The Wire

Urban Decay and American Television

edited by
Tiffany Potter
and
C. W. Marshall

continuum
NEW YORK • LONDON

2009

The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038

The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

www.continuumbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN: HB: 978-0-8264-2345-0
PB: 978-0-8264-3804-1

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt. Ltd. Chennai, India
Printed in the United States of America

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Stringer Bell's Lament: Violence and Legitimacy in Contemporary Capitalism

Jason Read

In *The Wire*, the illegal drug trade acts as a sustained allegory for capitalism. It is at once the outside of the world of legitimate business, governed by different rules and principles of loyalty, and the dark mirror of business, revealing the effects of a relentless pursuit of profit on the community and lives of those caught in its grip. Nowhere is this tension between "the game" (the drug trade) and the larger world of capitalism illustrated with greater clarity than in the life and death of Russell "Stringer" Bell. Stringer is often presented as the character most enamored of the legitimate world of business, taking economics classes at community college and applying the lessons to the world of the drug trade. Stringer is also presented as the character who desires not only wealth, but the legitimacy of the world of legal business. His story offers a brutal retelling of the classic "rags to riches" story in which murder, addiction, and betrayal are as fundamental as hard work and business acumen. His story ends tragically as well: while Stringer is able to accumulate money, he is unable to acquire security and legitimacy, and he remains caught between the semi-feudal loyalties of the drug trade and the ruthless world of capital, until the contradictions between the two eventually kill him.

What Stringer's story reveals is not only the unstable nature of the border that separates the drug trade from the world of legitimate business, but the way in which the relationship between the two is sustained as much by narratives and fictions as by their actual material relations. The connection between material relations and the narratives and fictions that sustain them is at the center of Karl Marx's critique of capitalism, most famously in his concept of ideology, which reveals the way in which particular social relations of production are sustained by particular ideas, narratives and fictions. More specifically, and more relevant to the matter of the drug trade, is Marx's critique of primitive accumulation.

So-called primitive accumulation is the narrative that classical political economy offers to account for the historical origins of capitalism. In order for capitalism to exist, there must be an original difference between capitalists and workers, between those who have money to invest and those who have only their labor power to sell. Within capitalism this situation is always presupposed. Political economy solves this problem by transforming this difference of class into a moral difference, and the economic distinction of workers and capitalists is transposed into a difference between the wasteful and frugal. As Marx writes,

> This primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote about the past. Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one the diligent, intelligent, and above all frugal elite; the other lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. (*Capital* 873)

Marx's irony indicates that such a moral difference is insufficient to account for the historical emergence of capitalism. It is not enough to save money, because the saving of money will not produce the other necessary condition, the existence of workers. The morality of thrift does not produce the dispossessed that can be put to work. In order for this to happen, there must be a corresponding dispossession of peasants from the land, a destruction of the old feudal system. This destruction takes place through a complex list of factors that includes the laws that convert the commons to private property, the accumulation of wealth

made possible by colonialism and slavery, and practices of debt and usury, previously outlawed due to religious restrictions.

Marx's point here is twofold. First, he replaces a moralizing fairy tale with a historical genealogy that stresses a multiplicity of conditions: capitalism is the product of a series of historical transformations, reshaping Europe and the world, and not the simple effect of a moral difference. Capital is not the cause of this process, but the effect: "The knights of industry, however, only succeeded in supplanting the knights of the sword by making use of events in which they had played no part in whatsoever" (*Capital* 875). Second, whereas the first narrative stressed the importance of morality, painting the worker as lazy and the capitalist as thrifty, Marx's counter-history underscores the importance of violence and force. In order for capitalism to exist, peasants had to be violently expropriated from the land. Workers are not born, they are made: "Force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one" (*Capital* 915). On first glance it would appear that Marx is simply inverting the terms of the narrative of so-called primitive accumulation: where the first saw the clear victory of moral intention, Marx sees the hazy effects of unintended consequences tainted with violence. However, Marx does not simply oppose one narrative to the other, juxtaposing the image of the capitalist with blood on his hands with that of the moral hero of thrift, because the story of primitive accumulation, the idea that we could all become rich with a little more thrift or the right investment advice, is a functioning element of contemporary capitalism. It is not enough simply to displace the false, ideological account of the formation of capitalism with the true account, because the false account continues to linger on in the fantasy life of most people in capitalist society. Unlike previous modes of production (such as feudalism, in which people were born into specific paths for life), capitalism undoes previous conditions of social hierarchy, replacing the motley ties of birth and title, with money, which is available to everyone. Capitalism does not spread the wealth, just the idea that we could all become wealthy.

Marx's critical engagement with primitive accumulation provides the schema from which much of the central allegorical dynamic of *The Wire* can be unpacked. It outlines the constitutive elements of myth, violence, and unintended consequences that make up day-to-day life in capitalism.

Right and Money

The connection between the drug trade and a certain ideal of capitalism is firmly established early in the series. In interrogating D'Angelo Barksdale, Detective Jimmy McNulty, in an attempt to play off of Barksdale's guilt over the murder of a "citizen" (i.e. someone not in the drug trade), clearly states the line of demarcation that separates the drug trade from legitimate business. As McNulty argues, "Everything else in this country gets sold without people shooting each other behind it" (1.02). Later D'Angelo repeats McNulty's description to his underlings in "the Pit," modifying it slightly: "Shit, everything else in this world gets sold without people taking advantage. Scamming, lying, doing each other dirty. Why does it got to be that way with this?" (1.03). The world of legitimate business stands apart from the drug world precisely because of its moral basis. For D'Angelo, guilt-ridden and torn over the human cost of the drug business, this moral difference constitutes an ideal. D'Angelo initially seems to believe in the ideals and narratives of the world of business, taking its maxims and slogans, "the customer is always right," as moral maxims rather than just advertising type (1.03). D'Angelo believes that the world of business is a moral world, in that one can survive while doing right, and that moral behavior is rewarded. As with the narrative of so-called primitive accumulation, the distinction between the rich and the poor is a moral distinction, between good and bad.

The break between the world of business and the world of drugs is never clean; however, they are both constituted by the same fundamental economy and the same drive for profit. They are unified by the fact that in each economy it is money, and not morals or any other measure, that stands as the highest value. Despite his idealization of the business world, D'Angelo recognizes this with darkly humorous clarity. This is reflected when D'Angelo corrects Poot Carr and Wallace about the workings of the world of business in a discussion about the inventor of the Chicken McNugget. Against Wallace's and Poot's naïve claim that the "genius" inventor of the McNugget "got paid" for the idea of serving chicken in nugget form, D'Angelo argues that the corporate hierarchy dictates that the man who invented the McNugget would still be working in the basement of McDonald's, "figuring out a way to make the shakes

taste better" (1.02). Against the ideal of equal and just compensation, D'Angelo asserts the harsh reality of the rule of money: "Fuck right. It ain't about right, it's about money." As much as D'Angelo eventually wants to escape the game, he recognizes that the same hierarchy and harsh pursuit of profit exists in the legitimate world as well. The world of business and the drug trade are thus two different manifestations of the same chessboard, of the same structure, in which the pawns remain pawns, slaving away, and the king stays the king. They may be separated by means, legal and illegal, but are ultimately unified by ends, by the pursuit of profit.

In *The Wire*, money is presented as what Marx terms the "abstract equivalent," not only because it can be exchanged for any commodity, but because it effaces its condition of origin. Once money is made, once the drugs have been sold, the money is as good as the money from any other enterprise, legal or illegal. By definition money overspills its specific condition of origin. As Lester Freamon sums up the show's narrative itinerary, which extends from the streets to the corridors of power, "You follow drugs, you get drug addicts and drug dealers. But you start to follow the money, and you don't know where the fuck it's gonna take you" (1.09). As money ties together the various businesses and human endeavors (traveling in garbage bags of stacked and counted bills from the hands of junkies to politicians such as Clay Davis), it carries with it the ability to transgress borders as well. Though money crosses borders, it does not always take its earners or holders with it: when D'Angelo takes his girlfriend Donette out to dinner at one of Baltimore's upscale restaurants in the inner harbor, he wonders if its high-class clientele knows "what he is about"; Donette is quick to remind him that the distinctions between legal and illegal fall apart in the face of money's indifference to its conditions, saying, "You got money, you get to be whoever you say you are" (1.05). Donette's remark echoes one of Marx's fundamental points regarding money: money is not just a means of payment, it is a means of transformation. Money transforms the desire to have something into the possession of that thing; money actualizes desire, including the desire to be someone.

In the tension between D'Angelo's desire to escape the world of drugs, gaining legitimacy through an enterprise governed by moral rules, and the recognition that, in our society money is legitimacy, we see the

contours of Marx's critique of the fundamental division of capitalist society: a division between its values, which are opposed to drugs and murder, and its measure of value, which is primarily if not exclusively economic, recognizing only money. For Marx, capitalist society is schizophrenic, divided between two standards:

> The ethics of political economy is *acquisition*, work, thrift, sobriety—but political economy promises to satisfy my needs.—The political economy of ethics is the opulence of a good conscience, of virtue, etc.; but how can I live virtuously if I do not live? . . . It stems from the very nature of estrangement that each sphere applies to me a different and opposite yardstick—ethics one and political economy another; for each is a specific estrangement of man and focuses attention on a particular field of estranged essential activity, and each stands in an estranged relation to the other. (*1844 Manuscript* 151)

This is the split that plagues D'Angelo. He has all that society values—a closet full of fine clothes, an SUV, and meals at fine restaurants—but it comes at the cost of a good conscience. D'Angelo recognizes that he can only make money by devaluing human life, by selling his own conscience. Against this split existence, which poses a division between the value of money and the values of morals, D'Angelo dreams of a unified existence. For D'Angelo the world of drug trafficking is not some sort of refusal of the norms and ideals of society, crime as some kind of rebellion, but it is an attempt to possess the very dream that has been denied to him. This is why when D'Angelo is arrested, and offered an opportunity to be a witness against his uncle and the Barksdale organization, he sees this as a chance to escape not only jail time, but his life. His fantasy is that the police will make it possible for him to live like "regular folks" (1.13).

The Soldier and the CEO

The ambiguous relationship between the drug trade and the world of capitalism reaches its point of maximum tension and outright contradiction

in the relationship between Avon Barksdale and Stringer. In the beginning Stringer is simply Avon's second in command, the queen to his king, to use the chess metaphor from the opening of Season One. As such he is more directly tied to the day-to-day and brutal aspects of the drug trade. Stringer orders the initial hit on Omar's crew (1.05), and the murder of Wallace. These killings are presented as purely rational, governed by a strict logic of cost and benefit. By Stringer's estimation, letting Omar's crew get away with the robbery of the Barksdale stash would expose them to future robberies; similarly, Wallace has proven himself too weak, a likely candidate to become an informant. At the same time that Stringer orders these murders, revealing his ability to utilize violence, he also dissuades Avon from engaging in an out-and-out war with Omar. In Stringer's mind, a war is too expensive, risking not only loss of life but the increased police scrutiny that comes with bodies. The logic underlying Stringer's initial acts of brutality is governed by a rational assessment of risks versus benefits. It is this ability to calculate costs against potential profits that eventually pits Stringer against Avon.

From the beginning, Avon is presented as a "soldier," as someone whose control of the drug trade is less about turning a profit than it is about controlling territory and respect. For Avon, conflict and violence are not subject to calculations that measure cost against benefits, but to a tradition that establishes the rules and conditions of respect. Conflict takes place within particular rules and traditions. These traditions include the truce that limits conflict and violence on Sundays, and the annual Eastside/Westside basketball game, in which rival gangs put aside violence in order to compete for bragging rights on the court. These rules provide no instrumental purpose; they do not serve the ends of profit or even dominance. The rules reveal that violence is not just a strategy, but it is constitutive of reputation, inseparable from the ends it serves.

In Season One, Stringer is Avon's loyal second in command, whose shrewd calculations maintain Avon's power at whatever cost. As Avon's organization faces the dual threats of Omar and an aggressive police investigation, Stringer is willing to employ deception, murder, and a fundamental restructuring of the organization, in order to protect

Avon and maintain territory. When Avon is incarcerated at the end of Season One and the drug connection dries up, Stringer continues his pursuit of power. This is at first a question of pure survival. The incarceration of D'Angelo and Avon has left the Barksdale crew severely crippled and without access to a product. Stringer, however, recognizes this problem to be as much a problem of economics as a problem of street-level warfare, asking his economics professor at the community college how to deal with "an inferior product in an aggressive market place" (2.05). After attempting to simply rename and thus rebrand his product, Stringer turns to his rival, Proposition Joe, in order to cut a deal, exchanging territory in the Towers (the housing projects) for access to Joe's supply at wholesale prices. In the conversation in which Proposition Joe and Stringer make their deal, the ideal of running drugs like a business is opposed to the work of being a soldier: they are two fundamentally different strategies, and ultimately two different perspectives on the game. From this conversation, the business strategy emerges. Rather than deal with conflict through violence and the struggle over territory, the agreement makes it possible to convert every possible conflict into a shared enterprise. This is the ideal behind the "co-op" in which formerly rival drug gangs are unified through shared access to a wholesale supply of drugs. The co-op ultimately becomes its own end, the idea of the drug trade as pure business, separate from street-level conflicts. As Stringer relates this ideal to Avon, the co-op makes possible a new business plan, based on product rather than territory: "Nothing but cash. No corners, no territory, nothing" (3.06).

When Avon is released from prison in Season Three, Stringer's reorganization of the drug trade into a business comes into direct conflict with Avon's ideal. Avon responds to Stringer's drug trade without violence, saying, "Yeah, I ain't no suit-wearing businessman like you. You know I am just a gangster, I suppose. And I want my corners" (3.06). Despite Avon's increasing militarization over the course of the sustained wars with Marlo and Omar (evident in his army-fatigue hat and increasingly lethal arsenal), his disdain for the ideal of running the drug trade as a pure business is not just based on some crude street-level mentality, or a simple identification of masculinity and violence. Being a soldier, or a

gangster, is not just about using violence to solve problems: it requires restricting that violence with specific rules in order to gain respect. Avon is enraged when Stringer orders a hit on Omar on a Sunday: "Sunday truce been there as long as the game itself" (3.09). In order to gain respect, to earn a name, it is necessary to maintain territory within certain respected traditions and rules. When Stringer and Avon come to a direct conflict over their respective strategies, Avon angrily states that the difference between the two of them is in their blood, touching the core of their humanity: "I bleed red and you bleed green" (3.08). For Avon the rules of the game are the very conditions for recognition, for the constitution of a reputation. In the world of a businessman, there is only one rule—to accumulate money. The conflict between Avon and Stringer is not just between different means, violence or negotiations, but between the ends those means serve, reputation or accumulation.

For Marx primitive accumulation is not just an argument about the violent foundation of capitalism; it is an argument about the transformation of violence. Both of these apply to the situation of Stringer. Just as Marx argues that capitalism was made possible by the wealth generated through slavery and colonial plunder, economic relations that would become illegitimate under capitalism itself, Stringer utilizes the money gained from the drug trade to start a legitimate business, to invest in real estate, and even to have his own business cards printed. The drug trade does not just make Stringer wealthy; it carries the possibility of making him a capitalist, someone who not only has wealth, but legitimacy as well. Whereas it first appears that Stringer is not concerned with reputation, discarding the rules that govern the game, this is only because he has switched games, moved to the point where it is accumulating wealth, rather than maintaining territory and upholding the codes of the street, that dictate reputation. The businesses that Stringer runs, copy shops and condo developments, initially function as a front; but eventually they make it possible for him not only to print business cards, but to hand one to McNulty.

Stringer's struggle for legitimacy can be contrasted with Bubbles's story. Bubbles, the informant who works closely with Detectives McNulty and Greggs, begins a legitimate enterprise in Season Three, selling t-shirts and other consumer goods from a shopping cart he dubs "Bubble's Depo [sic]" (3.07). While such an endeavor is in many respects more

legitimate than Bubbles's other activities such as scavenging or stealing scrap metal and selling information to the police, he does not pursue it as an attempt to become a legitimate member of society. For Bubbles, money is money; any endeavor that makes enough money to provide the next high is equally legitimate. This puts him into conflict with his "boy" Johnny for whom there is a certain point of pride in making money from "capers." It also puts him into conflict with Stringer's worldview in which there is a fundamental dignity to the ideal of becoming a legitimate businessman. Bubbles does not subscribe to the code of the streets or to the moral ideal of capitalism. He neither romanticizes "capers" nor idealizes business, grasping instead what Marx referred to as the "ethics of political economy" (*1844 Manuscript* 151): the fundamental idea that what is good is what makes money. It takes an addict, the ultimate consumer, to see the truth of money's indifference to its causes or conditions.

At first glance the narrative of primitive accumulation, whether on the individual or social scale, would seem to bring an end to violence, as legitimate means of exploitation take the place of plunder. For Marx, however, primitive accumulation is not so much an end to violence, but a transformation of it; the overt violence of slavery is replaced with the day-to-day violence of the factory floor: "The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases" (*Capital* 899). Capitalism is not an end to violence but a codification of it, a normalization of it to the point where it becomes invisible. A similar transformation of violence takes place in *The Wire*. For Avon, all violence is caught up in the drama of recognition; it is visible and overt, functioning as a sign as much as the simple elimination of an adversary. In contrast to this, Stringer utilizes a different mode of violence when he arranges the murder of D'Angelo. The motivation is based on a simple calculation: the 20-year sentence that D'Angelo received for transporting drugs is, in Stringer's view, more than he can be reasonably expected to carry. When he becomes a risk to the organization he is eliminated. Since he is family, his murder is made to look like a suicide, rendered invisible. Violence is transformed from an activity to what is at once a strategy and a symbol, to a way of dealing with the risks of doing business.

Man without a Country

As Avon and Stringer come into conflict, they each find others who embody their particular side of the contradiction between soldier and CEO: Avon turns to the fiercely principled Brother Mouzone, while Stinger finds an unlikely ally in Police Major Howard "Bunny" Colvin. Stringer admires Colvin's "Hamsterdam" experiment not for its effect on the quality of life in West Baltimore or for its effects on the crime statistics, but because it emulates the ideal of drugs as business, removing crime from the picture. Stringer reveals the location of Avon's hideout to Colvin, in a betrayal that he defines as "strictly business" (3.11). At the same time Avon turns to Brother Mouzone (and, less directly, to Omar) in order to eliminate Stringer. Mouzone and Omar personify the ideal of a life governed by the rules of respect, by a code.

When Avon and Stringer turn on each other, betraying each other to the forces that will see the other arrested or murdered, it is not out of personal animosity; they still regard each other as brothers (3.11). They have come to represent two sides of an uneasy duality—the soldier and the CEO—that has been torn asunder. While this particular duality reflects the drug trade, it is not without its resonances within the culture at large. When McNulty searches the apartment of the recently deceased Stringer, it is no accident that he stumbles upon a copy of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* alongside a pair of samurai swords (3.12): this represents the ideal of the CEO as "knight of industry," as one who conducts business while consulting Sun Tzu for strategy. Stringer's identification with the idea of the CEO is made clear in Season Two, when he struggles with the collapsing market and increased violence of the Barksdale organization in decline. As an exasperated Stringer states, "That's why they be payin' these CEOs so much damn money, 'cause when the shit fall bad it fall on them" (2.09). Stringer believes in the American ideal, right down to the justification of the extreme inequality of current pay scales, and this turns out to be his undoing. The deadly conflict between Avon and Stringer is a conflict between two ways of establishing a reputation, violence and money, which come into such bloody conflict because they are so intertwined.

Although the conflict ends poorly for both the incarcerated Avon and the murdered Stringer, there is a fundamental asymmetry in this tragedy. It is not just that Stringer is dead, paying the ultimate price for his ambition, but that he is, as Avon says, "a man without a country" (3.06). Stringer's attempts to become a legitimate businessman are in part thwarted by Clay Davis. Davis, a State Senator, is hired by Stringer to negotiate the complex world of city and state permits. However, this is actually a scam, playing on Stringer's credulity, inexperience, and desire for legitimacy; Davis is simply milking Stringer for money, scamming him for hundreds of thousands of dollars, a point that he eventually brags about (5.09). Stringer's search for legitimacy is doomed from the start; he fails to see the way in which drugs and business overlap. Stringer views the world of the drug trade to be a world of brutal survival, a world to be escaped as quickly as possible. In contrast to this, he sees the world of business to be governed by different rules, to be less bloody and thus more moral. He proves to be wrong on both counts: the drug world is more moral than he thinks (Avon, Brother Mouzone, and Omar are all governed by a code) and the business world is more ruthless than he imagines.

Stringer's demise illustrates the difference between the story that capital tells about its origins, stressing the moral basis of the distinction between the rich and the poor, and Marx's understanding of primitive accumulation, which stresses the role of violence and the primacy of conditions over intentions. The first is the narrative that Stringer believes in; it is why he thinks that his intelligence and hard work will translate into not only wealth but also legitimacy. In subscribing to such a narrative, Stringer fails to perceive the divided nature of capitalist society, in which, as Marx argues, the "ethics of political economy" are separate from the "political economy of ethics" (*1844 Manuscript* 151); each comprises a separate measure. Stringer's story is thus not just a retelling of the fundamental narrative of capitalism, in which the game stands in for the violent and honor-bound world of feudalism, but it becomes an allegory for life under capitalism. Stringer has proven to be too good a student, taking seriously capital's lessons about the virtues of the market and the idealization of the CEO—all of which proves to be his undoing. Stringer's lesson, learned too late, is the

lesson learned by every employee who has been downsized, or anyone who has fallen for the latest get-rich-quick scheme: the only value capital respects is money. What *The Wire* reveals is not the inner workings of the dangerous underworld of drugs, but the nature of our world and the narratives that sustain it.[1]

Note

1. This chapter benefits immeasurably from countless conversations with Jackson Nichols.

9

Networks of Affiliation: Familialism and Anticorporatism in Black and White

Stephen Lucasi

Mark Bowden's profile of David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, begins not with Simon's successes, but by enumerating his disappointments and professional grudges. Chief among these are experiences reporting for *The Baltimore Sun*, experiences rendered lamentable by "the editors and corporate owners who have . . . spent the last two decades eviscerating a great American newspaper" (Bowden 51). *The Sun* certainly receives its fair share of critique throughout the series, especially in its final season. Among the most nefarious characters introduced in Season Five is *Sun* Executive Editor James C. Whiting, who refers and defers to "Chicago" (the paper's corporate headquarters), who engineers the departures of veteran reporters in favor of younger, cheaper talent, and who parrots the corporate mantra "Do more with less" as a solution to the paper's escalating economic crises.

While Season Five of *The Wire* contains the most acerbic commentary on the corporatization of local economies and cultures, this same strident anticorporatism weaves its way throughout the series, intersecting often with another of its central themes: the deformation of traditional familial networks under conditions of socio-economic privation. The series of divorces, detentions, and deaths that shape the many familial