

POPULAR CULTURE AND WORLD POLITICS

# The Politics of HBO's *The Wire*

Everything is connected

Edited by  
Shirin S. Deylami and  
Jonathan Havercroft



# The Politics of HBO's *The Wire*

This innovative new work suggests that *The Wire* reflects not simply a cultural take on contemporary America, but a structural critique of the conditions of late-modernity and global capitalism. As such, it is a visual text worth investigating and exploring for its nuanced examination of power, difference, and inequality.

Deylami and Havercroft bring together seven essays addressing issues of interest to a range of academic fields in order to engage with this important cultural intervention that has transfixed audiences and sparked debate within the social scientific community. While the TV show is primarily focused upon the urban politics of Baltimore, the contributors to this volume read Baltimore as a global city. That is, they argue that the relations between race, class, power, and violence that the series examines only make sense if we understand that inner-city Baltimore is a node in a larger global network of violence and economic inequality. The book is divided into three interrelated sections focusing on systemic and cultural violence, the rise and decline of national and state formations, and the dysfunctional and destructive forces of global capitalism.

Throughout the series the relation of the urban to the global is constantly being explored. This innovative new volume explains clearly how *The Wire* portrays this interaction, and what this representation can show social scientists interested in race, neoliberal processes of globalization, criminality, gender, violence, and surveillance.

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The Popular Culture and World Politics (PCWP) book series is the forum for leading interdisciplinary research that explores the profound and diverse interconnections between popular culture and world politics. It aims to bring further innovation, rigor, and recognition to this emerging sub-field of international relations.

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and Jonathan Havercroft**

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# Acknowledgments

The idea for this volume began when a few old friends from graduate school got together for drinks after a conference. Sitting outside on a surprisingly beautiful night in Toronto, we excitedly discussed and argued over the beauty and complexity of a remarkable television show. Within minutes, it was decided that we had to write about *The Wire* as it was one of the finest political texts we had all engaged in a long time. The next year, after enlisting others who also loved the series, we presented a panel on the politics of *The Wire* at the 2011 Western Political Science Association. Speaking to a packed house of political scientists, we had the most enlivening and thoughtful conversation about race, capitalism, sexuality, gender, and so much more. Perhaps the audience had more to say than the contributors. From that lively discussion we knew that this was a book worth pursuing.

We have been lucky enough to have a set of amazing contributors to continue those early conversations and make this volume what it is. Thanks to Elisabeth Anker, Paul Goode, Isaac Kamola, Naomi Murakawa, Joshua Page, Joe Soss, and Dara Strolovitch for all of your thoughtful and imaginative work. We would also like to thank Sam Chambers and Lisa Disch, who offered early encouragement to turn our papers into an edited volume. Michael Ferguson provided us with invaluable help in navigating the complexities of putting an edited volume together. At Routledge, we were guided through the publication process by Peter Harris and Nicola Parkin. Megan Fowler provided invaluable assistance in assembling and formatting the volume. We also received very valuable feedback from Matthew Davies, Kyle Grayson, Simon Philpott, Christina Rowley, and Jutta Weldes, the editors of Routledge's "Popular Culture and World Politics" series. This volume was supported by a Western Washington University manuscript preparation grant.

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# Introduction

## Everything is connected

*Shirin S. Deylami and Jonathan Havercroft*

What do scholars of politics see when they watch HBO's *The Wire*? From its premiere episode in 2002, the series examined the complexity and nuance of the Baltimore inner city. Never resting on one aspect or sector, it followed the drug trade and the bureaucratic politics of the Baltimore Police Department; it moved to examining the stevedores union and the disintegration of working class union jobs; it exposed the corrupt nature of city politics; it offered a structural account of the disintegration of city-schools; and finally it exposed its audience to the deterioration of the news media and the complicated structural elements that produce urban poverty. Yet, critically, the series refused to be a heroic tale of overcoming structural inequality. Rather it focused on the complexity of life endemic to every inner city. It offered a comprehensive political and social critique of capitalism, democracy, and structural inequality and it did this by looking at both the struggles of the great American city and connecting it to the broader interconnected global landscape. As the renowned Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson has argued, "Although *The Wire* is fiction, not a documentary, its depiction of [the] systemic urban inequality that constrains the lives of the urban poor is more poignant and compelling [than] that of any published study."<sup>1</sup>

But the poignancy of *The Wire* is not simply in its representations of inequality. Unlike any other series on US American television, it makes concrete a set of political critiques and theories widely expressed in the social science literature. It does so by engaging these ideas simultaneously rather than individually; a feat that is difficult to do in everyday social science analysis. As a consequence of the richness of its theoretical and empirical terrain, this volume taps into the intersectional nature of the series and seeks to unpack this television show for its political content with specific attention to what it can tell analysts of social science about both global and local politics. As such, the question that animates this volume is not whether *The Wire* is a political text, for surely it is. Rather the question is what kind of global political critiques does this visual text illuminate? How does this visual text expose, reify and/or reject common claims made by analysts of domestic and global politics? Thus, all of the essays in this volume, albeit in different and sometimes contested ways, elucidate the political nature of the series and by proxy the nature of the parts of US and global life rarely captured in popular culture. In turn, they also challenge social scientific assumptions and methods that have been the hallmark of the empirical analysis of politics.

The book's essays argue that *The Wire* reflects a particular political moment in contemporary urban life that transcends national boundaries. While the series is no doubt about the demise of working class Baltimore, it also mirrors the slow decline of all global cities that are interconnected through the new world order. In this way the series' exposure of the limits of contemporary identity politics, the dark-side of capitalism and the inequalities fostered by the war against drugs should be seen as effects of the broader configurations of global systems of power. What is striking about *The Wire*'s analysis of these issues is that it refuses to theorize them separately. Rather, the series makes the connections between the diverse structural inequalities existent in the modern global city and, more importantly, shows how those inequalities affect one another. While the chapters in this volume focus on a myriad of different political and social concerns, they all explore the interconstitutive and intersectional nature of structural inequality and political power. Our analysis of *The Wire* exposes the interactions between global capitalist formations, state power, and competing levels of violence, showing the fact that everything is connected and cannot be analyzed on its own.

The issues the authors tackle are particularly worthy for social science analysis in that they allow a broad based view of how the intricacies of power relations and different parts of the global system work together to produce mass inequality. "But more than making these issues accessible to a broader audience, the show demonstrates the interconnectedness of systemic urban inequality in a way that can be very difficult to illustrate in academic works" that "tend to focus on many of these issues in relative isolation."<sup>2</sup> Thus, *The Wire*, as fiction-based journalism, both provides data for social scientists of all stripes and challenges many of the methodological and theoretic presumptions of social science. By connecting disparate institutional, structural and cultural causes, from the decline of working class jobs in the stevedores union to the crumbling infrastructure of urban schools, it challenges social scientists to be more attentive to the complexity of social and political problems that plague the contemporary city. Further, as an allegory for the decline of the United States' domestic and global power, through capitalist and technological expansion, the series questions the popularization of social scientific methods like statistics in contributing to these systemic problems through phenomena such as "joking the stats." In order to analyze the issues illuminated by *The Wire*, the chapters of this volume are divided into three sections focusing on, the rise, decline and transformation of national and state institutions, the intersectional dynamics of identity that foster violence and precarity and the dysfunctional and destructive forces of neoliberalism and late-capitalism.

## **Building states, crumbling nations**

The first section of this volume explores a central tension in *The Wire* by examining the relationship between the constant struggle of the state to assert control over the "streets" of West Baltimore and the resistance to state violence and surveillance by the various participants in the drug trade. The chapters in this section explore the themes of state power and violence, in the series, through recent social science

literature on comparative state and institution building, crime prevention and urban poverty policy. The contributors argue that *The Wire* offers a penetrating analysis of how the United States attempts to legitimate itself through its exercise of violence in waging the war on drugs. Yet, many of these policies are failures in their stated goals, and they quite often have the consequence of undermining the very social and political institutions that they set out to defend. Exploring such diverse sites as schools, prisons, election campaigns, and newsrooms the authors argue that *The Wire* exposes how policies of legitimized violence weaken the very institutions they were designed to protect from within. The show therefore confirms and complicates much recent scholarly literature on institution building in the disciplines of public policy, American government, global politics and comparative politics.

In the [first chapter](#) in the volume, “‘It can’t be a lie’: *The Wire* as breaching Experiment,” Joshua Page and Joe Soss argue that *The Wire* confirms and represents many recent findings by scholars of urban politics about the various ways authorities work to manage the problems and populations found in deeply marginalized neighborhoods. Page and Soss argue that unlike most depictions of urban life, *The Wire* offers a realistic depiction of life inside what they call the “hyperghetto” – that is, “an urban locale characterized by stark racial segregation, severely diminished jobs and social service institutions, inadequate schools, rampant poverty, open-air drug markets, widespread housing foreclosures, and pervasive depression and dilapidation.”<sup>3</sup> Their chapter clarifies the origins of the devastated neighborhood conditions and foreshortened life opportunities portrayed in the show, by placing the themes of *The Wire* in dialogue with recent scholarship on the subject of urban crime and poverty. Page and Soss also explore the dynamic interplay of social disorder and survival strategies in hyperghettos, on one side, and state efforts to contain and control the threats they pose for the broader society, on the other. By focusing particularly on the drug trade and the War on Drugs, Page and Soss draw out the deeper significance of *The Wire* as a portrait of the hyperghetto and as a critique of contemporary poverty governance. Importantly, they argue that the series does not simply replicate dominant and hegemonic narratives of the causes of poverty and crime. Instead, *The Wire* works as a kind of “breaching experiment” that refuses to reify dominant tropes and narratives and simultaneously problematizes those discourses and imaginaries.

Paul Goode’s chapter, “Classroom democracy: demystifying the civic nation in *The Wire*,” explores how *The Wire*’s portrayal of social institutions such as schools can be analyzed as a site of nation building. Goode examines *The Wire*’s use of education and elections in season Four to de-mystify American civic national identity. The chapter argues that Baltimore can be interpreted as an “imagined community” that is emblematic of daily life in the United States. The series challenges constitutive national myths in its treatment of educational and electoral institutions at the intersection of the drug trade and the state. Goode contends that from the perspective of comparative studies of nationalism, the particular combination of education, elections, and law enforcement is intriguing. Education and elections are quintessential modernizing forces bound up with the articulation



of nationalist doctrines and the state's invention of nations. The failure of each to produce their intended effects also indicts the nationalizing projects that they purportedly serve. Goode concludes that Baltimore presents a familiar picture for those with an eye for comparative politics in its depiction of the often-competing logics of nation and institution-building in post-colonial republics.

### Neoliberalism, capitalist power and social resistance

The contributors to the middle section of the volume explore how *The Wire*, by pointing out the connections between apparently disparate social phenomena, exposes the operation of social and economic structures. The authors look at how different norms, structures, and practices presented in the show work in collaboration to both maintain and disrupt the ideology of neoliberalism. This ideology, by extension, is meant to make Baltimore safe for the operation of post-industrial capitalism. As such, these chapters foreground the way in which *The Wire*'s examination of the drug trade and the war on drugs is deeply embedded in the practices of the global capitalist order. The authors then draw upon this ideological analysis to demonstrate how the show also presents its viewers with possible means and sites of resistance. The significant intervention of these chapters is a reading of *The Wire* as a critique of the late-modern neoliberal political economy.

In [Chapter 3](#), "The politics of knowledge production: on structure and the world of *The Wire*," Isaac Kamola draws upon the work of the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser to analyze *The Wire*, but he turns his attention from the content of the series, to the nature of its audience. His chapter argues that the "academic crush" on *The Wire* should be reread not as an indication of the show's success at empirically revealing the world "as it really is" but rather for its ability to remind academics of a possible alternative "politics of knowledge production." Kamola contends that *The Wire* captures the human cost of neoliberal transformations in ways that document, and give meaning to, the personal experiences of its viewers. He draws upon Althusser's concept of *overdetermination* to theorize that *The Wire* represents a structural transformation in narrative form. Through the examples of McNulty's invention of a serial killer and Scott Templeton's falsified reporting in season 5, he argues that, within certain structured material relations, fiction actually becomes necessary to tell the truth. Yet Kamola also analyzes the limits of fiction as social scientific analysis. He argues that the closing montage of season 5 reveals that the show's attempts to analyze a social structure from a "disinterested point outside the social whole" comes undone as the montage reveals that the real outside of the social whole is the audience – largely white, educated, and from an upper-middle class background – who bear little resemblance to the characters in the show. As such, Kamola contends that the real tragedy of *The Wire* is not the misfortunes that befall its protagonists, but that the narrative structure of a TV series make it impossible for the show's producers and audience to inhabit the social whole that the series carefully examines.

In [Chapter 4](#), titled "Corruption as solidarity: an inverted republicanism to resist inverted totalitarianism," Jonathan Havercroft focuses on another institutional

theme that runs throughout the series: corruption and its effects on the politics and economy of Baltimore. Havercroft argues that according to conventional accounts of vices and virtues in republican political theory, solidarity is a virtue that strengthens the polity and corruption is a vice that undermines political and social bonds. He focuses on the figure of Frank Sobotka from season 2 as a counter-example to this traditional narrative. Sobotka engages in corruption as a means to maintain his labor union in an ultimately futile act of resistance against the encroaching forces of post-industrial global capitalism. Havercroft reads the figure of Sobotka against more traditional accounts of the relationship between solidarity and corruption as found in such diverse political theorists as Richard Rorty, Niccolò Machiavelli, Quentin Skinner, Hannah Arendt, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. He argues that Sobotka complicates the conventional understanding of the dynamics between corruption and solidarity. Traditional institutions for practicing solidarity such as labor unions, religious organizations, and political parties are all compromised in fundamental ways by the global tendencies of late modern capitalism, thereby making political solidarity difficult to maintain. However, Havercroft argues that corruption, seen by classical republicans as a threat to the social fabric of the state, may under these conditions be re-appropriated as a means for resisting the onslaught of global capital by those whose very way of life is threatened by its expansion. As such, the figure of Sobotka raises the possibility of an inverted republicanism that can resist the inverted totalitarianism Sheldon Wolin identifies as the condition of post-World War II US democracy and that is depicted in *The Wire*.

In Chapter 5, Elisabeth Anker draws a connection between the cinematic techniques of *The Wire* and the political message of the show. In her chapter, “The limits of neoliberalism: market rationality in *The Wire*,” she argues that *The Wire* critiques the neoliberal rationality endemic to globalization. The series does this through its discursive and cinematic strategies of disorientation. Neoliberal rationality is a mode of governance and subjectivity that values efficiency, maximization of profit, cost-benefit analyses, and the predictable calculations of rational actors for the use and extension of power that is assumed to be transparent and easily calculated. Anker contends that *The Wire*, by contrast, constantly confounds these values and expectations through its investigations into the complexities of contemporary politics. It envisions a political field in which power is convoluted and unaccountable, in which predictions about rational actors are unsustainable and easily overturned, in which cost-benefit analyses lead to the disruption of effective work, and in which individuals in various institutional settings are held hostage to the obfuscating decisions of bureaucratic machinations. *The Wire* undoes the justifications of neoliberal norms by disorienting their fundamental tenets. Its strategies of disorientation are found not only in its narrative and diegesis, but also in its extradiegetic cinematic techniques, which disrupt stable visual fields and conventional affective expectations of its viewing spectators. Its disorientation thus works at multiple registers to depict the contemporary moment as one in which neoliberal norms reign as governing values that make the global field but then are fundamentally unable to organize the political environments they inhabit.

## Precarious intersections

While the earlier chapters both laud and interrogate *The Wire* for its exposure of and challenges to structural inequality, the final chapters of the volume tackle the series' complex and sometimes problematic engagement with identity and difference. This last section argues that the series pushes its audience to think about the powerful intersecting demands of masculinity, heterosexuality and race by showing how these normative demands play an important part in the development of a logic of violence and carcerality. They do so by tapping into the normative pulls and resistances endemic to the drug trade and urban poverty. By exposing these normative pulls, the authors show how the characters in the series both extend and exemplify cultural stereotypes and how they subvert and challenge the normative frames that bind them. Importantly, these chapters look at the intersectional nature of identity to analyze how the series elaborates the discursive conditions that contribute to the logic of a masculinist, racialized and heteronormative urban citizenry. In turn, this last section also takes the creators of *The Wire* to task for their inattentiveness towards the gendered dynamics of urban poverty and carcerality.

In Chapter 6, "It's all in the game": masculinity, mourning, and violence in *The Wire*," Shirin S. Deylami builds on earlier chapters' explorations of the critique of neoliberalism in *The Wire*. She argues that the precarious existence of those who live on "the street" is both facilitated and fundamentally obfuscated by the neoliberal state. Working from the political theory of Judith Butler, Deylami argues that *The Wire* acts as a political text that illuminates the complex dimensions of precarious life. Focusing on the way in which violence is manifested throughout the series, through an examination of the narrative arcs of Omar Little, Wallace, and D'Angelo Barksdale, Deylami offers a close reading of how the series illuminates the relationship between masculinity, heteronormativity and violence. She does so by arguing that *The Wire* depicts the ways in which the socio-cultural demands of masculinity and heterosexuality in a racialized economic order work to (1) differentially expose some to greater violence and injury, and (2) thus, produce normative barriers that limit the capacity to mourn and be recognized publicly. Paying close attention to the physical and normative forms of violence portrayed in the series, this chapter argues that *The Wire* illustrates the ways in which the intersectional demands of gender, sexuality, race, and economic inequality foster precarious subjects who are erased from communal and political recognition. In this way, *The Wire* acts as a vehicle for the recognition of the precarious. It exposes the ways in which the performative demands of identity mark some as more vulnerable to violence at multiple levels, but it also offers a critique of state power that renders such identities as both criminal and erasable.

In the final chapter, "The missing women of *The Wire*: gender and the limits of verisimilitude" Dara Z. Strolovitch and Naomi Murakawa also explore the intersectional demands of gender, race, sexuality and economic inequality in *The Wire*, but rather than focusing on how these identities are presented in the show, they explore how and why particular identities are largely absent in the context of developing a critique of the carceral state. In particular, they ask, "Where are the women?" As they note, of the sixty-eight characters listed on *The Wire*'s website,

only nine are female, and only one of the twenty-one characters listed as being from “The Street” is a woman. Furthermore, most of the female characters on the show fall into traditional sexist tropes, such as the nagging mother or housewife, and thus are relegated to sideline actors. Their investigation of the paucity of compelling female characters in a show that is often hailed for its social realism leads them to argue that *The Wire* is both a less realistic depiction of urban communities than is often presupposed and a far more conventional television series than critics often claim. Since fans of the television series, including social scientists, often praise the series for its realism, that lack of female characters reflects *The Wire*’s obliviousness to the complexity of gender dynamics endemic to “the game.” This means that by watching the show, the audience may end up less able to “understand, diagnose and alleviate the problems of the drug war and the carceral state.”

### **Conclusion: *The Wire* as social science fiction**

While *The Wire* is often praised as one of the best, if not the best, television shows in history, the purpose of our volume is not to assess its technical or artistic merits. As social scientists, the authors of this volume are drawn to the show because of the ways in which it portrays complex social structures and problems. The academic world intersects only briefly with the storylines of the show in season 3, when Major Bunny Colvin considers a position at Johns Hopkins University, and in season 4, when an academic conducts research on alternative pedagogical techniques for at risk youth. In both instances, academics come across as naive, idealistic, and unable to comprehend the complexity and reality of urban poverty and the war on drugs. The irony of course is that one of the TV show’s strongest fan bases is the very academics that the show’s writers gently ridicule. Our purpose here is not to defend academics against their stereotyping by the series. Instead, our purpose is to make the case that *The Wire* is a show that is worthy of being taken seriously as a text by social scientists who are attentive to the local, national and global dynamics of power. While it is based upon the extensive knowledge of the Baltimore drug trade and law enforcement accumulated by the show’s creators, *The Wire* does not offer up any new evidence. Instead, the narrative of the show could be read as presenting a set of social scientific hypotheses and theories that it invites social scientists – and other members of the audience – to explore in greater detail. Before *The Wire* there was strong academic consensus that the United States’ “War on Drugs” was a failure, and that there are complicated connections between high crime rates, poverty, organized crime, and a failing educational systems.<sup>4</sup> What the creators of *The Wire* have offered through the narrative structure of their show is an explanation of how these different phenomena interact and affect each other. So, our interest is not in assessing how “realistic” *The Wire* is. While some of the contributors to this volume do find that *The Wire* does portray elements of contemporary global life in a way that accurately reflects the findings of cutting edge social scientific research, this is not why the show is of interest to scholars. Instead, the show is interesting because it is