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Is *The Wire* Too Cynical?

By [John Atlas and Peter Dreier](#) - March 25, 2008

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THE WIRE, the television drama about Baltimore that just ended its fifth and final season, was a huge hit with critics who applauded its gritty depiction of urban life. The show won praise from reviewers across the political spectrum. From the *N.Y. Times* to the *Wall Street Journal*, from the liberal *American Prospect* to the libertarian *Reason* magazine, there was a unanimous chorus of plaudits for the HBO show whose large ensemble cast, comprised disproportionately of African American actors, include cops, teachers, reporters, drug dealers, dockworkers, politicians, and other characters in the real dramas of a major American city. Jack Dumphy, a columnist for the right-wing *National Review*, wrote that *The Wire* is “still the best show on television.” *Slate*’s Jacob Weisberg called it “...the best TV show ever broadcast in America.” Stephen King, writing in *Entertainment Weekly* called the show “a staggering achievement.”

Some critics compared *The Wire* to a great literary novel. Unpredictable plot twists, deft foreshadowing, and complex characters justify that judgment. The show juggled over 65 characters and kept them vividly evil, sad, or humane. Like most great stories, the main characters were morally ambiguous, but so finely etched that we cared about them. Even the gangsters were complex personalities, not the stereotypes typical of TV crime dramas. We ended up taking sides in gangland battles, rooting for Omar, Proposition Joe, and Bodie, and wanting Marlo annihilated.

The writers attended to detail. Police detectives drank “Natty Boh” – National Bohemian, a beer originally brewed in Baltimore. And the dialogue rang true. Snoop, second in command to drug thug Marlo, explained to a hesitant gang member how she’ll retaliate if he doesn’t cooperate: “We will be brief with all you motherfuckers – I think you know.” Another drug kingpin, Avon, locked in jail and eager for stories in the street, asked Marlo: “What about you? How you been?” Marlo shrugs: “You know. The game is the game.”

Anyone who’s worked or lived in America’s inner-city neighborhoods would recognize the reality of the show’s characters and the issues of crime, poverty, drugs, and family stress portrayed with a combination of sympathy and outrage. But the show’s version of reality was only partly right. *The Wire* reinforced white middle-class stereotypes of inner-city life. The show’s writers, producers, and directors persuaded reviewers that they were presenting a radical critique of American society and its neglect of its poor, its minorities, and its cities. But there’s nothing radical about a show that portrays nearly every character – clergy and cops, teachers and principals, reporters and editors, union members and leaders, politicians and city employees – as corrupt, cynical, and/or ineffective. *The Wire* misled viewers into thinking they were seeing the whole picture. But the show’s unrelenting bleak portrayal missed what’s hopeful in Baltimore and, indeed, in other major American cities. In that way, *The Wire* was the opposite of radical; it was hopeless and nihilistic.

IN 1994, a community group known as BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development) led a campaign that mobilized ordinary people to fight for higher wages for the working poor. One of those people was Valerie Bell. She lived in a small row house in Baltimore. With just a high school degree, she secured a job with a private, non-union

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custodial firm that contracted with the city to scrub floors and take out the garbage at Southern High School. Baltimore was trying to cut costs by outsourcing jobs to private firms. Bell earned \$4.25 an hour with no health benefits. Like so many others who earned a minimum wage each month, Bell coped with how to pay the electricity bill, groceries, and the rent.

BUILD put together a coalition of churches and labor unions, and lobbied the city to pass a “living wage” law that would increase wages above federal poverty line. The law would apply to employees who worked for private firms that had contracts with the city. It would affect 1,500 workers, hired by private bus, security, and janitorial companies. The ordinance would force wages up from \$4.25 to \$8.80 an hour over three years, and then increase each year to account for inflation.

At some risk to herself, Bell organized other custodians to join the living wage campaign. When the company discovered Bell’s activities, it fired her. Undeterred, Bell stayed active with BUILD and helped gather petition signatures and organize demonstrations. BUILD recruited academics who produced studies showing that it made no sense for the city government to save money in the short term by underpaying workers, who then had to resort to a variety of government-supported homeless shelters and soup kitchens to supplement their low wages. Working with BUILD, Bell and others put so much pressure on the city, they convinced then-Mayor Kurt Schmoke to support them. As a result of this grassroots organizing effort, Baltimore passed the nation’s first living-wage ordinance. The current rate is \$9.62. (Last year, Maryland became the first state in the country to enact a state living wage law.)

Economists estimate that the law puts millions of dollars into the pockets of Baltimore’s working poor each year, and has had a ripple effect pushing up wages in other low-paid jobs in the city. There are now similar laws in about 200 cities across the country.

For 30 years, BUILD – whose activism is based on the ideas of the late organizing guru Saul Alinsky – has been dedicated to transforming Baltimore’s struggling inner-city neighborhoods. BUILD has not only won the nation’s first living wage campaign, it also has built hundreds of affordable housing units called Nehemiah Homes (named after the Biblical prophet who rebuilt Jerusalem).

BUILD also created a network of after-school youth programs called Child First. That program began in 1996 with city and private money, and provides free after-school care for over 1,000 children every year at the city public schools. Child First is an academic enrichment program. The program involves parents, staff, administrators, church members, and other community members to help students, a real “it takes a village” approach. Child First trains parents to take part in their kids’ education by volunteering at schools and coming together to discuss how they can improve the school system. Volunteers tutor students in math and English, help them with study skills, and nurture their artistic talents.

During the 2007 election, BUILD signed up 10,000 voters as part of its “Save Our Youth” campaign. Every candidate for City Council and Mayor, including the current mayor Sheila Dixon, committed to the agenda, which included doubling the number of summer jobs for young people and funding neighborhood recreation centers.

Last December, after several years of working with Dixon (as a City Council member and now as Mayor) to renew the run down section of Baltimore, known as Oliver – where much of *The Wire* is filmed – BUILD persuaded the city to transfer 155 abandoned properties to the community group, which will either rehab the homes or tear them down and build new ones, then sell them to working-class homebuyers. “BUILD is making steady progress in eliminating blight throughout the Oliver neighborhood, where 44 percent of properties are vacant,” said Bishop Douglas Miles, 59, pastor of Koinonia Baptist Church.

A native Baltimorean, Bishop Miles, BUILD's co-chair, grew up in public housing projects. He's been involved with BUILD for 30 years. Under his leadership, Koinonia Baptist Church initiated a number of innovative ministries including an after-school program called Project Safe Haven, a juvenile alternative sentencing program that has saved many teenagers from the fate of a life in and out of jail. Bishop Miles, who has watched every episode of *The Wire*, was outraged at the way the church community was portrayed. "*The Wire* ignores all the good work the faith community had done," he complained.

PEOPLE LIKE Valerie Bell and Bishop Miles – committed activists, who have persisted in the organizing through victories and disappointments, but never succumb to cynicism or corruption – were nowhere to be found in *The Wire*. Just as the show found no room for grassroots heroes like Bell and Miles, so too has it overlooked the efforts of other community groups involved in successful organizing efforts.

The fourth year of *The Wire* focused on Baltimore's school crisis through the lives of several young boys barely coping with problems at home and lured by the illegal drug business. At one point in the show, the boyish but cynical Mayor Thomas "Tommy" Carcetti, lobbies Maryland's governor to help bail out the city's bankrupt public school system. Missing from the storyline is what actually occurred in 2004 when two groups – ACORN and the Algebra Project – mobilized parents, students and teacher to pressure then-Mayor Martin O'Malley to ask for state funds to avoid massive lay-offs and school closings.

ACORN, a community organizing group, built a coalition that included public employee unions and the Algebra Project, a group founded by civil rights icon Bob Moses to organize young people around school issues. The community and union activists hit the streets and filed lawsuits to get more money pumped into the school system. In December 2003, ACORN organized a confrontation at a board of education meeting. With hundreds of ACORN members attending, and one member shouting through a bullhorn, ACORN took over the meeting before police hauled them out of the room.

The protest was part of a months-long campaign of agitation that forced O'Malley to come up with the money and avoid unnecessary lay-offs and a state take-over. Their action encouraged a school reform effort led by the new Superintendent Bonnie Copeland and egged on more families to become involved in their children's education.

"The system is in meltdown," said Mitch Klein, an ACORN organizer. "Cutting funds is like the Baghdad version of putting back together the Baltimore city public schools."

School reform is only one of several issues that Baltimore ACORN – an affiliate of a national organization with chapters in over 100 cities – has addressed. Its young organizers have identified and trained tenant leaders to wage a campaign to clean up hundreds of lead-contaminated rental units. ACORN's tenants organized a rent strike to pressure slumlords to remove lead hazards in thousands of apartments. ACORN's members also closed corner stores dealing drugs, improved the city's housing code enforcement program, and pressured the police department to assign more foot patrols to the low-income Cherry Hill section of Baltimore.

Banks have persistently redlined its minority neighborhoods or engaged in abusive, discriminatory predatory lending practices, leading to a recent wave of widespread foreclosures. Lobbied by ACORN and other community groups, Mayor Dixon and the City Council sued Wells Fargo Bank in January for targeting risky sub-prime loans in the city's black neighborhoods that led to a wave of foreclosures that reduced city tax revenues and increased its costs of dealing with abandoned properties.

"Some things I can't accomplish by myself," said Sonja Merchant-Jones, a former public

housing resident who is active in Baltimore ACORN, “but together we’ve been able to confront elected officials, banks, and the utility companies, and get them to meet with us, negotiate with us, and change things. But I’m disappointed that I never see things like this on *The Wire*.”

Robert Mathews is a 64-year-old janitor in an 11-story office building in downtown Baltimore. He rents a small house in Montebello, one of Baltimore’s most troubled neighborhoods, with his wife and two grown sons. The former Merchant Marine has been a deacon in his church for many years and a mentor for many of the church’s youth. He takes them on trips and counsels them when they appear to be heading in the wrong direction. For almost three decades, Mathews has also been a union activist, utilizing the same skills to counsel, mentor, and organize his fellow low-wage janitors across the city.

After 30 years cleaning office buildings, he makes \$9.10 an hour.

Last December, Mathews helped lead a campaign of thousands of janitors in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. to win a better contract, among them 700 cleaners, most of them African-American, at over 40 Baltimore buildings, including the high-rise Candler, Legg Mason, and Bank of America buildings downtown. After months of protesting, picketing, threatening to strike, and negotiating, the janitors – part of the Service Employees International Union’s Justice for Janitors campaign – won a 28% pay increase. The janitors also won up to two weeks vacation and employer-paid family prescription drug coverage. The agreement added dental and vision benefits to the employer-paid health plan.

Mathews, who remembers when Baltimore’s schools, movie theaters, and restaurants were segregated, participated in civil rights protests in the 1960s. “To make change, you have to take a stand,” he says.

Mathews only occasionally watched *The Wire*. He was offended by its bad language, but also by its unrealistic depiction of the Baltimore he’s lived in his entire life. “It’s more negative than positive,” he observed. “The people on the show don’t have anything to live for. The young people have no vision. If you want change, you have to believe things can change.”

THESE REAL-life organizing campaigns by BUILD, ACORN, and Justice for Janitors were reported in the Baltimore Sun and by local TV and radio stations. Yet David Simon, the show’s creator, found no room to tell any of these stories in the 60 episodes of *The Wire* over its five-year run. “The show does an exceptional job of telling one side of the story,” says Rob English, the 38-year old lead organizer for BUILD who served for four years as a platoon leader in Somalia. “But it’s missing all the pastors, parents and teachers, principles, young people who are doing amazing work, radically trying to change and improve Baltimore.”

This is a problem, but not an aesthetic one. Shakespeare was not wrong because he didn’t write about the good kings. Dante was not wrong because he wrote about hell. Simon’s characters are fascinating individuals who reflect a broad array of human emotions and conflicts. The workplaces, neighborhoods, language and events portrayed in *The Wire* have the kind of verisimilitude that justifies the torrent of praise.

But Simon says he wanted the show to spur our country to do something about the plight of America’s inner-cities. Instead, his portrayal of Baltimore buttresses the myth that the poor, especially the black poor in the city’s ghettos, are drug dealers or users, eternally helpless victims, unable to engage in collective self-help and dependent on government largess, or crime, to survive. Week in and week out, the stories were so relentlessly hopeless that *Slate*’s Jacob Weisberg felt buoyant because the show “...is filled with characters who should quit but don’t, not only the boys themselves but teachers, cops, ex-cops, and ex-cons... This refusal to give up in the face of defeat is the reality of ghetto life as well. Feel me: It’s what *The Wire* is all about.”

Liberals, like Weisberg, are satisfied with the small ray of hope in some of these characters, like Bubbles, who maintain their dignity and pride amid such turmoil. Conservatives have their stereotypes reinforced, since the show depicts most blacks as dangerous criminals, drug addicts, or welfare recipients—culturally damaged, a class of people whose behavior and values separate them from respectable society. To liberals and conservatives alike, *The Wire* reinforces the notion that the status quo cannot be changed.

The Wire is populated almost entirely by low-income African-Americans and a handful of middle-class people whose jobs—cop, teacher, social worker, government bureaucrat, reporter, minister—involve relating to the poor as “problems” or “clients” rather than fellow citizens. For sure, many of Baltimore’s inner-city residents are apathetic, alienated, and suffer from the “quiet riots” of crime, violence, drugs, and other forms of self-destruction. Most of the black middle class, like their white counterparts, have fled to the suburbs. But virtually absent from the show are the law-abiding working poor — those who earn their poverty in low-wage jobs. Among Baltimore residents holding full-time jobs, 14 percent earn less than \$20,000 and 38 percent make less than \$30,000.

The few heroes depicted in *The Wire* are individualist renegades and gadflies. These include cops like James McNulty and Lester Freeman and the stick-up artist Omar, as well as social worker Whalen (a Narcotics Anonymous sponsor played by the singer Steve Earle), the Deacon (an influential West side church man played by Melvin Williams), and Dennis “Cutty” Wise (whose boxing program may stop a teenager from succumbing to life of drugs). Unlike ACORN, BUILD, the Algebra Project, and Justice for Janitors, these do-gooders don’t seek to empower people as a collective force. They try to help individuals, one at a time, rather than try to reform the institutions that fail to address their needs.

These people organized by BUILD, ACORN, SEIU, Algebra Project, and other community, labor, and environmental justice groups maintain a sense of hope and possibility in the face of difficult odds. And, slowly and steadily, their organizations have won significant victories that improve the lives of Baltimore’s poor and working class residents.

These community activists are not superheroes or naive idealists. They are ordinary people who sometimes manage to do extraordinary things. What distinguishes them is their patience, political savvy, street smarts, empathy, faith, and people skills required to build strong organizations that can mount grassroots organizing campaigns. They harness what organizers call “cold anger” and turn it into outrage against injustice rather than indiscriminate rage.

They do not expect to turn Baltimore upside down. Rather, they mobilize people to win small, concrete victories that improve people’s living and working conditions, and whet their appetites for further battles. They challenge the city’s political and business establishment and seek to get Baltimore’s power players and institutions—employers, landlords, politicians, police chiefs, and others—to the bargaining table, where they can negotiate on a somewhat level playing field. They don’t always win, but by their persistence and their ability to recruit people to join them, they have to be taken seriously by the city’s powerbrokers.

But community activists and leaders like these don’t exist in the Baltimore depicted in *The Wire*. Without them, and the organizations they belong to, we are left with a view of Baltimore’s poor as people sentenced for life to an unchanging prison of social pathology. This, in fact, is how *The Wire* views the poor.

Simon recently told *Slate* that, “Thematically, it’s about the very simple idea that, in this Postmodern world of ours, human beings – all of us – are worth less. We’re worth less every day, despite the fact that some of us are achieving more and more. It’s the triumph of capitalism.” He added, “It’s the triumph of capitalism over human value. This country has embraced the idea that this is a viable domestic policy. It is. It’s viable for the few.”

But Simon's worldview is hardly radical. He generally views the poor as helpless victims rather than as people with the capacity to act on their own behalf to bring about change. He may think he's the crusading journalist exposing injustice, but he's really a cynic who takes pity on the poor but can't imagine a world where things could be different.

Ironically, Simon's last season ends with a critique of the press for failing to tell the true story of the inner-city. Simon blames the *Baltimore Sun's* weak reporting about cities on its decision to kill off its poverty beat in the early 1990s. "To write intelligently about the complexity of urban society," Simon said, "reporters need to know not only their beat inside and out, but possess an awareness of social and economic trends over years, if not decades." Simon was determined to show the real inner-city, warts and all, but ends up showing only the warts.

AMERICA'S MEDIA consistently fail to report on grassroots organizing. Few daily newspapers, and no broadcast media, have a labor beat, or a community-organizing beat, or an activism beat. In its portrayal of the *Baltimore Sun* and the city's TV news reporting, *The Wire* reveals that daily reporters have little time or inclination to learn about complicated issues or follow a story over time, especially when it involves inner-city activist community groups. So most reporters can't possibly understand and properly report on these groups' issues and the persistent, patient work that has brought an organizing campaign to the point at which a reporter encounters it.

Reporters know how to cover rallies, demonstrations, and riots, where protesters disrupt business-as-usual and get into the media's line of vision. But effective grassroots organizing is rarely dramatic. It typically involves lots of one-on-one meetings, strategy discussions, phone calls, and training sessions. The news media rarely pay attention to the small miracles that happen when ordinary people join together to channel their frustration and anger into solid organizations that win improvements in workplaces, neighborhoods and schools. The media are generally more interested in political theater and confrontation—when workers strike, when community activists protest, or when hopeless people resort to rioting. As a result, much of the best organizing work during the last decade has been unheralded in the mainstream press.

The view from *The Wire* is similar to a spate of recent books by liberal journalists who give readers an "inside" look at the lives of the inner-city poor. These include Jason DeParle's *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and A Nation's Drive To End Welfare*, David Shipler's *The Working Poor*, and Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family*. They each provide vivid narratives about the real struggle it takes to survive in urban neighborhoods, and the revolving door between prison and ghetto for many black men. They are meant to humanize the plight of lower-income black families. But like *The Wire* they draw a portrait of the African-American poor as helpless and hopeless victims. There are no winners; just losers. Watching *The Wire* we are encouraged to feel sympathy, guilt, or outrage—but not hope.

Perhaps it is no accident that *The Wire* is ending its five-year run just as the Bush era is ending. The zeitgeist of the Bush era was a culture of fend-for-yourself cynicism, with no agenda to address the needs of cities like Baltimore. It was an era epitomized by the claim of Alphonso Jackson, Bush's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, who testified to Congress that "being poor is a state of mind, not a condition." It was an era that saw the Bush administration's savage indifference to the survivors of Hurricane Katrina. It was an era when the White House demanded that underfunded local school systems leave no child behind, but failed to provide the money to hire the teachers to make it possible.

It appears that, as we usher the Bush era out the door, Americans may be ready to feel hopeful again, reflected in the broad appeal of Barack Obama's campaign, who after graduating from Columbia University became a community organizer in Chicago.

Perhaps, a year or two from now, a little-known writer will propose a new series to TV

networks about the inner workings of the White House and an idealist young president, a former community organizer, who uses his bully pulpit to mobilize the American people around their better instincts. This president would challenge the influence of big business and its political allies, to build a movement, a New Deal for the 21st century, to address the nation's health care and environmental problems, to provide adequate funding for inner-city schools, and to reduce poverty and homelessness. A savvy network executive will scoop it up, schedule it for prime time, and give it a title that will let Americans know that the cultural tide is changing: "Left Wing."

John Atlas is president of the National Housing Institute and is writing a book about poverty in American through the lens of community organizing. Peter Dreier teaches politics at Occidental College in Los Angeles and is coauthor of *Place Matters: Metropolitica for the 21st Century* and *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City*.

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