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# THE **POPULAR** CULTURE STUDIES **JOURNAL**

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# Discipline and Policing: HBO's *The Wire* as a Critique of Modern American Culture

MORGAN SHIPLEY  
JACK TAYLOR

It has approximately been seven years since the final episode of HBO's *The Wire* aired in March 2008. From 2002 to 2008, critics hailed the wildly successful series as accurately depicting the harsh realities of black, inner-city, urban life in the midst of the decaying and postindustrial city Baltimore. Yet, despite critics' praise that *The Wire* is an aesthetic production most closely aligned with social realism, our analysis focuses on how *The Wire* attempts to not only remain faithful to the everyday conditions and situations that individuals face in inner-city of Baltimore, but it also provides a firm critique of the institutions that the show depicts. The cultural distinctions dividing show characters from modern, American institutions reveal that, at the heart of *The Wire*, lays a critique of the institutions that shape the American, cultural landscape driven by the capitalist project.

J. M. Tyree, in "*The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season*," notes that the moral universe of *The Wire* is structured like a Greek tragedy, but that the series ultimately has more epic qualities that align it with Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (36). Given the praise *The Wire* received from critics, it's no surprise that the series has sparked the interest of academics who are now putting the series under the same analytic scrutiny as classics in American film and literature. Most academics are using *The Wire* to expose problems within contemporary

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culture in regards to issues of race and economic inequality. For example, the University of Michigan dedicated an entire conference to the series in January of 2009 entitled “‘Heart of a City’: Black Urban Life on *The Wire*.” In the conference, presenters included a range of topics from sex trafficking and neoliberalism to *The Wire* and Barack Obama. *The Los Angeles Sentinel* also reported, in December 2010, that the 60-episode series would be used as a “textbook” for a course at John Hopkins University in which students explored the economic and social problems faced by big cities. And shortly before that course was designed at John Hopkins, Harvard Kennedy School professor and prominent American sociologist, William Julius Wilson, announced that *The Wire* would play an instrumental role in his class on urban inequality in an article for *The Washington Post* (Chaddha and Wilson 1).

The impact of *The Wire* also made its way into Capitol Hill. In a recent article from *The Atlantic*, Ray Gustini reports that attorney general Eric Holder “will not rest until HBO brings back *The Wire*.” This was a statement made after the attorney general invited three actors from *The Wire*—Wendell Pierce (Det. Bunk Moreland), Sonja Sohn (Det. Kima Greggs), and Jim True-Frost (Roland Pryzbylowski)—to join him on Capitol Hill to announce his newly constructed anti-drug public relations campaign (“Eric Holder Will Not Rest” 1). Show creator, David Simon, responded to Holder’s statement in *The National Journal*: “I’ve spoken to Ed Burns and we are prepared to go to work on season six of *The Wire* if the Department of Justice is equally ready to reconsider and address its continuing prosecution of our misguided, destructive, and dehumanizing drug prohibition” (“The Wire Creator David Simon has a Counter-Offer” 1). However, despite academic and political interest, there still remains an extremely limited amount of published scholarship compared to its level of praise. To our knowledge, an edited collection by Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall entitled *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* and Rafael Alvarez’s *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, are the only full-length

books on the series and only a handful of scholarly articles have been published regarding *The Wire*.

Our goal, then, is to add to this limited body of scholarship in a fashion that does not reduce the series to hard-boiled social realism or deterministic American naturalism. The journal *Criticism* recently dedicated two issues to *The Wire* that helps develop this new critical frame. In the Fall and Summer 2010 issue, Fredric Jameson notes in “Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*” that the “realism” presented in *The Wire* is not simply a realist narrative. Instead, “*The Wire* can be observed to be ceasing to replicate a static reality or to be ‘realist’ in the traditional mimetic and replicative sense” (Jameson 365). In the same issue, Leigh Claire La Berge argues in “Capitalist Realism and Serial Form: The Fifth Season of *The Wire*,” that the series, and realism itself, need to be understood in terms of the dynamics of capitalism. She calls this “capitalist realism,” and defines it as “the realistic representation of the commodification of realism” (La Berge 552).

In a similar light, we argue and demonstrate that *The Wire* may be understood as nothing short of a critique of modernity’s institutions and, by extension, a critique of the broader American culture itself. In fact, it is not a stretch to suggest that each season critiques a prominent phenomenon that is rooted in modern America: policing and technological surveillance, unionization vis-à-vis capitalism, democratic politics, public schools, and print media. In this way, the piece at hand interacts with Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson’s “‘Way Down in the Hole’: Systemic Urban Inequality and *The Wire*,” which analyzes political and social systems within *The Wire*, but ultimately tilts in favor of presenting brilliant and convincing sociological data. Thus, we want to strike a balance and show how these institutions are represented within *The Wire*, while augmenting the scenes discussed with sociological data. We draw lightly on Michel Foucault and focus on Season Four to disclose *The Wire*’s critique of statistical analysis – the science of the state – and

technologies of surveillance in policing, a discussion further situated by the disciplinary tactics in public schools that resemble the prison industrial complex.

### Season Four of *The Wire*

Season Four of *The Wire* introduces the viewers to Baltimore city schools. It is important to understand that the institutions of modernity are never dealt with in isolation, rather, they are understood in relation to other institutions. Throughout the course of the introduction sequence, we see shots from the city of Baltimore. The sequence begins with images of drug runners and eventually moves to show a glimpse of a murder scene. The introduction continues from images of “corner boys,” who appear to be very young (somewhere around 10 years old), to a shot of the two hit men, Chris Partlow (Gbenga Akinnagbe) and Felicia ‘Snoop’ Pearson (Felicia Pearson), which eventually transitions to show politicians and then a political debate with Thomas ‘Tommy’ Carcetti (Aiden Gillen). The final shot of the introduction is triggered by a school bell and shows a crowd of students in maroon uniforms being ushered into school. Here we see the show trying to disclose the tight connection between life in the inner-city and the knowledge produced in the school. Thus, in this season, *The Wire* explicitly critiques the idea that a city can maintain a viable and successful school system while life outside of the school is partially constituted by murder, drugs, and corrupt and opportunistic politicians who ultimately leave schools severely underfunded.

### Critique of the School System

*The Wire* is not simply critiquing modernity from the standpoint of failing schools, but is also suggesting that schools cannot help but fail against the

backdrop of the daily reality these kids face combined with the underfunding of schools in general. As a result schools operate as a space that warehouses youth in preparation for prison, as there is little room for them in a society governed by the mandates of capitalism. This is made most clear by Howard 'Bunny' Colvin (Robert Wisdom) in "Corner Boys." In that episode, the "corner kids" targeted in the pilot program practice adverting trouble in school so as to avoid trouble in the street. In one scene, Bunny tells Namond Brice (Julito McCullum) to put his magazine down and to focus on the day's instruction. Bunny adds: "You know, we're givin' them a free education. 'it ain't even mine,' it was just laying here when I came in. You know this right here, this whole damn school, the way they carry themselves; it's training for the street. The building is the system, we the cops" ("Corner Boys").

Ideally, American schools embody the physical location for transmitting cultural values, thus making it possible to leave the streets behind in order to obtain enough cultural capital to join the American enterprise. However, we see the reverse occurring; the schools have become, as Bunny stresses, "training for the street." Schools now function as revolving doors in which the troubles on the streets continually press on the school. As a result, schools merely become sites to process and train future criminals as schools take on the disciplinary logic usually reserved for prisons. In other words, students are being pushed out of schools and into prisons.

The first episode of the fourth season, "Boys of Summer," explicitly makes the connection between the harsh reality of the street and the mentality it breeds. The school itself no longer provides a viable means for improving the conditions of West Baltimore's youth due to the daily realities of black urban life and the failed attempts by schools to "educate" American citizens. About a third of the way through the episode, Namond makes a request to his drug lieutenant, Preston 'Bodie' Broadus (J. D. Williams), to be relieved early from work so he can go shopping for back-

to-school clothes. In reality, Namond and his friends are planning a prank to fill water balloons with urine to get back at those who attacked Duquan 'Dukie' Weems (Jermaine Crawford) on his way back from school. In response to Namond's request Bodie says, "What do you need back to school stuff for? Your ass stay suspended. If it wasn't for social promotion your ass would still be in Pre-K, mother\*fcker. Probably daycare out this bitch. You owe me extra time tomorrow" ("Boys of Summer"). This particular instance not only reveals Namond and Bodie's lack of concern for education and also the school's lack of concern for its very students, but it also suggests that Namond is learning and working more on the corner than he is school. In addition, the scene levels a critique against conservative punitive disciplinary policies arguing that zero-tolerance disciplinary measures deprive kids of their education, forcing them into illicit means to earn a living, and failing to make schools a safer place (Gonzalez 282).

Culturally, value is exclusively located within measures of productivity, regardless of what is being sold. Hence Bodie quips after granting Namond's request: "pay this late-to-work, early-to-leave motherf\*cker out" ("Boys of Summer"). The embrace of capitalism on behalf of the youth, in particular criminals, appears throughout *The Wire*, demonstrating the ways in which American culture remains bounded by capitalist intentions and how the desires capitalism produces can lead to illegal activity to obtain those ends. For example, the sociopath and criminal Marlo 'Black' Stanfield (Jamie Hector) embraces a common capitalist adage when he tells Michael Lee that "the early bird gets that worm, yo" ("That Got His Own"). Within this embrace of capitalistic bureaucracy, however, lies a scathing, albeit implicit, critique: urban inner-city youth are willing to work if they are afforded other means and more inclusion in the capitalist system. Through this formal technique *The Wire* uses the logic of capitalism to attack the culture of capitalism itself

by arguing that marginalized and displaced individuals are necessary (by)products of the capitalist machinery.

That the school functions like a prison is further crystallized about a third of the way through the sixth episode, “Margin of Error,” as Namond responds to the assertion that these students have repeatedly proven that they are not ready for a regular classroom. He says, “Ready for gen[eral] pop[ulation]. This is prison, yo. And we’re in solitary and sh\*t.” Bunny replies: “That’s good, son. This is solitary. This is a hole up in here.” In this scene, we see explicitly that the school is being critiqued for resembling prisons by taking on its measures and tactics for disciplining subjects. The school is essentially training those deemed as “bad students” for prison life, not for school. *The Wire* calls attention to the problem that modern schools often function as institutions that work to contain children in a prison-like fashion, instead of preparing them to be academically successful and socially viable.

In essence, we see a breakdown in the American dream because the school now functions as a pipeline to prison. *The Wire* truthfully depicts the reality of schools concerning the broader social concerns in the United States where 37% of African American male high-school dropouts are incarcerated (Pettit and Western 13). In fact, as Michelle Alexander argues so persuasively, “The nature of the criminal justice system has changed. It is no longer primarily concerned with the prevention and punishment of crime, but rather with the management and control of the dispossessed” (188). Such management, what Alexander defines as the “New Jim Crow,” finds its localized expression in the schools, which now function in places like Baltimore to manage the transition of bodies from a place of education to a warehouse of the “dispossessed.”

The classification of subjects by experts exercises itself in a more individualized fashion in the seventh episode of season four, “Unto Others.” Foucault suggests that there are no longer individuals; there are only “types” of subjects – “the delinquent” or “bad student” for example –

who have been classified as objects of knowledge to be categorized and disciplined by experts. After Namond tells Miss Duquette (Stacie Davis) that he did not wear his uniform because he felt that such clothing was no longer necessary outside the normal classroom setting, one of the experts tells Bunny that “Darnell has a drinking problem, and Namond, we believe, suffers from conduct disorder issues.” Also, after Chandra Porter (Na’ Dric Jennings) acts in an unruly manner after being criticized for doing her hair, the experts continue with their classification of her: “oppositional defiant personality. An extreme case” (“Unto Others”).

In this instance, the producers are attempting to make an extended critique regarding how individual behavior is shaped and structured by one’s material surroundings. This claim can be extended to argue that *The Wire* also seeks to show the futility of addressing what are essentially social (read: structural) problems at an individual level, and are thereby suggesting that the only real solution is broad based socio-cultural changes that address greater problems (such as the decaying city, failing schools, and ubiquitous violence). Thus, *The Wire* discloses how such practices become self-fulfilling prophecies because the teachers do not expect much from the students, and in turn, the students accomplish very little. Namond is aware of this tension and attempts to exploit it to his advantage by purposefully acting out so that he can be suspended from school. The classification and utilization of experts is not isolated to this particular episode, nor is the critique of institutional attempts to identify and pathologize psychological “disorders.”

In “Corner Boys,” the eighth episode, this connection is made explicitly clear when Miss Duquette separates erroneously “corner logic” from particular disorders. After realizing that their program is a success yet at the same time uncharted territory, Miss Duquette and Bunny express concern about how to continue and move forward:

Miss Duquette: The ones with deeper problem, they opted out.

Bunny: Deeper problems?

Miss Duquette: We're not just up against corner logic in there. I'm seeing oppositional defiant disorders, clinical depression, post-traumatic stress. And with the girl Chandra, borderline psychosis, maybe. ("Corner Boys")

Not only does Miss Duquette divorce "corner logic" from the particular "disorders" that she locates and uses to construct the subjects under her gaze, but she also places the types of disorders in a hierarchy when she appears to be stunned by Chandra's mental state. This is apparent through her pause and hesitation before she states her diagnosis to Bunny and Professor David Parenti (Dan DeLuca) that Chandra might suffer from "border line psychosis." Again, we see the experts separating "corner logic" from particular "disorders," the social from the psychological, the structural from the individual, thereby indicating that the problems inner-city youth face can be dealt with on a case-by-case, individualized basis, as opposed to acknowledging that it is precisely the "corner logic" (social structures determined by unrestrained capitalism) that may in fact be responsible for the disorders themselves. With this in mind, we argue that *The Wire* itself levels a critique against American culture by addressing the problem of arch-individualism that characterizes the modern project by showing that individuals are in fact byproducts of the conditions that produce them, in this instance "corner logic."

Foucault also gives significant consideration to the role of the examination as a unique disciplinary tactic that works to not only order and hierarchize individuals by ranking them, but also as a ritualized tactic that turns students into objects of knowledge. In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault says:

The examination enabled the teacher, while transmitting his knowledge, to transform his pupils into a whole field of knowledge... in this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially, by arranging objects. The examination is, as it were, the ceremony of this objectification. (186)

*The Wire* clearly details how the Maryland State Exam (MSA) turns students into objects of knowledge by putting their performance under the gaze of expert administrators. This is articulated by the assistant principle of Edward J. Tilghman Middle School, Marcia Donnelly (Susan 'Tootsie' Duvall), in the ninth episode of season four, "Know Your Place." In this episode, while in a meeting with faculty members, the administrators noticed that only 22% of students meet the state's minimum requirement in reading and math. In turn she proposes "curriculum alignment" that will teach the test directly to create a 10% improvement rate. *The Wire* also discloses the ritualized nature of the exam in the tenth episode of the same season, "Misgivings," when Grace Sampson (Dravon James) tells Det. Roland 'Prez' Pryzbylewski (Jim True-Frost) that "From now 'til they're done, everything is about the test," suggesting that he move to 90 minute block classes and focus solely on Math and Language Arts. However, *The Wire* analyzes the role of the exam in schools only to provide a critique against its implementation.

The critique comes through in the twelfth ("That's Got his Own") and thirteenth ("Final Grades") episodes. In "That's Got his Own," Parenti, a professor of Sociology, poignantly acknowledges that the "Test material doesn't actually speak to their world." More acerbic critiques of the exam are shown in "Final Grades," when Prez appears to be excited by the fact that 38% of students met state requirements, only to be disappointed when he discovers how easy it is to manipulate the stats of the test. In this episode Prez learns that 'proficient' means two grades below actual grade level, and that 'advanced' indicates at grade level or just below. The

manipulation of statistics is thus ongoing in *The Wire*, and plays a crucial role in *The Wire*'s critique of statistical policing that situates both the school-to-prison narrative and corresponding politics of season four.

### Critique of Policing and the War on Drugs

Nowhere is the critique of policing and the war on drugs more evident than in the mayoral election during season four, when we see a reliance on police value, influence, and public-safety success. We are first introduced to Tommy as a Baltimore councilman, when he takes affront with the high crime rates presented by then Acting Commissioner of Police, Ervin H. Burrell (Frankie Faison) in "All Due Respect." Both Tommy's career path (from councilman to mayoral candidate to mayor to candidate for governor) and the decline of Ervin's career revolve around an imagined relationship between statistics and public safety/police success. Both exemplify the problematic careerism and statistical abuse of the modern political bureaucrat, embodied most aptly in season four by the incumbent mayor of Baltimore, Clarence V. Royce (Glynn Turman). As made increasingly clear throughout this season, the relationship between career success, perceptions of improvement, and statistical indicators becomes possible only within a modern ideology that determines who and what is valuable through statistical analyses. In this way, statistic-based policing unveils the social violence of relying on modern statistical measures as indicators of political and social achievement.

Consequently, whereas the show powerfully captures the constant battle to survive in Baltimore, we want to complicate Jacob Weisberg's interpretation that

What ultimately makes *The Wire* uplifting amid the heartbreak it conveys is its embodiment of a spirit that Barack Obama calls 'the audacity of hope.' It is filled with characters who should quit but

don't, not only the boys themselves but teachers, cops, ex-cops, and ex-cons who lose their hearts to them (1).

Such an interpretation, veiled as it is by a cultural mirage of progress and hope, ultimately fails to capture how American institutions, determined and justified through statistical measures, can fail populations, often with exceedingly violent and racialized results. Mired within a critique of free market capitalism, Simon creates a season that exposes the ways in which the instruments of the state sequester “a place where the deprivation is so deep that it challenges our conception of what America is” (Wallace-Wells 48). In doing so, *The Wire* suggests that the focus and methodology of modern policing functions according to a racist logic seeking to jail people as quickly as possible to bolster police effectiveness.

By emphasizing the political battle between Clarence and Tommy, the fourth season directly addresses the political game of statistics, capturing how bureaucratic decisions between career politicians do next to nothing in addressing the daily reality of “corner boys.” Accused by Clarence during the first mayoral debate of stoking fears and playing on people’s imaginations regarding the streets of Baltimore, Tommy captures the sense in which statistical measures of policing function politically, often ignoring real socio-cultural and economic concerns in favor of numbers that determine one’s worth and value within the institutions of America (“Soft Eyes”). In a moment of honesty, Tommy responds by highlighting the corruptibility of statistical policing while implicitly affirming its value:

Any statistics coming from the police department cannot be trusted because under this mayor the police are more concerned with protecting Clarence Royce politically than fighting crime. There’s no leadership, and morale has never been lower.

During a strategy session the day before the debate, Tommy responds to concerns that he cannot overcome the reality that even if he beats Clarence

in the debate, he will “still wake up white in a city that ain’t.” This captures the malleability and politicization of statistical policing. Furthermore, when discussing his strategy, Tommy states:

He comes at me with race and some bullsh\*t crime stats. I ignore the race thing and counter by noting that homicides are up 15% even though other violent crime stats are down 12%. I point out this does not make sense unless Royce is cooking the crime stats making robberies, rapes and assaults disappear. I suggest the mayor is not telling the truth about crime in the City. (“Soft Eyes”)

Tommy’s essential strategy, however, indicates how even critiques of the statistical processes of modernity often function in, and are filtered through, the same institutions that elicit the criticism. This narrative, while propelling Tommy to the mayoral office, ultimately traps Tommy as well because to operate through statistics requires bold, measurable results, and when reality does not accord with promises or perceptions, then these tools of the state often devolve into endless spirals of manipulation and further regularization (“Soft Eyes”). In the place of progress and improvement, *The Wire* remains circular, capturing the constant negotiation between forgotten people and quantifiable political progress.

The relationship between political office and quantifiable results, consequently, dissolves the daily experiences of a people or place into a mere statistical indicator, equipping politicians and modern social scientists with a way to “track” failures and successes, thereby legitimating a method to proclaim, and “measure,” degrees of improvement. Yet as the episodes in season four make clear, such indicators simply veil or hide daily conditions, allowing for the manipulation of populations, the ability to “juice” or “cook” the numbers and, most insidiously as all five seasons emphasize, the forgetting of a people and a place. *The Wire*’s critical intervention into the mechanisms of modern biopolitics and modes of governmentality, thereby, reveal the

menacing underbelly of statistical analysis as it manifests in American culture.

Beyond mere numbers, *The Wire* depicts bodies in action—or bodies acted on—in order to expose a double-bind; in its preoccupation with bodies that betray America's expectations of them, the show also reflects a persistent mythology of autonomy in an era of paradoxically increasing discipline, regularization and unchecked capitalism. By bringing to life the varied experiences of bodies within this grand statistical machine, *The Wire*, to borrow from Jason Vest's recent chapter on the show, ultimately "reveals the exhaustion of American confidence in 21<sup>st</sup>-century bureaucracies that demean, diminish, and degrade the lives of average citizens" (Vest 171). As creator and executive producer Simon himself writes in his introduction to Rafael Alvarez's "*The Wire*": *Truth be Told*, the show captures what America has lost through the instrumentalization of everyday life, critically demonstrating "what we have left behind in our cities, and at what cost we have done so" (8). The show becomes, in the end, a slow funeral march, Simon continues, for "the other America... ex-steelworkers and ex-longshoremens; street dealers and street addicts, and an army of young men hired to chase the dealers and addicts; whores and johns and men to run the whores and coerce the johns" (Alvarez 8). This irrelevancy, captured so powerfully in *The Wire*'s depiction of the politicking behind Baltimore City's ComStat, is fortified by the constant negotiation between numbers that "speak," numbers that "lie," and numbers that can, and often are, "cooked."

This abject reality becomes most evident following Tommy's election. Portrayed as sincerely concerned with the reality, versus appearance, of crime in Baltimore, Tommy initially sets out to overcome the destructive use of statistical policing. Believing that cooked numbers only function to cover-up the severity and extent of crime in Baltimore, in "Corner Boys," Tommy is rudely introduced to the rip-and-run approach to policing that often accompanies—or worse defines—law enforcement tactics within the

statistical state. This tactic, in which police pursue low-level arrests to bolster stats and thus appear active and effective, does little to nothing in responding to the issues, circumstances, and institutions that construct the daily cityscape of West Baltimore. And it is within this critique that *The Wire* most adeptly draws out the violence of statistical policing. Riding along with officers, Tommy experiences firsthand the tactical implementation of ComStat as undercover officers arrest a man on his way to work who helps the officers procure crack-cocaine in exchange for a small payment. Neither a user, nor a dealer, this man is subsequently arrested by three patrol cars, who celebrate their statistical entrapment by turning to Tommy and declaring “One down” (“Corner Boys”). This perception, that an arrest, regardless of its merit or long-term value, achieves a public safety end, remains just that, a perception enflamed by the equivocation of numbers with police worth and public safety.

*The Wire*, constantly stressing the repetition that accompanies the modern moment, furthers its concern with this problematic police tactic. Following the celebration of “one down,” Tommy witnesses a second arrest in which four police cruisers circle a young man with three-pills. After admitting they are his and that he is a user, the officers threaten the young man with a three-year sentence for dealing on a pre-indicted corner unless he gives up his stash. After repeatedly denying his involvement in the drug trade, and reiterating that the pills are his, the arresting officers continue to berate and threaten the young man with the prospect of being raped in prison. As the young man is led away, the same police officer from the first arrest turns to Tommy and adamantly, and proudly, states, “that’s two” (“Corner Boys”).

These scenes capture the cultural clashes that embody America’s War on Drugs, which produced a 600% increase in the United States’ prison population to 2,340,000 inmates, of which 60% are of racial minorities (Provine 49). On the one hand, police officers who care little for improvement and only seek to boost statistical measures of effectiveness

and, on the other, a culture of addiction that is further ostracized by tactics that have made such people expendable. Tommy, enraged by the faulty sincerity of the police he rode along with, confronts Deputy Commissioner William Rawls (John Doman) in the hope of better understanding how petty arrests reflect improvements in public safety. Problematically, as William “honestly” explicates, the modern practice of fusing police success with statistical indicators, and directly correlating these measures with job security, strips the bureaucratic cage of any true morality, and by consequence, an unbiased understanding of justice.

As this scene plays out, *The Wire* relates the statistical reduction of human lives, the ways in which career bureaucrats remove the quotidian from its manipulated image (“Corner Boys”). Confronting William, Tommy states,

They basically entrap some poor bastard on a bet; haul in \$20 worth of drugs. Now they’ve got to process him, feed him, property voucher his bike. Next thing, they’re working on some 14-year-old smoke hound like he’s Bin Laden. The big haul there is three vials of cocaine. I mean, are you with this?

Tommy, more concerned with the relationship between the severity of a crime and the resulting cruelty of the punishment, is quickly reminded of the relationship between racialized law and statistical policing. William, always concerned with the representation of policing, completely overlooks Tommy’s broader concern. He transfers the conversation from the equity of crime and punishment, to a manipulated system in which career politicians become exclusively concerned with the *image* of public safety, and thus overstress increased street arrests, which, in turn, leads to projects of mass incarcerations as signs of a more secure city/state. To this William, while duplicitously hiding his own reliance on juke numbers, states the odds of the modern, police game:

It's a numbers game and numbers games breed more numbers games. You need a 20% hike in the hiring of black officers to keep up with the city demographic... Gotta show arrests are up 15, 20%. We'll worry about the quality later. So what you saw out there, it's a con game, a Band-Aid on cancers. So no, I'm not with this, but I do follow orders. ("Corner Boys")

It is precisely this "one down" logic, which has focused on low level street dealers, that has led to 1,100% hike in drug imprisonment since 1980 (Provine 49). Also, because of this racially insidious logic, the United States imprisons more citizens per capita than any other country at 762 per 100,000 (Pettit and Western 9). Referencing continued racial biases and problems of police careerism, this depiction of William captures more than a simple reliance on numbers. It shows the racialized nature of the drug war in its entirety by revealing how police target minority neighborhoods as sites to execute this damaging war because it is easy to make arrests (Provine 49).

Much like its critique of rip-and-run policing, *The Wire* challenges the viewer to accord unedited scenes of violence with a police tactic revolving around monitoring and maintaining the urban landscape, all while patterning local conditions. Rather than deal with the structural problems that help produce and situate forgotten areas, the Broken-Windows Theory contends that aesthetically maintaining material well-being—of physical properties not people—helps prevent the escalation of crime. However, by failing to account for the institutional structures and inequities that predetermine social environments and delimit impact, the Broken-Windows Theory remains surface level only. It represents no more than a figurative, and literally practiced, façade that simply seeks to maintain the permanence of the façade itself. More insidiously, statistical policing, and the ways in which *The Wire* consistently toys with problems of statistical manipulation, can produce any façade desired, regardless of daily realities. What matters are not simply stats that speak, but stats that speak quickly.

In this case, public loitering and open-containers, due to their rip-and-run nature, gain precedence over the quotidian violence *The Wire* portrays in regards to street life in West Baltimore. By objectifying daily experiences into statistics that can be measured, the show illustrates the failure of modern American policing to deal with real structural problems, instead emphasizing that a simple increase or decrease in “perceptible” crime determines the extent and focus of police action. In this scenario, physical violence and real crime remain hidden, veiled behind self-enclosed institutional structures.

As the fourth season comes to a close, *The Wire* turns full circle, situating the structural problems of modern American culture within an endless repetition of symbolic progress. Rather than policies that seek to ameliorate the socio-economic and political realities that banish West Baltimore to statistical manipulation and figurative governance, *The Wire* captures how modern forms of controls operate in destructive circles. Season four of *The Wire* begins within the imagined livelihood of the school and ends with the school as an adapted morgue. In truth, the fourth season of *The Wire* forces the viewer to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable. In the name of progress, instrumentalization, and rational control, the modern practices of policing and politicking have trapped the subjects of Baltimore and Baltimore itself. This illustrates how systematic disenfranchisement of populations result in cycles of violence that begin, and end, within the very structures and institutions designed to give everyone an “opportunity” to participate in, and benefit from, American culture. These benefits, however, never reach those populations deemed expendable within the modern, capitalist cityscape.

From education to the morgue, from a place of perceived learning to a warehouse for the dead, *The Wire* exposes the ways in which the cold rationality of statistically driven policing and politicians is echoed, and materialized, in the cold rationality of the streets. *The Wire* depicts the very lack of morality that seems to necessarily correspond within this

violent juxtaposition. Yet, while life is held loosely, season four of *The Wire* refuses to situate this amorality as a function of the people; rather, the capitalist driven rationality that drives the modern system finds its ultimate microcosm in West Baltimore's drug trade.

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