part of Baltimore has become a necropolis rather than a warehouse, imbuing with literality a city that is already figuratively dead (Clandfield 2009, p.40). The social dissolution that enables Marlo's actions are the same as those that enabled the murder of Andrea Perry, recounted in *The Corner*, and dramatised in *Homicide*.

Marlo represents a new way of doing business, one that breaks with the implied social obligations of the old ways, and which corresponds with the boundary smashing policies of neoliberalism. If Omar represents an attenuated and residual code of honour, Marlo is the ultimate in unrestrained free market accumulation. (Omar is denied the finale his legend seemingly deserves, and the manner of his death, shot dead by a child, underlines his lack of importance in the wider narrative.) In this, he stands in stark contrast to Proposition Joe, a major figure in the Baltimore drug trade. Joe sees himself as part of an older tradition of working, home-owning African-Americans. Ed Burns describes him as someone who represents "the old school drug world [and] still had some connection to the traditional world. Then along comes Marlo, he's devoid of all that, he's sociopathic" (Burns and Thorson 2008). Joe speaks of this, to Marlo, moments before he is shot in the head, killing even the memory that things were ever different (W5.04, 2008). The ultimate triumph of capital over labour, both narratively and socially, is personified in Marlo Stanfield. Marlo's ascent represents an intensification of the devouring logic of accumulation, the stripping away of all vestiges of regulation, and the acquisition of power for its own sake. Unlike most of his forebears, like



Proposition Joe, Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell, he is uninterested in the trappings of wealth, and seems to live a relatively ascetic existence.



Fig. 37: Marlo's mausoleum.

David Simon describes the meeting between the Greek and Marlo in season five as the moment when “pure capitalism recognised pure power.” The Greek is the gangster who operated the trafficking operation in season two. Ben Davie calls Marlo “the ultimate bureaucrat, one who plays the system without empathy or fear” (Busfield and Owen 2009, p.193). The meeting between the two is accompanied by Marlo’s demonstration of his intent by presenting a briefcase of money to the Greek (W5.04, 2008). The money is straight from the street, literally dirty, and can go no further. Money laundering implies physical cleaning as all of the grime, sweat, and blood from the street is washed away. It is a striking visual illustration of what Lester Freamon describes as “all the tragedy and the fraud” that lie behind the drug trade [Fig. 37]. As John Kraniauskas describes it: “bribery, loans, and money laundering underwrites [the] upper echelons of the local state and economy through the circulation of its accumulated wealth – at which point it becomes finance capital” (2012, p.180). Like neoliberalism, which demands access to areas of economic activity previously closed to it (Harvey 2005, p.65), Marlo will not, the Greek points out, take no for an answer. Stringer Bell, though ruthless, misunderstood the nature of the power weighted against him, even as the mainstream needed his money as much as he needed investment opportunities. Marlo, unencumbered by any code or conception of the rules of capitalism, is truly recognised as one of their own.



Fig. 38: Dirty money.

Where Stringer Bell saw money as a means to an end, to escape the alternative economy, Marlo sees it as a symbol of power in and of itself. Marlo is the logic of the corner personified, of a place “stripped down past the point of social legitimacy, until it served no human connections beyond those required to buy and sell drugs” (Simon and Burns 1997, p.497). When he is offered everything that Stringer Bell wanted, figuratively and literally reaching the top floor, he turns away. Stringer’s youthful theft of a badminton set, despite having nowhere to play it, is presented as testimony of his need to belong in the mainstream (W3.11, 2004). Marlo desires no such validation, and leaves the assembled lobbyists, politicians, and developers, to returns to the street, “elated, [to] risk everything one last time” (Simon and Noble 2008).

It is Marlo, and not the Greek, who represents “capitalism in its purest form” (O’Rourke 2006). However, his presence, his relentlessness, and hostility to compromise raise larger questions as what all of this accumulated power is for. His worldview is a curtailed one, bounded by the street. Stringer Bell harboured fantasies of social mobility informed by the memory of black power. Marlo has no such memories. On discovering that Omar has been naming him openly as a coward, Marlo deviates for just one moment from his customary monotone to declare “My name is my name!” (W5.09, 2008). It is an illustration, not of narcissism, but of a conflation of street reputation and corporate branding. Spiros Vondas, an associate of the Greek, and an owner of multiple passports, declares the opposite in the second season. For him, his name is simply a means to an end, part of a fluid identity that changes as necessary so he may travel freely. Naked economic power, represented by Marlo, seeing no value beyond what it can accumulate, possesses a more insular worldview than the

cosmopolitan Greek or Vondas. It reveals the lie behind the supposedly outward looking perspective of globalisation where outsourcing was always only a means to more efficient, and internationalised, forms of accumulation. Marlo's desire to "see" his money once it has been moved offshore is another example of this. He travels, not to do business, but simply to affirm ownership of his wealth (W5.03, 2008).

The ascent of Marlo is the logical terminus of the evolution of the drug trade and capitalism throughout the previous seasons. He is the ultimate product of a failed drug war, whose legacy is a deregulated form of narco-capitalism and an abandoned underclass to supply plentiful cheap labour. His organisation is less refined, more overtly vicious, and has even less regard for labour rights than those of either the Barksdales or Proposition Joe. While all drug organisations are, by definition, coercive, in Marlo's group there is not even the pretence of democracy or consent. The merest suspicion of disloyalty can terminate in a plastic sheet doused on quick lime in an abandoned row-house. Marlo's simple belief that power is its own justification is foregrounded in the killing of a security guard, who is guilty of nothing but asserting his dignity as a worker (W4.04, 2006). Marlo looks him in the face, and says, with the impeccable logic of the Thatcherite acronym TINA (There Is No Alternative), "You want it to be one way, but it's the other way." It echoes the Barksdales' killing of security guard William Gant in the first season, a murder which at least had an economic rationale, as a warning to other potential witnesses (W1.01, 2002). Marlo, as Bodie observes shortly before his own death, "is killing niggers just because he can" (W4.11,

The amount of power Marlo accrues to himself points to the narcissism of neoliberal capitalism. Economic power and ownership have always been partly justified and maintained through a mixture of brute force, claims to expertise, paternalism, and meritocracy. 2006). Significantly, the narrative does not engage with Marlo symbolically as in the case of Omar and Stringer. LaBerge argues that, in Marlo's case, his economic violence is economic violence and he has no interiority (2010, p.554). However, this is precisely the point. The symbolism of Marlo is that he represents a new stage of accumulation. He is capitalism rampant, unfettered and unencumbered, and represents a drive for accumulation that no longer needs to clothe itself in ideological justification. To adapt a phrase from *The Wire* overused almost to the point of meaninglessness; he is what he is.

## INVENTION AND COMPLICITY: THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The phrase, “it is what it is”, is used on numerous occasions to describe a seemingly self-evident reality that cannot be changed, often in the context of institutional intransigence. This supposedly unproblematic statement is undermined by the numerous ways in which reality is defined through language, perception and institutional requirements. The police department and the public school system define their reality by reference to statistics which are massaged to the point of fiction. Similarly the mass media, represented by the *Baltimore Sun*, define their reality not through how accurately or thoroughly they report their city, but by how many prizes they win.

For example, a reality Marlo understands is that the invisibility of dead, black males in Baltimore is not figurative, but literally, at least in administrative terms. Focussing on numbers in a particular way also disguises the racial and class disparity in murder rates; statistics are colourless. Murders, “represent a fundamental rupture in the social order” (Hall et al. 1978, p.68), which David Simon argues are “politically” important. A declining murder rate creates the illusion of success. On the other hand, the idea of the individual murder as a crime barely exists (Simon 2005). As the bodies are finally removed from the row-houses, Sergeant Landsman asks Lester to leave them where they are, as it will have a catastrophic effect on their clearance rates (“That’s Got His Own,” W4.12, 2006).

The comment implies that a murder is not a murder until it appears on the board. For the bosses, motivated by achieving favourable numbers, and a labour force trying to maintain a manageable workload, what constitutes a murder is crucial. It is a matter of bureaucratic definition, to be fought out with medical examiners and recalcitrant witnesses. Murder and natural death are about far more than the absence or presence of malicious intent. From the perspective of labour in particular, it is in the interest of the investigating detective that anything which possibly can be, is designated a natural death. This makes the invented serial killer narrative of season five particularly counter-intuitive. It inverts Colvin’s initial question from season three, to become “how do you make a body appear?” More specifically, it asks, how do you make the right type of body appear?

McNulty inverts Landsman's implied assertion that a murder is not a murder until a name appears on the board. By definition then, a name that finds its way onto the board is a murder. Much that had previously been sub-textual becomes overt in the final season. After years of subjection to the stats driven tyranny of the bosses, McNulty turns his knowledge of the bureaucracy against it. By ticking all of the correct boxes, he slowly constructs a serial killer, and self-evidently "natural" deaths become murders, marked in red on the board. He uses people discarded by the wider social and economic system as raw material, from which he creates a homicide detail to indict Marlo Stanfield. The storyline, in a series praised for its realism, seems far-fetched, but is consistent with how institutional priorities are habitually portrayed. It is consistent with bureaucratic logic, if not necessarily specifically plausible, that a police department which manipulates statistics should eventually produce fictional crimes to solve. Jameson describes it as the "invention of a secret source for funding real and serious police operations outside the bureaucracy and its budget" (2010, p.372). It is an attempt to create a shadow police department that, from the perspective of McNulty and Freamon, does what it is supposed to do.<sup>9</sup> They are attempting to solve murders that are politically unimportant, by creating a more compelling narrative. The serial killer stands in for a social system that has already killed the victims, by denying them the means to support themselves.

Murders carried out by Marlo Stanfield's organisation, and other "black on black" killings are not considered newsworthy, in contrast with the coverage given a supposed serial killer (Sabin 2011, p.145). This is not simply due to the relative novelty that clings to the idea of the serial killer, and to the seemingly unending stream of "black on black" killings. Homeless people cannot be demonised in the same way as the black underclass, even though they are often poor, black drug addicts. By describing them simply as homeless and erasing the complexity of how they became that way, it is easier to present their deaths as attacks on the most vulnerable members of society.

It is also noteworthy that McNulty's victims are white males. This not only implies greater sympathy in a macabre extension of white privilege, but also reveals that poverty is not confined to Baltimore's African-American majority. In an underexplored narrative thread, the fictional case forces attention onto these un-mourned dead, drug addicts and the working poor. Kima Greggs visits a white couple, who speak of their son's descent into drug addiction, and his pointless death (W5.07, 2008). McNulty's non-existent serial killer has turned him into a real victim. Many of the homeless

revealed throughout the story are, in fact, working poor. Johnny Fifty, a longshoreman last seen in season two appears briefly, now homeless (W5.04, 2008).

The inevitable revelation of McNulty's ruse further exposes the priorities of a state apparatus bent on its own self-preservation. Unlike the demise of Hamsterdam, and the sacrifice of Bunny Colvin, McNulty realises that his own lie is too big for them to reveal, or "live with" (W5.10, 2008). The potential scandal and blow to their credibility cannot be dissipated simply by offering up McNulty and Freamon as a sacrifice. The contrasting storylines also imply something more complex about institutional endurance than is suggested by comparison with indifferent Olympian gods. Bunny Colvin can be cast out because his actions are explicable as those of a maverick police officer, and pose no real institutional threat. Exposure of McNulty's invention not only suggests a failure of supervision. It also reveals the systemically skewed priorities of the policing and political administrations. Despite being subject to several layers of bureaucratic supervision, McNulty is spectacularly unsupervised. It exposes not only the credulity of the police and political administrations, but flaws in a bureaucratic system where accountability has been compartmentalised and decentralised.

The *Baltimore Sun's* complicity with the serial killer contrasts with the fact that it has missed almost every story developing over the previous five years of the series. Implicit in this contrast is the ideological role played by the media in propagating and reinforcing dominant narratives; the right kind of stories. This first becomes clear during the Hamsterdam debacle. A *Baltimore Sun* journalist arriving on a tip-off frames his story as that of a police major going rogue and effectively legalising narcotics. This is the right kind of narrative, one that accepts as natural the probity of the war on drugs. Completely missing is any alternative perspective, asking what such an action says about the drug war itself, or about the harm reduction aspect of Hamsterdam. However, *The Wire* goes further than most media theory in suggesting that the newspaper industry is so wedded to the right type of narrative that it will create one where none exists. The overly creative Scott Templeton invents numerous stories and quotations to fit with his perception of what constitutes a good narrative. While publicly known examples of journalistic invention, like Janet Cooke or Jayson Blair are often presented as isolated bad apples, *The Wire* questions the soundness of the barrel.<sup>10</sup> Templeton's invention occurs in a context where "doing more with less", and upward effect on stock price of

prizes have become the means by which journalistic value is calculated. It is an environment that enables such behaviour, which is then, at best, wilfully ignored.

There is undeniable *schadenfreude* in Simon's depiction of a newsroom being slashed, and the impotent reaction of journalists in response. Newsrooms are victims of the same triumph of capital they have been failing to cover in the city over the preceding years. Simon quipped in an interview, "Guys, you're a little late. It happened to you, and it happened to the entire working class" (Lanahan 2008).<sup>11</sup> Reaction from non-fictional journalists to the storyline tended to the negative (Steiner et al. 2012). There were claims of personal animosity bordering on sour grapes in Simon's portrayal of the *Baltimore Sun*.<sup>12</sup> Whiting, the editor at the fictional newspaper, supposedly based on Simon's former boss, Bill Marimow, is too arch and shallow. Arguing against their depiction as corporate stooges John Carroll, Marimow's deputy, argues that they both later lost their jobs for defending newspaper quality in Los Angeles (Steiner et al. 2012, p.9). Simon admits to feeling bad when he heard about this "heroic stand at the *Los Angeles Times*" (Lanahan 2008). Despite negative reactions from real newsrooms, and the lack of nuance in the characters of Whiting and Klebanow, Roger Sabin feels that the portrayal in *The Wire* "rings true" (2011, p.152). This is most evident in the institutional sense, as a further illustration of how the logic of the market has infiltrated not only the public sector, but the fourth estate of journalism.<sup>13</sup>

The stifling effects of a target driven bureaucracy are just as apparent. The equivalent to standardised testing in schools and the stats game in the police department is the prize culture, principally that of the Pulitzer. The priorities of the newspaper, like those of the police, are circumscribed by temporal considerations. Just as the police department begins each year with a clean sheet, in the context of the Pulitzer, newspapers only care about stories until the end of the calendar year. Scott Templeton represents a spectacular example of this culture, taken to its extreme conclusion. While his narrative shadows McNulty's, a key difference is that in fabricating stories, Templeton is interested only in his own advancement. McNulty is using his ploy to investigate a mass murderer. It is a similar distinction to that drawn between Frank Sobotka and others involved in organised crime in the second season.

Templeton's misdeeds are impressive, and his trajectory ironically replicates that of a serial killer who becomes more prolific, bolder and more reckless as time passes. (More ironically, the FBI profile of the fictitious killer resembles nobody so much as McNulty himself (W5.08, 2008).) He invents and distorts stories and attributes

a potentially damaging quote to Cedric Daniels (W5.03, 2008).<sup>14</sup> As the “killings” dry up, because McNulty is unable to stage any more, Templeton tries to abduct a homeless man on the street (W5.10, 2008).

One reason Templeton gets away with his deceit is because everything he writes fits into comfortable and accepted narratives (Linkon, Russo and Russo 2012, p.246). Stories which do not fit into these narratives, like those addressed in *The Wire*, tend to be relegated or missed completely. Another factor in the missed stories is the depletion in resources, mainly the reduction, through redundancy, of the number of journalists covering the city. The newspaper is almost completely disconnected from the drug trade, with few connections into either the street culture or the police department. They have no idea who Proposition Joe or Omar Little are. In the first episode of the season, city editor Gus Haynes picks up a story involving a former drug dealer about to receive a pay-off from the city council. That he is an older player suggests that Haynes knew him earlier in their respective careers. Haynes also has connections into the city administration through Carcetti’s aide, Norm Wilson, and knows some older police officers, like Colvin’s aide, Dennis Mello.

The fictional *Baltimore Sun* believes it is doing good journalism, and there are regular editorial meetings to discuss reporting priorities. From the series perspective, the meetings are often amusingly self-referential. Reference to the “Dickensian aspect” in the reporting of urban issues seems to be a nod to critics who had praised *The Wire* for its realist elements. More directly it refers to the human element, and the editors’ desire to reduce complex systemic issues to relatable personal ones: “Johnny can’t write, because Johnny doesn’t have a fucking pencil,” as sub-editor Gus Haynes quips (W5.02, 2008). In the context of the Templeton storyline it could also be taken to mean the purely fictional. Leigh Claire La Berge points out that the story about the production of news is also the story of *The Wire*’s creative choices, as “an amorphous series detailing society’s ills,” exactly what the editor, Whiting, wants to avoid (2011, p.550).

## INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL ORDER: THE LIMITS OF POPULAR NARRATIVE

In the final episode commentary, Simon observes that “the problem with outing a fabricator is that it involves genuine self-reflection on behalf of an institution” (Simon



and Noble 2008). In other words, both police and newspaper are threatened with the revelation, as much to themselves as to the public, of the actual, rather than the official, truth. Also hinted at here is the existence of another force, simultaneously absent but hiding in plain sight within the narrative. This other force could realistically be described as public opinion and popular outrage. The biggest threat to even postmodern institutions is an angry and politicised populace that demands accountability, or at the very least that corruption and ineptitude be deniable. The image of state institutions described by David Simon draws them as overarching, all determining structures. As illustration of a general malaise in the social order, the image is a powerful one, but it also ignores the tacit, but no less real, public consent on which institutional authority relies. They are the great, invisible presence, for whom the official truth, of the stats and easily digestible outrage exists, but from whom the actual truth needs to be concealed.

Unfortunately, it is revealing that even where the entrance of the public onto the stage could realistically have formed part of the narrative, they are overlooked. As an introduction it would run counter to the pessimism about the possibility of mass mobilisation for social change, as opposed to individual motivation for personal improvement. Popular mobilisation, as represented in *The Wire* is usually of the manipulated, misguided, and stage-managed variety; a courthouse protest in support of Clay Davis (W5.05, 2008), and Carcetti's rally against homelessness (W5.08, 2008). Carcetti diverts blame from his own administration to the Republican state governor, comparing the abandonment of Baltimore to that of post-Katrina New Orleans (W5.07, 2008). He demands FEMA trailers and organises a stage-managed candle-lit rally outside city hall, short on solutions, but strong on depoliticised rhetoric of the "never again" type ("Clarifications," W5.08, 2008).<sup>15</sup>

Simon argues that newspapers are fundamentally ill-equipped to understand "systemic societal failure that has multiple problems," (Talbot 2007) citing a report on Clinton-era welfare reform. The *Baltimore Sun* discovered that "a lot of people were getting SSI [Supplemental Security Income] checks and maybe weren't truly disabled" (Lanahan 2008). As a result, the Department of Social Security proposed a plan "to purge the SSI rolls of those using their checks... 'to drink and drug themselves to death at taxpayers' expense,'" as the paper put it in a follow up article (ibid). Simon felt the report lacked a systemic focus:

It lacked enough context of mid-1990s welfare reform. [Simon] pointed out that as state social workers watched traditional welfare being pared down in those days, they began deliberately pushing welfare recipients onto the disability rolls out of concern for their...well, their welfare. (ibid.)

At one point the mayor reminds his aide, a former journalist, of his own role with the admonishment “say it Norman, truth to power” (W5.01, 2008). Carcetti, like all politicians of a left-liberal complexion finds himself in an impossible situation. Increasing tax revenues means the gradual depopulation of the city must be halted. To entice both people and investment back, he needs to present a city where it is safe to live and work. This is the rational explanation for a focus on crime statistics as the only way of creating and measuring an illusion of safety.

After five years of stories that speak directly to the disintegration of the social fabric, their almost complete absence from the main city newspaper is jarring. In a contemporary interview, David Simon listed the stories that the fictional version of his former paper failed to report:

They miss that the mayor wants to be governor, so ultimately the guy who was the reformer ends up telling people to cook the stats as bad as Royce ever did. Well, in Baltimore that happened. And they missed the fact that the third-grade test scores are cooked to make it look like the schools are improving, when in fact it doesn't extend to the fifth grade, and that No Child Left Behind is an unmitigated disaster. They set out to do a story on the school system, but they abandoned it for homelessness because they're sort of reed thin. Prosecutions collapse because of backroom maneuvering and ambition by various political figures, speaking of Clay Davis ... And when a guy like Prop Joe dies, he's a brief on page B5. (Havrilesky 2008a)

The elephant in the fictional newsroom, and the biggest story missed in the season, is the on-going police investigation into corrupt state senator, Clay Davis. From the audience perspective, this is the culmination of a five year investigative slog, not simply the beginning of a news cycle. A media properly rooted in the city could have presented the case more credibly, and with more context than a politically motivated, and faltering, prosecution.<sup>16</sup>

Lester Freamon claims that he would die happy if he could draw the disparate lines of the corruption investigation together, “to show who gets paid behind all of the tragedy and the fraud,” and how “we are all of us vested, all of us complicit” (W5.02, 2008). These lines of enquiry are also the narrative threads of the entire series, and his

declaration of collective complicity and responsibility echoes a 2007 speech by David Simon:

At every given moment where this country has had a choice (and even on a local level, this country, its corporations, its institutions, its government, its social framework...) to exalt the value of individuals over the value of the share price, we have chosen raw, unencumbered, capitalism. Capitalism has become our god. (Hughes 2007)

Of course, exaltation of the share price also implies an exaltation of individuals, just not the ones to whom Simon is referring. It is a striking articulation of how he seems to perceive the social order, implying collective responsibility for the abandonment of human beings in the interests of capitalism. Yet those human beings so abandoned are perceived as individuals rather than as part of the working or middle class. It cuts across the prevailing worldview of the series which, in the context of systemic capitalism, presents relatively small groups acting for themselves against the collective. In the same speech, at Loyola University, Simon speaks of a descent into oligarchy, and of the United States as an unrepresentative democracy run in the interests of a wealthy minority.

Lester pursues drug money from the street corner into legitimacy, through laundering operations like strip clubs, offshore banks and property investment. Money funnelled to Clay Davis seems shrouded in ambiguity, with speculation about its origin rooted in surmise and circumstance. *The Wire* avoids the easy scandal of an administration in thrall to, and owing favours to its city drug dealers. On the contrary, the mayor's office is as committed as the police department to pursuing the drug war to its self-defeating end. The complicity Lester speaks of is mostly unconscious and unacknowledged, a web of sustained self-interest based on plausible deniability. As indictment moves closer, Clay Davis tugs a thread in this fabric of wilful ignorance, asking Royce where else he is will find enough money for the Democratic ticket, in Baltimore (W5.02, 2008).

When forced to testify, Davis calls on a history of racial oppression to present himself as the wronged party, alluding to conspiracy theories about shadowy figures pulling the strings of "our leaders". The crowd on the court steps sings "We Shall Overcome", as Royce stands alongside him smiling, hands aloft (W5.05, 2008). Davis brandishes a copy of *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus on the way into the courtroom, describing him as a man punished for bringing light to the common people (W5.07,

2008) [Fig. 38]. This is the first time he is presented his constituents see him, in which context his protestations seem almost plausible. He is a hustling politician in the neighbourhoods that mainstream America forgot. He claims the money he receives is used to pay for basketball hoops and day care programmes, to pay electricity bills and buy winter clothes for his constituents. The people he helps do not give receipts. Davis draws on narratives of both racial and class contempt. He speaks of a new black elite far removed from how things are where he lives, and counts the black State's Attorney alongside the "senator from Chicago" (presumably Barack Obama). The resentment of the "arabber" street trader from *Homicide's* "Three Men and Adena" (H1.05, 1993) railing against wealthy black "five hundreds," echoes through his speech. The Clay Davis case is ultimately "derailed by a yawning cultural chasm, inspired oratory, and a deeply ingrained acceptance of corruption" (Bandes 2011, p.441).

"One thieving politician trumps twenty dead bodies," observes Daniels, referring to the political point scoring aroused between the Clay Davis case and the investigation into the row-house murders. Yet, despite the visceral gulf between financial corruption and direct, violent loss of life, only one investigation has the potential to reveal the interconnected nature of corruption. It is at least conceivable that the successful prosecution of Clay Davis would expose a link between the city's drug dealing, speculative, and political establishments. By contrast, when twenty outstanding murders committed by the Marlo Stanfield organisation are cleared, nothing really changes.

However, Daniels' comment reveals a more fundamental truth about the compartmentalised nature and political reality of police work. Freamon may be grasping for some deeper truth about the organisation of society, but a police investigation, like a series of newspaper articles, is not fit for this purpose. How do you investigate and capture an entire social system? That question is beyond the scope of both Freamon and McNulty, but it is what *The Wire* has been attempting to do for five years. From this angle, McNulty's serial killer is not a sign of narrative excess, but an attempt to circumvent the limits imposed by attempting to realistically portray police work. "This invention is a version of the truth," argues Peter Clandfield (2009, p.47), referring to McNulty's fictional serial killer. The homeless may not be targeted by an actual murderer, but they are assailed by a social system that views them as disposable (ibid.). In this sense, their deaths are anything but natural.

The problem with most narratives of police work is that they tend to accept, as a basic premise, the essentially aberrant nature of most crime. Police work is always

reactive, in the sense that crimes are seen as disruptions to a social order perceived as fundamentally sound. *The Wire* portrays the social order as neither sound nor just. The serial killer invention may violate the conventions of the crime drama, but it is necessary to make a more substantial point about systemic violence. From its narrative perspective therefore, this does not represent investigative failure so much as the limitations of a particular model of investigation. Despite *The Wire's* focus on the political realm, it seems to argue that the most damaging criminal activities are not actually illegal, but simply capitalism going about its business.

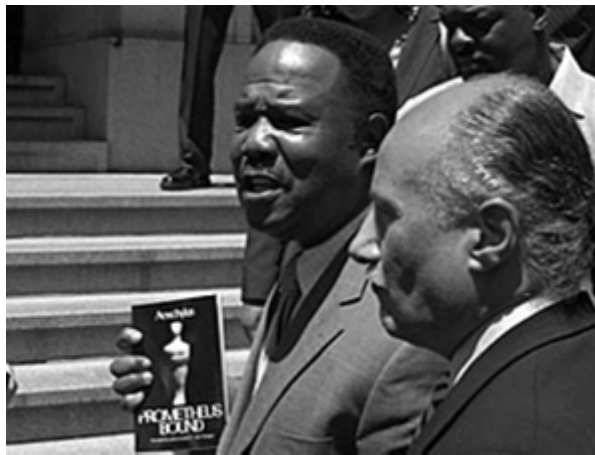


Fig. 39: Bringing light, one electricity bill at a time.

### NEGLECTED NARRATIVES AND MISSING ALTERNATIVES

Fredric Jameson's argument about utopianism in *The Wire* suggests a dynamic seemingly at odds with its pessimism. He presents as utopian solutions the attempted resuscitation of the port, Hamsterdam, Pryzbylewski's teaching methods and, "the most problematical," McNulty's fictional serial killer (Jameson 2010, p.371). He describes them as a utopian "future that here and there breaks through, before reality and the present again close it down" (ibid.). Showing how they fail as the reality of the existing social order intrudes begs the question as to what kind of social order they would work in. This absence has prompted some critics to take the show to task for its lack of "a clear articulation of an affirmative social and political project" (Etheridge 2008, p.152)<sup>17</sup>. Many criticisms focus on perceived misrepresentation within the narrative, particularly the absence of positive grassroots and political projects in Baltimore. In an essay on public education in Baltimore, Tom Waldron suggests that the show presents

an incomplete picture, ignoring many positive reforms to the system in recent years (2009, p.313).<sup>18</sup> In a more substantial way, Peter Dreier and John Atlas engage with very real advances in consciousness and activism over the past decade in Baltimore (2009, p.332). Arguably, one problem with *The Wire* is that its starting point is the critique from *The Corner*, formed in the mid-1990s, when community activism seemed largely absent. However, David Simon and Ed Burns were not the only ones who could see the rot at the heart of “the American experiment.” William Julius Wilson’s *When Work Disappears* was originally published the year before *The Corner*, in 1996. In the intervening years, significant grassroots initiatives developed to resist the assault against the lives and livelihoods of those living in the city. Dreier and Atlas present their critique in a context where groups attempting wider social and institutional reform did exist, but were overlooked by the drama (2009, p.333).

The community organisation BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development) fought, successfully, the first campaign for a living wage in the United States. They “built hundreds of affordable” homes, rehabbed older ones, and created numerous after-school programmes (Dreier and Atlas 2009, p.335). This puts a new inflection on the harvesting of metal from affordable housing by “metalmen” like Gary McCullough and Bubbles. A different perspective on the education funding crisis in season four is also provided by community groups ACORN and The Algebra Project. In 2004 they lobbied Mayor Martin O’Malley for more state funds for the school system, in a coalition that included public sector unions. They occupied the school board until removed by the police, and they forced O’Malley to come up with money to avoid teacher lay-offs (Dreier and Atlas 2009, p.336). Jennifer Klein (2012, p.44) points out that public unions, particularly the teaching and social work unions, had always been at the forefront in defending the quality of public services. There is no hint of this with the teaching union in *The Wire*, which seems lethargic and completely disengaged.

The coalition has also, in recent years, confronted ministers, banks, slumlords, utility companies and the police department, to increase foot patrols in poor areas (ibid.). In *The Wire* version of the education funding crisis, the mayor is forced to make a humiliating cap-in-hand run to the state governor in Annapolis.<sup>19</sup> The accounts provided by Dreier and Atlas reveal a significantly more engaged public than that which emerges in the series. School board meetings in *The Wire* show decisions being taken far removed from those they affect. In one scene, the head of the school board is shown to be none other than property developer Andy Krawczyk, berated by Nick Sobotka in

the final season. It is a brief revelation of the explicit connection between speculative capitalism and the public sector (W4.12, 2006).

These examples of neglected collective activism draw attention to the nature of redemption and progress in *The Wire*, which only seems possible on an individual basis. They conflict slightly with Simon's insistence that people need to exert for dignity and purpose, these are not lessons of grit and determination, but examples of arbitrary happenstance. In fact, the author suggests that more conventional narratives of individual redemption are effective enablers of discrimination. He describes them as the moral equivalent of "some of my best friends are black" (Beilenson and McGuire 2012, p.xvii).

Jennifer Klein claims that *The Wire* depicts communities as "so traumatised or shattered they no longer can organise politically" and that "Simon in key ways gives us a classic culture of poverty thesis" (2012, p.37). John Atlas (2008) claims that the series "buttresses the myth that the poor, especially the black poor in the city's ghettos, are drug dealers or users, eternally helpless victims, unable to engage in collective self-help and dependent on government largess, or crime, to survive". He further suggests that "the cynicism and hopelessness of the show is in part a reflection of the Bush era zeitgeist, but also of David Simon's own journalistic frame" (ibid.). There is likely a grain of truth in this. As a journalist, David Simon has been seeing human beings in straitened and desperate situations for almost thirty years. His narratives are peppered with killers and victims, drug dealers and addicts, and police officers who, while often endearingly cynical, are cynical just the same.

Dreier and Atlas conclude that *The Wire* "failed because it portrayed urban life as hopeless", it "portrays nearly every major character as corrupt, cynical or ineffective," and that "the show is nihilistic" (2009, p.330). This is an understandable conclusion to reach, in a show that offers very little hope for the future, and few clues of a way forward. Reacting to claims of the show's cynicism, David Simon argues that "if you want to suggest that it's cynical about institutions and their capacity to reform themselves or be reformed, I would have to plead guilty to that" (Sepinwall 2008). Elsewhere, he expands on this to suggest that reform or regulation is impossible short of a major social upheaval, which by definition suggests something beyond reform (Mills 2007a). This is not so much nihilism as recognition of the unbreachable impasse at the heart of all democracies where the priorities of capital have trumped all others. In its

cynicism towards institutions incapable of internal or external reform *The Wire* implies, possibly unintentionally, that only systemic transformation offers a way forward.

## CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, such criticisms are relevant, particularly those dealing with the absence of existing community based activism. At the same time it should not be forgotten that while *The Wire* is superficially a drama about Baltimore, it is also, more importantly, a “social and political argument” (Sheehan and Sweeney 2009). It has broken decisively from the mythology that those who work hard will succeed and survive, exploring a social order where economically unviable human beings are discarded. *The Wire* makes its argument in a popular medium, but runs contrary to most pop cultural critiques of capitalism, which accept the soundness of the structure, and focus on individual wrongdoing. Todd Gitlin argues in *Inside Prime Time* that so far as television is concerned, “structures rarely exist, culprits do” (1994, p.270). Mike Beggs similarly suggests that, in much popular culture, the focus of capitalist wrongdoing rests with a particular individual or a corporation (2008). That *The Wire* drama resonates not only beyond Baltimore and United States is testimony to its success in dramatizing structures. It is also an affirmation of the homogenising effects of neoliberalism, which has created a world after its own image, not least in that part of the globe designated as western.

Images of the west’s industrial past recur throughout *The Wire*, with the most prominent being that of the train, which periodically appears, both visually and aurally. The rail bed where the detectives drink contains some of the first sections of rail track laid in the United States, for the Baltimore and Ohio railroad. Simon admits that the trains are consciously symbolic (Simon 2006c). Train and rail imagery are prevalent in the history and popular culture of the United States. They not only symbolise westward expansion, national consolidation and the modernisation of the past two centuries, but also potential freedom of movement for the masses. Jefferson Cowie observes that the train was the primary means of transport for the hundreds of thousands of African-Americans who flocked to the industrial cities of the north (2010, p.235). In popular culture, the train has often been a symbol of escape, progress, and industrial power, in the writings and songs of Woody Guthrie and Johnny Cash. It is America’s “native son”



in Steve Goodman's *City of New Orleans*. In film and television, this has often been combined with narratives of the old west, knitting together two components in the myth making of the United States.

In *The Wire*, fittingly, all of these affirming, modernising images are inverted, appropriate to a narrative which shows capitalism's descent into a self-cannibalising financial model. The train now represents nothing more than the omnipotent, crushing weight of an institution bearing down on those who serve it.<sup>20</sup> Kennedy and Shapiro observe that resistance to institutional pressures in *The Wire* are "staged multiple times... as 'pissing in the tracks of an incoming train'" (2012, p.154). The obvious symbolic resonance in the context of the entire series is difficult to overstate. If a train is bearing down on you and you do not get out of the way, you get crushed. In the first episode, a drunken McNulty declares that he is going to investigate the Barksdale organisation properly, just as a train approaches. He steps off the tracks moments before it hits him. In the third season, he stands in front of an idling and stationary train that represents the virtual paralysis engendered within the police and political establishment by Hamsterdam (Simon and Thorson 2007) [Fig. 39]. Colvin has figuratively thrown an obstruction under its wheels. They might seem unstoppable, the image suggests, but they can be obstructed and delayed. It is a tantalising glimpse of alternatives for transformation which are so often claimed to be absent from *The Wire*. It is also an effective encapsulation of David Simon's wider argument about capitalism itself. Trains, like capitalism, are a progressive force, but left to run unencumbered and unhindered, they destroy everything in their path. Colvin's project suggests at disruption, rather than outright systemic transformation. Similarly, the use of such a powerful image of the industrial age suggests an echo of the old productive capacities that are embodied within it.

On the whole, *The Wire* avoids an over-reliance on allegory and metaphor, and its greatest strength lies in the immediacy and clarity of its critique of "unencumbered capitalism." The world it draws is a recognisable representation of, not only Baltimore and the United States, but "the west," if this term is taken to mean urbanised, marketised, liberal democracies. By focussing at the point where legitimate and illegitimate accumulations intersect, it exposes what Ernest Mandel suggests is the essentially criminal nature of bourgeois society (1984, p.135). Wendell Pierce, who plays Detective Bunk Moreland, hoped that viewers would see "how people benefit from keeping an underclass, that's the real criminal element of the show" (2008).



Fig. 40: McNulty versus the train.

The war on drugs creates the narrative of a criminal underclass, which proves useful in furthering an increase in state power in some areas, like law enforcement and incarceration. Simultaneously it diminishes that same power in others, like universal welfare provision and public employment. The narrative is therefore an exemplary corrective to the commonplace that neoliberalism is simply about the diminution of state power. It is about the diminution of state power on those areas designed to act as a brake and as ameliorative against the excesses of unencumbered capitalism.

As argued in the context of Stringer Bell, another contradiction is that the drug war also creates a sterile area, both economic and physical, in terms of urban space. This is largely inaccessible to legitimate capital accumulation. Available labour in these areas is exploitable primarily by drug dealers, whether in the productive sense of work on a drug corner, or as capers that support a drug habit. An economic system starves for investment money which is accumulating in a space where it cannot “legally” be accessed. It needs to be converted, as would any other foreign currency, into clean capital which can be used within the mainstream economy. A government can, of course, legally expropriate the proceeds of crime, but this money would remain tainted, by virtue of its origin. In theory, its moral redemption could only lie in the funding of drug treatment facilities or other redistributive or ameliorative public services. (Given the nature of the neoliberal state, it would probably still find its way into private hands anyway.) The open conversion of drug money into capital for private sector accumulation would violate the legal and moral ideological underpinnings of capitalism, as described by Jason Read. From this perspective, money laundering serves two

purposes. It is a practical way to circumvent state racketeering laws, and maintains the self-image of the capitalist social order.

There is a fitting circularity to the final episodes that underlines structural factors and the improbability of change, as younger characters step into pre-ordained roles. Michael Lee becomes the new Omar, Dookie the new Bubbles, and Detective Sydnor the new McNulty. Namond Brice escapes only through the intervention of Bunny Colvin, who fosters him (W4.13, 2006). It is an intervention that through its arbitrary nature underlines rather than erases structural obstacles. The intention is contrary to its Dickensian precedents which hoped for state paternalism as a solution to inequality. Namond's salvation is not the end of the narrative, which carries on after he disappears to a more settled and stable neighbourhood. The story follows his friends who remain on the corner, not one of whom is gifted such a positive ending. The resolution finally afforded Bubbles represents a plausible, partial victory (W5.10, 2008). Quitting drugs after accidentally killing his protégé, he spends the final season living in his sister's basement, and selling the *Baltimore Sun* at traffic lights. The *Baltimore Sun* publishes a feature article about him, an in-depth account of the life of Bubbles, similar to Simon's earlier articles about "metalmen" and the corner culture. Bubbles is embarrassed that it makes his rehabilitation to a functioning and structured life worthy of valorisation, when from his perspective he is merely "doing what the fuck I need to be doing" (W5.10, 2008).<sup>21</sup> David Simon is arguably giving him the ending he would have wished for Gary McCullough had life not intervened.

*The Wire* is intended a wake-up call about the future of the American empire, a future the author sees in stark terms of gated communities and an expanding underclass. "Don't say you didn't know this was coming," he says, "because they made a fucking tv show out of it" (Lanahan 2008). In such a context, what would have been the impact of a less hopeless narrative, especially within the artificial unity of a tv drama? Would this not simply have left *The Wire* in the same situation as other well-meaning liberal narratives of urban decay? It would give an impression of decline, but also of a countervailing force, of people in the community working to make things better. Which narrative is most likely to send people away discomfited, as opposed to feeling that while things may be bad, there are, at least, good people doing good work? As a counter to such conclusions of nihilism, Brian Cook (2008) argues:

The findings in, say, *Punishment and Inequality in America*, the 2006 book by Princeton sociologist Bruce Western, are not happy. Western notes that blacks are incarcerated at a rate eight times higher than whites, that 60 percent of black high school dropouts are either imprisoned or ex-convicts, and that if one includes prisoners when calculating unemployment rates, joblessness among black high school dropouts jumps from 41 percent to 65 percent. In a majority-black city like Baltimore, where half the adult black male population is unemployed and where an estimated 60 percent of high school students drop out, foregrounding the disastrous consequences of such statistics - or better yet, crafting a compelling narrative that humanizes them - is not nihilistic. Indeed, it's a necessary first step if such disparities are ever to be rectified.

*The Wire's* achievement lies not in providing a new map to a better future but in showing us where we are on the current one. It has done so on a cultural terrain teeming with tv drama that not only steadfastly refuses such engagement, but often seems to deny that the social order is comprehensible at all. *The Wire*, regardless of the criticisms raised in recent chapters, is the pre-eminent dramatic representation, not only of where we are, but of how, if not exactly why, we got there. Similar to the obstruction flung beneath institutional train wheels by Colvin's *Hamsterdam*, it is a brief disruption to the seemingly unstoppable flow of naturalising neoliberal ideology. For all of its omissions and occasional missteps, it places an image of the social order in front of its viewers as a challenge. Whether they choose to lapse into pessimism, or to act individually or collectively in response, is beyond the capacity of a television drama.

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<sup>1</sup> The school he works in is named after Edward Tilghman, the commissioner who gave Simon permission to embed with the homicide unit (Simon 2006a, p.624).

<sup>2</sup> William Julius Wilson also cites a contemporary study arguing that "youngsters in inner-city ghetto neighbourhoods are more likely than other children to see violence as a way of life" (1996, p.72).

<sup>3</sup> Dookie resembles Anthony, a similarly uncared for child described in *The Corner* (Simon and Burns 1997, p.279).

<sup>4</sup> Ault argues that *The Wire* "ends up reinvesting, insofar as it makes any sort of prescriptive claim, in the benefits of the heteropatriarchal family," although it is unclear if this is intentional or unintentional. She concludes her article by arguing less convincingly that the negative portrayals of African-American women are a compromise, and a price the series "is willing to pay" to make its wider argument in the "institutional context of Time/Warner-owned HBO" (2012, p.14). There is no evidence produced to support this particular proposition.

<sup>5</sup> See previous chapter on *The Corner*, for more on this division between the rough and respectable working classes.

<sup>6</sup> Randy has an entrepreneurial flair, suggesting that he takes after his great uncle, Proposition Joe. See (Marshall 2009, p.161) and (Weber 2008) for widespread belief, and seeming confirmation from David Simon that Cheese Wagstaff, Prop Joe's nephew, is Randy Wagstaff's father.

<sup>7</sup> Fisher cites a line from the 1995 film *Heat*, in which a gangster is advised not to "get attached to anything you are not willing to walk out on in 30 seconds flat, if you feel the heat around the corner" (2009, p.31).

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<sup>8</sup> Wendell Pierce, who played Bunk Moreland, was one of the first public figures to take to Twitter following the July 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman for shooting dead unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida. The clip referred to above was shared widely on social media in the hours following the verdict, including by Pierce.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Luff (2013, p.25) compares the actions of McNulty and Freamon to those of the longshoremen in season two. In contrast to Jameson's conception of a utopian project, Luff perceives both examples as acts of theft in the workplace in the service of a greater. In this case it is the pursuit of legitimate police work.

<sup>10</sup> Steiner et al. (2012, p.3) identify the real Scott Templeton as Jim Haner, while Sabin (2011, p.146) draws on the more obvious Templeton and Jayson Blair analogy.

<sup>11</sup> "As the Internet arrived, profit margins were challenged and buyouts began at even the largest, most viable monopoly papers in regional markets. But only when the disease reached their own newsrooms did it really matter to the big papers" (Simon 2009d).

<sup>12</sup> The unit commander in season 4 is named Marimow after Simon's old boss at *Baltimore Sun*. He is described in as someone who "does not cast talent off lightly. He heaves it away with great force" (W4.04, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Sabin points out that Simon's arguments about the decline of journalism also tend to ignore or dismiss the development of new media (2011, p.147). He defines the internet and blogosphere as a place of news harvesting and commentary, but with little in the way of first generation reporting. His oft-repeated criticism is that he sees very few bloggers sitting in at the courthouse or at council meetings (Havrilesky 2008a). Simon sees little alternative to professional, paid journalism as a source of first-generation news gathering.

<sup>14</sup> The most damaging story is derived from an interview he conducts with a homeless veteran of the Iraq war, who was caught in a roadside bomb blast (W5.06, 2008). His embellishment of a story that most journalists would consider sufficient unto itself leads directly to a complaint from the interviewee, who demands a retraction.

<sup>15</sup> The Federal Emergency Management Agency provided trailers to some of those made homeless by the flooding on New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

<sup>16</sup> As Simon explained:

[The season] begins with a very good act of adversarial journalism -- they catch a quid pro quo between a drug dealer and a council president -- which actually happened in Baltimore. Not necessarily the council president, but between a drug dealer and the city government (Havrilesky 2008a).

<sup>17</sup> The show was also subject to much criticism for its perceived lack of civic responsibility. Mayor Martin O'Malley criticised its portrayal for not helping to reduce crime (Alvarez 2004, p.230). David Simon testified before a city council that criticised the show (Alvarez 2004, p.232). The author himself tried to redress such perceptions by pointing out in a piece for *The Guardian Re-Up*, that "Baltimore is not the inner circle of hell... *The Wire* is not Baltimore" (Simon 2009c, p.262) He further rebuked O'Malley for arrest policies that alienated citizens and were potential civil rights violations (Simon 2009c, p.265). Simon also suggests, against claims of damage to the image of Baltimore that, "every season, NBC's Law & Order franchise alone murders more people in Manhattan than are actually slain in that borough and no one cares in the slightest" (Simon 2008a).

<sup>18</sup> Waldron's criticisms were published in the 2009 edition of *The Wire: truth be told*, the official series guide.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Klein (2013, p.41) points out that the fact that Carcetti had to travel to Annapolis in the first place was a result of how "Reagan-Bush era policies deliberately shifted power and purse strings to the governors and away from the urban groups that had gained too much power in the 1960s and 1970s."

<sup>20</sup> A recent article in *Salon* described globalisation in the 1980s as "a locomotive," and the American working class as being tied to the tracks in its path (Leonard 2012).

<sup>21</sup> He says this to his sponsor, Walon, who cites the Kafka quote used as the epigraph in *The Corner* as a defence of this kind of journalism: "You can hold back from the suffering of the world. You have free permission to do so and it is in accordance with your nature. But perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could have avoided" (W5.10, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

### **THE HOPE THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME.**

“But in all of these Baltimore stories – *Homicide*, *The Corner*, *The Wire* – there exists a deep and abiding faith in the capacity of individuals. They are, in small and credible ways, a humanist celebration in which hope, though unspoken, is clearly implied.”

- David Simon, Introduction to *The Wire: truth be told* (2004, p.34).

Coming from someone so intimately involved in three dramas chronicling seemingly irreversible urban decline, this comment seems counterintuitive, bizarre, and possibly self-serving. The implication of hope, and the suggestion that such pessimistic narratives contain within them what Raymond Williams (1958, p.338) calls the “seeds of life”, suggests guarded optimism. This is an optimism largely at odds with many of David Simon’s other public statements about his Baltimore stories. He has intervened, arguably in an unprecedented way, with their meaning, their arguments, and how they relate to the larger societal metanarrative that produced them. While these interventions are sometimes useful they need contesting, as there is often a contradiction between the worldview expressed by David Simon, and that revealed dramatically. The latter, while subject to other influences, like the political economy of tv drama, and other, contending, authorial voices have been of most concern in the foregoing chapters. Simon’s writings and public statements have been drawn upon to provide clues, context, and intellectual underpinning.

His more recent pronouncements seem to confirm a social and political perspective rooted in a re-energised variation of New Deal type social democracy. He has described himself as a social democrat (Mills 2007a). He has also described himself as a socialist, but has tended to do so in a polemical fashion, drawing provocatively on how debased the term is in the political language of the United States (Honors Carolina 2011). He perceives a return to the New Deal as the only alternative to the current free market, neoliberal orthodoxy. This “new” New Deal would be characterised by an interventionist state, regulating both capital and labour, but also with strong unions acting as a brake on unencumbered capitalism (Honors Carolina 2011). In this context, the state effectively functions as referee between capital and labour.<sup>1</sup>

This New Deal is the type of backward move attributed by Frederic Jameson to Frank Sobotka in season two of *The Wire*, but critiqued as an impossible and utopian ideal. This impasse between how things are and any possible solutions is most apparent when Simon admits that the political process has been bought by finance capitalism, whose priorities it accepts. “Our elections,” he wrote in 2013, “and therefore our governance – have been purchased” (Simon 2013a). The same situation prevails across large swathes of the world, especially in those countries currently being asset-stripped in the name of fiscal discipline and market confidence. It is hardly surprising therefore that even when seemingly reasonable reform-based solutions are expressed dramatically, they seem like utopian experiments doomed to failure. Neither is it surprising that *The Wire* has resonated so widely as the doomed Every City of the neoliberal world order.

Accusations of pessimism and nihilism levelled against *The Wire* also need to be considered in the context of US cable television drama more widely. Its cop show contemporary *The Shield* evinces a worldview drenched in contemptuous racism and misanthropy, which masquerades as gritty realism. The contrast is even more apparent when the bleakness of *The Wire* is compared with a more allegorical representation of brutality, atomisation and societal regression. In the wake of the Newtown school shooting in 2012, David Simon engaged perceptively with zombie drama *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010- ):

On television the other evening, I caught a glimpse of a drama in which some future America was overrun by zombies, a thrilling narrative in which survivors could only rely on force of arms to keep the unthinking, unfeeling hordes at bay. And I realized: This isn't mere entertainment, it's national consensus. More than that, it's a well-executed and starkly visual rendering of the collective fear that governs us. We know that they're out there: The less human. The poor. The godless. The frightening *other*. And they want what we have, they are going to take what we have, and they understand nothing save for a well-placed bullet. It's my understanding that the show I encountered is quite popular; in this America, it may even be called populist in its argument — a morality tale that speaks to why we must arm ourselves, and carry those guns with us, and stand our fucking ground; it declares that we can't rely on collective, utilitarian will to achieve a safe and viable society, that government by the people and for the people is, at this point, an empty catchphrase for fools and weaklings. No, our future is every man for himself, and a gun in every outstretched hand, and if a classroom of six and seven year olds is the requisite cost every now and then, so be it. (Simon 2012f)

The opposition set up by this critique implicitly contrasts “this America”, characterised by fear of “the other”, and standing your ground, with the “other America”. Both are exceptionally bleak depictions and predictions of a shared future, but only one, *The Wire*, encourages reflection on why things will not change. By contrast, *The Walking Dead* and its undead underclass, confirms with urgency to its audience that the future is here, spreading to suburbia, and demands to know how you are going to defend you and yours? Against such an alternative, an “abiding faith in the capacity of individuals”, even if the problem of how to generalise and collectivise their individual struggles is not addressed, seems relatively optimistic.

However, as noted above, Simon’s perception of an alternative future, rooted in capital behaving itself seems scarcely more credible than the supernatural vision of *The Walking Dead*. Both Mike Davis and Jefferson Cowie suggest that such an idealisation of a revitalised New Deal is problematic for reasons other than its improbability. Both the New Deal and the post-war consumer boom were built on the marginalisation of African-Americans and women. In particular Cowie argues, the period was instrumental in enshrining the divide between black and white working class (2010, p.237). The legacy of this division, Davis argues, was that those left outside the boom, constituted “‘the other America’ that rebelled in the 1960s” (1986, p.191). Similarly, Ira Katznelson describes the post-war “golden age” as one where “affirmative action was white” (cited in Cowie 2010, p.238). Simon’s perception of the New Deal also overlooks the previously existing union militancy, particularly the sit-down strikes of the mid-1930s, that helped force government action in the first place (David 1986, p.61).

In a recent documentary on drug prohibition in the United States, David Simon features as a prominent interviewee. His contributions reiterate many previous positions and statements about the drug war, as a “holocaust in slow motion ... that is class based, not race based... going on under the guise of a war against illegal drugs.” He links the prosecution of the drug war and the development of the drug war itself to structural changes within capitalism. He makes explicit what is implied within the narrative of *The Wire*’s second season, which is that the fate of the white working class replicates what happened to their black counterparts:

Capitalism is fairly colour-blind in the end ... when it doesn’t need somebody, it doesn’t need somebody. It doesn’t give a damn who you



are. White people found that out a little bit later than black folk, but they found it out. (Jarecki 2012)

The war on drugs is an effective way to dispense with all of those people that capitalism does not need any more, and make money from it. With anger more palpable than the sardonic distance which usually characterises his interviews he asks, “Why don’t you just say, ‘Kill the poor. If you kill the poor we’re going to be an awful lot better off?’” (ibid.) The entire complex of the war on drugs, from street corner to prison cell, from government to boardroom, is the “American Gulag.” It is an attempt to monetise the poor, from prison construction to parole supervision contracts, and represents a massive transfer of wealth from the state to the private sector. Simon concludes that as the government is most likely not going to act, then it will be for the people themselves to stand up and demand action. Sooner or later, he points out in another forum “somebody is going to pick up a brick” (Honors Carolina 2011).<sup>2</sup>

## STORIES OF BALTIMORE

So how does this contradictory, pessimistic, humanistic, radical and reforming worldview evolve across those narratives in which Simon plays a significant role? From *Homicide: a year on the killings streets* onwards, certain contradictions are immediately apparent. A central contradiction throughout *Homicide’s* television incarnation and *The Wire* is that which runs through most narratives of police work. In one respect, homicide detectives are presented as ordinary white, working class men solving crimes through hard work. In another, their fractious relationship with the wider community imbues them with coercive power, through possessing a monopoly on the legal use of violence. In a societal context, their role could be described as that of the junior manager, with all of the petty accumulated frustrations such a role contains. In the sense that the detectives are accurately presented as working class, it is because they depend on the sale of their labour power to survive. Yet this does not necessarily translate into a sense of common purpose or class solidarity with other workers. Whatever the opinions of individual police officers, both their own jobs and the functioning of the institution they serve depends on a refusal to develop such common purpose. It is a situation well-summed up in a (possibly apocryphal) comment from the occupy movement of 2011-2012; the police may be part of the 99%, but they work for the 1%.

This contradiction is never addressed in *Homicide*, and even though David Simon adopts a critical view of police history, it is at first glance a conventionally critical one. The narrative it seems to present is one where the past was a time of systemic racism, brutality and corruption, the worst of which has been dissipated through reform. However, it becomes clear that racism, brutality and corruption have become re-institutionalised through a system of statistical measurement which is a caricature of accountability. The drug war is its ultimate expression. Yet even here Simon suggests that “good police work” remains possible. The valorisation of the detective’s skill in this context is arguably the first expression of the individual asserting against, in this case, bureaucratic determinism. This contradictory depiction of the detective as a mixture of administered labourer and skilled artisan is central to the deconstruction of the myth of the archetypal detective. It is also central to *Homicide*’s television incarnation.

*Homicide: life on the street* is where the proposition that the Baltimore dramas are bearers of David Simon’s worldview becomes most problematic. This is not least because of the numerous, often more important, creative voices involved in its production, like Barry Levinson and Tom Fontana. *Homicide* also diverges most obviously from its literary forebear in the prominence accorded to the contradictory identities of African-American detectives within the narrative. Importantly, their characters are not simply tokenistic presences, but are varied, prominent, and expressive of different political positions, in terms of both race and class. While this was a significant achievement on 1990s network television, *Homicide* also placed the exploration of individual and institutional power at the centre of its narrative. It is here that class tensions are most obviously expressed, if largely identifiable as simple conflicts between managers and managed, negotiating the stats regime and command structure imported into the series from Simon’s book.

What NBC perceived as the relative darkness of the narrative is leavened throughout with the insertion of interpersonal humour and lighter subplots. Unlike many of its contemporaries the show is rarely unremittingly dark. Nevertheless, in terms of its visual style, *Homicide* is superficially part of a trend, begun with *Hill Street Blues*, of treating the urban landscape as one of inherent dysfunction and menace. What separates it from other shows is the way it uses the context afforded by its location, placing the sense of decline central to many narratives in a specific, if not always explicit, social and economic frame. While the motives of murderers are not always rationalised, there

are occasional attempts to critique the conditions that give rise to them. These conditions, like unemployment, family breakdown, and drug addiction are equally open to framing from a conservative perspective. Yet, insofar as they are presented as collective and systemic problems, rather than personal flaws and failings to be solved on an individual basis, the perspective is identifiably left leaning. While some of this context exists in the book, it is also viscerally present in the city where the series was filmed, and absorbed into the narrative from both sources

Left-leaning cop shows will inevitably run into the same contradiction referred to in relation to the book. Those charged with delivering justice are necessary components of a social order that denies justice as a matter of course. Relatively honourable detectives pursue justice for those people, killed by other human beings, often driven to desperation by poverty and addiction. Yet the police officers are charged with upholding and defending the same complex of property and ownership relations that determine poverty and addiction in the first place. *Homicide*, like most other cop shows seems to unconsciously erase this contradiction through concentration on what are referred to as “real victims”, the innocent and blameless. In the case of *Homicide* this is accomplished even as the narrative draws attention to the contradiction itself, as in the Simon and Mills penned episode “Bop Gun” (2.04, 1994).

David Simon’s work displays an impressive grasp of the ways in which joblessness has become intergenerational, embedded in the social fabric, and seemingly intractable. Intergenerational, embedded poverty and a disposable working class are structural to the urban existence presented in *The Corner*. Jacob Weisberg (2006), in a paean of almost uncritical praise to *The Wire*, refers to the television adaptation of *The Corner* as “almost unwatchable” by comparison.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the mini-series shows an alternative economy, seemingly disconnected from the mainstream, destroying its own operating environment, even as it generates wealth. It is a contradiction never commented upon, but the viewer seems invited to draw parallels with the economic mainstream. Simon believes the drug trade needs to be decriminalised and regulated, consistent with his belief that capitalism needs to be reined in. This is not a conclusion necessarily suggested by the narrative. The parallels between the capers of the addicted, the drug trade, and its tendency to destroy its environment suggest a more obvious comparison; that both variants of capitalism are equally destructive. After all, the labour force of the corner economy is composed of the unwanted and discarded from mainstream economic activity.

While serving more as digression than a point of evolution in Simon's dramatic worldview, *The Corner* marks the emergence of a deeper systemic analysis than was possible in *Homicide*. *The Wire*, in its turn, seeks to explain on a broader canvas why the world depicted in *The Corner* exists, and will continue to exist. The world presented in *The Wire* is one which seems to have completely adopted the priorities of finance capitalism (Sheehan and Sweeney 2009). Viewed as a wider social allegory, this adoption represents the victory of capital over labour, exemplified by the ways in which "commodity value is consistently prioritised over use value" (ibid.). David Simon has ideas about how this triumph occurred, referring to the end of New Deal era collective bargaining, and the decline of manufacturing employment. He also points, justifiably, to the PATCO (air traffic controllers) strike of 1981 as a defining moment, when the Reagan administration summarily sacked thousands of striking workers (Honors Carolina 2011). Unfortunately, little of this comes across in *The Wire*, which presents the triumph as an already present, accomplished fact rather than a process. This is in marked contrast to the dramatised evolution of the drug trade. It naturalises the social order in a way that exacerbates a sense of determinism and fatalism engendered by the depiction of postmodern institutional gods. This is a valid dramatic choice, but one which does nothing to suggest solutions, even erasing the sense of historical development that may provide a path to their conceptualisation.

"Unencumbered capitalism" is deeply entrenched, both at the material and ideological level, dictating how problems and their solutions are perceived. Urban regeneration means urban gentrification, maximum return for minimum effort, and the aims of the city administration are presented as similarly short sighted. Even reforms that operate within the presumed functionality of the actually existing social order seem far-fetched. While Frederic Jameson's perception of these attempts at reform as utopian ultimately stretches into meaninglessness, he is substantially correct. To describe them as utopian principally means acknowledging how far the political terrain has shifted in the past thirty years, and how limited the scope for reform has become.

Colvin believes he can introduce an element of "good sense" into the drug war, and salvage some of the city being destroyed as war is waged on the poor. Stringer Bell and Frank Sobotka believe they can play by the rules of actually existing capitalism, and win. Both fail to realise that their outcomes are, in Simon's phrase, socially determined or, as described in the series, part of a rigged game. Individuals asserting against postmodern institutional gods are cut down for hubris. The image is powerfully

illustrative. It presents capitalism as a game rigged in the interests of power, but beyond the control of any individual. However, it simultaneously sets up an over-determined image of capitalism as a closed and unassailable system. This is ironic, given that almost simultaneously with the final season, a speculative property bubble brought the economic system so close to collapse that it needed rescuing by states worldwide. Unfortunately, subsequent years seem to suggest that “the social and political argument” of *The Wire* may be proven retrospectively correct (Sheehan and Sweeney 2009). The collapse of 2007-2008 seems, in the medium term, to have strengthened rather than weakened the neoliberal project, an indication of how dominant its assumptions have become.<sup>4</sup>

The evident pessimism of *The Wire* is a consequence of its decisive narrative break from the myth that hard work pays off, which still acts as the common sense of many popular narratives. Instead, it accepts as fact that a significant number of human beings are surplus to requirements, and have been discarded as economically unviable. In some respects, it would be more accurate to describe it, not as a depiction of the “other” America, but as a through the looking glass depiction of the mainstream. This is nowhere so apparent as in the recurring image of the train, an exemplar of industrial expansion inverted to an alienating relic of former industrial glories as the frontier contracts.

David Simon repeatedly insists that capitalism is “the only game in town”, as a system that can generate vast quantities of wealth (Hughes 2007). That it is also an inherently unjust, rigged game is clear from both *The Corner* and *The Wire*, which express genuine grievance about how, in particular, intellectual labour is stolen. For Gary McCullough, his bizarrely ingenious scheme to steal cars for insurance money while also selling them for scrap clearly qualifies as his intellectual property. Unfortunately, this is of little use to him without the means (the pick-up truck) to put the idea into operation, and his truck owning partner steals the scam for himself. Similarly, a celebrated scene in *The Wire* reveals the outrage of young dealer, Wallace, on discovering that the person who invented the chicken nugget likely received nothing for his idea. It is noteworthy that in both cases, labour is presented as artisanal, entrepreneurial, and creative. The sense of injustice lies not in workers being denied the full value of their labour, which theft is central to marxist critiques of capitalism. In these examples, the outrage is at the theft of intellectual property by those with the material capacity to steal it, like having a truck, or owning a corporate fast food

organisation. Those who came up with a particularly profitable idea are denied the profits that accrue from it. Unfortunately, in both cases, the outrage is tempered by an almost shrugging belief that there is no real alternative to this particular type of theft. What it represents is nostalgia, not for an older form of capitalism, but for much older, and pre-capitalist, guild and artisan centred modes of production.

*The Wire* successfully depicts the alienation of increasingly administered and supervised skilled labour, like detectives, teachers and journalists. Unfortunately, its portrayal of less differentiated, mass labour is not so convincing. For the longshoremen of season two, alienation has always been part of their existence. Their depiction in particular seems strangely colourless, like an outline that has not been filled in. Their work, as work, while productive and important, is not presented inherently interesting, unlike that of semi-autonomous artisans and craftsmen in other areas.<sup>5</sup> Police work, teaching, and journalism, are professions which, despite gradual de-skilling, lend themselves to portrayals that privilege individual creativity and talent. Massed labour in a busy port, where work is far more regimented, is less receptive to such a portrayal.<sup>6</sup>

This privileging of craft is apparent in the police where, despite apparent myth-busting, the detectives themselves are types recognisable to readers and viewers of crime fiction. They are skilled professionals, with individual idiosyncrasies and talents used to solve crimes in their own particular ways. McNulty in *The Wire* and Pembleton in *Homicide*, based in different ways on real detective Harry Edgerton, are variations of the stereotypical maverick, playing by his own rules. Again, a contradictory view of labour emerges. The valorisation of creative, artisan labour, as a source of wealth creation that deserves autonomy, contrasts with a more negative, heritage-like perception of collective union labour. There is very little sense of the longshoreman's union as an active, competent collective, as opposed to simply being led by Frank Sobotka.

This final example is important in illustrating the intersection of a socially determined social order with those who kick against it. Almost every person who stands up is knocked down, sometimes fatally. Nevertheless, the suggestion appears to be that combative, albeit futile Promethean over-reach is the only viable response in the face of unencumbered capitalism and its institutional gods. This is in accord with Simon's own seeming identification with the social existentialism of Albert Camus: *Find original quote*

Let me misquote, because I'm not quoting exactly: Camus, in *The Myth Of Sisyphus*, said something to this effect: "Rebelling against an injustice where you are certain to fail is absurd. But to not rebel against an injustice where you are certain to fail is also absurd. Only one choice offers the opportunity for dignity." I think that's inherent in a lot of the stuff we're talking about. (Tobias 2008).

In the absence of somebody throwing a brick, assertions of self-worth and value, such acts of individual resistance and refusal to comply are all that the narratives have to offer. Political institutions have been bought, labour has for the moment been defeated, and the sense of a collective good has been routed in a country, and global system, that has declared war on the poor. Yet, some continue to resist, individually, in important ways. David Simon may disavow the marxist solution (2012e), but everything about *The Wire* implicitly calls for "a system requiring from each according to their abilities and giving to each according to their needs" (ibid.). It celebrates individual over-reach when what is clearly required are more collective acts of audacity.

This is how the contradictions, which are apparent in different ways from *Homicide* onward, are resolved, or at least accommodated. The relative lack of solutions is in many ways inevitable given that contradiction is embraced rather than suppressed. The marbled, intersecting, mutually constructing nature of race and class in particular resists simple resolution or representation. In this respect it should be acknowledged that in much American drama, racism is treated as aberrant rather than systemic, and class is simply invisible as a social category. *Homicide*, *The Corner* and *The Wire* are attempts to understand the city and the social order, as seen through the prism of war on drugs and the changing nature, and death, of work. The expectation of an answer from *The Wire*, as the ultimate expression of this interrogation is testament to how comprehensively it posed a question which resonates far beyond Baltimore.

With this in mind, it is worth briefly examining David Simon's tv dramas since *The Wire*, which have engaged more directly with the world beyond Baltimore. Both have tackled issues beyond the war on drugs, but return to recognisable engagements around class, race, the nature of work and the future of the city.

## “FROM HERE TO THE REST OF THE WORLD”: BEYOND BALTIMORE

The focus on craft and institutional failure re-emerges, in a particularly myopic and problematic way in *Generation Kill* (HBO, 2008). This six-part mini-series about the 2003 invasion of Iraq was adapted by Simon and Ed Burns from a book of war reportage by *Rolling Stone* journalist Evan Wright. In dramatic terms, it is so devoid of a contextual frame that it ultimately seems to suggest that there is something inherently noble in the fighting man. While focussed on institutional failure, these failings are considered solely in the context of the execution of the war itself.<sup>7</sup> At no point is the wider question of the legality of the invasion introduced. The invasion and occupation of another country is relegated to the background. The prominence of institutional failure seems like a way to artificially create thematic unity that does not exist between *Generation Kill* and previous narratives. In fact, there are numerous potential connections between *Generation Kill* and the earlier dramas, but they are all missed.

While *The Wire* resonated and prompted recognition beyond the borders of the United States, it was not written with this intention. David Simon (2008c) admitted surprise at how it had been received in Europe. What this means is that *Generation Kill* is the first time Simon, and Ed Burns, engage with a subject that explicitly transcends a localised context. While Simon has made it clear that he did not think the Iraq war was a good idea (Honors Carolina 2011), he also makes clear that his personal feelings about the war did not belong in the drama about it. In an interview with *Film Quarterly* he argues that the drama may be considered useful by those who both supported and opposed the war. His argument is peppered with phrases about how civilian deaths were mixed in with “legitimate targeting and killing,” and how war defies classification, political agenda, “morality and immorality” (Brown 2008). Again, there is no suggestion that the war was a resource grab, a war of accumulation by dispossession, or even a war of aggression illegal under international law.<sup>8</sup>

These are curious omissions for someone whose previous dramatic offering had been so concerned with the predations of unencumbered capitalism. There are, in this context more important, systemic problems than institutional dysfunction; like imperialism, globalisation, or the wider class interests served by the war. None of these are addressed by the drama. The suggestion that institutional inefficiencies are the primary angle from which to examine the invasion of Iraq suggests equivalence between different narratives that does not exist. For example, this presumed equivalence erases



the real and visceral distinction between occupier and occupied. If a drama is filled with people of broadly similar cultural, geographic and national backgrounds, a focus on class and institutional disparity works, as these are primary fault lines. In a situation where this is not the case, such a focus is beside the point and privileges the viewpoint of the powerful, of the aggressor and the occupier. It could perhaps be argued that by giving viewers a glimpse at the chaos of war, *Generation Kill* is implicitly an anti-war narrative. This suggestion is challenged by Roy Scranton, a former marine and veteran of the war who argues, in a devastating critique, that *Generation Kill* “valorises the men who commit violence on the government’s behalf even as it ostensibly critiques the violence they are asked to commit” (2010, p.563).

Scranton challenges not only the drama itself, but the book and assumptions that inspired it. He highlights the emptiness of Evan Wright’s title, and the “hoary cliché” that the marines are in any way representative of “our doomed youth.” The unit that Wright focuses on are “an elite volunteer unit in a volunteer military, a tiny, self-selected cadre” (Scranton 2010, p.560). Not only are they unrepresentative of the youth of the United States, they are not representative of the US military, or even the Marine Corps. Like Simon, who consciously followed the “rarefied species” of “thinking cop” in his first book, Wright focussed on an elite unit. Unlike Simon, he seems to have generalised the worldviews and motivations of his group into an anatomisation of a whole generation. With Simon, the generalised critique comes much later, and is rooted in the environment in which he found himself, rather than drawn from those with whom he was embedded.

Insofar as Simon and Burns draw out a particular theme from Wright’s book, it is that of institutions that no longer work properly. The trials faced by troops on the ground, in terms of inadequate equipment, lack of communication, and incompetent command seem familiar from *Homicide* and *The Wire*. Yet, unlike the latter drama in particular, this is effectively all there is to *Generation Kill*:

The perspective is a sharply limited boots-on-the-ground view. This has serious implications for Simon’s miniseries, which lacks the range, depth and scope of *The Wire* for just this reason. With *The Wire*, we see how the difficulties, negotiations, compromises and failures that make the Drug War such a disaster are systemic and happen at every level, with both the cops and the crooks, on the street, on the beat and in city hall. With *Generation Kill*, on the other hand, we get one tiny slice of the big picture. Imagine how much *The Wire* would lose if it were all from

McNulty's point of view and you get a sense of the narrowness of *Generation Kill*'s perspective. (ibid.)

As is apparent with both *Homicide* and *The Corner*, it is important that the subjects of *Generation Kill* that its subjects recognise the truth of their lives onscreen. However laudable this intention may be, in the context of a drama of this nature, unlike *Homicide*, *The Corner* or *The Wire*, it is also beside the point:

While the role of the police is far from unproblematic, the nature of the job undertaken by the marines in the First Recon unit is even more so. The homicide cops Simon shadowed in Baltimore were flawed human beings, but their job was to catch murderers. The role of the marines is to invade a sovereign state and if necessary kill its citizens. (Sweeney 2010)

While it is futile to second guess what a more panoramic *Generation Kill* would have been, some indications are apparent in David Simon's pronouncements on the middle-east. In contrast to his iconoclasm on policy within the United States, his worldview in this case is largely one of conventional truths. With regard to Israel's ongoing occupation of Palestinian land, he regurgitates familiar liberal tropes, perceiving the conflict as one between two reasonably matched adversaries. In an interview cited by Roger Sabin, he speaks of missed opportunities on "both sides – Israeli and Arab," to resolve the conflict. He also, in mild but damning terms spells out how his own opinions diverge from those of Noam Chomsky, and suggests that "Chomsky seems a bit opposed to the Israeli viewpoint and a bit oblivious to the political realities that Israel has confronted since 1947" (Sabin 2011, p.153). Such an assessment of Chomsky suggests either ignorance or disingenuousness. Similarly, speaking about Israel's attack on Lebanon in 2006, he avoids engagement with the political background in decades of civil war and occupation and blames human nature:

But human empathy has its limits and some, of those limits are based on race and culture. Personally, this has always been a disappointment to me, but it is simply human nature. Witness the horror in the Middle East currently, where Arabs cannot fully feel the pain of Israelis being rocketed randomly in their cities and towns and Israelis cannot feel the tragedy of the Lebanese being bombed in their homes and streets. (Simon 2006c)

*Generation Kill* also represents a more basic failure of the imagination, by not linking the urban warfare of the invasion with the militarised language and execution of the "war on drugs" in the United States. In both countries, at the imperial centre, and the

periphery, cities have become threat-filled spaces to be controlled. In *Cities under siege* (2013), Stephen Graham describes this emerging “military urbanism”, defining it as:

The paradigmatic shift that renders cities’ communal and private spaces, as well as their infrastructure – along with their civilian populations – a source of targets and threats. This is manifest in the widespread use of the war as the dominant metaphor in describing the perpetual and boundless condition of urban societies – at war against drugs, against crime, against terror, against insecurity itself. (Graham 2011, p.xiv)

By contrast, the connection is forcefully made in Simon’s most recent show *Treme* (US HBO, 2010-2013), set in post-Katrina New Orleans. The drama, planned years earlier, was intended as the story of a “working-class black neighbourhood”, but acquired “a new import” after the flooding (Simon 2006c). Early episodes teem with direct visual parallels between New Orleans and Iraq, with wrecked infrastructure and troops patrolling the streets in humvees. Notoriously, the Louisiana National Guard was deployed in Iraq at the time of the hurricane and its aftermath.

*Treme* places, at the centre of its narrative, people who are largely absent from previous representations of labour; an actual working class. It also features female characters far more prominently than either *Homicide* or *The Wire*. In this sense, it is something of a corrective to the problems identified by Elizabeth Ault (2012), and Laura Lippman (2004), in relation to the latter series in particular. The female characters occupy different race and class positions and tend to be the backbone of the working and middle class, a location of order and stability in the narrative. On occasion it seems like equal parts over-compensation and historical recuperation. Toni Burnette, a human rights lawyer, is played by Melissa Leo, who portrayed Detective Kay Howard in *Homicide*. Bar owner, LaDonna Batiste-Williams is played by Khandi Alexander who portrayed Fran Boyd in *The Corner*. In addition there are female teachers, restaurateurs, shop workers and musicians.

Most of the musicians are male, and usually marginally employed. The drug war, drug culture, the underclass and the police are also present, but largely peripheral to the main storylines. The valorisation of craft is evident throughout, particularly in an overly sentimental and uncritical portrayal of the jazz and blues musical subculture. At times, New Orleans sometimes seems worthy of salvage only because it is a craft city. The series is projected to end with election of Barack Obama in 2008. Whether this will lend the finale a sense of optimism tempered by hindsight remains to be seen. *Treme* is

the story of a city at a particular point in its history, rather than a contrived symbolic drama about an “Every city.” It tracks actual historical events from the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina onwards.

In even more marked contrast to *The Wire*, grassroots mobilisations and initiatives play a relatively significant role. There are community marches against the drug trade and challenges to the disaster capitalism which is driving the poor out of New Orleans through house demolitions. One act of individual resistance to institutional inertia and malice takes place in the first season, when Mardi Gras Indian chief Albert Lambreaux occupies a housing project. He is beaten by the police for his trouble. The housing project remains closed despite being undamaged, because reopening it would allow poor African-Americans to come home. In the third season, Albert is involved in a confrontation with police at a city hall protest about planning corruption. Nevertheless, the relative centrality of engaged, working people with their own sense of agency indicates a shift away from the pessimism of *The Wire*. While it is still devoid of a suggested solution, it acknowledges collective resistance to the predations presented in that earlier drama, and attempts to represent it. Perhaps it is also the case that resistance is easier to represent in this case. Unlike the slow motion destruction of Baltimore, resistance in New Orleans is tied to the shock doctrine economics that followed Hurricane Katrina. It suggests a different, more positive reaction to institutional failure than that presented in *The Wire*. As David Simon points out:

“There was nobody looking out for them and for the actual interest of the city. There were people ... who were in a place where they might have interposed between some of the excesses of venture capitalism or some of the indifference of certain bureaucracies, but they failed to do so. And ultimately it was down to regular citizens to start asserting for their own lives and their own communities.”  
(Watercutter 2012)

In other words, on this occasion his pessimism has been outmanoeuvred and contradicted by reality. Furthermore, while all of his observations may be true, the same points could reasonably also be made about Baltimore. As described in the last chapter, in the face of official abandonment and institutional failure, the citizens of that city also banded together to assert for their lives and dignity. *Treme* also represents a significant departure from *The Wire* in the explicit nature of its argument that the city and urban life are something worth saving. In marked contrast, *Generation Kill* lacked this ambition. While it shares an impetus toward ethnographic exploration like *The Corner*,

it lacks that earlier drama's ability to suggest a wider social order from its restricted perspective. It is a myopic piece that borders on self-indulgence, and its perspective in terms of the development of the occupation of Iraq was redundant even before its broadcast in 2008.

In the context of *The Wire*, David Simon's declaration that the HBO model gave him room to "crawl in" and make television was always contingent on their continued indulgence. The critical narrative around shows produced by HBO, AMC and Showtime has often seemed burdened with the subtext that television drama has come of age. Undoubtedly, the advent of segmented cable audiences has allowed for the production of more nuanced, minority drama, which would not survive in a traditional network environment.<sup>9</sup> *The Wire* reached the end of its story arc more or less intact, but with some narrative compression in the final season. In the case of *Treme*, its final season will be curtailed, from ten episodes to five. Simon has described the attempt to adequately finish the story in this timeframe as "frustrating", but credits "HBO for letting us go as far as we have with a television show that is not pulling numbers" (Watercutter 2012).<sup>10</sup> It remains to be seen whether a future home for his dramatic vision emerges on what is increasingly redundantly referred to as the television screen.

## CONCLUSION

Fundamental to Simon's worldview, as it becomes more developed in *The Wire* and *Treme*, is the sense of a break between the current and previous forms of capitalism. This becomes especially clear in a lecture he delivered at the University of North Carolina in 2011. He sees the middle period of the twentieth century as one where the contending powers of capital and labour were held in check by a strong state. Neither got their own way completely all of the time. While he feels that a society where capitalism is free to run roughshod over any idea of "a social compact" is disastrous, he predicts the same effect were labour to do the same. In the lecture, entitled "The end of the American century and the decline of labour," he argues that it is the tension between capital and labour that created well-paid employment and a consumer class. This vision of a regulated economy might seem surprising for someone whose writing is so critical of public institutions. Elizabeth Ault describes Simon as an "anarcho-libertarian", largely on account of his scepticism towards both state and market (2012, p.13). This

conclusion overlooks that the subtext of much of his writing is not that the state is undesirable, but that it has failed. David Simon may not have much faith in “the capacity of institutions to reform themselves,” but this is not the same as believing that they have no role to play.<sup>11</sup>

The belief that the tension between capital and labour is a sustainable engine of prosperity is problematic. In terms of the marxist critique of capitalism, which Simon substantially accepts while rejecting its solution, this tension or contradiction will necessarily be resolved one way or the other. What Simon perceives as the ultimate victory of capital over labour may, from a longer historical perspective, prove temporary and transient. David Harvey has argued consistently in recent years that capital’s need for constant expansion and increased accumulation is unsustainable (2010; 2007). Of course, this does not necessarily augur well for labour, whose victory is the marxist solution rejected by Simon. At this point in history, such a victory seems increasingly far-fetched. The alternative is the ongoing degeneration of capitalism, with more concentration of ownership, the reversal of social gains, and intensified transfer of wealth upwards. In terms of the current global balance of forces and the relative power of capital, it is difficult to argue with Simon’s pessimism.

Crucial to understanding his worldview is the realisation that, despite his pessimism, he perceives the role of the state as a potential force for the common good. His intervention, after whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed the extent of US government surveillance, suggested not only technical ignorance but credulity (Simon 2013b). While evincing a healthy cynicism about the state’s technical capabilities, he seemed to suggest that possessing vast quantities of personal data was fine once that data was not abused. He did not countenance the argument that the possession of data itself constituted an act of abuse. Of course, it should not be particularly surprising that someone who wrote a drama about a police wire tap unit should be a supporter of electronic surveillance. The primary role of the state, as referee between the contending forces of capital and labour is also clear in his perception of capitalism as a wealth creating engine, or “a tool in the box” of social policy (Honors Carolina 2011).

Simon fails to adequately explain the nature of the box in which capitalism is a tool. He is right to suggest that the penetration of the logic of unfettered, unencumbered neoliberal capitalism into every area of human activity represents a certain failure of the state. What he overlooks is that insofar as the state has ever adopted a regulatory role, this was defensive rather than directive. Furthermore, it only undertook this role for so

long as the balance of social forces rendered capital amenable to regulation. He implies that capitalism exists at the pleasure of the state, even as it is clear from his own writings and statements that the state has been co-opted by capital. In fact, as the principal means by which production is organised within society, capitalism itself is the box. A more appropriate box related analogy would be that of Pandora, implied in the imagery of the uncontrollable spirits conjured up by capitalism, as evoked by Marx and Engels. That capitalism is not a social compact, as Simon points out, is precisely the point. It was never intended to be one.

Despite these criticisms, the narratives of *The Corner*, *The Wire*, and latterly *Treme* are important elements in challenging and disrupting the dominant, normalising, neoliberal narrative. This ideology, while rarely expressed directly in the drama of official America, is always implicit. It is present in tv drama as the assumption that upper middle class occupations are the norm, and that inequality is not structural, but natural. Since 2008, this ideology has been challenged by reality, and elements of this, in terms of lost wealth, domestic downsizing, and thrifty living have seeped into mainstream drama. These are presented as individual, not systemic tragedies. Insofar as shows of mainstream America like *Gossip Girl* (US CW, 2007-2012), *Brothers and Sisters* (US ABC, 2006-2011 ), or *Two Broke Girls* (US CBS, 2011- ) and others, engage with the greatest economic crisis of modern times, this is how they do so.

By contrast, the potential for a drama like *The Wire* to become part of an alternative narrative, resistant to the dominance of neoliberalism, should not be dismissed. Its stories have become part of the way in which this particular “rigged game” is understood, and it provides a systemic, structural, and coherent symbolic representation of the system. It may fail to provide an alternative, but neither have there been an abundance of solutions from the real world left. There is surely no more definitive indication of how comprehensive the victory of the economic right has been, than this absence of alternative narratives. David Simon’s dramas have at the very least tracked the changes that other dramas have failed even to acknowledge. The problems in the United States and beyond are not simply incidental and individual. They are inextricably linked to the unbridled prosperity a diminishing number of people are enjoying, at the expense of the expropriation of the majority.

It is arguable that my thesis has not so much tracked the evolution of David Simon’s personal and dramatic worldviews, but a certain lack of evolution therein. Implicit in his writing is a critique of the breakdown of the New Deal consensus and the

post-Second World War economic boom. This writing also tracks the conservative and right wing backlash to the gains of the 1960s, particularly where African-Americans are concerned. Apparent in all three Baltimore dramas is an awareness of the importance of the civil rights movement, particularly in the late 1960s, to the life of the city. What Sergeant Landsman in *The Wire* describes as the “American experiment” is present early on as a conceptual thread in *Homicide: a year on the killing streets*. Its measured critique of policing accepts the need for a coercive force, but also acknowledges systemic flaws like institutional racism and the destructive potential of the war on drugs.

The idea of the United States as an experiment also suggests a finely balanced system that not only needs tending and tweaking, but which carries within it the possibility of failure. *Homicide: life on the street* dramatises the fall-out from Reagan and Bush era reforms, when mass unemployment as a permanent feature of the social landscape may not have been apparent to many. The intended fundamental and permanent power shift away from labour intended by these policies is more apparent in *The Corner* and especially *The Wire*. David Simon’s comprehension of the systemic nature of this ongoing worsening crisis, even while he posits solutions based on the reform of the American experiment, is worth noting. It is his adherence to a belief in reform and regulation, even as the economic and political narrative has seemed to shift irrevocably to the right, which makes him appear radical.

It needs acknowledging that even this perspective places Simon on the more leftward fringes of politics and culture in the United States and beyond. Ken Tucker (2007) may have been incorrect to describe him as the “finest marxist ever to make a television show,” but he is possibly the finest social-democrat ever do so, at least in the United States. As Dreier and Atlas conclude, Simon lately seems to be moving in a direction that sees grassroots mobilisation, away from the co-opted political arena, as not only inevitable, but necessary and desirable (2009, p.338). This much at least is indicated by the acknowledgement and inclusion of such movements in *Treme*. Writing after the recent failure of gun reform legislation in the United States, he reached a conclusion that resonates far beyond that galling event:

Only fools play a rigged game forever, and governments that elevate money and firearms over human life, that treat its people and their will with such indifference — such governments eventually lose not only honor, but credibility. People lose the reason to believe. Eventually, a



deep and abiding apathy prevails. Either that, or someone picks up a brick. (Simon 2013a)

*The Corner* and *The Wire* suggested that the former was the case. *Treme*, even in its unfinished state, seems to suggest the latter.

With little sign of improvement in sight, either in the United States or globally, it remains to be seen which direction David Simon's dramatic vision moves in the future. He claims to have recently completed a script about the early history of the C.I.A., but also suggests that *Treme* represents an end to his television career for the moment (Watercutter 2012). In terms of the commitment expected from a prospective viewer, *Treme* is a much tougher proposition than *The Wire*, which at least had the outward appearance of a cop show. It is rooted in the everyday rhythms of a working class neighbourhood where, as in *The Wire*, connections between disparate lives only slowly become apparent. Concerns about institutional dysfunction shading into corruption and unencumbered capitalism are present, but minus the scope of the earlier drama. In this case, disaster capitalism is a concentrated but recognisable version of unencumbered capitalism, but with Hurricane Katrina as an enabling event. A messier, more sprawling, and less focused piece, it lacks both the scope, and the contrived incremental exposition of the interconnectedness of an entire social order. In terms of narrative scope and ambition, it seems that *The Wire* may have been an aberration not only in the context of US television drama in general, but of David Simon's dramatic output in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> As argued in the previous chapter, the image of a detached, disinterested state is present in *The Wire*, where it forms the terminus point for the corruption investigation. As debased an example as he may be, Clay David is presented as greasing palms to open doors and create opportunities, operating as a conduit and a regulating influence between capital and labour.

<sup>2</sup> That "somebody is going to pick up a brick" implies that reform will be forced only when a disenfranchised group hits out. "At that point," Simon argues, "maybe there's another New Deal" (Sepinwall 2008). Therefore, revolt is seen not as an attempt to overturn the system so much as to force reform within the current one. That these reforms tend to be attempts to forestall systemic challenge is not acknowledged. In this case, while his critique of capitalism and the social order is rooted in systemic excess, this is seen as correctible, through pressure within the confines of the existing social order. In other words, the problems are systemic only in the sense that the system itself, capitalism, has become deformed, bloated, and out of control. This is a relatively uncontroversial view among liberal, and left-liberal Keynesian economists including, notably, Paul Krugman of the *New York Times*. It is unsurprising therefore that some critics have drawn attention to a nostalgic tone, particularly in *The Wire*, which has received most critical attention. The drama, these critiques suggest, harks back to an older model of capitalism which never really existed. Kennedy and Shapiro suggest that *The Wire* "is not about capitalism, only about a late stage of capitalism", characterised by a "nostalgic yearning for a state run by meritocratic elites that grants a place for capitalism" (2012, p.159). Toscano and Kinkle (2009) similarly argue, in the context of the final season, that "the ideological positioning of the show ... could be encapsulated as a kind of labourist social critique, infused by a dose of nostalgia for the Fordist

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compact.” Thomas Jessen Adams (2013) draws attention to its privileging of manufacturing and “producerist” labour, particularly with the longshoremen of season two. The period of assembly line mass production seems to be valourised, a period which for numerous reasons is never coming back.

<sup>3</sup> “While *The Wire* feels startlingly lifelike, it is not in fact a naturalistic depiction of ghetto life. That kind of realism better describes an earlier miniseries of Simon’s, *The Corner*, which was based on the book of the same title that he and Ed Burns wrote, set in the same Baltimore ghetto. The six-part HBO version of *The Corner* is nearly unwatchable, because—however true to life—the extended depiction of shrieking crack whores and broken-down junkies 10 cents short of the price of a “loosie” is too much to take.” (Weisberg 2006)

<sup>4</sup> The paradox that the seeming collapse of the neoliberal project has instead left in an even more unassailable position is the subject of Colin Crouch’s 2011 book, *The Strange Death of Neoliberalism*.

<sup>5</sup> Even “Possum” the real police informant on whom the character of Bubbles is partially based, is subject to an article that engages with his sense of “professional accomplishment” (Simon 1992c).

<sup>6</sup> This is not to suggest that credible nuanced portrayals of such working environments are not possible. The social realist tradition, particularly in British television regularly attempted to portray the reality of exactly this type of work. The drama lay in portraying the contradiction of motivated human beings forced into an alienated and alienating work environment. The basic contradiction of labour under capitalism is understood as implicit in all work. This is particularly apparent in the work of Ken Loach and Jim Allen in *The Lump* (1968), *The Big Flame* (1969), *The Rank and File* (1971), and *The Price of Coal* (1977).

<sup>7</sup> This argument was central to a review of *Generation Kill* published in the online film journal, *Scope* (Sweeney 2010).

<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Ed Burns suggested in a contemporary interview that those responsible for starting the war should end up in a courtroom (Havrilesky 2008b).

<sup>9</sup> The move into original drama production by on-demand web broadcaster Netflix suggests a further refinement. All episodes are made available simultaneously, deepening the tendency toward block, or binge, viewing introduced by the DVD box set.

<sup>10</sup> In the same interview, Simon proposes two possible future dramas. One is about the CIA from the end of the Second World War onwards, to explore “America’s foreign policy footprint.” The second, retreading similar allegorical territory to *The Wire* is based in the development of the adult entertainment industry in the 1970s:

I’m not particularly interested in porn as porn, but I’m fascinated by the allegory for capitalism. The idea of product and this moment at which a product went from being impermissible and under-the-counter to overt and taking up real estate in the largest American city. And then this moment when the real estate became utterly expendable, because the product changed and everything went to home video. Then everybody who had seized on the physical plant — including the mob, and politicians, and real estate — at some point it all transpired to Disney. (Watercutter 2012)

Both dramas, along with a drama posited by Ed Burns (Wilson 2008) on the Haymarket bombings, are speculative and have not been confirmed.

<sup>11</sup> Attractive as it may seem, Simon’s perspective of the mid-twentieth century US economy as one overseen by the state as a referee is only part of the narrative. Mike Davis describes the social democratic compromise in superficially similar terms, but views it as a compromise that was always going to backfire on labour. He refers to “a dynamic wage system that synchronised mass consumption with labour productivity,” significantly raising living standards. Repeating the central point of Simon’s thesis, but from a more critical perspective, he argues that “The stability of the wage-productivity trade-off between capital and organised labour allowed the US working class increasingly to reproduce itself as a collectivity of privatised consumers” (Davis 1986, p.191). There is more than a hint here of Ed Burns’s 2008 comment about the fate of the working class. “We’ve forgotten what it’s like to be a working man,” he said. “There was a flush of money, and we’ve forgotten our roots. These stories have a power because it’s when men stood up” (Wilson 2008). When the inevitable backlash arrived, this analysis suggests, the sense of collective identification and solidarity had been ruptured in favour of a working class self-image partly built around atomised consumption.

## APPENDIX A

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is in the nature of work of this type that new avenues are uncovered and become apparent during the research process. There are a number of areas which would, had the boundaries of my research extended in different directions, have provided fruitful areas for exploration. My own intention has been to attempt an exposition of David Simon's worldview, and in particular how it has been expressed through these three Baltimore dramas. I believe that, despite my own criticisms, his worldview is unusually coherent, and politically progressive. More time and space would also have enabled a substantial exploration of both *Generation Kill* and *Treme*, both of which I have paid scant attention to here. Future research to expand the current critique to include these later dramas would allow for a more comprehensive engagement with David Simon's television oeuvre. It would be a continuation of the same type of text based, politically engaged analysis, unified by theme and/or authorship, and multi-disciplinary in approach. This would provide a natural sense of closure and ending, especially as it seems that *Treme* represents his last engagement with the contemporary United States for the near future.

In a related sense, and especially given the fate of *Treme*, I think that a lot of work remains to be done on the limits of the HBO model as a forum for storytelling. These studies would be rooted in both political economy and textual analysis, and also consider the emerging web subscription model, exemplified by Netflix. This is also rooted in subscription, provides access to many older television dramas via the internet, but has recently moved into original drama production. Its unique selling point lies in making numerous episodes available simultaneously, mimicking the experience of DVD box set anthology viewing.

However, the area where most scope for future research exists is in the representation of gender in all three dramas, particularly *Homicide* and *The Wire*. Criticisms from writers like Elizabeth Ault (2012), Courtney D. Marshall (2009) and Laura Lippman (2004) have drawn attention to the relatively marginalised position of women in *The Wire* especially. The potential for such critiques stretches right back to *Homicide*, and particularly to the portrayal of Detective (later Sergeant) Kay Howard.

Due to the fact that there were no female detectives in the male-dominated source material, Howard's character was based on a high achieving male detective (Simon 2006a, p.630). Her inclusion was a nod to evolving viewer expectations rather than a reflection of the diversity of the real department. There was an obvious intention to make her, in some ways, better than her male counterparts. She had a perfect clearance rate, and was promoted to Sergeant. Unfortunately, as the Sergeant's role is primarily an administrative one, her character was sidelined and would develop unevenly. Another female detective, Megan Russert, enjoyed a meteoric rise to Major, before being demoted back to detective, returning her to a central position in the investigative storylines.

Howard is not simply the only female in a male-dominated department, but also an investigator of crimes which are mostly carried out by men:

“Most of those who kill are men. And most of the people who get killed are men. I'm surrounded by men, solving crimes by men, against men.” (“See No Evil” H2.01, 1994)

She is unique in an environment where, almost by definition, women are absent except as victims or, more rarely, as perpetrators. Unfortunately, this aspect of her work is not explored in any meaningful way. In their final appearance, Howard and Russert were relegated to choosing a funeral suit for a murdered detective, the former's professional partner, and the latter's romantic partner. The other (male) detectives investigated his murder.

In *The Wire: truth be told* (2004), Laura Lippman writes a defence of the women of *The Wire* that Elizabeth Ault (2010, p.3) reasonably characterises as being more like “a defence of the (male) writers of *The Wire*.” Lippman draws attention to aspects of *The Wire* which appear to consciously deliver what is expected of a HBO drama series, including the “obligatory HBO tittie bar shot” (2004, p.56). However, she argues that *The Wire* shows women as they are in the world that is being represented. They “appear in secondary roles, but that is a simple truth about the world it portrays” (2004, p.60), and preferable to the world presented on much mainstream television, which “teems with a rainbow coalition of female professionals.” In this world, the “ceilings prove to be more gossamer than glass,” and crucially that, “there are no institutional biases, just a backward individual here or there who needs his consciousness yanked sternly upward” (2004, p.55).

David Simon claims to accept these shortcomings, rehearsing the criticism that he tends to write women as Hemingway did, as “men with tits” (Jordan c.2002).<sup>1</sup> He acknowledged that the inclusion of a small number of female writers was a deliberate attempt to broaden the base of contributors, particularly Joy Lusco in early seasons. The female, African-American playwright Kia Corthron also wrote an episode for the fourth season (Simon 2006c). The examples seem damningly sparse, bordering on the tokenistic.<sup>2</sup> These attempts to rectify short-comings may seem laudable but also tend to gloss over structural difficulties with the genre and material itself. When looking for narratives that looked out onto the wider life of the city, David Simon interned in a male dominated environment. Further, the decision to write in a genre dominated by white men biases the pool of potential contributors in a particular way. There are successful female crime writers; not least the Baltimore based Laura Lippman. Frederic Jameson points out that, like *The Wire*, the novels of Chicago based left-feminist crime writer Sara Paretsky also focus on specific segments of industrial city life (2010, p.372).

These criticisms are, of course, not limited to *The Wire*, but it is arguable that the almost unanimous critical acclaim for its narrative, served to highlight these exclusions. Attention to these deficiencies needs to address the structural imbalances referred to above, and the nature of the crime genre itself. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done in this area, not only with regard to *The Wire*, but other dramas like *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos* and their contemporaries, around which a approbatory critical consensus seems to have developed.

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<sup>1</sup> In a 2008 opinion piece for *The Guardian* David Simon acknowledged those areas that *The Wire* had neglected, including its engagement with gender issues: “We did not contemplate immigration. We largely ignored sex-based discrimination, feminism and gender issues. We spoke not a word about the pyramid scheme that is the mortgage crisis, or the diminishing consumer class, or the time bomb that all of our China-bought debt might prove to be.” (Simon 2008c)

<sup>2</sup> Away from the writers’ room, women are more prominently represented with executive product Nina Noble, director of photography Uta Briesewitz and producer Karen Thorson.

## APPENDIX B

### DAVID SIMON AT THE *BALTIMORE SUN*: EXAMPLES

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#### Homicide squad follows same script on Christmas

David Simon

*The Sun* (1837-1987); Dec 26, 1985; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Baltimore Sun (1837-1987)

pg. 1F

### Homicide squad follows same script on Christmas

By David Simon

Christmas Day, 4:30 a.m. In the squad room of the city homicide unit, where phrases like "peace on earth" and "goodwill toward men" have comedic appeal, the shift sergeant, Roger Reager, is balancing two serious shootings and a fatal stabbing.

"I like chaos," he said dryly after the first shooting call came in. "My attitude is: if you're going to get one, you might as well have four." And it has been said that when the gods want to punish you, they answer your prayers.

The refugees from each successive incident — suspects who are crying or oblivious, witnesses who are bored one moment and nervous the next, patrol officers who scrape through pages of incident reports — move back and forth between interview rooms and offices, reluctant actors working over the same tired script.

In one corner sits the battered suspect in the stabbing death of his 62-year-old boyfriend in a West Baltimore Street row house. With one

#### CITY LIFE

bruised eye shut, the young woman is struggling to keep awake while chemical tests and photographs are taken by a technician. At brief intervals, her eyes close and her head slips to her shoulder, but she is jolted awake when her body begins to slip from the chair.

When her eyes stay open, the woman catches black-and-white images of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, stars of the all-night movie, swirling across a television screen on the far wall.

"Come on now," Fred says to Ginger. "I'm really not such a bad fellow."

Another woman, a Reservoir Hill resident who shot and critically wounded her boyfriend in the eye with a .25-caliber pistol, is on the way downtown accompanied by a patrol officer.

Meanwhile, in the opposite corner of the office, a group of Western District patrolmen sit drawing in a

sea of incident reports, occasionally surfacing to pick at the pretzels, carrot sticks and olives that are the remnants of the squad's Christmas Eve party.

Witnesses to an earlier shooting, in which a young man was wounded in the neck on the street near his home, are waiting for the last in their group to give a statement. Along with witnesses to the stabbing, they've been in the squad room for two hours. They're wearing worn work clothes and sneakers — the woman has her hair in curlers — and watching some skinny guy in an ascot and top hat croon things like, "Do you think I could disappoint you? I wouldn't miss that dance audition for the world."

"What time is it?" asks one of the men, after being told that he will have to return to the Western District to be interviewed there. "I mean, damn, it's Christmas."

The third detective on the overnight shift, Robert McAllister, walks in from an outer office carrying his paperwork with him.

"Hey, it's Fred and Ginger. The return of civilization," he says,

prompting two of the witnesses to scan the squad room for the couple in question.

A half-hour later the witnesses are gone and the stabbing suspect is taken to Mercy Hospital for her swollen eye. A short time after that, patrol officers checking the woman's belongings into the evidence-control unit find a bloody knife in one of her bags. And the detectives are called downstairs.

For about 15 minutes after they return, there is a lull — a brief intermission when the detectives slump in their chairs and soak in the holiday music from the television. But it lasts no longer than the next phone call, when the phone lines light up across the office. A detective grabs at a receiver and pulls out a pen to record a new address, and perhaps the name of a hospital.

This time the call is for a detective to respond to the third shooting scene. The suspect has arrived and, after being placed in an interview room, she begins crying uncontrollably.

See CITY LIFE, 3F, Col 1

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"Shaven and Hildingsworth should be in here. One of them came to the scene," says Detective Oscar Reager, leaning back in his chair. "And they call it Chess City," he adds abruptly.

The elevator bell rings from down the hall.

"Best sound in the world," says Reager.

Detectives Donald Elnaad and David Hildingsworth arrive and are

held of the holiday bloodletting. At first, they feign some surprise, as if the coming of Christmas Day ought to make people pause before pulling a trigger or plunging a kitchen knife into someone's chest.

But deep down they know better. Before long, the group is joking as only cops do, acting out a series of stereotypical Christmas homicides to all their incredible serendipities.

"But I don't want a food processor," whines Elnaad. "BANG!"

"This is the same thing you got

McAllister smiled a bit, but he was beyond humor. The paperwork from the West Baltimore Street homicide would keep him working through Christmas morning.

me last Christmas, BOOM!" adds Reager.

"Merry Christmas, baby. POW!" says Hildingsworth.

McAllister smiles a bit, but he's beyond humor. The paperwork from the West Baltimore Street homicide will keep him there through Christ-

mas morning. He tries to sleep in a back office while waiting for the suspect to return from Mercy Hospital and for the sergeant to complete his reports.

For Oscar Reager, the shift ends at about 7 a.m. He picks up his gun, briefcase and coat and makes his way toward the door.

"Now, back," he says to McAllister, "if you want me to stay, I can't

will if you need me."

"OK," says McAllister, picking up on it. "Stay."

"Just say the word, back, and I'll stay," says Reager, putting on his coat.

"OK," says McAllister. "Hang around."

"Just say the word."

"OK."

Reager smiles and turns in the doorway before heading for the elevator.

"Hey," he says, "I mean this sincerely. Merry Christmas to all of you guys."

And then he laughs.

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## Violence erupts as non-union laborers unload ship

David Simon

*The Sun (1837-1987)*; Oct 9, 1985; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Baltimore Sun (1837-1987)

pg. 1F

# Violence erupts as non-union laborers unload ship

By David Simon  
and Allegra Bennett

Violence broke out last night on Baltimore's waterfront as angry longshoremen protested non-union workers unloading Polish cement from a Greek freighter at wages less than a third of union scale.

Saying the cheaper labor was threatening their jobs, about 25 members of the International Longshoremen's Association Local 1429 initially set up what they called an informational picket line at the gate to Pier 7, South Locust Point, where the Greek ship *Devy* is berthed with its cargo of 400,000 bags of cement.

But the crowd of I.L.A. protesters grew to about 125 by 8:30 p.m., when the first disturbance occurred

— apparently when a worker attempted to drive a forklift through or near the picket line in the 1000 block McComas Street.

Southern District Sgt. Walter Price, 45, was hit by the forklift and slightly injured, police said.

About 10 p.m., a large number of protesters marched along McComas Street chanting, "I.L.A. all the way," then crossed railroad tracks and approached the ship, city police said. A Chesle System policeman and a group of Southern District officers who tried to halt the crowd were pelted by rocks, bottles and debris.

A city patrolman was slightly injured in this confrontation, and five longshoremen were arrested, police said.

Both injured policemen were

treated at South Baltimore General Hospital.

The union members finally left about 10:45 p.m., but vowed to return today.

The longshoremen, who earn \$17 an hour, contended the company, Baltimore Launch and Marine Services Inc., was trying to break the union by hiring about 400 non-union men at \$5 an hour to unload the cargo.

The company, which is primarily a towing firm, advertised for workers in the Baltimore area for several weeks and received responses from "hard-core unemployed" men, said Mark Ferragamo, the company's warehouse operator.

"Ninety-seven percent of the people are hard-core unemployed — out

for six months or more," he said. They will work for 90 days, unloading the cargo, then manning warehouses as the cement is sold.

General manager John Sorensen said the company has never used unionized stevedores because they cost too much. He said the cost of bringing the cement from Poland to the United States was less than what the longshoremen would charge just to unload the ship at a rate of \$17 an hour per man.

"If we could not unload it, it would have been diverted to another country. We could offer hundreds of people a job at a fair wage rate and that is exactly what happened," Mr. Sorensen said in defense of the \$5

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### SHIP, from 1F

hourly rate.

However, union members said that while they understand the workers' need for jobs, they cannot accept the company's rationale for hiring cheaper labor while half of the local's 3,000 members are out of work.

"They are taking the money out of our mouths, and they are getting paid this one time on our backs," said one longshoreman, who explained that he was concerned about the long-term effect of the cheap labor.

One 49-year-old worker who was hired at the \$5 hourly rate said he was sympathetic with the I.L.A.'s position but added, "We both have to eat. We can't go to their union and get a job."

Reporter David Michael Ettlin contributed to this article.

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## Recovering own car part of day's work

David Simon

*The Sun* (1837-1987); Nov 15, 1985; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Baltimore Sun (1837-1987)  
pg. 5C

# Recovering own car part of day's work

By David Simon

When Baltimore police Detective William Matthews got up yesterday, he looked out into the parking lot of the Baltimore County apartment complex where he lives and noticed that his Mazda wasn't where he parked it. He went to work anyway.

By lunchtime, he had recovered his car and helped other city officers to arrest a young suspect in the case. "Quite a day," he said after the arrest.

The incident began a little before 2 p.m., when the plainclothes detective, who is assigned to the department's Special Tactical Operations Patrol, got a call from a friend who had seen two youths in his gold-and-black sports car cruising the area of Monument and Caroline streets in East Baltimore.

"It's a pretty distinctive car," said Detective Matthews, who added that the auto's license plates of "Bill 6" represent his name and athletic jersey number. "You can spot it pretty easily."

So Detective Matthews, using a Police Department vehicle, set out for Monument and Caroline. "I figured, well, I'm at police headquarters on Fayette Street, I might as well go find it myself."

But when the detective arrived at the East Baltimore intersection, his car was gone. He drove through the area for several minutes without success. Then he broadcast a description of the stolen car, and its last known location, on the police department's city-wide radio band.

Bingo. "A patrol car radioed in that they had the car right in front of them on the Orleans Street viaduct, and that's when [the suspects] bailed out," Detective Matthews said.

At the viaduct exit at St. Paul Street, the officer's car jerked to a halt in a westbound lane of the viaduct and the suspects jumped from the vehicle. The suspects ran through a small park on St. Paul Street below the viaduct and into the alleys between St. Paul and Calvert streets, police said.

One suspect paused in a garage on Hargrove Alley to shed a distinctive green Boston Celtics athletic jacket. The jacket was later recovered by pursuing officers for evidence.

Several patrol cars, along with mounted officers and the police helicopter, caught up to one of the suspects in The Baltimore Sun's employee parking lot on the southeast corner of Calvert and Centre streets, where the youth had bolted between two delivery vans in an apparent attempt to hide.

With their guns drawn, officers flushed the youth out and then handcuffed him. That's when Detective Matthews arrived, introduced himself, and helped lead the suspect to a waiting police wagon.

The suspect, a 15-year-old East Baltimore resident, was charged as a juvenile and placed in the custody of the state Juvenile Services Administration, police said. The second suspect in the case was still at large last night.



## Smoke-filled high-rise evacuated

David Simon

*The Sun* (1837-1987); Dec 29, 1986; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Baltimore Sun (1837-1987)  
pg. 1D



Rescue workers take away victim of trash fire in Centre Towers apartment house.

## Smoke-filled high-rise evacuated

By David Simon

More than 100 apartment dwellers — many of them elderly and some with their pets — were evacuated from a downtown high-rise after smoke from a trash fire rolled through the upper floors yesterday.

Four residents of the 15-story building on Centre Street were taken to area hospitals for treatment, fire officials said.

Firefighters arrived at 12:35 p.m. to find heavy smoke permeating much of the Centre Towers apartment house at 111 West Centre

Street. They called for a second alarm as they searched for the source of the smoke and began to evacuate the upper floors of the building, fire officials said.

The smoke was traced to a trash chute on the 18th floor, where a pile of burning newspapers was found to be lodged, Baltimore fire investigators said.

Fire officials said three residents of the building were taken out in litters and rushed by ambulance to Mercy Hospital. They were treated for smoke inhalation in the emergency room and released, according

to a hospital spokeswoman.

A trash resident — an elderly woman — was taken by paramedics to University Hospital when she complained of chest pains after walking down several flights of stairs during the evacuation, according to fire officials.

University Hospital said that that woman also was discharged after treatment.

Fire officials said the smoky blaze was brought under control by 1:30 p.m. and most residents were able to return to their apartments a short time afterward.



Deisy Moffatt, who was evacuated yesterday after smoke filled the apartment building where she lives, hugs her dog, Charlie.

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# Train derailment leaks chemicals in Susquehanna

By Deborah I. Greene  
and David Simon

PERRYVILLE — A freight train derailed north of this Cecil County river town last night, leaving at least one chemical tanker leaking into the Susquehanna River and prompting pumping stations providing water to Baltimore and several Northeast Maryland communities to shut down as a precaution.

No one was injured in the accident at 7:55 p.m., which involved a Conrail freight train traveling south along the river from Harrisburg, Pa., en route to Baltimore, officials said.

Authorities at the scene confirmed that one tanker that came to rest at the water's edge was leaking sodium hydroxide, or caustic soda, into the river in small amounts, while two other cars containing chlorine were in the water but did not appear to be leaking.

Officials said the tanker contained 15,000 to 16,000 gallons of the chemical, which they described as a corrosive material used in petroleum refining, paper production and as a cleaning product.

However, authorities said, sodium hydroxide only forms a toxic gas if mixed with metallic elements, and there was little chance of that occurring, as the chemical was being diluted in the river.

"We really can't stop the leak," said Bob Thomas, spokesman for the state fire marshal's office. "It will probably continue throughout the night."

Investigators said last night that they did not know the cause of the derailment.

Health officials were at the scene earlier checking into a report that a car containing the chemical nitric

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**"We really can't stop  
the leak."**

**BOB THOMAS**  
State fire marshal's office

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acid was also leaking into the river, but authorities later determined that the tanker car containing that chemical was intact.

Authorities said a total of 22 cars left the tracks in the derailment, but only nine of those left the rail bed and were in danger of leaking their contents into the river, officials said. Many of the cars on the train were empty or contained only residual amounts of chemicals, officials said.

The cars left the rail bed about a half-mile north of the Conowingo Dam, which spans the river at U.S. 1 and is about seven miles north of Perryville. The train, which was powered by two locomotives, comprised 72 rail cars, officials said.

One of the derailed cars was also said to be carrying fireworks, according to Mr. Thomas, the fire marshal's spokesman.

The pumping stations providing water to the towns of Perryville, Port Deposit and Perry Point — as well as to the Baltimore area, which has been pumping water from the Susquehanna to augment the city reservoirs during this year's drought — were all shut down as a precaution. But the Havre de Grace pumping station — which is located south of the dam — was allowed to remain open after officials there were informed by county health department

See **TRAIN**, 6B, Col. 1

# Derailing dumps tank cars in river

**TRAIN**, from 1B

officials that there was no danger.

Mr. Thomas, of the state fire marshal's office, said water reserves in the Port Deposit and Perryville communities were relatively low and there could be some problem today with supplies if the pumping stations remain closed for any length of time.

The Baltimore area's water supply, which relies predominantly on the three county reservoirs, will be unaffected by the shutdown, official

said.

About 800 residents of the Conowingo Trailer Park near the accident site were informed of the incident, and civil defense officials were on hand in the unlikely event that an evacuation was necessary.

In addition, officials said that the Conowingo Dam was shut down to slow the current and limit the spread of the chemicals.

Cleanup efforts were expected to go on through the early morning and well into this afternoon, officials said. In addition to Conrail officials,

those at the scene included health and environmental experts, local fire fighters, state and local police and water management officials.

A similar incident occurred in October 1984 when a 75-car Conrail train carrying hazardous chemicals jumped the tracks in Cecil County just south of Port Deposit. There was no leakage in that incident, but some Port Deposit residents were evacuated as a precaution.

"We don't believe that much of the tracks will be clear before day-break," said Mr. Thomas.

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2 UM campus newspapers plant seeds for a spring of controversy  
David Simon; David Mills  
*The Sun (1837-1987)*; Mar 26, 1984; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Baltimore Sun (1837-1987)  
pg. D2

## 2 UM campus newspapers plant seeds for a spring of controversy

By David Simon and David Mills

Student newspapers at two University of Maryland campuses are showing some growing pains this spring, as the College Park daily threatens to sue the university for access to student disciplinary hearings and the UMBC paper fights for independence from the Student Government Association.

At College Park, the publishing board of the *Doromondack*, the independent student daily newspaper, voted last week to challenge in court the university's policy of conducting student disciplinary hearings behind closed doors.

The public never knows how the judicial board reaches its decisions.

said editor-in-chief Gary Gately, "and that's the basis of public trust in a judicial system — openness."

But judicial program officials at College Park contend that the university couldn't make its disciplinary hearings open if it wanted to, because they are constrained by federal privacy statutes.

Nonetheless, the 12-member governing board of Maryland Media, an independent corporation that publishes the *Doromondack*, voted to challenge the university's regulation that closes such hearings to the public.

Under the campus's conduct code, students accused of violations ranging from assault or theft to academic dishonesty are brought before a student board. Penalties can range

from several hours of charity work to suspension or expulsion from the university.

The campus judicial system received attention last year when a nationally basketball player was removed from participating in intercollegiate sports when he was alleged to have made improper sexual advances to a female student and been found to be in violation of the conduct code.

Jra Allen, Maryland Media's board chairman and a reporter for *United Press International*, said he was surprised that the media didn't have routine access to serious judicial proceedings.

Mr. Allen said he sent a letter to Chancellor John B. Slaughter inviting him to discuss the closed-hearing

the before the corporation files its lawsuit in federal court.

However, judicial programs director Gary Pavela said privacy for student academic and disciplinary records is guaranteed by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, commonly known as the Buckley Amendment.

Mr. Pavela said he asked the U.S. Education Department for a written response to a November, 1981, request by the *Doromondack* and was told that if the school opened up its student hearings, "they would cut off federal funds."

While the 62-year-old *Doromondack* was battling heads with the College Park administration, the fledgling student weekly at the university's Baltimore county campus was

struggling to establish its editorial and financial independence.

While the *Doromondack* is funded through advertising revenues, about 50 percent of the budget of *UMBC's Retriever* comes from student activities fees allocated by the Student Government Association in conjunction with campus officials.

Earlier this month, the SCA Senate passed a resolution that would cut by 80 percent the amount of money the newspaper could spend on salaries for editors and reporters, according to editor-in-chief Jon Fitchel.

"The intent of that bill was to compel the *Retriever* editors into economic independence," explained GA senator David Rifkin, noting that it was eventually vetoed by the

GA president.

The SCA also passed a resolution prohibiting the campus paper from distributing copies at the university's Baltimore city campus.

In response to the SCA resolution, as well as earlier efforts, Mr. Fitchel said he is negotiating with the SCA and campus officials for a new publications board that would remove the newspaper from the student government budget process.

While noting that there weren't any major disagreements between the SCA and the student newspaper before, Mr. Michael said that since he SCA controls my budget, I've got to think twice any time we write anything bad about them."

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## 12 arrested in numbers crackdown

David Simon; David Michael Ettlin

*The Sun (1837-1987)*; Jun 21, 1985; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Baltimore Sun (1837-1987)  
pg. 6B

# 12 arrested in numbers crackdown

By David Simon  
and David Michael Ettlin

In a crackdown on an alleged illegal numbers operation, city and State Police conducted simultaneous raids last night at 10 homes and arrested 12 persons — including a key figure in a 1973 police bribery scandal.

Lt. William A. Robbins, head of the city police vice squad, said the raids were the result of a four-month investigation and focused on the middle and upper levels of a gambling operation he alleged took in millions of dollars a year.

The lieutenant said four other persons suspected of involvement in

the numbers operation were not arrested because of physical infirmities, but would be issued criminal summonses later.

Police alleged that the leader — or “backer” — of the gambling ring was William I. Klemkowski, 57, of the 1100 block East Fort avenue. He and an accomplice pleaded guilty in 1973 to federal gambling conspiracy and bribery charges in a case that led to criminal convictions of a number of Western District and vice squad officers.

Mr. Klemkowski, who owned a Glen Burnie tavern before his 1973 conviction, was arrested last night after a raid at the French Quarter bar — owned by members of his family

— and an apartment above it, police said.

While officers raided the bar, members of the Police Department's Quick Response Team climbed a ladder to reach a window to the apartment to make sure that no evidence was destroyed, police said.

Other sites raided were four homes in the 1400 block Reynolds street and homes in the 400 block East 28th street, the 2400 block Llewelyn avenue and the 5900 block Glennor road.

State Police participating in the investigation raided and made arrests at homes in the 1800 block Lansing road and the 100 block Marie avenue, both in Glen Burnie.

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# One of 4 policemen injured by gunman in Harford dies

By David Simon  
and David Michael Ettlin

The first of four policemen wounded Sept. 18 in Havre de Grace by a gunman alleged to be a New York rape suspect and parolee died yesterday at the shock-trauma unit at University Hospital.

Robert F. Pyles, a 54-year-old officer with the Toll Facilities Police, who was wounded at the old Susquehanna River bridge where he had served for almost 19 years, had been in critical condition since being flown by Medevac helicopter to the trauma unit nine days ago, a hospital spokeswoman said.

Reached at home yesterday, Harford County State's Attorney Joseph I. Cassilly said that as a result of the officer's death, he will seek the death penalty for 27-year-old Frank Green, the man arrested after an all-night search and charged with shooting the four officers.

"I have thought about it," Mr. Cassilly said. "He will be prosecuted under the death penalty statute."

As the first Maryland Toll Facilities police officer to be killed in the line of duty, Officer Pyles was eulogized yesterday as a "a fine employee and police officer."

Toll Facilities Police Chief Edward Hechmer said that his department had received condolences from law enforcement agencies throughout Maryland and in other states.

"It's a sad occasion, as it is when any police officer loses his life," Chief Hechmer said. "We've been in touch with the family and will continue to be in touch."

Born in Fort Ashby, W.Va., Officer Pyles had served as a bridge guard at the Susquehanna River post beginning in November 1967. In March 1971, he became a member of the Toll Facilities agency when the bridge guards were merged with that police department, which has jurisdiction over the state's bridges and tunnels.

The officer has a wife and several grown children, Chief Hechmer said. Funeral arrangements were not complete last night, he said.



**OFFICER ROBERT F. PYLES**  
Served with Toll Facilities Police.

Officer Pyles was the first policeman to encounter the gunman on the Thomas J. Hatern Memorial Bridge on U.S. 40, after a van the suspect had been driving was found abandoned on the eastbound approach following a minor accident.

The officer spotted the man walking on the bridge and, in the apparent belief that he was nothing more than a stranded motorist, had him sit in the back seat of his Toll Facilities cruiser, police said.

Officer Pyles was at the wheel, nearing the abandoned van, when he was shot behind the right ear.

According to the account pieced together by authorities, the cruiser crashed into the concrete median barrier and Havre de Grace Officer Dennis Rittershofer and Harford County Deputy Sheriff Steven O. Wagner, who were investigating the accident involving the van, ran toward it in the belief that Officer Pyles may have had a heart attack or stroke.

They also were shot by the suspect, and moments later another Havre de Grace policeman, Officer

See **OFFICER**, 5B, Col. 1

# 1 of 4 policemen shot by gunman in Harford dies

**OFFICER**, from 1B

Charles Briggs III, was shot behind a nearby McDonald's restaurant as he chased the gunman, authorities said.

The van was found to have been stolen in New York, and a check with authorities there enabled state police to identify Green as the suspect. On parole from a prison term for attempted armed robbery, Green also was a suspect in a brutal rape and stabbing in his oceanfront Queens community of Far Rockaway.

About 200 police officers sealed off the town of Havre de Grace with an intricate series of roadblocks and captured the suspect about 6:45 a.m. after a gunbattle near the intersection of Revolution and Union streets in a residential neighborhood near Harford Memorial Hospital.

Green has been held without bail since then in the Harford County Detention Center on charges including four counts of attempted murder.

Officer Rittershofer, 30, remained in critical but stable condition yesterday at the shock-trauma center. Officer Briggs, 29, who also was flown to the trauma unit, and Deputy Wagner, 28, who was treated at Harford Memorial, have been released from the hospitals.

## FDA seizes \$3 million in drugs at Arundel company

David Simon

*The Sun* (1837-1987); Dec 4, 1986; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Baltimore Sun (1837-1987)

pg. 10D

# FDA seizes \$3 million in drugs at Arundel company

By David Simon

Federal authorities have confiscated more than \$3 million worth of antibiotics distributed for animal and human use by an Anne Arundel County drug company that was barred from selling the products because it failed to follow federal regulations.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration contends that the Brooklyn Park firm of Kanasco Ltd. manufactured the drugs in a manner that failed to follow federal regulations, thereby raising questions about the sterility and potency of the products.

More seizures of antibiotics manufactured by Kanasco, which also trades under the name of John D. Copares & Sons Inc., are anticipated, FDA officials said.

Federal authorities Friday halted the sale of a half-million vials of antibiotics from veterinary suppliers in Middlesex, N.J., and Bridgewater, N.J., according to a representative of the U.S. attorney's office in Newark.

In addition, other drugs — some of them said to be penicillin for hu-

## The FDA said Kanasco's manufacturing process could not offer the proper guarantee of sterility.

man use — were seized from other distributors in the Long Island, N.Y., towns of Rockville Center and West Hempstead, according to FDA spokeswoman Susan Cruzan.

The director of Maryland's FDA office, Thomas Hooker, said yesterday Kanasco's production of injectable drugs was halted in October, because the firm was not in compliance with good manufacturing practice.

Mr. Hooker said Kanasco's manufacturing process could not offer the proper guarantee of sterility, but the FDA has no indication the drugs were contaminated.

The drugs confiscated out of state were manufactured by the firm before October.

Jerald K. Oppel, an attorney rep-

resenting the company, could not be reached for comment yesterday, but he earlier told the Associated Press that company officials "believe that the FDA tests conclusively show that the product is pure. It's our position that this was seized in error. The regulations have been followed to a tee."

Mr. Oppel said the company may respond to the government's action in court.

This week's action by the FDA is the latest in a series of conflicts between the federal agency and the drug firm.

As long ago as fall 1984, according to court records, FDA investigators began a review of the company's manufacturing processes after they received information that the

firm was not in compliance with quality control guidelines.

FDA officials obtained consent orders in 1984 and 1985 barring the firm from manufacturing drugs, according to court records. The firm returned to the marketplace, however, after telling the FDA and the court it had corrected existing problems.

In September, however, FDA investigators again visited the firm's plants in the 6100 block of Robinwood Road and found similar problems with sterility, labeling, training of employees and records keepings, according to court records.

The agency obtained a third consent order barring the company from the further manufacture of injectable drugs in October. The order does not apply to other oral drugs manufactured by the firm under a program with the Parke-Davis division of the Warner-Lambert Co.

The manufacture of those drugs is supervised by Parke-Davis officials, according to court records.

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Stuart Simms' career parallels Kurt Schmoke's  
David Simon  
The Sun (1837-1987), Nov. 1, 1987, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Baltimore Sun (1837-1987)  
pg. 1E



THE SUN/BARBARA HADDOCK  
**STUART O. SIMMS**  
Deputy to Kurt L. Schmoke

## Stuart Simms' career parallels Kurt Schmoke's

By David Simon

On paper, at least, they are the same.

Harvard-educated lawyers, both highly respected, both veterans of the U.S. Attorney's Office and private practice with prominent Baltimore legal firms. Husbands, fathers, former football stars with impressive academic and athletic credentials, they are both 37-year-old professionals administering an office with 130 lawyers and a budget of \$9 million.

And if Stuart O. Simms, the man most likely to become this city's next state's attorney, is asked to differentiate himself from his boss and predecessor, Kurt L. Schmoke, he becomes cryptic:

"Kurt's a quarterback," he says, reaching back to earlier roles on high school playing fields. "I'm a fullback."

And what does that mean?  
"Let the sports fans figure that out," he laughs.

Sports fans aside, many of those who labor at the city courthouse might agree with the metaphor. If Mr. Schmoke, the current state's attorney who is all but assured of becoming Baltimore's mayor in Tuesday's general election, is the quarterback, the careful strategist, the charismatic leader, then Stuart Simms is his fullback. Reliable, durable, he's the guy who carries the ball.

"He knows what's going on in the trenches," says Lawrence C. Doan, a former assistant state's attorney now in private practice. As Mr. Schmoke's deputy for administration and investigations, Mr. Simms "is more of a presence for individual prosecutors. . . . He's more accessible, and he knows what you're talking about."

See **SIMMS**, 7E, Cbl. 1

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# Simms' path parallels Schmoke's

SIMMS, from 1E

While no one is rushing to criticize Mr. Schmoke's five-year tenure as the city's chief prosecutor, it's also true that many members of the state's attorney's office — as well as many judges on the Circuit Court bench — are looking forward to a Stuart Simms administration.

"He's a prosecutor's prosecutor," says one courthouse official, who asked not to be identified. "He's not going to be looking beyond the state's attorney's office to any higher office, as Kurt did, which sometimes led to political considerations. His interest is going to be the criminal justice system."

Mr. Schmoke's attention certainly was in more than one place at the same time, which is a credit to Mr. Schmoke's ability that he was able to do that," says Judge Clifton J. Gordy Jr., who headed the office's trial division before appointment to the bench. "With [Mr. Simms], the situation is one of full-time attention."

One of two deputy state's attorneys since his appointment at the beginning of Mr. Schmoke's first term, Mr. Simms enjoys strong support among his prosecutors.

"He's very accessible to the people in the office, not just if you have a problem but for anything," says Brian Murphy, a veteran assistant state's attorney in the trial division. "You get the feeling that he believes in what he's doing and that he sincerely cares about it."

The appointment of Mr. Simms as state's attorney awaits only a vote by the city's Circuit Court judges — something that members of the bench considered undertaking even before the general election until some colleagues objected to the presumption of a Schmoke victory.

And while at least one judge, Thomas Ward — a longstanding critic of the office under Mr. Schmoke — thinks a national search for a new prosecutor is a prerequisite to any vote, Mr. Simms remains the leading candidate.

The deputy state's attorney promises more of the same: "If I'm given the opportunity, I'm going to continue to build on the foundation laid by Kurt Schmoke," says Mr. Simms.

Mr. Simms credits his predecessor with bolstering the office's emphasis on narcotics prosecutions, as well as sexual offense and domestic violence cases. He also supports Mr. Schmoke's decision to create a repeat offenders unit to target career criminals.

Most important, according to Mr. Simms, is Mr. Schmoke's emphasis on community involvement and the high priority that the office has given to "reaching out and making those on the outside — be they black or white, male or female, feel that the state's attorney's office serves them."

It is something that Mr. Simms has long emphasized. Last spring, colleagues recall, Mr. Simms went to considerable effort to organize a mock play about drug abuse and violence for residents of the Charles H. Hickey Jr. School for Boys. With the help of police officers and members of Baltimore's Arena Players and others, Mr. Simms began working on scenes and dialogue for a dramatic skit about the consequences of a

**"If I'm given the opportunity, I'm going to continue to build on the foundation laid by Kurt Schmoke."**

STUART O. SIMMS

drug deal.

"He took a lot of his time to help pull that together," said Maj. Joseph Newman of the city police department. "It showed me that he really was concerned about that side of the job."

But while Mr. Simms may credit Mr. Schmoke with charting a clear path for him, others — both inside and outside the state's attorney's office — agree that there are problems not yet overcome.

"Given the higher salaries in private practice, the big question for that office is, 'Are you able to hold on to your experienced attorneys?'" says Steven Tully, a private attorney who resigned as chief of the office's trial division when Mr. Schmoke, in one of his first official actions, prohibited prosecutors from maintaining any outside practice.

With the starting salary of an assistant state's attorney at \$26,700 — an amount conservatively estimated at more than \$10,000 less than that of a comparable position in private practice — the prosecutor's office is struggling to keep its best people, most observers say.

"If the pay was decent, I never would have left," says Mr. Doan, who turned to private practice three months ago. The challenge for Mr. Simms "is to take steps to make it more than a transition office, a minor-league farm system where the best people leave for more competitive salaries."

Judge Ward agrees, contending that he and colleagues have continually encountered inexperienced and poorly trained prosecutors: "To the extent that Mr. Simms is in charge, he's responsible."

While Mr. Simms agrees that prosecutor's salaries have not kept

pace with the marketplace "during the past administration," he says the attrition rate among experienced attorneys has largely stabilized. As for questions of quality, he contends that under Mr. Schmoke the office has performed as well as or better than previous administrations.

Mr. Simms also points out that the man expected to be Baltimore's next mayor is likely to make competitive salaries for assistant state's attorneys a budget priority: "Mr. Schmoke is well aware of what the office's needs are."

An Ashburton resident and the father of two sons, Mr. Simms attended city public schools before enrolling at the Gilman School, where he became a star fullback, winning all-Maryland Scholastic Association honors in 1967. He graduated five years later from Dartmouth College, where he again made the varsity football squad and captained the 1971 team.

Along with Mr. Schmoke, he then attended Harvard Law School, where he served with the school's prison legal assistance project. After graduation, he began his career as an associate with the Baltimore firm of Semmes, Bowen & Semmes, then worked briefly as a counsel with Charles Center-Inner Harbor Management and the staff of U.S. Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes. He spent four years as an assistant U.S. attorney before becoming Mr. Schmoke's deputy in January 1983.

A member of the NAACP and Urban League, Mr. Simms maintains strong ties to Baltimore's black community. The current president of the prestigious Monumental City Bar Association and a co-chair of the Conference on Minorities and the Legal Profession, he nonetheless prefers — in the manner of Mr. Schmoke — to respond to racial considerations by example only.

"By being good," he says, "you accomplish everything."

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- W5.01: "More With Less." 2008. Teleplay by David Simon. Story by David Simon and Ed Burns.



- W5.02: "Unconfirmed Reports." 2008. Teleplay by William F. Zorzi. Story by David Simon and William F. Zorzi.
- W5.04: "Transitions." 2008. Teleplay by Ed Burns. Story by David Simon and Ed Burns.
- W5.05: "React Quotes". 2008. Teleplay by David Mills. Story by David Simon and David Mills.
- W5.06: "The Dickensian Aspect." 2008. Teleplay by Ed Burns. Story by David Simon and Ed Burns.
- W5.07: "Took". 2008. Teleplay by Richard Price. Story by David Simon and Richard Price.
- W5.08: "Clarifications." 2008. Teleplay by Dennis Lehane. Story by David Simon and Dennis Lehane.
- W5.09: "Late Editions." Teleplay by George Pelecanos. Story by David Simon and George Pelecanos.
- W5.10: "30." Teleplay by David Simon. Story by David Simon and Ed Burns.

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