



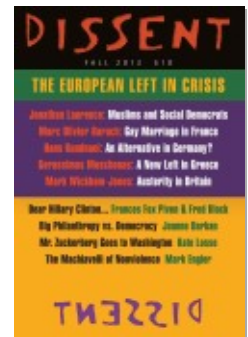
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Anmol Chaddha, William Julius Wilson, Sudhir A. Venkatesh

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In Defense of *The Wire*

Anmol Chaddha, William Julius Wilson, and Sudhir A. Venkatesh

ALTHOUGH WE agree that *The Wire* does not take on every issue relevant to life in the inner city, John Atlas and Peter Dreier do not sufficiently acknowledge its remarkable contributions. Quite simply, *The Wire*—even with its too-modest viewership—has done more to enhance both the popular and the scholarly understanding of the challenges of urban life and the problems of urban inequality than any other program in the media or academic publication we can think of.

Despite the show's critical acclaim, Atlas and Dreier fault it for four reasons: (1) *The Wire's* version of reality is only partly right because the show misses the positive aspects of changes brought about by collective activism; (2) *The Wire* reinforces white, middle-class stereotypes of inner city life; (3) the show's characters are for the most part corrupt, cynical, and ineffective; and (4) *The Wire* misses what is hopeful, and therefore the show does not encourage America to change.

It is true that the grassroots organizations and activists highlighted by Atlas and Dreier are not present in full force in *The Wire's* depiction of modern-day Baltimore, and in general these organizers and activists do not get the attention and credit they deserve in the mainstream media. However, the show is not remiss in focusing on the shocking inequality and injustice that persist despite the heroic efforts of these groups. According to Harvard sociologist Bruce Western, incarceration rates for black, male high school dropouts in their twenties and thirties are nearly fifty times the national average. Western points out that if prison and jail inmates are included among those who are out of work, the true jobless rate

for black men without a high school diploma would climb from 41 percent to 65 percent. In Baltimore, one-third of the adult black male population is jobless, a figure that probably exceeds 50 percent in ghetto neighborhoods, and the urban high school graduation rate is only 34.6 percent, compared to a suburban graduation rate of 81.5 percent—a gap of 47 percentage points.

In our view, an unflinching focus on these persisting crises is not irresponsible or gratuitously cynical. To be clear, we are not taking anything away from the critical work of groups like BUILD and ACORN. We would be wary, however, of overly optimistic portrayals that present the active involvement of community groups as sufficient counterweights to entrenched structural forces, when as the above figures so clearly reveal, a deepening crisis continues to mark ghetto neighborhoods across the United States.

The profound and widespread inability of media to adequately cover grassroots activism is a misguided premise for attacking *The Wire* and shortchanging its accomplishments. Compared to the countless television shows and movies in which good triumphs over evil and clichéd games of cops and robbers indulge us with a happy ending, in sharp contrast, *The Wire* has carefully depicted the ugly underbelly of urban inequality.

The Wire is not a documentary but fiction. The writers created characters and plotlines that advance the story they wished to tell. What is the story that *The Wire* sought to tell? According to its creator and chief writer, David Simon (previously a distinguished journalist at the *Baltimore Sun*), the show initially set out to expose the drug war as a fraudulent attack on the urban poor and communities of color. Subsequent seasons sought to examine the role of other social institutions and social forces in creating and maintaining social inequality—the

disappearance of jobs and the devaluation of labor, the inner workings of urban politics, the troubled urban education system, and the negligence of mainstream media in its coverage of important local issues. Each character in the five seasons—including police, gangsters, politicians, union officials, teachers, and journalists—serves the purpose of advancing these storylines with unequaled success and rare nuance.

According to Simon, the central and straightforward goal of *The Wire* was to show that the “system” is broken and that it fails individuals and families. With its sophisticated critique of the structure of urban inequality, the show drove this point home, although apparently with a “nihilism” that, for Atlas and Dreier, rendered the critique ineffective. However, the community organizers they describe would presumably agree that the “system” has profoundly failed their communities. We would argue that the message of the show and the work of the grassroots activists go hand in hand. *The Wire* exposes the systemic inequality that the activists and organizers are working tirelessly to challenge and reform. Indeed, *The Wire* suggests that, since attempts to reform these institutions from within are doomed to failure, the *only* way to challenge failed systems is through independent action unsanctioned by these very institutions.

We also take issue with Atlas and Dreier’s contention that the show promotes white, middle-class stereotypes of the inner city. They never really identify which characters reflect what stereotypes. The portrayals in *The Wire* are anything but shallow caricatures of the urban poor. Instead, the characters were consistently drawn with sincere complexity—Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris), the thug who physically flinches when his nephew rejects him; Russell “Stringer” Bell (Idris Elba), the cold-blooded shot-caller who introduces Robert’s Rules of Order into gang meetings; Bubbles (Andre Royo), the junkie who is often a better detective than the police he serves as an informant; and Omar (Michael Kenneth Williams), the shotgun-wielding stickup artist who robs drug dealers but pledges to never harm ordinary citizens and who brazenly works with the police to avenge the murder of his gay lover.

However, white, middle-class stereotypes of inner-city blacks often reflect the American belief system regarding poverty and welfare, namely, that people fail to succeed in life because of personal inadequacies. Indeed, Americans remain strongly disposed to the idea that individuals are largely responsible for their economic situations. In a series of surveys conducted between 1969 and 1990, the most-often selected explanation for poverty was “lack of effort by the poor themselves.” In fact, more than nine out of ten American adults thought that lack of effort was either very or somewhat important in terms of causing poverty. Fewer than 10 percent felt that it was not important.

THE WEIGHT Americans give to individualistic factors persists today. A 2007 survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that “fully two-thirds of all Americans believe personal factors, rather than racial discrimination, explain why many African Americans have difficulty getting ahead in life; just 19% blame discrimination.” Nearly three quarters of U.S. whites (71 percent), a majority of Hispanics (59 percent), and even a slight majority of blacks (53 percent) “believe that blacks who have not gotten ahead in life are mainly responsible for their own situation.” In the face of these biases, *The Wire* effectively challenges such stereotypes by showing how the decisions people make are profoundly influenced by their environment or social circumstances—in other words, how they are constrained by structural barriers.

The Wire develops morally complex characters on each side of the law, and with its scrupulous exploration of the inner workings of various institutions, including drug-dealing gangs, the police, politicians, unions, public schools, and the print media, viewers become aware that individuals’ decisions and behavior are often shaped by—and indeed limited by—social, political, and economic forces beyond their control. Anyone who watches Season Four will come away with a clear understanding of how the public school system has failed these students and why the atmosphere in these schools is so devastating. Over the course of that season, *The Wire* combats the misguided

belief that inner-city students themselves are largely responsible for their lack of educational achievement.

In criticizing the exclusion of activists and organizers who are indeed working to improve the conditions of the communities portrayed in *The Wire*, Atlas and Dreier seem to want characters that represent the forces of good against the evils that the show has accurately exposed. But they also overlook real instances from the show of community-led efforts to confront dehumanizing systems. Some examples include then-City Councilmember Thomas Carcetti's (Aiden Gillen) guided tour through a troubled neighborhood by the residents themselves who were concerned about drug-dealing gangs and other problems the city had neglected; the Narcotics Anonymous meetings held in the church basement; the educational intervention devised by University of Maryland researchers and implemented in the Baltimore schools; the debate society through which Namond Brice (Julito McCullum) finds his way out of a drug gang; and the community meetings with police district commander Howard "Bunny" Colvin (Robert Wisdom), where the residents aired their grievances. This list does not even take into account examples of individual, sometimes "renegade," efforts within and on behalf of the community, such as Cutty's boxing gym that effectively pulled youngsters off the streets; Bunny Colvin's "Hamsterdam" experiment to confine the selling of drugs in an isolated area; and Omar's Robin Hood ethic as a stickup artist. In a sharp criticism, the show revealed how the constant pandering to "the ministers" by the politicians indicates how community leadership positions are too often exploited by vested interests who sometimes try to advance agendas at the expense of the most vulnerable members of the community.

Indeed, one of the show's unique strengths was its refusal to engage a conventional plotline centered on a conflict between good and bad. Morality in *The Wire* is constructed with more subtlety and complexity. Virtue and hope are not absent from the show, but are instead embodied in characters that cannot be placed in unambiguous moral categories.

Quite unlike the Bush-era approach to the

urban poor, which utilizes a simplistic delineation between good and bad and right and wrong and assigns blame in all the wrong places, the show disentangles the complex structure of urban inequality and exposes its systemic roots. There are undoubtedly many issues that Simon and his colleagues did not address. The problem, however, is not *The Wire*. The real problem is that only one hour a week was set aside to examine the pressing issues of social inequality for a few months each year on a single premium cable network. *The Wire* shows us part of the world of the urban poor that should be examined in its entirety and by a number of media. Meanwhile, despite the real systemic challenges they face and *The Wire's* sometimes despairing representation of them, the communities that feel these problems most sharply will continue to build political power to demand reforms toward achieving true social justice. In our view, *The Wire* can complement these efforts by serving as a valuable source of the necessary political education that must accompany any effective attempt at reform.

Atlas and Dreier argue that the show's seemingly bleak outlook will stifle or discourage efforts for social change. We very strongly disagree. The show has contributed to an awareness of systemic urban inequality that has highlighted the incredible challenges inner-city residents face. We have been impressed with the dialogue this fictional drama has already generated among critics, commentators, and viewers.

AT THE SAME TIME, part of the success of the show is that it has in some ways confounded both academics and the general public. Social scientists may not be quite sure how to deal with the show because it fundamentally challenges some previously accepted, yet overly simplistic, ideas of a dichotomy between "street" and "decent" people in the inner city. Those in the wider public respond as if they had no idea these conditions existed, much like the reaction to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

When the poor are isolated from mainstream institutions, folk understandings of their world and other misperceptions infuse even academic

thought. Too often, this results in policy responses and debates that are inaccurate or unhelpful. In a unique way, *The Wire* offers a new foundation to attack social isolation by making us aware of how scholars, policymakers, and the general public form opinions about the problems of urban inequality without a full appreciation of their complexity. ●

The authors wish to thank Lauren Paremoer, Jessica Houston Su, and Abby Wolf, three enthusiastic fans of *The Wire*, for their helpful comments on a previous draft.

ANMOL CHADDHA is a doctoral student of sociology and social policy at Harvard University. WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON is the Lewis P. and Linda L. Geysler University Professor at Harvard and author of *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* and the forthcoming *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*. And SUDHIR A. VENKATESH is Professor of Sociology at Columbia University and author of *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* and *Gang Leader for a Day*.

John Atlas and Peter Dreier Respond

WE, TOO, were big fans of *The Wire* and are sorry that it is off the air. It touched a nerve among Americans who are hungry for a society that brings out the best in people—a society that encourages hope rather than fear.

In the past few years, we've witnessed a growing concern about poverty and inequality bubbling up from the grassroots, and just now surfacing in our national political life. America today has the biggest concentration of income and wealth since 1928. A growing number of working families are in debt, while the number facing foreclosure has spiraled. American workers face declining job security. The cost of housing, food, health care, and other necessities is rising faster than incomes. Since George W. Bush took office, an additional five million Americans are living in poverty.

These trends don't guarantee that middle-class Americans, faced with their own economic insecurities, will identify with and make common cause with the poor. For that to occur, they need to believe (1) that the plight of the poor is the result of political and social forces, not self-inflicted by the poor themselves; (2) that lifting up the poor will not come at the expense of middle-income Americans; and (3) that the problems of the urban poor *can* be solved. In other words, they need some sense of *hope*. Hope springs from a combination of political leadership and grassroots activism.

Each of these three conditions has taken root in recent years. Polls also show that sup-

port for labor unions has reached its highest level in more than three decades. Since welfare reform was enacted in 1996, Americans have viewed poverty primarily through the prism of working conditions. Polls revealed that a vast majority of Americans wanted to raise the federal minimum wage, which had been stuck at \$5.15 an hour since 1997. After they won a majority in Congress in 2006, the Democrats hiked the federal minimum wage to \$7.25, still below the poverty line, but an improvement. The popularity of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, the challenges to Wal-Mart, and the remarkable growth of the "living wage" movement we described all reflect an upsurge of concern about poverty. In his presidential campaign, former Senator John Edwards lifted the issue of poverty into the national debate. Senators Obama and Clinton picked up on Edwards's themes and some of his policy ideas.

What does this have to do with *The Wire*? Three things.

First, to the extent that *The Wire* helped raise awareness of these problems—and the *systemic* nature of the urban crisis—it deserves all the praise it has received. No other major industrial nation has allowed the level of sheer destitution that we have in the United States. We accept as "normal" levels of poverty, hunger, crime, and homelessness that would cause national alarm in Canada, Western Europe, or Australia. *The Wire* brilliantly portrayed these realities, putting a human face on the "urban crisis."

Second, *The Wire* showed us how overwhelming obstacles create desperation, even in people with good intentions and some idealism. Most of the cops, teachers, clergy, journalists, and even politicians on the series ultimately became cynical or corrupt. By exploring the dysfunction of many key urban institutions, *The Wire* revealed, although not explicitly, how urban politics is often a struggle over crumbs, whether the issue is funding for schools, police, housing subsidies, or drug-rehab programs.

But the show left it to the viewers to put the problems of Baltimore in a wider context. Although the United States has many serious problems that are disproportionately located in cities, these are *national* problems. Local governmental policies are not their cause. Even the most well-managed local governments, on their own, don't have the resources to significantly address them.

A good example is the current mortgage meltdown—caused by the greedy and racist practices of banks and mortgage companies and the failure of the federal government to regulate the financial services industry. In January, under pressure from community activists, the city of Baltimore sued Wells Fargo Bank for targeting minority neighborhoods for predatory loans leading to high foreclosure rates, costing the city millions of dollars in lost tax revenues, added fire and police costs, court administrative costs, and social programs to maintain healthy neighborhoods. It was the first lawsuit filed by a municipality seeking to recover costs of foreclosure caused by racially discriminatory lending practices

But Baltimore can't fix these problems on its own.

Only the federal government can address the issue of regulating business; providing adequate funding for housing, public schools, health care, child care, and environmental cleanup; and address the shortage of decent jobs that is ultimately at the root of Baltimore's crisis, from the docks to the ghetto to the inner suburbs.

Third, *The Wire* offered viewers little understanding that the problems facing cities and the urban poor are *solvable*, and that a small but growing movement has emerged to mobilize urban residents and their allies to address

these problems at both the local and national level. It is here that we differ with Chaddha, Wilson, and Vankatesh. People need to feel not only that things *should* be better but that they *can* be better. *The Wire* offered viewers little reason for hope that the lives of the people depicted in it could be improved not only by individual initiative but also (and primarily) by collective action and changes in public policy.

WE AGREE THAT the message of the show and the work of grassroots activists go hand in hand. But the sociologists' examples of community action portrayed—such as Narcotics Anonymous—hardly qualify as challenges to the powers-that-be.

As an example of community-led efforts in *The Wire*, they point to the fictional pilot project devised by University of Maryland researchers and implemented in the Baltimore schools to separate stoop kids from kids who disrupt classes and to intervene educationally. "Stoop" kids hang out near home and obey their parents, while "corner" kids, who have less parental discipline, are more likely to get involved with drugs. In the show, David Parenti (Dan DeLuca), the University of Maryland researcher, is concerned about "tracking" some students into classes with low expectations, but he believes that the program will truly help the corner kids rather than merely warehousing them in a separate class.

However, *The Wire's* mayor, Tommy Carcetti (Aiden Gillen), rejects this experimental program. There is an exchange between Howard "Bunny" Colvin (Robert Wisdom), an ex-cop working in the program, and Parenti that parallels our differences with the three sociologists. After it is clear that the city is rejecting the program, Colvin is despondent. Parenti, though, is optimistic about the great research they did and all the attention it will get from academics. "Academics?" Colvin asks in disbelief. "What, they gonna study your study? When do the shit change?"

We agree with Chaddha, Wilson, and Venkatesh that *The Wire* revealed how the lives of inner city residents are significantly determined by the spirit-demoralizing, soul-crushing institutions and bureaucracies. But the few heroes depicted in *The Wire* and mentioned

by our critics are individualist renegades and gadflies, not those who sought to change institutions and public policy. One person alone can't save a school system, create jobs, or make a neighborhood safer.

Unlike the activists involved with the programs we cite, they don't seek to empower people as a collective force. They try to help individuals, one at a time.

Those who lead union- and community-organizing fights have the same foibles and human weaknesses we witnessed in the characters in *The Wire*. But incorporating their stories in the series would have shown a different aspect of Baltimore, one in which the poor and their allies seek change, not charity, and learn how to marshal their collective power.

In May, *The Wire* creator David Simon and co-writer Ed Burns received an award from the Liberty Hill Foundation, a Los Angeles nonprofit that provides funding for cutting-edge grassroots community, environmental, and labor organiz-

ing. In accepting the award, they offered kudos to the activist groups whose leaders were represented in the audience. Simon said, "*The Wire* spoke to a world in which human beings—individuals—matter less, a world in which every day, the triumph of capital results in the diminution of human labor and human value. Is that world an accurate depiction of America? I hope not. So do you. But we live in interesting times, and perhaps the only thing that is left to us as individuals is the power to hope, and to commit that hope to action."

In their remarks, Simon and Burns reflected a new spirit of possibility that is a precondition to transforming the country. That attitude was not evident in *The Wire*, but we can hope that their next television series will embody that feeling of hope and change. ●

A longer version of this response is available at the Web site of the National Housing Institute/*Shelterforce* Magazine: www.rooflines.org.

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