

Research Article

‘A City upon a Hill’: *The Wire* and Its Distillation of the United States Polity

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The Home Box Office’s series *The Wire* (2002–2008) provides an informed critique of the decline of the democratic American ideal of the ‘city upon a hill’. From its inception as a police procedural, it expanded its interests across the dystopian city of Baltimore to consider the linkage between drug crimes, policing, the collapse of blue-collar life, social deprivation, institutional compromise, the public school system, media compliance and political self-interest. Therefore, this article will situate *The Wire* into the debates that have defined the US polity and will discuss how it employs the narrative conventions of a contemporary thriller to offer an alternative view of American democracy.

Keywords: *The Wire*; American politics; popular culture and politics

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 (Winthrop, 1630, p. 63).

David Simon and Ed Burns’ *The Wire* (2002–2008) has provided an informed critique of the decline of the democratic ideal in which John Winthrop’s utopian vision of the ‘city upon a hill’ gives way to the modern urban dystopia of Baltimore. From its inception as a self-styled ‘police procedural ... [whose] ... grand theme was nothing less than national existentialism’ (Simon, 2000, p. 2) it 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. Therefore, the show was notable for its creators’ use of the contemporary thriller to investigate the social issues that have defined a forgotten America.

Over 60 television episodes Simon et al. reflect on matters of race, sexuality, social injustice, growing inequality, individual liberties, anti-authoritarianism, corporate power and public malfeasance. In this respect, it is important to remember that the writers were not typical television programme makers and came from a varied set of backgrounds. Most especially, Simon was originally a crime journalist who worked on the *Baltimore Sun* and Burns had been both a Baltimore homicide detective and a public school teacher. Consequently, *The Wire* not only demonstrated a verisimilitude in relation to its characters, dialogue and multi-level plotting, but also provided many telling insights into the dichotomies that face American democratic behaviour.

Therefore, this article will consider how *The Wire's* austere presentation of the positive and negative values of political liberty affected a critique of the illusion of freedom when mediated through the market mechanism to a growing United States (US) underclass. Although Simon et al. employ the dramatic principles of Ancient Greek tragedies, West Baltimore's deprived residents have their lives shaped by the city's range of dysfunctional institutions rather than the indifferent Olympian gods of mythology. As the Deputy Commissioner for Operations Ervin H. Burrell comments, 'It's Baltimore gentlemen. The Gods will not save you'.

Against this background, this article will locate *The Wire* within the broader debates that exist within popular culture and politics concerning the decline of the modern city. Notably, there has been an interdisciplinary academic literature about the show's portrayal of urban decay from, inter alia, cultural studies, media studies, sociology, politics and philosophy. For instance, Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall edited a series of essays concerning the programme's consideration of law, order and disorder, and its impact on narrative television in *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* (Potter and Marshall, 2009). However, this article employs an analytical framework drawn from the political philosophies that underpinned the formation of the American democratic experiment. It therefore uses the critiques that were made by the nineteenth-century French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville about the contradictory effects of democratic reform to interpret Simon et al.'s dramatic constructions of the wasted lives within *The Wire*.

Within this context, Simon et al. established a binary division between the 'two Americas' which exists across the 'haves' and 'have nots' in US society. To sustain their critique of a divided America, the writers developed a narrative to dramatise the conflict that emerges from individual activism against institutional stasis. Thus, the programme begins by outlining the implications of the stifling 'chain of command' that Detective James 'Jimmy' McNulty faces when he draws Judge Daniel Phelan's attention to the Barksdale drugs crew, much to the consternation of his unprincipled superiors Homicide Major William 'Bill' A. Rawls and Deputy Commissioner Burrell. In turn, this article will consider how the show subverts audience expectations for a 'cop show' by demonstrating that while the insubordination of its principal protagonist McNulty may make the case against drugs crews, he does so only in a manner that leaves him even more alienated from the Baltimore Police Department's conniving commanding officers.

Further, there will be a discussion of how Simon et al. provide a mirror image of the 'legitimate' institutions of the police and the city government by detailing how an alternative chain of command operates within the drug crews. In contrast to the hierarchical limitations that face McNulty, Major Howard 'Bunny' Colvin and Lieutenant Cedric Daniels, the gangsters develop a highly organised force of leaders, lieutenants, enforcers and corner boys to establish an extremely effective (if brutal) control over the streets of West Baltimore. Finally, this article will demonstrate how *The Wire* provides a wider commentary upon the interconnected institutions which have led to the economic, political and social decline of Baltimore.

***The Wire* as part of popular culture and politics**

In *Politics and Popular Culture* (1997), John Street shows how films, television programmes and pop music provide insights into contemporary political systems and cultural forms. Street explores the relationship between popular culture and politics by asking:

- How can popular culture be deconstructed to consider the political and social concerns of the society?
- How has the contemporary political and ideological context for film, television or music determined the public's understanding of popular culture? (Street, 1997, p. 8)

Street therefore argues that film and television narratives may make conspicuous ongoing political practices, while demonstrating how the public 'lives' through its popular culture to attain meaning, identity and political efficacy (Street, 1997, p. 10).

Street's argument that popular culture, by defining meaningful identity, may facilitate political participation underpins Pete Woodcock's (2006) analysis in his article 'The Polis of Springfield: The Simpsons and the Teaching of Political Theory'. Woodcock demonstrates how the American cartoon series *The Simpsons* (1989 onwards) can be employed to discuss the principles, practices and configurations of democratic behaviour. He contends that the programme's creator Matt Groening has incorporated the quintessential elements of small-town America including the Main Street, the Church, the family, the school, the bar, the police force and civic governance to affect a comedic commentary on the principles of US exceptionalism. Therefore, Groening 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' (Cantor, 1999, p. 743), and can be regarded as and used by teachers as a model democratic society. Indeed ... Springfield can be regarded as a model of a deliberative democracy (Woodcock, 2006, p. 193).

In contrast to Springfield's grassroots democratic autonomy, *The Wire's* inhabitants are locked into Baltimore's especial configuration of drug gangs, ineffective policing and ineffectual civic responses. In this respect, the show corresponds to a strain of US films that have identified a declining, post-industrial American cityscape. Within these urban dystopias, people's lives have become more dangerous and less comprehensible. As the agencies of social order have withered, unrestrained capitalist imperatives have been mediated by the uncaring post-modern institutions of corporate governance. Mike Shapiro has commented upon the inchoate psycho-geography of Los Angeles in which such a diffusion of social, economic and political power has undermined individual autonomy. In his analysis of Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1992) Shapiro contends that the protagonist 'D-Fen's':

Odyssey through LA's spaces and ... complex landscape ... is recalcitrant to his expectations and coping abilities ... [so] ... we are able to recognise that LA is excessive to the regulative ideals within traditional political and social discourses (Shapiro, 2010, pp. 65–66).

In tandem, a second tier of US cities including St Louis, Detroit and Baltimore are post-industrial entities whose downtowns have lost their public, social and economic value. As these 'donut' cities' centres have collapsed through a combination of an eroding manufacturing base, the inequitable distribution of resources and the inevitable decline in land prices, there has been an associated 'hollowing' out of city governance as tax bases have become untenable, services have been outsourced to free market suppliers and democratic forms of governance have imploded (Rhodes, 1994).

It is within this milieu that Simon et al. have situated *The Wire* to show how individuals 'are used up and consumed by the systems that they are part of, be it City Hall or a gang, whether

the reason is the law or the [drugs] Game' (Poniewozik, 2013). Thus, scholars at Harvard University and the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee have considered how *The Wire* provides a commentary on the collapse of the urban job market, the public education system and the drugs war. For William Julius Wilson and Anmol Chaddha the show illustrates the deep inequalities that have affected American inner cities. They argue that *The Wire* has employed a multi-level narrative to weave together a picture of the range of forces including deindustrialisation and criminality which have undermined the lives and the opportunities of the urban poor so 'viewers become aware that individuals' decisions and behaviour are often shaped by – and indeed limited by – social, political, and economic forces beyond their control' (Wilson and Chaddha, 2010).

***The Wire* as a critique of the US polity, the democratic experiment and market interest**

Marxist and post-modernist academics such as Slavoj Žižek and Frederic Jameson have considered *The Wire's* representation of the positive and negative American values of political liberty. They have outlined how the civil virtues which were key to the formation of the democratic purposes of the US polity have been played out (or not) within the show's dramatic construction of the lives of the police, the criminals, the heroin addicts, legal officers, stevedores, politicians and journalists who inhabit the streets of Baltimore.

For instance, Žižek has commented that the very title of the programme –*The Wire* – can be read in several ways ranging from the description of wearing a bugging device or referring to the unit's interception of the pay/disposable cell phone messages made by the drugs crew to an analogy of an 'imaginary but inviolate boundary' between those who participate in the 'American Dream' and those who are left behind in its wake (Žižek, 2012, p. 92). Further, Jameson has noted how a polarised duality has emerged between the comfortable wealthy elite and a vilified, marginalised underclass that has increasingly been denied access to the benefits of the mainstream culture. He comments that these cultures continue to exist side by side but without any direct contact or communication with one another (Jameson, 2010, pp. 3–4). Simon has been most articulate on this radical split:

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 (Simon, 2008).

This understanding of the 'Two Americas' locates *The Wire* within a debate that 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 (De Tocqueville, 1863 [1830]).

In defining their ambitions, Simon et al. have highlighted the tensions in de Tocqueville's vision by portraying the gulf of contradictions and discord that 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 that 'in towns it is impossible to prevent men from assembling, getting excited together and forming sudden passionate resolves' (De Tocqueville, 1863 [1830], p. 106).

But for all his optimism about the virtues of the 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, *Democracy in America* predicted that the judgement of the wise would be subordinated to the prejudices of the ignorant. In several respects, de Tocqueville's fears would be inadvertently realised when James Truslow Adams established his materialistic vision of the 'American Dream' which has predominated in US popular culture:

There has ... been the *American Dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement ... a dream of social order (Adams, 1931, p. 374).

The Wire opens up the continuing debate about the role and effectiveness of republican democracy. The programme provides a sustained dramatisation of the divisions that exist between those who advocate John Rawls' concept of distributive justice in which social equality and the protection of the needy are the definitions of an ethically just society against a commodified vision of a meritocracy in which individual worth is defined by competitive gain (Rawls, 1971). 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 that 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:

The Wire ... shows what happens when maximised profit is mistaken for the basis of building a socially just society. ... 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 (Simon, 2009).

On the foundations of this critique of modern US capitalism Simon et al. explore the degree to which the instrumentalist pursuit of self-interest through 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 the police, city hall, the public school system, trade unions and the media have declined in value as they have responded to the relentless market-led disciplines defined by clearance rates, electability, minimal resourcing and consumer demand. Such a critique reflects Zygmunt Bauman's construct of 'wasted lives' in which the neoliberal state victimises 'collateral casualties' either in terms of rendering individual autonomy impotent or through a demonised underclass (Bauman, 2004). It is in this respect that the show provides its most explicit indictment of the 'hidden hand' of market forces as the ultimate allocator of scarce resources has eroded the democratic ideal.

Individual insubordination versus institutional stasis

In Season One Simon et al. utilised the dramatic conventions of a police procedural based upon a special unit, reluctantly led by the ambitious but ultimately principled Lieutenant Daniels whose objective is to obtain a wire tap to construct a case against a drugs gang responsible for 12 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 and resolves to bring him and the gang's leader Avon Barksdale 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 version of the TV 'maverick cop' who typically acts as the audience's righteous surrogate. On the contrary, in direct counterpoint to his abilities as 'natural police',¹ as the story unfolds he emerges as a flawed personality whose anti-authoritarianism, selfishness, womanising (he is having a casual affair with the Assistant State's Attorney Rhonda Pearlman), drinking and familial irresponsibility (which has further estranged him from his wife Elena) reflect more profoundly narcissistic and self-destructive tendencies. These will eventually culminate in his forced dismissal from the Baltimore Police Department, a position that defines his primary sense of identity.

Driven by these insubordinate tendencies, McNulty initiates the case by drawing Judge Phelan's attention to the crew (which includes Stringer, Avon, his nephew D'Angelo and enforcer Roland 'Wee-Bey' Brice) after D'Angelo is cleared of a murder charge in the scheming justice's court. This leads to the judge contacting the 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 immediate superior, the ruthless Chief of Homicide Major Rawls, whose principal concern is cynically to 'juke the stats' so that his clearance rates appease his superiors, thereby allowing him to pursue his own careerist ambitions. Consequently, the show indicates that the hubristic McNulty has more dangerous enemies in the vindictive Rawls and the politically astute Burrell than anyone in the Barksdale crew.² By introducing the personal and institutional enmity between Rawls and McNulty, Simon et al. identify the conflict between time-serving bureaucratic compliance and reckless individualism as one of the show's principal themes. As McNulty's acerbic partner Detective William 'Bunk' Moreland so eloquently encapsulates his problem, 'There you go, giving a fuck when it ain't your turn to give a fuck!'

The alternative chain of command: the Barksdale crew and the game

Further, Simon et al.'s subversion of the cop show genre enables *The Wire* to explore the drugs game from the perspective of its street-level characters who have their own organisational norms, alternative social-economic structures and levels of leadership. Instead of the stereotypical depiction of ethnic drug dealers who get 'high on their own supply' (*Scarface* (1983))

or become entrapped in the 'gangsta' lifestyles emulated by rap artists such as Fifty Cent, the Barksdale and later Stanfield crews are disciplined forces led, respectively, by the tactically skilled Avon, Stringer, Marlo Stanfield and Chris Partlow. Stringer attends night school classes on Adam Smith at the Baltimore City Community College (and even keeps a copy of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) in his personal library) in order to learn how to employ the market principles of supply and demand of an 'inelastic' product (e.g. heroin) to control the corners, and instructs his crew only to use violence for territorial dominance rather than personal vendettas.

In the first season, the Barksdale crew utilise a set of street lieutenants and enforcers such as D'Angelo (who has been demoted from the public housing high-rise towers to the low-rise 'pit' alongside Preston 'Bodie' Broadus, Malik 'Poot' Carr and Wallace) 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 siphon off the drug money.

And it is Stringer who has the greatest aspirations to transform himself and the Barksdale crew into legitimate businessmen. In the first episode of the third season of *The Wire*, as the acting commander of his street lieutenants, he demands that their meetings should be conducted according to Robert's Rules of Order in which he addresses his dealers from a podium and ensures that the others may only speak when recognised by the chair. Further, Stringer establishes with Proposition Joe the 'New Day Coop' ostensibly to streamline the supply of heroin between East and West Baltimore but also to function as a drug dealers' chamber of commerce. However, even the astute Stringer will be brought down by a combination of his own cunning (his breaking of the gangland's rules concerning the Sunday truce in a botched attempt to assassinate the quixotic drugs gang hijacker Omar Little and his betrayal of the New York-based hitman Brother Mouzone), the rigidity of Avon who remains suspicious of his former friend's desire to go 'straight' ('I ain't no suit wearin' business man like you. I'm just a gangster I suppose. And I want my corners') and by the corrupt State Senator Clay Davis who outwits him in a property investment scam.

Elsewhere, the programme broadens its focus to turn the spotlight on the docks, politics, 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. The programme explores how the incremental marketisation of core values has led to the replacement of positive conceptualisations of citizenship with a value-free emphasis upon individualist consumers' intent upon maximising personal pleasure and minimising pain through the market.

The unfolding dystopia of Baltimore: institutional collapse, the failure of the drugs war and the end of empire

The writers have therefore sought to unfold the individual stories of their trapped protagonists and antagonists among the dysfunctional institutions that 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 execution 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 and, more explicitly, in helping to model the characters of Rawls and Major Stanislaus 'Stan' Valchek upon those of the blame-shifting Generals Mireau and Broulard (Simon and West, 2008).

Both Kubrick's film and *The Wire* indicate 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' (Mark, 2008). Consequently, Burrell, Rawls and Valchek have sacrificed their principles to attain institutional power and their preoccupation for such 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 (Simon, 2008).

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) collude with one another to perpetuate the falsehood of McNulty's serial killer investigation (which was utilised by McNulty and the equally maverick but more methodical Detective Lester Freamon to free up resources for the wire tap on the Stanfield crew). This allows these players to maintain the stability of their closed police community, protect their institutional interests and further their own careers 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 critique is taken further as it widens its focus from the street level to the compromises that surround the ascendancy of the programme's main political protagonist Tommy Carcetti, who rises from being an ambitious councilman to becoming the mayor. While charting his calculating ascent through the political hierarchy, the programme acknowledges that Carcetti has sincere convictions about the improvement of his native city. Ultimately, however, 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. 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 partisan advantage to become 'Just a weak-ass mayor of a broke-ass 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. Yet despite the acutely observed characterisations of humanity struggling against overwhelming adversity, just as it appears that someone is making a difference to fulfil genre expectations, the inevitable forces of institutional power or market logic bring them down (West, 2009). As Žižek has commented, 'the greatest threat to bureaucracy ... comes from those who actually try to solve the problems the bureaucracy is supposed to deal with' (Žižek, 2012, p. 95). This becomes apparent in the case of Colvin's brave experiment to legalise drugs in 'Hamsterdam' which is brought down by the collusion of Carcetti, Burrell, Rawls and Mayor

Clarence Royce. He is made to suffer further indignity by being forced to resign as the scapegoat for the city's ills and loses a 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 of the inexorable perpetuation of the drugs game, Baltimore's predicament is presented as a form of historical inevitability. In this pessimistic résumé, the game carries on with new players occupying predestined roles concerning the drugs gangs, the heroin addicts, the thwarted investigation of a new detail and the misguided governance of the city and the state. Therefore it is the compromised, flawed and incompetent characters of Carcetti (the Governor of Maryland), Rawls (the head of the Maryland State Police) and Valchek (Baltimore Chief of Police) who respectively attain power rather than the honest but disenchanting Daniels, the painstaking Freamon or the effective Colvin. The show ends with the now 'ex-police' McNulty taking the down-and-out 'Mr Bobbles' whom he had used as a 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.

The Wire holds up a mirror to the erosion of city governance and citizens' rights which have been undermined by a mixture of political compromise and market power. In effect, the show demonstrates how a liberal democratic form of 'tyranny' has predominated in which West Baltimore's citizens receive none of the city's communal benefits but are still required to adhere to its laws and controls (Moore, 2011, p. 9). Throughout *The Wire's* five seasons, the city governance is shown to fail in its duty to protect its poorest inhabitants from the violence inherent in the drugs wars while simultaneously failing to provide them with any viable opportunities to live outside the game:

We pretend to a war against narcotics but in truth, we are simply brutalising and dehumanising an urban underclass that we no longer need as a labour supply ... The drug war is war on the underclass now. That's all it is. It has no other meaning (Simon, 2008).

Moreover, Simon et al., by focusing on the plight of the stevedores in Season Two, provide insights into the unravelling of US industries as American economic policies have replaced the national manufacturing base with the globalisation of capital and unfettered importation of products drawn from cheap labour markets. Consequently, Simon et al. have demonstrated their concern 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:

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 (Simon, 2009).

Conclusion

This article has considered the key themes presented in *The Wire* within the context of the decline of modern American democracy. Therefore, it has utilised the critiques that first appeared about the state of the 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 a post-industrial and globalised market era. The old certainties of US exceptionalism have been questioned as the American society has become further 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 at the triumph of market values and its impact leading to the collapse of civil society. Their programme demonstrates that individuals, from the police to the street, from city hall to public education and within the decline of the portside stevedores are trapped within a brutalising and uncaring market-led society. 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 that dominate public life in the increasingly dysfunctional second-tier US city of Baltimore.

Although *The Wire* cannot (and should not) offer solutions to the market-led compromises, by dramatising these events it has offset the common view of the materialistic success story of the American Dream which has been perpetuated in a large number of films and television series. Simon et al. have subverted many of the generic characteristics of the cop show to effect a truly profound social critique which highlights the plight of those who populate an alternative America that has been excluded from the overriding majority of US programming (Simon, 2009). The series therefore places the decisions, values and issues that face post-industrial societies under the microscope to consider their implications for the immediate future. It demonstrates with considerable humanity the difficulties that have defined the populace of West Baltimore. Thus, *The Wire*, through its masterful storytelling and telling insights, has taken up its rightful place within the pantheon of American television drama.

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Notes

- 1 Homicide Sergeant Jay Landsman's description of McNulty at his 'wake'.
- 2 It refers to the dramatic conventions of William Friedkin's *The French Connection* (1971) in which the protagonist Jimmy 'Popeye' Doyle fights the intrusion of two federal agents, Mulderig and Klein, who undermine his police work.

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