

The Wire: Bush-Era Fable about America's Urban Poor?

Peter Dreier and John Atlas

No television show about urban life has received as much praise as *The Wire*, a dramatic series about Baltimore that was broadcast on HBO for five years, ending in 2008. The entire show is now available in a five-CD set.

Although not a major commercial success with viewers, it was a huge hit with critics, who applauded its gritty depiction of urban life. The show won praise from reviewers across the political spectrum—from the *New York Times* to the *Wall Street Journal*, from the liberal *American Prospect* to the libertarian *Reason* magazine. Jack Dumphy, a columnist for the right-wing *National Review*, wrote that *The Wire* is “still the best show on television.” *Slate*'s Jacob Weisberg called it “the best TV show ever broadcast in America.” Novelist Stephen King, writing in *Entertainment Weekly*, called the show “a staggering achievement.”

The show was a sociological treasure chest. The main focus of *The Wire* was life on the mean streets of Baltimore's inner city, especially its African American neighborhoods, and particularly the world of the gangs that controlled the city's drug trade. But each season, the show focused on a different aspect of life in Baltimore—the police, the docks, city hall, the schools, and the daily newspaper. The show juggled over sixty-five vivid characters. The large ensemble cast (disproportionately African American actors) included cops, teachers, reporters, drug dealers, dockworkers, politicians, and other characters in the real dramas of a major American city. Each year of the show, at least twenty-five of

the characters had important parts. The writers wove these settings and characters into the show throughout its five-year run. As a result, viewers got a sense of how people were shaped by the larger system—their relationships with each other and with the web of institutions.

This wasn't just a formulaic cops-robbers-and-lawyers show (like *Law & Order*). Some critics compared *The Wire* to a great literary novel. Unpredictable plot twists, deft foreshadowing, and complex characters justify that judgment. Like most great stories, the main characters were morally ambiguous, but so finely etched that we cared about them. Even the gangsters were complex personalities, not the stereotypes typical of TV crime dramas. We ended up taking sides in gangland battles, rooting for Omar, Proposition Joe, and Bodie, and wanting Marlo annihilated. Unlike other TV crime shows, *The Wire* allowed viewers to see the characters and situations from multiple perspectives, not just through the point of view of the police and prosecutors.

David Simon, the show's creator and chief writer, is a former *Baltimore Sun* reporter; the other major cowriter, Ed Burns, is a former Baltimore cop and schoolteacher. Before writing *The Wire*, Simon wrote two books about Baltimore—*Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (the basis for the excellent NBC television series *Homicide*, which he served as a writer), and (with Burns), *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (which Simon adapted into an HBO miniseries, *The Corner*). Both books are full of sociological insights about urban life.

The writers paid attention to detail. The workplaces, neighborhoods, language, and events portrayed in *The Wire* had the kind of verisimilitude that justifies the torrent of praise. The show really captured Baltimore's nuances, flavor, language, and culture. Police detectives drank “Natty Boh”—National Bohemian, a beer originally brewed in Baltimore. And the dialogue rang true. Snoop, second in command to drug thug Marlo, explained to a hesitant gang member how she'd retaliate if he didn't cooperate: “We will be brief with all you motherfuckers—I think you know.” Another drug kingpin, Avon, locked in jail and eager for stories in the street, asked Marlo: “What about you? How you been?” Marlo shrugs: “You know. The game is the game.”

But in most ways, *The Wire* could have been about any older American city, facing the realities of the past decade—the loss of blue-collar union jobs, a shrinking tax base, racial segregation and the concentration of poverty, street gangs and the drug trade, and troubled schools.¹

The show's two creators had a political agenda. They wanted *The Wire* not only to examine the realities of urban life, but also to provoke moral outrage. In interviews during and after the show's five-year run, they explained that they considered *The Wire* to be a form of muckraking reporting. Simon said he considered himself a "gadfly" and called the show "a political tract masquerading as a cop show" and a "critique of what . . . has gone wrong in America."² They didn't simply want to entertain. They wanted to expose injustice. They wanted to get people upset—perhaps upset enough to actually do something about the conditions portrayed in the show.

But if that was their goal, they failed. They failed not because the show wasn't upsetting, but because it portrayed urban life as hopeless. They portrayed the characters in the show as victims of a "system" beyond reform.

The show's writers may have thought that they were presenting a radical critique of American society and its neglect of its poor, its African Americans, and its cities. But there's nothing radical about a show that portrays nearly every character—clergy and cops, teachers and principals, reporters and editors, union members and leaders, politicians and city employees, social workers and everyday people—as corrupt, cynical, or well intentioned but ineffective.

In an interview, Simon observed that "*The Wire* is dissent."³ But when asked, "Do you think change is possible?" Simon answered, "No, I don't. Not within the current political structure."⁴ This view is reflected in the show. All writers make choices about what to include and what to exclude. This is called "artistic license." But those choices have consequences. *The Wire* was the opposite of radical, it was hopeless and nihilistic. The city portrayed in *The Wire* is a dystopian nightmare, a web of oppression and social pathology that is impossible to escape. *The Wire*'s unrelentingly bleak portrayal missed what's hopeful in Baltimore and, indeed, in other major American cities.

The Wire's last season ends with a critique of the press for failing to tell the true story of the innercity. Simon criticized the *Baltimore Sun* for its inadequate reporting about poverty and its decision to drop its poverty beat in the early 1990s.⁵ In *The Wire*, however, Simon made the opposite error. He was so determined to expose Baltimore's problems that he provided viewers with an unrealistically negative picture of the inner city. In five seasons, the show didn't even hint at the possibility

that residents, if well organized and strategic, can push powerbrokers to change policies and institutions to make the city more humane and livable. The effective organizing work over the past two decades of progressive union, community, and environmental groups in many cities and metropolitan areas—including Baltimore—is entirely missing from *The Wire*.⁶

In this regard, *The Wire* is similar to much of American sociology, which, despite its reform impulse, is better at describing the various forms of inequality and injustice in society than at identifying the political opportunities that make mobilization and reform possible. Sociologists are typically sensitive to examining what's wrong, but not as useful at offering solutions. There are, of course, many important exceptions to this characterization, but, in general, sociologists—even the radicals among them—are typically more comfortable emphasizing the structures of oppression over human agency, political strategy, and public policies that promote greater fairness, equality, and opportunity.

The Wire was broadcast from 2002 through 2008—the George W. Bush era. During that period, America faced the biggest concentration of income and wealth since 1928. A growing number of Americans—not only the poor but also the middle class—found that their jobs, their health insurance, their pensions, even their homes were increasingly at risk.⁷ The cost of housing, food, health care, gas, and college tuition rose faster than incomes. During Bush's presidency, the number of Americans in poverty increased dramatically—from 32.9 million (11.7 percent of the population) in 2001 to 37.3 million (12.5 percent) in 2007—many of them among the growing army of the "working poor."

These conditions *should* provoke outrage. But simply being aware of these outrageous conditions doesn't guarantee that middle-class Americans, faced with their own economic insecurities, will identify with and make common cause with the poor. For that to occur, they need to believe three things:

- First, that the plight of the poor is the result of political and social forces, not self-inflicted by the poor themselves
- Second, that lifting up the poor will not come at the expense of middle-income Americans
- Third, that the problems of the urban poor—and the magnitude of urban poverty—*can* be solved

In other words, they need some sense that all, or most, Americans share a common fate. They also need some sense of hope that things can change for the better. Hope springs from a combination of political leadership and grassroots activism.

Each of these three conditions has taken root in the past decade. Polls show that more and more Americans want the government to address the issues of poverty, housing, health care, and the environment. Even before the nation's economy took a sharp nosedive in late 2008, a growing number of Americans, including those in the middle class, believed that the widening gap between the rich and everyone else is a serious problem that government should deal with.

Since welfare reform was enacted in 1996, pushing more and more low-income people into the workforce, Americans have changed their views about the poor. They now increasingly view poverty through the prism of work and working conditions. They view people who remain in poverty despite working as the "deserving" poor. As a result, polls reveal that a vast majority of Americans want to raise the federal minimum wage so that it is above the poverty level—in other words, they believe that work should be rewarded. The popularity of Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed*, the challenges to Walmart (the world's largest employer, with a large low-wage workforce), and the remarkable success of the "living wage" movement in about 200 cities all reflect an upsurge of concern about poverty. Polls also show that support for labor unions has reached its highest level in more than three decades.

What does this have to do with *The Wire*? Three things:

First, to the extent that *The Wire* helped raise awareness of these problems—and the systemic nature of the urban crisis—it deserves all the praise it received. No other major industrial nation has allowed the level of sheer destitution that we have in the United States. We accept as "normal" levels of poverty, inequality, hunger, crime, homelessness, and inadequate and unequal school funding that would cause national alarm in Canada, western Europe, or Australia. *The Wire* brilliantly portrayed these realities, putting a human face on the "urban crisis."

Second, *The Wire* showed how people cope with "the system" and the overwhelming obstacles they face in just trying to get by or do their jobs. It showed how even people with good intentions and some idealism face enormous hurdles. By exploring the dysfunction of many key urban institutions—including politics and municipal government, the

schools, the criminal justice system, and the media—*The Wire* revealed how urban politics is often a struggle over crumbs, whether the issue is funding for schools, police, housing subsidies, or drug rehab programs.

But third—and most important—*The Wire* failed to offer viewers any understanding that the problems facing cities and the urban poor are solvable.

To bring about the change that the show's writers hoped for, people need to feel not only that things *should* be better but that they *can* be better. *The Wire* offered viewers little reason for hope that the lives of the people depicted in it could be improved not only by individual initiative but also (and primarily) by collective action and changes in public policy. It offered viewers no hint that in Baltimore there was a small but growing movement to mobilize urban residents and their allies to address these problems—a movement that exists in every major city in the country and that has borne fruit in many ways.

The Wire's portrayal of Baltimore buttresses the myth that the poor, especially the black poor and the black working class, are helpless victims, unable to engage in collective efforts to bring about change. In other words, *The Wire* reinforced the notion that the harsh status quo cannot be changed.⁸

The Wire was populated by low-income African Americans and a handful of working-class and middle-class people whose jobs—cop, teacher, social worker, government bureaucrat, reporter, minister—involve relating to the poor as "problems" or "clients" rather than as fellow citizens.

The show virtually ignored Baltimore's black working class. Although the show portrayed African Americans in a wide range of occupations (police administrators and cops, principals and teachers, union leaders and dockworkers, social workers and clergy, editors and reporters), almost all of the African Americans living in Baltimore's ghetto were depicted as dangerous criminals, drug addicts, welfare recipients—an unemployed underclass—culturally damaged, a class of people whose behavior and values separate them from respectable society.

Much of the Baltimore we see in *The Wire* focused on the residents of the low-income black neighborhoods. In 2006, blacks comprised 65 percent of the city's population. Among them, 23 percent were poor.⁹ True, many were jobless. Baltimore has been hemorrhaging jobs for decades, an issue that *The Wire* addressed in its second season, when it

looked at the decline of the city's port. As a result, finding a job has become a problem, especially for African Americans. The black unemployment rate in Baltimore in 2006 was 13.7 percent, more than double the white rate of 5.7 percent. In 2006, 42,300 black Baltimoreans were jobless. That's a big number, but that means that 86.3 percent of Baltimore's black adults in the labor force *were* working.

Virtually absent from *The Wire* were the working poor—those who earn their poverty in low-wage jobs. Among the 180,000 Baltimore residents who worked full-time, 38 percent earned less than \$30,000. Among the 105,266 African Americans in Baltimore working full-time, almost half (46 percent) earned below \$30,000.

The show offered a few small rays of hope by portraying some characters as people who were able to maintain their dignity and pride amid enormous turmoil. One such character was Bubbles, a recovering heroin addict and homeless person who displays an incredible will to live and extraordinary survival skills. *Slate* magazine's Jacob Weisberg lauded this aspect of the show. *The Wire*, he wrote, "is filled with characters who should quit but don't, not only the boys themselves but teachers, cops, ex-cops, and ex-cons. . . . This refusal to give up in the face of defeat is the reality of ghetto life as well. Feel me: It's what *The Wire* is all about."¹⁰

But the few heroes depicted in *The Wire* were individualist renegades and gadflies. These include cops like James McNulty and Lester Freamon and the stick-up artist Omar, as well as the social worker Walon (a Narcotics Anonymous sponsor played by the singer Steve Earle), the Deacon (an influential West Side clergyman played by Melvin Williams), and Dennis "Cutty" Wise (whose boxing program may stop a teenager from succumbing to a life of drugs).

Unlike unions and community organizing groups, the few do-gooders portrayed in *The Wire* didn't seek to empower people as a collective force. They tried to help individuals, one at a time, rather than trying to reform the institutions that fail to address their needs. One person alone, no matter how well intentioned, can't save a school system, create jobs, or make a neighborhood safer.

But Baltimore *was* (and *is*) filled with labor and community activists who were doing just that—mobilizing people to reform *institutions*, to change the *system*, to change the relationships of *power* in the city. Those people were *completely absent* from the show over the entire five years and sixty episodes.

Baltimore's recent history is filled with examples of effective grassroots organizing that Simon and Burns could have used to portray a different slice of the city's sociological and political realities.

For example, in 1994, a community group known as BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development) led a campaign that mobilized ordinary people to fight for higher wages for the working poor. One of those people was Valerie Bell. She lived in a small row house in Baltimore. With just a high school degree, she secured a job with a private, nonunion custodial firm that contracted with the city to scrub floors and take out the garbage at Southern High School. Baltimore was trying to cut costs by outsourcing jobs to private firms. Bell earned \$4.25 an hour with no health benefits. Like so many others who earned a minimum wage each month, Bell coped with how to pay the electricity bill, groceries, and the rent.

BUILD put together a coalition of churches and labor unions and lobbied the city to pass a "living wage" law that would increase wages above federal poverty line. The law would apply to employees who worked for private firms that had contracts with the city. It would affect 1,500 workers, hired by private bus, security, and janitorial companies. The ordinance would force wages up from \$4.25 to \$8.80 an hour over three years, and then increase each year to account for inflation.

At some risk to herself, Bell organized other custodians to join the living wage campaign. When the company discovered Bell's activities, it fired her. Undeterred, Bell stayed active with BUILD and helped gather petition signatures and organize demonstrations. BUILD recruited academics who produced studies showing that it made no sense for the city government to save money in the short term by underpaying workers, who then had to resort to a variety of government-supported homeless shelters and soup kitchens to supplement their low wages. Working with BUILD, Bell and others put so much pressure on the city, they convinced Mayor Kurt Schmoke to support them. As a result of this grassroots organizing effort, Baltimore passed the nation's first living-wage ordinance. The current rate is \$9.62. In 2007, community and labor activists led a successful campaign to get the state of Maryland to enact a state living wage law—the first state in the country to do so.

Economists estimate that the Baltimore living wage law puts millions of dollars into the pockets of the city's working poor each year, and has had a ripple effect pushing up wages in other low-paid jobs in the city. Following Baltimore's lead, there are now similar laws in about

200 cities across the country. The political momentum created by these local living wage victories changed the political climate at the national level. In May 2007, President George W. Bush reluctantly signed a bill increasing the minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.25 over two years—the first increase in the federal minimum wage in almost a decade.

For thirty years, BUILD—which is part of the Industrial Areas Foundation network founded by organizer Saul Alinsky and which has affiliates in many cities—has been dedicated to transforming Baltimore's struggling inner-city neighborhoods. BUILD has not only won the nation's first living wage campaign, it also has built hundreds of affordable housing units called Nehemiah Homes (named after the biblical prophet who rebuilt Jerusalem and modeled on a similar program in New York City).

BUILD also created a network of after-school youth programs called Child First. That program began in 1996 with city and private money, and provides free after-school care for over 1,000 children every year at the city public schools. Child First is an academic enrichment program. The program involves parents, staff, administrators, church members, and other community members to help students, a real "it takes a village" approach. Child First trains parents to take part in their kids' education by volunteering at schools and coming together to discuss how they can improve the school system. Volunteers tutor students in math and English, help them with study skills, and nurture their artistic talents.

During the 2007 election, BUILD signed up 10,000 voters as part of its "Save Our Youth" campaign. Every candidate for city council and mayor, including Mayor Sheila Dixon, committed to the agenda, which included doubling the number of summer jobs for young people and funding neighborhood recreation centers.

In December 2007, after several years of working with Dixon (as a city council member and then as mayor) to renew the run-down section of Baltimore known as Oliver—where much of *The Wire* was filmed—BUILD persuaded the city to transfer 155 abandoned properties to the community group, which will either rehab the homes or tear them down and build new ones, then sell them to working-class homebuyers. "BUILD is making steady progress in eliminating blight throughout the Oliver neighborhood, where 44 percent of properties are vacant," said Bishop Douglas Miles, fifty-nine, pastor of Koinonia Baptist Church.

A native Baltimorean, Bishop Miles, BUILD's cochair, grew up in public housing projects. He's been involved with BUILD for thirty years. Under his leadership, Koinonia Baptist Church initiated a number of innovative ministries including an after-school program called Project Safe Haven, a juvenile alternative sentencing program that has saved many teenagers from the fate of a life in and out of jail.

Bishop Miles, who watched every episode of *The Wire*, was outraged at the way the church community was portrayed. "*The Wire* ignores all the good work the faith community had done," he complained.

BUILD isn't the only group in Baltimore engaged in successful grassroots organizing.

The fourth year of *The Wire* focused on Baltimore's school crisis through the lives of several young boys barely coping with problems at home and lured by the illegal drug business. At one point in the show (episode 50, "Final Grades"), the boyish but cynical Mayor Thomas "Tommy" Carcetti lobbies Maryland's governor to help bail out the city's bankrupt public school system.

Missing from the storyline is what actually occurred in 2004 when two groups—ACORN and the Algebra Project—mobilized parents, students, and teachers to pressure Mayor Martin O'Malley (now Maryland's governor) to ask for state funds to avoid massive layoffs and school closings.¹¹

ACORN, a community organizing group, built a coalition that included public employee unions and the Algebra Project (a group founded by civil rights icon Bob Moses to organize young people around school issues). The community and union activists hit the streets and filed lawsuits to get more money pumped into the school system.

In November 2003, ACORN members rallied at City Hall to deliver Maryland ACORN's second annual "Turkey of the Year Award" to Mayor O'Malley for his plan to balance the school district's budget at the expense of Baltimore students' education, in part by laying off a thousand school employees. The next month, ACORN organized a confrontation at a board of education meeting. With hundreds of ACORN members attending, and one member shouting through a bullhorn, ACORN took over the meeting before police hauled them out of the room.

The protests were part of a months-long campaign of agitation that forced O'Malley to come up with the money and avoid unnecessary layoffs and a state takeover.

"The system is in meltdown," Mitch Klein, an ACORN organizer, told us. "Cutting funds is like the Baghdad version of putting back together the Baltimore city public schools."

School reform is only one of several issues that Baltimore ACORN—an affiliate of a national organization with chapters in over 100 cities—has addressed. Its young organizers have identified and trained tenant leaders to wage a campaign to clean up hundreds of lead-contaminated rental units. ACORN's tenants organized a rent strike to pressure slumlords to remove lead hazards in thousands of apartments. ACORN's members also closed corner stores dealing drugs, improved the city's housing code enforcement program, and pressured the police department to assign more foot patrols to the low-income Cherry Hill section of Baltimore.

Banks have persistently redlined Baltimore's minority neighborhoods or engaged in abusive, discriminatory predatory lending practices, leading to a recent wave of widespread foreclosures. Lobbied by ACORN and other community groups, Mayor Dixon and the city council sued Wells Fargo Bank in January 2008 for targeting risky subprime loans in the city's black neighborhoods that led to a wave of foreclosures that reduced city tax revenues and increased its costs of dealing with abandoned properties. It was the first lawsuit filed by a municipality seeking to recover costs of foreclosure caused by racially discriminatory lending practices.

"Some things I can't accomplish by myself," said Sonja Merchant-Jones, a former public housing resident who is active in Baltimore ACORN, "but together we've been able to confront elected officials, banks, and the utility companies, and get them to meet with us, negotiate with us, and change things. But I'm disappointed that I never see things like this on *The Wire*."

Robert Mathews is a sixty-four-year-old janitor in an eleven-story office building in downtown Baltimore. He rents a small house in Montebello, one of Baltimore's most troubled neighborhoods, with his wife and two grown sons. The former merchant marine has been a deacon in his church for many years and a mentor for many of the church's youth. He takes them on trips and counsels them when they appear to be heading in the wrong direction. For almost three decades, Mathews has also been a union activist, utilizing the same skills to counsel, mentor, and organize his fellow low-wage janitors across the city.

After thirty years cleaning office buildings, he was making \$9.10 an hour.

To win a better contract, in December 2007 Mathews helped lead a campaign of thousands of janitors in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., among them 700 cleaners, most of them African American, at over forty Baltimore buildings, including the high-rise Candler, Legg Mason, and Bank of America buildings downtown.

After months of protesting, picketing, threatening to strike, and negotiating, the janitors—part of the Service Employees International Union's Justice for Janitors campaign—won a 28 percent pay increase. The janitors also won up to two weeks vacation and employer-paid family prescription drug coverage. The agreement added dental and vision benefits to the employer-paid health plan.

Mathews, who remembers when Baltimore's schools, movie theaters, and restaurants were segregated, participated in civil rights protests in the 1960s. "To make change, you have to take a stand," he told us.

Mathews only occasionally watched *The Wire*. He was offended by its bad language, but also by its unrealistic depiction of the Baltimore he's lived in his entire life. "It's more negative than positive," he said. "The people on the show don't have anything to live for. The young people have no vision. If you want change, you have to believe things can change."

These real-life organizing campaigns by BUILD, ACORN, and SEIU's Justice for Janitors were reported in the *Baltimore Sun* and by local TV and radio stations. Yet David Simon, the show's creator, found no room to tell any of these stories in the sixty episodes of *The Wire* over its five-year run.

Rob English, a thirty-eight-year-old organizer for BUILD, is hardly a romantic radical. He served for four years as a platoon leader in Somalia.

Referring to *The Wire*, he said: "The show does an excellent job of telling one side of the story. But it's missing all the pastors, parents and teachers, principles, young people who are doing amazing work, radically trying to change and improve Baltimore."

People like Valerie Bell, Bishop Miles, Sonja Merchant-Jones, Robert Mathews, and Rob English are committed activists who have persisted in their organizing efforts through victories and disappointments. They never succumb to cynicism or corruption. The people organized by BUILD, ACORN, the Algebra Project, SEIU, and other community,

labor, and environmental justice groups maintain a sense of hope and possibility in the face of difficult odds. And, slowly and steadily, their organizations have won significant victories that improve the lives of Baltimore's poor and working-class residents.

These community activists are not superheroes or naive idealists. They are ordinary people who sometimes manage to do extraordinary things. What distinguishes them is their patience, political savvy, street smarts, empathy, faith, and people skills required to build strong organizations that can mount grassroots organizing campaigns. They harness what organizers call "cold anger" and turn it into outrage against injustice rather than indiscriminate rage.

They do not expect to turn Baltimore upside down. Rather, they mobilize people to win small, concrete victories that improve people's living and working conditions, and whet their appetites for further battles. They challenge the city's political and business establishment and seek to get Baltimore's power players and institutions—employers, landlords, politicians, police chiefs, school superintendents, and others—to the bargaining table, where they can negotiate on a somewhat level playing field. They don't always win, but by their persistence and their ability to recruit people to join them, they have to be taken seriously by the city's powerbrokers.

They know that there are limits to what can be accomplished in one city—that many of the problems facing America's cities can only be solved with changes in federal policy. They recognize that organizing people in their communities and workplaces is a precondition for mobilizing people from across the country into a broader movement for social justice.¹²

Those who lead union- and community-organizing fights have the same foibles and human weaknesses we witnessed in the characters in *The Wire*. But incorporating their stories into the series would have shown a different aspect of Baltimore, one in which the poor and their allies seek change, not charity, and learn how to marshal their collective power. Unfortunately, community activists and leaders like these didn't exist in the Baltimore depicted in *The Wire*. Without them and the organizations they belong to, we were left with a view of Baltimore's poor as people sentenced for life to an unchanging prison of social pathology. This, in fact, was how *The Wire* viewed the poor.

David Simon, *The Wire*'s creator, told *Slate* magazine, "Themati-

cally, [*The Wire* is] about the very simple idea 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."¹³ He added, "It's the triumph of capitalism over human value. This country has embraced the idea that this is a viable domestic policy. It is. It's viable for the few."

But Simon's worldview—at least as it revealed in *The Wire*—is hardly radical. He generally views the poor as helpless victims rather than as people with the capacity to act on their own behalf to bring about change. He may think he's the crusading journalist exposing injustice, but, based on the show, he's really a cynic who takes pity on the poor but can't imagine a world where things could be different.

It is probably no accident that *The Wire* ended its five-year run just as the Bush era was ending. The zeitgeist of the Bush era was a culture of fend-for-yourself cynicism, with no agenda to address the needs of cities like Baltimore. It appears that Americans may be ready to feel hopeful again, as evidenced by the election of Barack Obama.

Perhaps, a year or two from now, Simon or another writer will propose a new series to TV networks about the inner workings of the White House and an idealistic young president, a former community organizer, who uses his bully pulpit to mobilize the American people around their better instincts.

This president would challenge the influence of big business and its political allies, to build a movement, a New Deal for the twenty-first century, to revitalize an economy brought to its knees by Wall Street greed, address the nation's health care and environmental problems, provide adequate funding for inner-city schools, reduce poverty and homelessness, and strengthen the power of unions and community groups.

In May 2008, Simon and Burns received an award from the Liberty Hill Foundation, a Los Angeles organization that provides funding for cutting-edge grassroots community, environmental, and labor organizing. In accepting the award, they offered congratulations to the activist groups whose leaders were represented in the audience.

Simon said, "*The Wire* spoke to a world in which human beings—individuals—matter less, a world in which every day, the triumph of capital results in the diminution of human labor and human value. Is that world an accurate depiction of America? I hope not. But we live in

interesting times, and perhaps the only thing that is left to us as individuals is the power to hope, and to commit that hope to action."

Unfortunately, that attitude was not evident in *The Wire*. But in that statement, Simon reflected a new spirit of possibility that is a precondition to transforming the country.

Notes

1. See William Julius Wilson, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009); William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The New World of the Urban Poor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); Douglas W. Rae, *City: Urbanism and Its End* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Peter Dreier, John Mollenkopf, and Todd Swanstrom, *Place Matters: Metropolitica for the 21st Century*, 2nd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); David Ranney, *Global Decisions, Local Collisions: Urban Life in the New World Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Steve Greenhouse, *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).
2. "The Wire's David Simon," KQED's Forum, December 4, 2008, <http://huffduffer.com/Clampants/1278>.
3. Margaret Talbot, "Stealing Life: The Crusader behind *The Wire*," *New Yorker*, October 22, 2007.
4. Meghan O'Rourke, "Behind *The Wire*: David Simon on Where the Show Goes Next," *Slate*, December 1, 2006, <http://www.slate.com/id/2154694>. In a 2006 speech, Simon said, "I am wholly pessimistic about American society. I believe *The Wire* is a show about the end of the American Empire. We are going to live that event. How we end up and survive, and on what terms, is going to be the open question." <http://imasmartypants.blogspot.com/2007/12/on-behalf-of-human-dignity.html>.
5. Lawrence Lahanan, "Secrets of the City: What *The Wire* Reveals about Urban Journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January–February 2008.
6. In recent years, a number of social scientists and journalists have documented that upsurge of grassroots organizing across the country. See, for example, Heidi J. Swarts, *Organizing Urban America: Secular and Faith-Based Progressive Movements* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Lowell Turner and Daniel Cornfield, eds., *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds: Local Solidarity in a Global Economy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007); Manuel Pastor, Chris Brenner, and Martha Matsuoka, *This Could Be the Start of Something Big: How Social Movements for Regional Equity Are Reshaping Metropolitan America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009); William

Julius Wilson, *The Bridge over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); Richard Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Robert Gottlieb, Mark Vallianatos, Regina Freer, and Peter Dreier, *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Daniel Clawson, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003); Samuel Freedman, *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993); David Reynolds, ed., *Partnering for Change: Unions and Community Groups Build Coalitions for Economic Justice* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2004); Paul Osterman, *Gathering Power: The Future of Progressive Politics in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); Marion Orr, ed., *Transforming the City: Community Organizing and the Challenge of Political Change* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007); Gregory Squires, ed., *Organizing Access to Capital: Advocacy and the Democratization of Financial Institutions* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farmworker Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Peter Dreier and John Atlas, "The GOP's Blame ACORN Game," *The Nation*, November 10, 2008; Peter Dreier, "A Progressive Moment or a New Progressive Era? Community Organizing, the Labor Movement, and Progressive Politics in the Age of Obama," in *Where Do We Go From Here? American Democracy and the Renewal of the Radical Imagination*, ed. Mark Major and William Thompson, (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010); and John Atlas, *Seeds of Hope: The Untold Story of ACORN, America's Most Controversial Community Organizing Group and How It's Changing America* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010).

7. Jacob S. Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
8. This is typical of how the media in general report on urban affairs. See Peter Dreier, "How the Media Compound Urban Problems," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 27.2 (2005): 193–201.
9. In 2006, 19.5 percent of Baltimore's residents—and 27.5 percent of its children under eighteen—were poor, according to the U.S. census.
10. Jacob Weisberg, "The Wire on Fire: Analyzing the Best Show on Television," *Slate*, September 13, 2006, <http://www.slate.com/id/2149566>.
11. Laura Vozzella, "Allies, Foes of Mayor Swap Sides over Loan: O'Malley's Schools Plan Praised by Labor, Activists; Business Leaders Worry," *Baltimore Sun*, March 15, 2004; Liz Bowie, "Trustee Suggested for City Schools: Grasmick

Bombshell Comes at Funding Hearing," *Baltimore Sun*, August 5, 2004; John Gehring, "Velvet Glove, Steel Hand," *Education Week*, January 14, 2004; John Gehring, "Studies, Sit-ins Earn ACORN's Activists Voice in Education," *Education Week*, February 18, 2004; "Blacks Support for ACORN Grows," *Sun Reporter*, January 8, 2004.

12. *The Wire* left it to the viewers to put the problems of Baltimore in a wider context. Although the United States has many serious problems that are disproportionately located in cities, these are national problems. Local governmental policies are not their cause. Even the most well-managed local governments on their own don't have the resources to significantly address them. A good example is the current mortgage meltdown. Baltimore sued Wells Fargo for its predatory lending practices. But the problem extends far beyond Baltimore. It was caused by the failure of the federal government to regulate the financial services industry. Only the federal government can address the issue of regulating banking practices. Similarly, only the federal government has the resources to provide adequate funding for housing, public schools, health care, child care, and environmental cleanup; and to address the shortage of decent jobs that is ultimately at the root of Baltimore's crisis, from the docks to the ghetto to the inner suburbs.

13. O'Rourke, "Behind *The Wire*"; Mark Bowden, "The Angriest Man in Television," *Atlantic*, January–February 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200801/bowden-wire>.

7

Tales of the Neoliberal City: *The Wire's* Boundary Lines

Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro

As noted in the introduction to this book, David Simon views *The Wire* "as a vehicle for making statements about the American city and even the American experiment."¹ That these two concepts are conjoined in Simon's perspective is suggestive of a particular view of the city as a crucible and laboratory of national concerns. This is an idea of the city that has a long lineage in American culture and representation: it valorizes the city as a space of encounter in which the dramatic intersections of different narratives and identities reproduce an imaginary citizenship. *The Wire* refashions this idea for the contemporary city and produces a belated imagining of the "making of Americans" as an urban process.² In this chapter we will examine how the show both critiques and reimagines this process, with particular focus on its treatment of neoliberal forms of urban governance.

"It's All Connected"

The Wire's opening scene can be read as projecting these concerns. The white cop McNulty arrives at a crime scene where the victim, Snot Boogie, has been killed having tried to rob a dice game. McNulty sits down next to a black Baltimorean and asks why Snot Boogie was allowed to return constantly to the contest if the players knew that he would always try to grab the money. The informant replies: "Got to. This America, man." Indeed, the series' first screen image reinforces this axiomatic claim. Our first view of *The Wire's* Baltimore is liter-