‘A City upon a Hill’: *The Wire* and the teaching of American politics

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Abstract
This paper examines how teachers of American politics, governance and democratic theory/practice can employ David Simon and Ed Burns’ *The Wire* (2002-8) to demonstrate how there has been a collapse in the principles of American exceptionalism. Most especially, the programme has shown how a police procedural set in the dystopian city of Baltimore has communicated key themes concerning the decline of US civic behaviour to its audience. Therefore, it has critically evaluated the linkages between drug crimes, policing, the collapse of blue collar life, social deprivation, the justice system, institutional compromise, public schools, media compliance and political self-interest. This analysis considers how the show has dissected US democratic traditions and discusses the extent to which it provides teacher and students with a fictional text through which they can analyse many of the social ills affecting the American urban polity.

Introduction
For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken ... we shall be made a story and a by-word throughout the world.¹

David Simon and Ed Burns’ *The Wire* (2002-2008)² has provided an informed critique of the decline of the democratic ideal in which John Winthrop’s classical utopian vision of the ‘city upon a hill’ gives way to the modern urban dystopia of Baltimore. From its inception as a police procedural to the expansion of its interests in subsequent seasons concerning the linkage between drug crimes, policing, the collapse of blue collar life, social deprivation, institutional compromise, the public

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¹ John Winthrop, ‘We shall be as a city upon a hill (1630)’ in Owen Collins and Andrew Young (ed.) *Speeches That Changed the World*, (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1999) 63-65.

school system, media compliance and political self-interest, the drama has occupied a central role in defining the United States (US) social agenda. Over sixty television (TV) episodes Simon and Burns, along with several writers including novelists George Pelecanos, Dennis Lehane and Richard Price (Simon et.al), reflect on issues of race, sexuality, social injustice, growing inequality, individual liberties, anti-authoritarianism, corporate power and public malfeasance. For teachers and students of American politics, *The Wire* has provided telling insights into the dichotomies which face US civil life. Most especially, through its austere presentation of the positive and negative values of political liberty, it has demonstrated how the illusion of ‘freedom’ has been mediated through the market mechanism to a growing US under-class. Therefore, Simon et.al’s programme presents scholars with an alternative viewpoint from the overriding majority of programming which is designed to re-assert the values of the ‘American Dream’:

Was the Wire myopic? Should it have been allowed to dwell for five seasons on that in America which is broken and brutal? ... Well, there are about 350 television shows about the affluent America ... the viable and cohesive nation where everyone gets what they want if they either work hard or know someone or have a pretty face or cheat like hell. That America is available every night, on every channel in the Comcast package. For a brief time, there was one television drama about the other America.³

This paper shows how *The Wire* can be employed as a teaching aid through which to consider the broader debates which exist about the contradictions within the American polity. It considers how the show’s depiction of the dysfunctional city of Baltimore can highlight to students of American politics the inadequacies of the justice, policing, schooling and political systems by focusing on failure of drug policies. And it will reflect upon the show’s significance within the contemporary political agenda both within the US and the UK to demonstrate how teachers and students can gain further insights into the American and Western European democratic traditions.

**The Wire as a teaching aid for the US polity, the democratic experiment and social institutions**

In his article ‘The Polis of Springfield: The Simpsons and the Teaching of Political Theory’, Pete Woodcock has shown how the popular American cartoon series *The Simpsons* (1989-onwards) can be profitably employed to teach students about the principles, practices and configurations of democratic behaviour. Principally, Woodcock has suggested that the programme’s creator Matt Groening and his writers have utilised a multi-referential range of popular citations about recognisable democratic processes to make important points about everyday American society:

Springfield’s citizens enjoy ‘a surprising degree of local control and autonomy’, and can be regarded as, and used by teacher as a model democratic society. Indeed, ... Springfield can be regarded as a model of a deliberative democracy.⁴

In contrast to Springfield’s grassroots democratic autonomy, the Baltimore based characters of *The Wire* are locked into predetermined destinies which they cannot control. Instead, Simon et.al employed the dramatic principles of Ancient Greek tragedies to explore how the issues of race, sexuality, social injustice, individual liberties, anti-authoritarianism, corporate power and public

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malfeasance combine to entrap the show’s protagonists and antagonists. As Deputy Commissioner for Operations Ervin H. Burrell (Frankie R. Faison) comments: ‘Its Baltimore gentlemen. The Gods will not save you.’

Thus, American scholars at Harvard University and the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee have established courses focusing on *The Wire* to comment on collapse of the urban job market, the public education system and the ‘game’ of the drugs war. For Harvard professors William Julius Wilson and Anmol Chaddha the series illustrates the deep inequalities that have affected American inner-cities. Although US academics remain aware that deindustrialisation, crime and prison, and the education system are deeply intertwined, they have invariably focused their attention on one subject at the expense of others. Conversely, *The Wire* has been more creative by using a multi-stranded narrative to weave together a picture of the range of forces that have combined to undermine the lives and the opportunities of the urban poor.  

Within this context, *The Wire* provides an explicit teaching aid through which to address the positive and negative American values of political liberty. It demonstrates to students of American political and social affairs how a polarised duality has emerged between the comfortable wealthy elite who enjoy the fruits of the ‘American dream’ and a vilified, marginalised underclass increasingly denied access to these benefits:

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.  

This understanding of the ‘Two Americas’ locates *The Wire* within a debate which can be traced back to the French political philosopher Alexis De Tocqueville in his famous 1830 account of *Democracy in America*. This classic text sought to apply the functional aspects of democracy in America to offset the failings of De Tocqueville’s native France. However, it also considered the dangers associated with a tyrannical majority and the ‘soft despotism’ of the power elite.  

In defining their ambitions, Simon et.al have highlighted the tensions in De Tocqueville’s vision by portraying the gulf of contradiction and discord which exists between the ‘Two Americas’. On one side, America prides itself on its social cohesiveness with democratic institutions and federal and state forms of governance to encourage political efficacy. This is rooted in the adherence to the Constitution, a separation of powers, the symbolism of the Stars and Stripes and the office of the Presidency as Head of State. This model of US democracy has been shaped by the principles of exceptionalism which were defined by De Tocqueville as those individual rights and communitarian responsibilities that should be utilised to define what it means to be an American citizen. As De Tocqueville noted Americans formed political associations and appeared to have succeeded in establishing a highly participatory form of democracy. He claimed ‘in towns it is

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impossible to prevent men from assembling, getting excited together and forming sudden passionate resolves.\textsuperscript{8}

But for all his optimism about virtues of US democratic experiment, De Tocqueville speculated on the danger that the Republic tended to degenerate into soft despotism in which its ideals would be undermined by the vagaries of public opinion, conformity to material security and the absence of intellectual freedom. Through these dangers, \textit{Democracy in America} predicted that the judgment of the wise would be subordinated to the prejudices of the ignorant.

Consequently, \textit{The Wire} allows teachers to bring to the attention of students the contours of the continuing debate about the role and effectiveness of republican democracy. The programme provides a dramatic account of the divisions which exist between those who advocate John Rawl’s concepts of distributive justice and the protection of the need for the formation of an ethically just society as against a commodified vision of a meritocracy in which individual worth is defined by competitive gain.\textsuperscript{9} Above all, it 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, the collapse of the social justice system and the end of any ‘safety net’ for a largely African-American underclass:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The Wire} ... shows what happens when maximised profit is mistaken for the basis of building a socially just society. ... To mistake capitalism as the method for the basis of society for shared core values is just incredible ... It has led to the ineffectiveness of the government to solve social problems. They can’t solve the war on drugs. They can’t solve the public school problem. ... If there’s no short term profit in it; it ain’t getting done.\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

On the foundations of this critique of modern US capitalism Simon et.al provide a pivotal example of how the American political economy’s instrumentalist pursuit of the unmediated market mechanism has prompted a decline in the public sphere and undermined the civic values of contemporary US society. In particular, they examine how a range of institutions (the police, city hall, the public school system, trade unions and the media) have each declined in value as they have responded to the relentless market-led disciplines defined by clearance rates, electability, minimal resourcing and consumer demand. It is in this respect that the show provides its most explicit indictment against the social consequences of free markets and the manner in which reverence for the ‘hidden hand’ of market forces as the ultimate allocator of scarce resources has eroded the democratic ideal.

\textbf{The unfolding drama, the collapse of civic virtue and institutional failure in the urban dystopia of Baltimore}

At core of \textit{The Wire} is the inherent conflict between individual activism and institutional stasis. Thus on one hand, the programme remains mindful of the implications of the stifling ‘chain of command’ that Detective James ‘Jimmy’ McNulty (Dominic West) and others such as Major Howard ‘Bunny’ Colvin (Robert Wisdom) face as exemplified by the inexorable rise of Deputy Commissioner for Operations William ‘Bill’ A. Rawls (John Doman). On the other hand, however, despite its bleak depiction of personal impotence when battling with the forces of institutional inertia, \textit{The Wire} demonstrates that individual actions have consequences.

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\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 106.
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\textsuperscript{10} Simon, 29 August 2009.
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In Season One Simon et al utilised the dramatic conventions of the police procedural based upon a special unit, reluctantly led by the ambitious but ultimately principled Lieutenant Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick), whose objective is to obtain a wire tap to construct a case against a drugs gang responsible for twelve homicides. The first episode opens with its nominal anti-hero McNulty identifying the Barksdale crew as the new power brokers in the drugs game in West Baltimore. In particular, he is impressed by the crew’s second-in-command Russell ‘Stringer’ Bell (Idris Elba) and resolves to bring him down.

From the outset, McNulty emerges as an insubordinate officer who combines amused contempt for the oppressive demands of the chain of command with a genuine (if misguided) dedication to what he considers to be ‘real policing’. Yet McNulty is anything but the orthodox stereotyped version of the American TV ‘maverick cop’. On the contrary, in direct counterpoint of his abilities as ‘natural police’\(^\text{11}\), as the story unfolds he emerges as flawed personality whose womanising (he is having a casual affair with the Assistant State’s Attorney Rhonda Pearlman (Deirdre Lovejoy), drinking (which has estranged from his wife Elena (Callie Thorner)) and conflicts about his methods and motives, even with his friends and allies including his partner Detective William ‘Bunk’ Moreland (Wendell Pierce) Bunk, Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters) and Daniels, reflect more profoundly self-destructive tendencies. Above all, the show subverts audience expectation by demonstrating that the insubordination of McNulty may make the cases against the Barksdale and Stanfield drugs crews but only by jeopardising the prosecution itself and in a manner which leaves him even more alienated from his commanding officers while his personal life is thrown (by this very action) into greater turmoil. This will eventually culminate in his enforced dismissal from the Baltimore Police department; a position which defines his primary sense of identity.

Driven by these insubordinate tendencies, McNulty initiates the case by drawing Judge Daniel Phelan’s (Peter Geharty) attention to the crew (which includes the gang’s leader Avon (Wood Harris), his nephew D’Angelo (Larry Gilliard Jr.) and enforcer Roland ‘Wee-Bey’ Brice (Hassan Johnson) after D’Angelo is cleared of a murder charge in the scheming justice’s court. This leads to the judge contacting the then Deputy Commissioner for Operations Burrell who, with great reluctance, requires his Homicide and Narcotics Divisions to form a unit to track Barksdale in the hope of bringing him to trial. In acceding to this request, Burrell’s objective is not to solve the problem by bringing a wide-ranging case against the Barksdale crew but to conduct a cosmetic exercise to appease the judge while limiting the manpower assigned to the detail.

By circumventing the chain of command, McNulty makes himself a ‘dead man’ to his superior, the ruthless Chief of Homicide Major Rawls whose principal concern is to cynically provide the most favourable presentation of his clearance rates by carefully ‘juking the stats’ to appease his superiors and to achieve his own ambitions. In their opening exchange he suggestively gives McNulty the ‘finger’ to claim:

Rawls: You see these McNulty (pointing to his fingers). Do you see them? These are for you for as long it takes for me to get even.

McNulty: Major.

Rawls: No don’t Major me you wiseass backstabbing piece of shit. What the fuck were you doing over at the Court House anyway? Why the fuck were you talking to that shit-bag Judge?

McNulty shakes his head.

Rawls: These are for you McNulty (sticking one index finger on either hand at him). This one other here is going up your narrow Irish ass. And this bad boy over here is in

\(^{11}\) Jay Landsman (Delaney Williams) description of McNulty at his ‘wake.’
your fucking eye. I’m upstairs asking answering questions about some project nigger I’ve never even heard of who’s supposed to have beat my unit out of ten murders...

McNulty: (interrupting) Three. They only beat three in court.
Rawls: I got the deputy asking about ten.
McNulty: No, they did ten but we only charged them with three.
Rawls: You’re full of shit.
McNulty: Well you can check the files. Maurice Croggins, Tourime Boyd, Roland Leggett, what’s-her-name the girl they found on the stairwell in Saratoga, Colette something or another. ... Look Major these guys are real. They beat me up on the Gerard Bo case just like that did Barlow.

Rawls: Scroggins? I don’t have an H file on Scroggins.
McNulty: He was last year ... summer. Two in the back of the head. Low rise courtyard.
Rawls: Let me understand something. You were having the Deputy bust my balls over a prior year case? Is this what I need from you, you insubordinate little fuck?
McNulty: Major look I’m really sorry. Phelan, he and I go back a little. He wanted to know what I knew about the crew in his court. I didn’t mean to cross you ...
Rawls: (interrupting) I had to go upstairs knowing nothing and had to explain to the Deputy why he’s getting calls about murders that don’t mean a shit to anybody.
McNulty: Look sir this judge he fucks me up. He asks me a question, I answer it. I didn’t know he was going to call anybody.

Rawls raises his two index fingers again.

Rawls: You have my attention Detective. My complete undivided attention!
McNulty: Yes sir.

McNulty gets up to leave.
Rawls: Where are you going?
McNulty: I am eight to four.
Rawls: No! You’re typing.
McNulty: Sir?
Rawls: Deputy wants a report on his desk at 0.800.
McNulty: A report?
Rawls: Clean, no typos. Make it look right and put my name on it.
McNulty: You want me to reference all the murders or should I soft peddle that?
Rawls: The fucking horse is out of the barn door right? Just try not to make me look stupid twice. ... And when you list the case put a little dot next to each one. The Deputy likes dots!

In this exchange, the show departs from the norms of the standard television cop show by intimidating that McNulty has more dangerous antagonists within the senior ranks of the Baltimore Police Department than any challenge he faces from the Barksdale crew. In particular, he has acquired truly vindictive enemies in Rawls who will bide his time for his revenge and the politically astute Burrell. This early scene identifies one of the show’s principal themes by highlighting the

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It refers more directly to the dramatic conventions of William Friedkin’s The French Connection (1971) in which the protagonist Jimmy ‘Popeye’ Doyle (Gene Hackman) fights the intrusion of two Federal Agents Mulderig and Klein (Bill Hickman and Sonny Grosso) who directly criticise his police work. Doyle, like McNulty, has no interest in the victims of drug crime but is more concerned about a relentless personal battle with ‘Frog One’ or Alain Charnier (Fernando Rey). In Britain, in direct lineage to Friedkin’s film, Euston Film’s The Sweeney (1974-78) also focused on an archetypical maverick cop Inspector Jack Regan (John Thaw) whose policing was contrasted to the institutional closure of New Scotland Yard.
dangerous conflict between the cynical time-serving bureaucratic compliance of Rawls and the reckless individualism of McNulty. As McNulty’s acerbic partner Bunk so eloquently encapsulates McNulty’s problem, ‘There you go, giving a fuck when it ain’t your turn to give a fuck!’

Unbowed by the censure, the unrepentant McNulty engages in a quixotic crusade against the Barksdale crew – albeit one motivated by the quest for personal satisfaction as a detective than any human sympathy for the victims of the drugs game. Indeed, his relentless pursuit of Stringer through the first three seasons develops into a personal obsession to the extent that when Bell is murdered on the eve of police action he is utterly devastated. As Detective Kima Gregg’s (Sonja Sohn) comments, ‘He is taking it personal; like the death of kin.’

As the series develops it becomes an ensemble piece with major characters being introduced throughout the first season. For instance, the Barksdale crew is shown as a disciplined force led by the tactically skilled Avon and Stringer who utilise a set of street lieutenants and enforcers such as D’Angelo (who has been demoted from the towers to the ‘pit’ alongside Preston ‘Bodie’ Broadus (J.D. Williams), Malik ‘Poot’ Carr (Tray Chaney) and Wallace (Michael B. Jordan)) and Wee-Bay to sell the product. Moreover, they employ Stringer’s detailed telephone codes to communicate with one another to circumvent any form of eavesdropping from the police. Stringer assiduously protects Avon from any form of legal identification and uses front organisations such as the strip joint ‘Orlandos’ to syphon off the drug money.

On the other side of the drugs war, the maverick detective Lester Freamon who has been left to rot for ‘thirteen years and four months’ for having previously challenged the chain of command becomes a significant player along with Greggs, Ellis Carver (Seth Gilliam), Thomas ‘Herc’ Hauk (Domenick Lombardozzi) and Roland ‘Prez’ Pryzbylewski (Jim True-Frost). Further, several characters are only revealed in terms of their importance as the show progresses such as drug-crew hi-jacker Omar (Michael K. Williams), ‘Proposition’ Joe Stewart (Robert F. Chew) and later in Seasons Two and Three Frank Sobotka (Chris Bauer), Major ‘Bunny’ Colvin and Councillor Tommy Carcetti (Aiden Gillen).

Within this unfolding milieu, the show examines the mechanics of the war on drugs to highlight a more fundamental decline of civic virtue. As each season progresses, the programme broadens its focus to turn the spotlight on the docks, politics, the public schools and the values of the media. This dramatic conceit highlights the degree to which the 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 a far broader point to the effect that these forces have instigated a more general collapse of civil society and the financial exploitation of the public. In this respect, the programme explores how the incremental marketisation of core values has led to the replacement of positive conceptualisations of civic virtue and the ‘good’ citizen with a value-free emphasis upon atomised individual consumers intent upon maximising personal pleasure and minimising pain through the market; a transformation in the nature of citizenship which has led to flawed responses to the challenges of the ‘war on drugs’.

Therefore, the writers have sought to unfold the individual stories of their trapped protagonists and antagonists amongst the dysfunctional institutions which have defined the broken American city. While such an emphasis is relatively novel in current US TV content, Simon has acknowledged the importance of Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory* (1957) as a filmic template in which the inhumanity of institutions can triumph over the human spirit. Based on Humphrey Cobb’s 1935 novel, the film provides a disturbing account of corrupt French Generals who conceal their own culpability with the unjust trial and executions of three nominated soldiers. As Simon has conceded Kubrick’s film provided inspiration both in terms of the decision to define the story from the viewpoint of the middle-management of Colonel Dax (Kirk Douglas) and, more explicitly, in helping to model the characters of Rawls and Major Stanislaus ‘Stan’ Valchek (Al Brown) upon those of the blame-shifting Generals Mireau (George Macready) and Broulard (Adolph Menjou).13

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Within this dramatic conceit, institutional power is sacrificed for principle and the characters' preoccupation for status has undermined the meaning of their work:

But here's the thing of which we can all be certain, the thing that fuels all the dramatic arcs of *The Wire*, in fact: the why is the only thing that actually matters. ... The why is everything and without it, the very suggestion of human progress becomes a cosmic joke. And in the American city, at the millennium, the why has ceased to exist. 14

This preoccupation with ‘the why’ is most poignantly highlighted in the final season when the various legitimate agencies of city governance (the police, city hall and the press) demonstrate that they are prepared to collude with one another to perpetuate the falsehood of McNulty’s serial killer investigation (which was utilised by McNulty and Freamon to free up resources for the wire tap on the Stanfield crew). This allows these players to maintain the stability of their closed policy community, protect their institutional interests and further their own careers (and in the case of the dishonest journalist Scott Templeton (Tom McCarthy) to make his name) rather than acknowledge this deception to the public.

The show throws a particularly harsh spotlight upon the law enforcement and legal institutions over their obsession with clearance rates. This thesis is taken further as the show broadens its focus from the street level to the higher echelons of the opposing forces. The compromises and calculations which surround the rise of the programme’s main political protagonist Carcetti which form a central theme in Season Three build upon the previous background of bureaucratic policing and the collapse of the portside trade unions. Throughout the remaining seasons Carcetti rises from being an ambitious councilman to becoming the Mayor and, ultimately, the Maryland State Governor. While charting his calculating ascent through the political hierarchy, the programme comments upon Carcetti’s self-interest while still allowing space to acknowledged that he does have sincere convictions and beliefs about the improvement of his native city.

Ultimately, however, like everyone else, Carcetti is trapped by the complexity of urban governance and the messy compromises dictated by political expediency, career aspirations and a heavy dependence on the support of organised interests, business and other campaign contributors. In order to reconcile the conflicting pressures and to balance the needs of the city with limited resources, Carcetti slashes the police and public school budgets for short-term career and partisan advantage to become ‘Just a weakass mayor of a brokeass city.’

Despite their indictment of institutional behaviour, Simon et.al strike a balance between cynicism about the self-perpetuating structures of power designed more to defend their own interests than solve problems and a humanist sympathy towards those trapped within them. Indeed, characters such as Bodie, Bubbles (Andre Royo) and Omar are presented with considerable pathos, sympathy and humour. More important, the programme indicates that these marginalised characters are defined by a brand of street honour of their own. In particular, Omar’s individualist code of loyalty sees him avenge the death of his boyfriend Brandon Wright (Michael Kevin Darnall) by executing Stringer Bell with Brother Mouzone (Michael Potts), who had been previously double-crossed by Stringer. He is undoubtedly the most maverick and quixotic character drawn from the street with his own highly developed sense of morality. Omar is given one of the show’s most memorable sequences when he humorously deconstructs Maurice ‘Maury’ Levy’s (Michael Kostroff) defence of the Barksdale gunman Marquis ‘Bird’ Hilton’s (Fredro Starr) murder of William Gant (Larry Hull) who had testified against D’Angelo:

Levy: So you rob drug dealers? This is what you do.

Omar: Yes sir.
Levy: You walk the streets of Baltimore with a gun taking what you want when you want it, willing to use violence when your demands aren’t met. This is who you are?
Omar nods.
Levy: Why should we believe your testimony then? Why believe anything you say?
Omar: That’s up to you all really.
Levy: You say you aren’t here to testify against the defendant because of any deal you made with the police.
Omar: True that.
Levy: But you are here because you want to tell the truth about what happened to Mr. Gant in that housing project parking lot.
Omar: Yep.
Levy: When in fact you are exactly the kind of person who would, if you felt you needed to, shoot a man down on a housing project parking lot and lie to the police about it. Would you not?
Omar: Hey look I never put my gun against no citizen.
Levy: You are immoral are you not? You are feeding of the violence and the despair of the drug trade. You are stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city. You are a parasite who leaches off...
Omar (interrupting) Just like you man.
Levy ... a culture of drugs ... Excuse me? What?
Omar: I got the shotgun ... you got the briefcase. It’s all in the game do right?
Levy looks at Phelan who shrugs back.

Omar develops an affinity with Bunk Moreland. Despite their different vocations, they attended the same school and share a code of honour drawn from Sam Peckinah’s outlaws in The Wild Bunch (1969). Above all, it is a value system in which a person’s word binds them to a set of moral duties and it is no accident that these characters often cite lines drawn directly from Peckinah’s seminal western. Therefore, Bunk reminds Omar that they once ‘had ourselves a community ... makes me sick motherfucker how far we done fell.’

Yet, despite the acutely observed characterisations of humanity struggling against overwhelming adversity, just as it appears that someone is making a difference, the inevitable forces of institutional power or market-logic bring them down. As Slavoj Zizek has commented ‘the greatest threat to bureaucracy ... comes from those who actually try to solve the problems the bureaucracy is supposed to deal with.’ This becomes painfully apparent in the case of Colvin’s legalisation of drugs in ‘Hamsterdam’ but the theme also underlies the thwarted promotion of Daniels to the Deputy Chief for Operations. Colvin’s brave experiment is brought down by a collusion of Carcetti, Burrell, Rawls and Mayor Clarence Royce (Glynn Turman). He is made to suffer further indignity by being forced to resign as the scapegoat for the city’s ills and loses a


16 Simon has commented that the writers liberally quoted from Peckinah’s film and within Season Two there were twenty lines drawn directly from The Wild Bunch.


significant amount of his pension rights. This accords with Simon et al’s dictum that ‘shit rolls downhill’ as superiors seek to blame their subordinates for their own mistakes.

In the final episode’s montage (accompanied by the version of Tom Wait’s Down in the Hole by the Blind Boys of Alabama which was used in the title sequence of Season One) the thesis of institutional failure, the collapse of the city and the inexorable perpetuation of the drugs game is presented as a form of historical inevitability. In this pessimistic resume, Michael Lee (Tristan Wilds) becomes the new Omar; Duquan ‘Dukie’ Weems (Jermaine Crawford) shoots up heroin to become the new Bubbles; Slim Charles (Anwan Glover) makes links with the ‘Greek’ (Bill Raymond) through his contact Spiros ‘Vondas’ Vondopoulos (Paul Ben-Victor); Leander Sydnor (Corey Parker Robinson) follows McNulty’s lead in visiting Phelan to initiate a new case; Carcetti has become the Governor of Maryland; Rawls has been made the head of the Maryland State Police and the incompetent but scheming Valchek, rather than the disenchanted Daniels who has resigned to take up private legal practice, has become the Baltimore Chief of Police. The show ends with the now ‘ex-police’ McNulty taking the down and out ‘Mr Bobbles’ (William Joseph Brookes), whom he had used as foil in his serial killer scheme, ‘home’ and it fades out on an ambiguous shot of cars passing on the Interstate (I-59) overlooking the city of Baltimore. Everything has changed and nothing has changed at all.

Ultimately, The Wire may be used as a text by students of American civic life to consider how the collapse of Baltimore’s urban institutions has become representative of wider deterioration in the governance across many second-tier American cities. For teachers and students, the narrative provides a dramatisation of how the incremental marketisation of core values, civic virtues and citizenship has facilitated this failure to respond to the drugs war. Thus, The Wire shows through its range of inter-related plots, character arcs and binary oppositions that the destruction of civil society has been paralleled by institutional compromise and failure.

The Wire as a ‘political football’: the response of politicians and shows agenda concerning the end of American Empire, the inner cities and the drugs war

Teachers and students may be further interested in considering how the show has proved resonant to the contemporary US and UK political agenda. Simon expressed his pleasure in seeing how The Wire had become a topic of political discussion and was asked to comment on the then Conservative Shadow Home Secretary Chris Grayling’s speech on 25 August 2009 in which he compared the inner cities of Britain, most especially Manchester’s Moss Side, to the streets of Baltimore:

The Wire used to be just a work of fiction for British viewers. But under this government, in many parts of British cities, The Wire has become a part of real life in this country too. Far too many of those features of what we have always seen as a US phenomenon are now to be found on the streets of Britain as well. 19

Yet, Grayling later had to confess that he had only seen a few episodes of the Season One, thereby failing to address the demands of the narrative or the critique on offer. However, Simon responded with no little irony that while Grayling appeared to stand at the other of the political spectrum:

It’s really gratifying to be a political football. One of the things you want to do is get off the entertainment pages, to become a source of discussion on the op-ed and editorial pages.

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19 Chris Grayling quoted from Andrew Pettie ‘What’s ‘The Wire’ got to do with us?’, The Daily Telegraph, 25 August 2009 home page http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment on 12 September 2009. Grayling has subsequently been appointed the Minister of Justice in the 2012 Cabinet reshuffle.
That’s sort of the very edge of the zeitgeist and where you want to be ... It hasn’t happened in my country but it has happened here (UK).  

The greatest ostensible support for the programme from the educated and mainstream American political classes has come from Barack Obama during his 2008 Presidential campaign in which he proclaimed that *The Wire* was his favourite show and that he found Omar the most interesting character. During the campaign, Obama commented on how its critique of American inner cities tied in with the associative democratic practices he had advocated in tackling the nation’s social ills. He also received the support in campaign commercials and on platforms from several members of the cast calling for voter registration and campaign work in North Carolina and New Orleans. Subsequently, Sonja Sohn (the actress who played Griggs) developed a programme at the Department of Social Work at the University of Maryland entitled *ReWired for Life* for youth offenders from the streets of West Baltimore.

For students of the American dystopia, *The Wire* is notable for its creators’ conscious use of the contemporary thriller as a means to investigate the forgotten America. In this respect, it is important for teachers to identify that the writers are not typical television programme makers and come from a varied set of backgrounds. Most especially, Simon remains a newspaper man from his time as a crime journalist on the *Baltimore Sun* and Burns has been both a homicide detective and a public schools teacher. Consequently, Simon et.al have demonstrated their concern to not only to bring a unique level of knowledge and detail to the show but to use it as a commentary on post-industrial society and the end of the American Empire. While refuting the suggestion that he is a class warrior Simon has noted that the institutions of modern capitalism are increasingly indifferent to the needs of the people who work within them. Thus, for those studying the dynamics of cultural politics, it has been interesting to see how the show has been taken up as a political tract and the extent to which it may affect wider understandings of the unraveling US policy agendas concerning the globalisation of capital, welfare policies and the drugs war:

> We thought we had a fair critique when we started the show with Enron and the financial implosions which were starting. But we did not anticipate the complete collapse of Wall Street based on the extent to which Wall Street had bought into maximised short term profits as its core value to the exclusion of all sanity. 

**Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to consider how the themes and arguments presented in *The Wire* provide a commentary on the decline of modern American democracy. Therefore, the programme enables teachers and students of American politics to address the critiques which first appeared about the state of US polity when the American democratic experiment was in its infancy. De Tocqueville’s examination of the soft despotism which defined elite behaviour has been writ large as the US enters into a post-industrial and globalised market era. The old certainties of US exceptionalism have been questioned as the American society has become divided on racial and class lines. Consequently, Simon et.al have pitched their drama concerning the perniciousness of the drugs war within these broader concerns of the triumph of market values and its impact leading to the collapse of civil society and civic values. Their programme demonstrates that individuals whether from the police to the street, from City Hall to public education and within the decline of

20 Simon, 29 August 2009.


22 Simon, 29 August 2009.
the portside stevedores are trapped within a brutalising and uncaring institutional structure. Far from the free market providing the ultimate vehicle for the realisation of individual freedom, people are forced to make decisions while having little or no choice in their outcomes due to the market economics which dominate public life in the increasingly dysfunctional second-tier US cities. Simon has shown how the murder and crime rates in Baltimore are exponentially higher than such major metropolises as New York, Los Angeles or Chicago. He has been highly critical of how the dominance of cultural product which is made within these first-rank American cities tends to provide a distorted and favourable account of US urban life.

Thus, The Wire has offset the common view of the ‘American Dream’ which has been perpetuated in a large number of American television series. Instead, it places the decisions, values and issues which face American society, and by extension British politics, under the microscope to consider their implications for the immediate future. It demonstrates to students of American civil life, with considerable humanity and without any condescension, the difficulties and aspirations which have defined the populace of West Baltimore. Thus, The Wire shows through it masterful storytelling that the eyes of the world are upon America once more and it enables those studying American politics to understand the consequences of US civic institutions wilfully embracing market-based logics.