

## 'The Wire' reflects a declining American cityscape where people's lives have become more dangerous and less comprehensible.

*The concept that dramatic fiction should be a form of truth, and not just entertainment is not a new one, and much of contemporary cultural production now aims to hold a mirror up to society. **Mark Wheeler** takes a close look at how television series *The Wire* has provided telling insights into contemporary urban American life. He writes that the series reflects the rise of free-market neoliberalism in US cities, which has led to the collapse of the social justice system. He argues that through its characters and stories, *The Wire* reflects the current conflicts between individual activism, in its portrayal of gangs and drug dealers, and the institutional stasis of law enforcement and city officials.*



David Simon and Ed Burns' television series *The Wire* (2002-2008) provides an informed critique of the decline of the American democratic ideal in the urban dystopia of Baltimore. From its **inception** as a 'police procedural ... (whose) grand theme was nothing less than national existentialism' which would examine the linkage between drug crimes, the collapse of blue collar life, social deprivation, institutional compromise, the public school system, media compliance and political self-interest, the show has dramatized the key issues which are currently on the United States' social agenda.

To affect their critiques of the illusion of freedom when mediated through the market mechanism to a growing US underclass, the series' writers, Simon and Burns, along with several others including novelists George Pelecanos, Dennis Lehane and Richard Price, have employed the dramatic principles of Ancient Greek tragedies. Yet, rather than having their lives shaped by the indifferent Olympian Gods of mythology, the residents of West Baltimore have had their destinies mapped out by city's range of dysfunctional institutions.

Consequently, *The Wire* has not only been recognised for verisimilitude of its characters, dialogue and multi-level plotting, but has provided many telling insights into the dichotomies that face American democratic behaviour. The contradictory effects of the US polity were first investigated into by the nineteenth century French philosopher Alexis De Tocqueville. He contended that the fledgling Republic might degenerate into a soft despotism in which the vagaries of public opinion, conformity to material security and the absence of intellectual freedom would subordinate the judgment of the wise to the prejudices of the ignorant.



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*The Wire* demonstrates how elites in America have favoured the soft despotism of Milton Friedman's market-liberalism which linked the promise of individual liberty with the reality of free market economics; an ideological preference which has led to the deregulatory retreat of the welfare state and the collapse of the social justice system. It shows how Baltimore's city officials have failed to protect its poorest inhabitants from the violence

inherent in the drugs 'game'. Such a critique reflects Zygmunt Bauman's construct of 'wasted lives' in which the neo-liberal state victimises 'collateral casualties' either in terms of rendering individual autonomy as being impotent or through a [demonised underclass](#):

*There are two Americas – separate, unequal, and no longer even acknowledging each other except on the barest cultural terms. In the one nation, new millionaires are minted every day. In the other, human beings no longer necessary to our economy, to our society, are being devalued and destroyed.*

To dramatize this 'divided' America the writers focus on the conflict between individual activism as against institutional stasis. Thus, the programme begins by outlining the implications of the stifling 'chain of command' that Detectives James 'Jimmy' McNulty and Lester Freamon, and others such as Major Howard 'Bunny' Colvin and Lieutenant Cedric Daniels face. This is exemplified by the rise of Homicide Major William 'Bill' A. Rawls who cynically 'juke the stats' so that his clearance rates will allow him to pursue his careerist ambitions. *The Wire* [indicates](#) how, 'the gap between the incentives and constraints established by any institution and the goals it is meant to serve leaves a space for self-interest to subvert the original purpose of the institution.' Consequently, the police chiefs' principles have been sacrificed for institutional power and their preoccupation for status has undermined the meaning of their work.

Further, the writers of *The Wire* provide a mirror image to the 'legitimate' institutions by detailing an alternative chain of command which operates within the drug crews. In contrast to the hierarchical limitations that exist in the Baltimore Police Department, the gangsters including Avon Barksdale, Russell 'Stringer' Bell and Marlo Stanfield develop a highly organised force of leaders, lieutenants and corner boys to establish an effective (if brutal) control over the streets of West Baltimore. As *The Wire* broadens its focus to turn the spotlight on the docks, politics, the public schools and the values of the media, it highlights how this chain of command renders the drugs crews far more effective in their operations while simultaneously proving corrosive to the effectiveness of police responses.

Underlying this proposition is the broader point that these forces have instigated a more general collapse of civil society and the financial exploitation of the public. *The Wire* provides a commentary upon the interconnected institutions which have led to the economic, political and social decline of Baltimore. As the agencies of social order have withered, unrestrained capitalist imperatives have been mediated by the uncaring post-modern institutions of corporate governance. In this respect, the show indicates that in a declining American cityscape people's lives have become more dangerous and less comprehensible.



Consequently, the writers subverted many of the generic characteristics of the cop show to highlight the plight of those who populate an alternative America that has been excluded from the overriding majority of US programming. Therefore, the series places the decisions, values and issues which face post-industrial societies under the microscope to consider their implications for the immediate future. Thus, *The Wire* through its masterful storytelling and telling insights has taken up its rightful place within the pantheon of American television drama.

*This article is based on the paper, 'A City upon a Hill': The Wire and Its Distillation of the United States Polity', in*

the journal, *Politics*.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

**Mark Wheeler** – *London Metropolitan University*

Mark Wheeler is Professor of Political Communications at London Metropolitan University. He has written and co-written four books including *Politics and the Mass Media* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), *European Television Industries* (co-authored with Petros Iosifidis and Jeanette Steemers) (London: BFI, 2005), *Hollywood: Politics and Society* (London: BFI 2006) and *Celebrity Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Publishers, 2013). He has published numerous peer-reviewed articles and contributed chapters to many edited volumes.



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