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Critical Response II
Sociology and *The Wire*

Kenneth W. Warren

Among the reasons that Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson give for admiring David Simon's television series *The Wire* is that it effectively dramatizes important sociological concepts (see Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson, "'Way Down in the Hole': Systemic Urban Inequality and *The Wire*," *Critical Inquiry* 38 [Autumn 2011]: 164–88). Citing various demographic changes that have led to an "unprecedented concentration of poverty" that in turn has "produced the profound social isolation of poor blacks in the inner city," Chaddha and Wilson insist, "one of the greatest strengths of *The Wire* is that it captures this analytic perspective" (pp. 173, 174). As they explain further, the "concept of concentration effects" refers to the "various processes" that "work together to produce uniquely severe disadvantage for residents of these neighborhoods" (p. 174). In essence, then, a key test of the accuracy of *The Wire*'s social analysis is whether or not its depiction of the "systemic failure of political, economic and social institutions" highlights the "uniquely severe" impoverishment of black neighborhoods.

That Chaddha and Wilson praise *The Wire* for its portrayal of concentration effects might seem somewhat self-congratulatory given that the work they cite most prominently for having established this analytic perspective is Wilson's own *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (1987). In truth, however, Simon himself has cited another of Wilson's texts, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (1996), as an important source for the series' second

Critical Inquiry 38 (Autumn 2011)

season.[1] Even more importantly, Wilson's work has anchored sociological inquiry on poverty since its publication in 1987. Surveying research on urban poverty over the 1990s, Katherine Newman and Mario Small observe that despite differences in the way scholars have assessed both the cause and the significance of the phenomenon, "most sociologists agree that (a) urban poverty changed over the 1970s and 1980s and that (b) it became more concentrated."[2] Taking this consensus for granted, Wilson and Chaddha insist that an adequate representation of the effects of urban deindustrialization will demonstrate that black poverty, while part of the general systemic failure of institutions depicted in *The Wire*, is also different from other forms of impoverishment.

Their insistence on this point, however, causes Chaddha and Wilson to misread *The Wire* in at least one important way, while also leading them to produce a depoliticized account of poverty that is also at least somewhat collusive with the very forces they wish to criticize. In fact, one could say that as Chaddha and Wilson bring poverty and its depiction in *The Wire* under the regime of sociology they remove both from the realm of politics. This claim will of course require some explanation chiefly because Chaddha and Wilson devote one section of their article to politics and policy.

The misreading I'm concerned with occurs in their relatively brief discussion of the series' second season, which, Chaddha and Wilson say, "examines the declining fortunes of white workers through the storyline of dockworkers" (p. 174). In episode six of that season, Frank Sobotka, the secretary-treasurer of local 1514 of the International Brotherhood of Stevedores (IBS), vainly presses the state government in Annapolis to appropriate funds to dredge the main shipping channel so that larger cargo-carrying vessels will be able to dock at the Baltimore shipyards, thereby creating more

1. See Carly Carioli, "*The Wire*'s David Simon at Harvard," *The Pholg*, thephoenix.com/BLOGS/phlog/archive/2008/04/08/video-the-wire-s-david-simon-at-harvard.aspx

2. Mario Luis Small and Katherine Newman, "Urban Poverty after the Truly Disadvantaged: The Rediscovery of the Family, the Neighborhood, and Culture," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 24.

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work for the union workers.[3] Over the course of the season we learn that IBS 1514 is in trouble. Its dues-paying membership is down to around one hundred from the three hundred or so it was in the 1970s, and there's currently not enough work to keep even this diminished number of cargo checkers anywhere close to fully employed. With union coffers stretched thin at a moment when the need to curry support in the state capitol is acute, Sobotka has resorted to abetting smugglers to acquire additional funds to pay a lobbyist. To top it off, the members of the union have been shown a video promoting a new, cargo-offloading system that, if implemented, will require only a fraction of the labor time currently needed to remove cargo containers from ships. So, things are bad indeed.

Yet, according to Chaddha and Wilson, as bad as things are, they could be worse; the workers could be black. Chaddha and Wilson note that while in "many ways, the experiences of the dockworkers parallel those of the black poor depicted in *The Wire*," their situation is comparatively better than poor blacks. The stevedores have an "attachment to a job and the community of fellow union members [as] significant buffers against the social isolation that has accompanied economic decline in the inner city"; they maintain "meaningful ties in a well-developed social network"; are "less isolated from mainstream institutions"; and manage to "maintain access to political leaders in local and state government" (pp. 175, 176, 178). All of this may be true with respect to the comparative advantages the dockworkers have over the poor, largely unemployed (except for the drug trade) blacks in Baltimore's housing projects. But there is one problem with distinguishing the two groups in these terms: some of the stevedores *are* black. Although the central characters in the second series are Polish-American, the union is integrated. The black and Polish workers drink in the same bar after work, and in terms of governance they have established a power-sharing arrangement to determine how they will vote for union officers.

That Wilson and Chaddha distinguish the stevedores from the drug gangs by race (when they clearly must know that some of the stevedores are black) rather than employment status reflects the programmatic commitment of their reading. Their significant unit of analysis is the neighborhood. In the portion of their argument preceding their discussion of the stevedores, they contend that the problems we ought to be concerned with are the relative concentrations of impoverishment within, and the degrees of social isolation of, these neighborhoods. They cite comparative statistics

3. See David Simon, "All Prologue," dir. Steve Shill, 2003, *The Wire: The Complete Series*, DVD, 23 discs (2002–8), season 2, episode 6.

on incarceration, median per capita income, and concentrated poverty to demonstrate the relative capacity of white and black neighborhoods to mitigate the ill effects of deindustrialization. On this account, the goal of *The Wire* is to show not only how American cities responded to deindustrialization but also why urban black Americans fared less well than their white counterparts.

This secondary concern, which is actually a primary commitment, becomes the vehicle for reading politics out of their account even as they strive to read it in. Politics matters for their analysis not as the way that people strive to pursue their interests either by getting governments in power to enact laws and policies that further or protect those interests or even by taking over governments to do so. Rather, in Chaddha and Wilson's analysis, politics matters primarily as an index of social connectedness or lack of social isolation. They write, "The leaders of the union maintain access to political leaders in local and state government, although their political influence has diminished with their declining economic prospects" (p. 178). They continue, "In short, whites with diminishing employment prospects still maintain fundamental advantages in social capital and access to political institutions that are not similarly available to their African American counterparts" (p. 178). In essence, then, what *The Wire* represents as a political failure, namely, the inability of the union to persuade the Maryland General Assembly to appropriate funds to dredge the harbor, Chaddha and Wilson count as a positive moment simply because the union leadership at least has access to the legislature. But what makes even this reading strange is that in substantive ways it is the similarities between the stevedores and the drug gangs and not their differences that are most on display here. For example, it is not true that drug gang leaders, unlike union leaders, have no access to political institutions. In some sense they have the same degree of political access as the stevedore's union, given that both the Barksdales and the union contribute funds to the oily state senator, Clay Davis (who infamously fleeces Stringer Bell, the second-in-command of the Barksdale gang, and also double-crosses Sobotka). Indeed, it remains a little puzzling to think of the stevedores as better off than their public housing counterparts given that the series' second season ends with Frank Sobotka murdered as a result of his illegal activities, his son Ziggy convicted for murder, and his nephew Nick forced to enter into a witness protection program as a result of getting involved in the drug trade and for agreeing to testify against the "Greek" smuggler responsible for shipping drugs, prostitutes, and other contraband into Baltimore.

But the fundamental insufficiency of Chaddha and Wilson's analysis

emerges when they return to the series' depiction of concentration effects and the subsequent efforts by the city of Baltimore to deconcentrate poverty—an effort that does not lead to improved conditions for the city's black poor. Quite the contrary, the demolition of the city's notorious high-rises occasions a destruction of lived networks in west Baltimore that makes way for even more brutal and inhumane drug trafficking. In accounting for the concentration of poverty and the dismal results of deconcentrating the poor, Chaddha and Wilson correctly note that neither was an inevitable occurrence. Rather, the culprits for these social and economic changes include the Reagan administration's "political project of New Federalism," the Clinton administration's failure to restore Reagan-era budget cuts and most importantly, the way that both Republican and Democratic administrations "in the late 1970s" turned "to the private sector and a market-based approach to urban policy . . . [through which] neighborhoods became particularly vulnerable to the widespread problems of joblessness, which are typically viewed as an economic process" (pp. 178, 179). Adding to the baleful effects of this turn in federal policy are the actions of local politicians who did not prioritize "policies that would benefit the black poor" (p. 181). Chaddha and Wilson conclude that these failures up and down the political ladder point "to the significance of political processes and shows that macroeconomic forces do not solely determine urban inequality" (p. 181). In other words, joblessness and the problems associated with it are, in a significant way (and on Chaddha and Wilson's account), *political* problems.

What is striking, however, is that despite acknowledging the importance of politics in producing inequality, Chaddha and Wilson give it no analytic force. Indeed, when it comes to taking up the series' dramatization of the additional devastation caused by deconcentration, their analysis grows vague, and they appear strangely flummoxed as to why demolishing housing projects has failed poor people. Noting that "many cities also sought to deconcentrate poverty in the 1990s," they tell us that although local "officials typically promoted the demolition of housing projects by highlighting the problems of concentrated poverty" with the claim that significant improvement for urban poor residents would follow, "many former residents of public housing in cities like Baltimore, Chicago, St. Louis, and Atlanta had not been relocated to other areas several years after their public housing projects were demolished" (pp. 179, 180). Chaddha and Wilson don't immediately provide an explanation for this injustice. Instead, they ventriloquize the skepticism of the displaced poor, who are "apt to question whether the discourse of deconcentrating poverty had been cynically employed to promote high-end real estate development

instead" (p. 180). Left unsaid is that federal and local officials sought to deconcentrate poverty not only because they felt it was in their best interests to do so but also because sociologists like Wilson had presumably demonstrated that it was in the best interests of the poor to do so. In a critique of the arguments put forth to support tearing down Chicago's Cabrini-Green housing project, Larry Bennett and Adolph Reed, Jr. note that the Chicago Housing Authority's Hope VI application for redevelopment "identifies 'isolation and concentration' as Cabrini-Green's defining features."[4] Similar arguments, as Chaddha and Wilson admit, surfaced elsewhere. The crucial point here is that Wilson's "analytic perspective" is not just a window onto how the urban poor were dislocated during the late twentieth century. *Rather, Wilson's sociology was also part of that process of dislocation.* All that is in question here is whether or not the cynical appropriation of sociological ideas by real estate developers adequately explains how Wilson's ideas came to play the role they played.

For reasons of space, the answer here can only be suggestive. But by way of sketching in a conclusion let me say first Chaddha and Wilson are unnecessarily opaque when discussing the federal policy shifts that abetted and intensified the effects of deindustrialization. David Harvey helps fill in the blanks. He writes that during this period business, "acting as a class . . . increasingly used its financial power and influence (particularly through political action committees) . . . to effectively capture the Republican Party as its class instrument and forge a coalition against all forms of government intervention (save those advantageous to itself) as well as against the welfare state (as represented by government spending and taxation)." Then, while "capitalist-class interests and an increasingly captive Republican Party . . . [waged] a no-holds-barred and across-the-board class war against the least privileged sectors of the population," attacks from the Right, along with a crescendoing refrain from within academia that class inadequately explained inequality, eroded the appeal of working-class politics as an alternative to this power grab by capitalist interests.[5] One example of how routine it has become to dismiss class as an analytic is Small and Newman's observation that in the wake of Wilson's *Truly Disadvantaged* "most empirical studies now implicitly follow a model of

4. Larry Bennett and Adolph Reed, Jr., "The New Face of Urban Renewal: The Near North Redevelopment Initiative and the Cabrini-Green Neighborhood," *Without Justice for All: The New Liberalism and Our Retreat from Racial Equality*, ed. Reed (New York, 2001), p. 182.

5. David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Malden, Mass., 1996), pp. 339, 341.

society as a collective of individuals (not classes), but individuals whose neighborhood of residence is important."[6]

It might seem curious that at a moment when capitalist interests were taking the gloves off in their fight against all other sectors of society the dominant sociological model of poverty became one that subordinated politics to neighborhood demographics. But perhaps we should not be all that surprised. With apologies to Jane Austen, it is a truth infrequently acknowledged that a predatory class with its eye on a great fortune must be in want of intellectual cover. This does not mean that social science scholars always knowingly or intentionally trim their sails to catch the prevailing winds of naked class interest (although there are plenty instances of this). But it does mean that any reflection on the prominence of academic models ought to include at least a brief glance at whose interests might be served should analysis become policy. Interestingly enough in a recent essay advocating both a "structural" and "cultural" approach to poverty, Wilson cautions:

> The use of a cultural argument, however, is not without peril. Anyone who wishes to understand American society must be aware that explanations focusing on the cultural traits of inner-city residents are likely to draw far more attention from policy makers and the general public than structural explanations will.[7]

He then concludes his essay by calling for some circumspection on this very point, noting, "there is little evidence that cultural forces carry the power of structural forces." He then adds:

> Although cultural forces play a role in inner-city outcomes, the evidence suggests that they are secondary to the larger economic and political forces, both racial and nonracial, that move our American society. Indeed, structural conditions provide the context within which cultural responses to chronic economic and racial subordination are developed.[8]

Fair enough. But even more recently, in his remarks at a May 2010 congressional briefing on culture and poverty, Wilson allows the putative cultural effects of living in poor neighborhoods to take center stage. He explains, "neighborhood effects are not solely structural. Among the

6. Small and Newman, "Urban Poverty after the Truly Disadvantaged," p. 25.

7. William Julius Wilson, "Why Both Social Structure and Culture Matter in a Holistic Analysis of Inner-City Poverty," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629 (May 2010): 204.

8. Ibid., p. 216.

effects of living in segregated neighborhoods over extended periods is repeated exposure to cultural traits, and this would include linguistic patterns that emanate from race, or I should say that emanate from or are the products of racial exclusion." Adding that "exposure to different cultural influences in the neighborhood environment over time has to be taken into account if one is to really appreciate and explain the divergent social outcomes of human groups," he concludes, "as social scientists we can no longer afford to keep our heads in the sand by ignoring these patterns of cultural behavior."[9] The readiness with which Wilson, in this context, drops all of his qualifications about attending to culture underscores Stephen Steinberg's trenchant observation that Wilson "routinely violates his own axiom about the integral relationship between culture and social structure."[10] Moreover, in this same congressional briefing Wilson then fully assimilates *The Wire* into this culturalist analysis, telling his audience, "When I was watching this program I came to appreciate how important it is to look at the cultural aspects of violence, because David Simon brilliantly captured it."[11]

That Wilson makes *The Wire* a mirror of his own sociological preoccupations is, as I noted at the outset, somewhat justifiable in light of the fact that his work inspired the series' creators. One only wishes that Chaddha and Wilson had taken the time to wipe away the smudges enough to see that the series does not merely bring to life the analytic concepts of social scientists. It also shows what can happen to a society when those who set policy affecting the lives of our nation's most vulnerable citizens do sociologists the courtesy of taking them seriously.

9. "Reconsidering Culture and Poverty: A Congressional Briefing," *The American Academy of Political and Social Science News*, 8 June 2010, www.aapss.org/news/2010/06/18/reconsidering-culture-and-poverty-a-congressional-briefing

10. Stephen Steinberg, "Poor Reason: Culture Still Doesn't Explain Poverty," *Boston Review*, 13 Jan. 2011, www.bostonreview.net/BR36.1/steinberg.php

11. "Reconsidering Culture and Poverty."