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Following the Money: The Wire and Distant American Studies

Abstract

In this essay, I argue that the pedagogical, or, more generally, heuristic potential of HBO's crime drama The Wire (2002/2008) is related to the specific institutional developments in post-network television, the show's didactic intention, and its focus on the delineation of the economic process, or what has been called its "openly class-based" politics. I will dedicate most time to the latter, as it represents a particularly welcome intervention for American Studies, a discipline in which the problem of class has usually been either marginalized, or articulated in terms of the historically hegemonic disciplinary paradigm, that of identity

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In this essay, I would like to approach HBO's crime drama The Wire (2002-2008) based on my experience of teaching the show in an American Studies class in Croatia. The course in which I try to work with it, Cultural Aspects of American Neoliberalism, deals with the gradual departure in the US from the legacy of the New Deal, with a special focus on the cultural articulations of economic inequality from the 1970s onwards. Using The Wire in the classroom is nothing new. It has been taught for years now in different courses, mostly in the US. A quick web search will show that it has appeared in curricula in film studies, media studies, urban studies, ethics, communication, criminal justice, sociology, social anthropology, and social work. The inclusion of the series in these various academic fields seems to confirm what I have learned from experience: the show offers plenty of teachable material. Moreover, the variety of pedagogical uses of The Wire speaks to the series' ability to serve many different disciplinary interests, both in the US and abroad. Here, I would like

to make a point precisely out of the apparent potential of The Wire to provide a common ground for the recognition of a diverse array of particular social positions and experiences.

My approach to this problem will be three-fold. I argue that the pedagogical, or, more generally, heuristic potential of The Wire is related to the specific institutional developments in post-network television, the show's own didactic intention, and its focus on the delineation of the economic process, or what has been called its "openly class-based" politics (Vest 179). I will dedicate most time to the latter, as it represents a particularly welcome intervention for American Studies, a discipline in which the topic of class has usually been either marginalized, or articulated in terms of the historically hegemonic disciplinary paradigm, that of identity. In what follows, I will comment on each of these aspects, as well as on the "institutional-technological" context of The Wire's debut in Croatian culture, as I find it to open interesting venues for thinking about the trans-national logics by which American Studies and its object are constituted. By focusing on the class process, The Wire manages to draw complex networks that impress viewers, and allow them to recognize their own position within capitalist social relations. Finally, let me add that these remarks are far from definitive, and should be understood as starting points for further discussion and research.

1.

The first aspect of The Wire I would like to mention could be called economic or institutional-technological. It has to do with the peculiar serial format of the show and the medium of pay or subscription television in which it appeared. This medium is structurally different from the classic network system that dominated US television production between 1960 and 1980. The network system was an "oligopoly in which three American networks, CBS... NBC... and ABC... secured control of production, distribution and exhibition through a 'tight vertical integration, similar to that of the movie studios before 1947'" (Pearson 12). This system, Roberta Pearson argues, "militated against artistry and originality" in television production (12). In the network era, shows had to be "written with commercial interruptions in mind, yielding 'mini- narratives' designed to reach a climax before the breaks" (Kelso 48). This model also required "safe" or "appropriate" environments for ads, making certain kinds of content either very difficult to show or simply difficult to see (often being relegated to late-night hours). Thus, the demands of advertisers put certain constraints on

the narrative form possible in television. The pay TV model, where the transaction between the producer and the audience takes place without the interference on the part of advertisers, allows for a different set of structural opportunities. As Tony Kelso writes, "subscriber-backed HBO has generally had the capacity to show greater respect for its audience than advertising-supported networks by more often not merely giving viewers what they are willing to watch . . . but what they really want to watch" (46). In this situation, in which more creative control, as well as more work and responsibility is given to writer-producers, television can become an important site of experimentation with cultural forms. HBO's innovative approach to television production has been noticed even by the experimental French filmmaker Chris Marker, who stated that he:

> *no longer watch[es] many films . . . I feed my hunger for fiction with what is by far the most accomplished source: those terrific American TV series like Deadwood, Firefly, or The Wire. . . . There is a knowledge in them, a sense of story and economy, of ellipses, a science of framing and of cutting, a dramaturgy, and an acting style that has no equal anywhere, and certainly not in Hollywood. (qtd. in Fridman)*

That such praise for the artistry of a traditionally lowbrow medium can come from an avant-gardist icon says a lot about the change television has undergone since the 1980s (HBO started airing in 1972, but its current model consolidated in the 1980s [cf. Leverette 2-7]). It is important to keep in mind that the direct relationship between HBO and its subscribers, apart from creating an environment for "quality programming," turned quality programming into cultural capital that HBO sells to its viewers. Kelso rightly points out that HBO shows "function, in part, as devices or product placements that augment HBO's brand" (51). In other words, the ad-free, innovative and fascinating shows such as The Wire are also themselves ads for HBO.

2.

The Wire's pedagogical usefulness has to do with the series' pronounced sense of engagement with problems of contemporary life. In the words of one of its creators, The Wire is "interested in economics, sociology and politics" (Simon, qtd. in Toscano and Kinkle). This puts at its heart an explanatory and didactic intention. In a sense, I think, it is possible to see The Wire as continuing

the tradition of literature of social reform, even as it constantly exposes real-life attempts at urban reform as mere political rhetoric that, as one critic put it, “perpetuate[s] a historic status quo while serving the ends of professional advancement,” primarily for politicians and businessmen (Alff 26). The ambiguous reformist impulse of The Wire is understandable considering the actually existing conditions of American neoliberal capitalism, especially the virtual non-existence of organized reformist political forces. In its second season, the series reflects on the state of the traditional organizational form dedicated to such a goal, the trade union. With this important qualification in mind, it could be argued that in certain ways, which include a sometimes melodramatic inclination, David Simon’s and Ed Burns’ work resembles the classic example of socially engaged (“muckraking”) photojournalism, Jacob Riis’s 1890 How the Other Half Lives. Like The Wire, this book takes as its subject the urban poor and their living and working conditions. (Riis was also, like David Simon, a police reporter.) However, in The Wire there is nothing even remotely similar to the policy recommendations with which Riis ends his book (cf. Riis 244-254). The public controversy stirred by the work of another native of Baltimore, Upton Sinclair, directly influenced contemporary US social policy when the pure food laws were passed in 1906. Sinclair, of course, was involved in the Socialist movement of his time, and could therefore ground his appeal to the readers of The Jungle to “Organize! Organize! Organize!” in a realistic expectation of social change (Sinclair 340). There is no similar call to counter the destructive social effects of “raw, unencumbered capitalism” in The Wire – logically so, since there is no real-life political subject that could realistically carry out such a vision. Instead, The Wire presents us with a fascinating, yet pessimistic diagnosis of the contemporary historical conjuncture.

3.

It is the representational potential of The Wire – the panoramic view of urban life and its structural conditions that it presents – that has garnered it praises from virtually all of the series’ critics. The Wire is very often considered as a particularly successful representation of social processes such as: urban decay, political corruption, or criminalization of poverty. The series is therefore described as a work of social realism, but bolder labels are also applied to it; critics speak of a “Sociological Imagination,” “Ethnographic Imaginary,” or even “Social Science-Fiction” in The Wire (cf. Penfold-

Mounce, Williams). The point of fascination in the substantial critical corpus on The Wire seems to be its ability to represent the totality of a complex social system, especially the intricate connections between various social processes. This is why The Wire seems to be particularly popular among social scientists, who often use it as an illustration or dramatization of the complex interdependences that characterize social interaction. For instance, Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson have argued that The Wire manages to do something academic work cannot:

[T]he show demonstrates the interconnectedness of systemic urban inequality in a way that can be very dif?cult to illustrate in academic works. Due to the structure of academic research, scholarly works tend to focus on many of these issues in relative isolation. ... With the freedom of artistic expression, The Wire is able to deftly weave together the range of forces that shape the circumstances of the urban poor while exposing deep inequality as a fundamental feature of broader social and economic arrangements. (2011: 166)

This passage is exemplary of the tendency to view the series as a privileged site for investigation of social issues. The observation that The Wire aims at grasping the complexity and, I would like to stress, totality of the social process is certainly correct. (It is important to note how the “freedom of artistic expression” should be understood in the technological-institutional context delineated above.) The authors’ acknowledgment that the disciplinary character of academic work represents an obstacle in grasping the “broader social and economic arrangements” is of no lesser importance. However, the sociological zeal for The Wire also points to certain limits of this fiction-as-illustration approach. This becomes apparent if we relate Wilson’s praise for the series to the fact that David Simon cites Wilson’s own influential study of urban poverty, When Work Disappears , as an inspiration and a “book [that] helped him to frame Season 2 of the series” (Mills). Simon clearly shares Wilson’s view that the root of urban inequality in the US is to be located in deindustrialization and the consequent loss of blue-collar jobs. He is explicit on this point:

Every single moment on the planet, from here on out, human beings are worth less. We are in a post-industrial age. We don’t need as many of us as we once did. So, if the first season was about devaluing the cops who knew their beats and the corner boys slinging drugs, then the second was about devaluing the longshoremen and their labour, the third about people who wanted to make

changes in the city, and the fourth was about kids who were being prepared, badly, for an economy that no longer really needs them. (Talbot)

Simon's economically based social vision, which finds its fictionalized form in The Wire, is built on the notion that a changed economy (loss of industry, manufacturing jobs) creates the conditions for the sort of social decline that is depicted in the series. This reference to deindustrialization points to the familiar periodization of the history of capitalism, according to which the origins of the present moment should be located in the economic and political crisis of the early 1970s, when the consolidation of the contemporary hegemony began. But Simon avoids using common terms such as "post-Fordism" or "neoliberalism," creating instead his own term for the sort of political-economic logic behind the decay of The Wire: "unencumbered capitalism." The Wire has thus rightly been said to represent "a nostalgic valorisation of the moral economy of work and craft" (Toscano and Kinkle). One of its themes is certainly "the end of 'real' labour," which gets substituted by a "vicious entrepreneurialism of neoliberal work (the drug trade) and informal economies of survival and expediency," as Toscano and Kinkle observe. To their convincing comment, that Simon is politically closer to Karl Polanyi than Karl Marx, I would add that the political-economic imagination of The Wire might also be summarily described as Keynesian.

The situation of deindustrialization and unemployment gives rise, spontaneously as it were, to the organization of an economy – the illegal drug market – that fills in the void created by these conditions. (In many ways, the drug economy in The Wire is the mirror image of the larger economy in which it is embedded.) The series insists that this void is not created only by a failing or changing formal economy but also by the erosion of the institutions of the state. For example, Season 4 focuses on the failing public school system, but this aspect should also include the failure of the media to work for public interest in Season 5. Clearly, The Wire situates "urban decline" in the context of longer historical processes, which include the decline of the welfare state. It is interesting to note how in The Wire the police – the state's repressive apparatus – takes on various caring functions of the state, such as when a chief of police adopts a "corner boy." That way, the series again dramatizes and illustrates the social process variously referred to as the "criminalization of poverty" or "the rise of the penal state." Writing about the stagnating or falling crime rate since the mid-1970s, and a four-fold increase in the incarceration rate in the same

period, Loic Wacquant argues that this development cannot be understood without considering the growing social insecurity from the 1970s onwards and the decline of welfare. The neoliberal "prisonfare" is then a way of managing the social excesses of the market economy:

> *The return of the prison to the institutional forefront of advanced society over the past quarter-century is a political response, not to rising criminal insecurity, but to the diffuse social insecurity wrought by the fragmentation of wage labor and the shakeup of ethnic hierarchy. ... The paternalist penalization of poverty aims to contain the urban disorders spawned by economic deregulation and to discipline the precarious fractions of the postindustrial working class. Diligent and belligerent programs of "law and order" entailing the enlargement and exaltation of the police, the courts, and the penitentiary have also spread across the First World because they enable political elites to reassert the authority of the state and shore up the deficit of legitimacy officials suffer when they abandon the mission of social and economic protection established during the Fordist-Keynesian era. (Wacquant 198)*

Wacquant, like others, also notes the disproportional number of black males in prisons, as well as the connection between this development and the "war on drugs." It is easy to see how such points are reinforced and elucidated by The Wire, and how this illustrative potential makes the series easily usable in the classroom in this respect too.

But limiting interpretive approaches to The Wire simply to its status as an illustration of existing sociological models or ongoing social trends prevents us from understanding the ways in which it moves beyond "reflection" in general, and beyond the sort of problematic mirroring involved in the vicious Wilson-Simon-Wilson circle in particular. It is my opinion that The Wire's structural insight goes beyond sociological illustration, and that the series, to paraphrase Susan Buck-Morss, "envisions capital" in its contemporary complexity, acknowledging its ambivalent, creative and destructive power. It is precisely the ability to envision the political-economic process that, I want to argue, allows The Wire to achieve the representational and heuristic power equally celebrated by its critics and viewers.

4.

The totalizing aspiration of The Wire, evident in its attempt at delineating the connections and social processes spanning various spheres of American society, also leads to the one serious obstacle when working with The Wire in the classroom. Although our department purchased the series on DVD and made it available to the students in the library, the fairly obvious problem of including sixty hours of television programming in a fifteen-week course remained. It certainly is possible to do useful work by focusing on only one season, or even a selection of episodes, but that would betray the systemic ambition of the series, and reduce it to illustration. I decided to solve this problem by asking students to watch the series on their own, in their free time. In the Croatian context, such a request can reasonably be made thanks to the existence of the informal economy of Internet file sharing, which includes not only TV programming and movies, but also – more often than academics would care to admit – scholarly literature.[1]

I am mentioning this as an aside, although the problem is not unrelated to The Wire, since the series, among other things, reflects on the emergence of an informal economy and its ability to act as a medium of social integration for those left outside of dominant or official channels of communication and economic transaction. Furthermore, the role of the file-sharing economy is worth emphasizing if we consider the key point for the consolidation of HBO's model of pay TV; namely the moment in 1986 when "HBO became the first TV station that scrambled its entire output, so it couldn't be pirated. This set the network apart as a premium service that had to be purchased. HBO's decision to encrypt made the ownership of original content, and its protection, a byword of US cultural capitalism" (Miller ix).

The technology of file sharing, which is often described as "pirating," clearly presents a challenge to such a logic of protection of digital "premium content" and its underlying economy, since it makes content more easily available to those who could not otherwise access it, or would need to invest significant, and often unavailable financial resources to do so.[2] In this way, The Wire was made available to mostly young Croatian viewers, achieving a cult status before it became legally and commercially available on TV channels. It is not irrelevant that The Wire has also appealed to the younger generation of Croatian researchers and political activists on the left, who are working in a society undergoing dramatic neoliberal reforms. In a 2001 issue of the cultural weekly Zarez, Iva Marčetić, Jovica Lončar, and Mislav Žitko wrote about The Wire from the position of their own

scholarly and activist interests – urban development, labour history, and political economy, respectively. This, then, is the institutional-technological context of the show's introduction in Croatia.

When asked about their explanation for the series' popularity, the students in my class would inevitably come up with an Aristotelian argument similar to those of social scientists mentioned above: the show made them realize "how the system works", e.g. how crime is connected to politics, how private interests drive public policies, etc. Now, the obvious problem with this explanation is that the students were talking about the Croatian situation, the mechanics of which they were able to recognize in an intensely local American story. This leads us to the question about the level of generalization on which the narrative of The Wire operates and which can make the story about the mechanics of urbanization of capital in Baltimore so easily recognizable in Croatia. On a more general or abstract level, we seem to be able to recognize the historical experience accumulated in The Wire as being akin to our own, even if the stories of The Wire remain firmly rooted in the streets of an American post-industrial city and the historical experience of its racialized populations. What appears as a slippage – between irreducibly different experiences and localities – turns out to be also a point of suture.

The level of generalization on which such a trans-national recognition can take place stems from the fact that The Wire manages to represent the process formative of a common reality. What lies behind the representational power and the totalizing ambition of The Wire is its dedication to tracing various social effects of accumulation and circulation of capital. Simply put, The Wire's focus on the economic (or class) process is responsible for the show's heuristic potential![3]

5.

In order to substantiate this claim, I would like to make several related remarks on some formal aspects of The Wire. The first one concerns the difficulty of categorizing it in terms of genre. While recognizing the series as a police procedural, Janica Tomić finds that its "rootedness in the social space" causes "the text to transgress the crime genre," move beyond the confines of the "police procedural," and become an "urban procedural" (247). "The Wire's hermeneutic project," Tomić writes, becomes "an investigation into the social genesis of crime" (252). These remarks highlight

The Wire's emphasis on the process – procedure of detection, genesis of crime – that becomes visible in the complex structural operations of a panoptical narrative that defies easy categorization. The multiple foci and story-lines that intersect and connect the five seasons of the series have also often led critics to speak about The Wire as a narrative "network" (Tomić 252). Patrick Jagoda has argued that The Wire belongs to a larger contemporary representational mode he terms the "network aesthetic": "The style of The Wire aligns with the core insight of social network analysis by representing a distributed system of social relations instead of focusing on a dominant protagonist," he argues. This allows the show to produce "something that aspires to [the] aesthetic of 'cognitive mapping'" (Jagoda 193).

Both "urban procedural" and "network aesthetic" represent conceptual innovations intended to grasp the dynamic structure of The Wire that – process-oriented and network-like – forms the basis for the series' mimetic potential. Jagoda's reference to Jameson's famous notion of "cognitive mapping" is particularly interesting, as it suggests that The Wire attempts to give a representational form to "that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (Jameson, qtd. in Jagoda 193). However, Jagoda insists on the structural moment of Jameson's definition, leaving out – in a move that has long become customary – his additional remark that the term "cognitive mapping" was originally "nothing but a code word for 'class consciousness': only it proposed the need for class consciousness of a new and hitherto undreamed of kind" (Jameson 49). Toscano and Kinkle, stressing explicitly the class inflection of the concept, make similar claims about The Wire's proximity to cognitive mapping: "The Wire can be understood as one [of] the most cogent attempts at producing a work classifiable under [the cognitive mapping] aesthetic." I think that the "creativity" and the ability to "cognitively map" US social reality in The Wire must be related to the fact that the organizing logic of its narrative structure is the creation and distribution of wealth. In the series' own terms, it can efficiently "cognitively map" reality because it "follows the money."

The expansive structural movement of The Wire is not entirely apparent from the beginning. The series opens as a classic police procedural: there is a drug case, a special unit is formed to solve it, and so on. The move towards narrative complexity starts when the police uncover the involvement of the street-level drug dealing with political structures running the city. In the housing

projects of West Baltimore, the driver of a city politician (Clay Davis) is found to be carrying a briefcase with $20,000 in cash. At this point, the unit commander (Cedric Daniels) has to make a choice: to follow the drugs, or to follow the money: “I’m bringing in a case that goes everywhere. ... See this is the thing that everyone knows and no one says. You follow the drugs, you get a drug case. You start following the money, you don’t know where you’re going” (“Lessons”). What the series does after this decisive moment – in the rest of the first and the following four seasons – is precisely that: it “follows the money,” or, in more general terms, the creation and distribution of wealth, the economic process at work. The activity of detection, now rearticulated as the mapping of the circuits of Baltimore’s political economy, pushes forward the plots of The Wire, and shapes the narrative and social web that is put on display in its complexity. Toscano and Kinkle called this The Wire’s “aesthetics of circulation,” carefully adding that the series also insists on “the latter’s opacity.”

This difficult envisioning of capital flows, where it both becomes visible and resists final narrative closure, might be understood as the series’ greatest achievement. John Kraniauskas makes a point of the opacity of the circulation of capital in The Wire in his excellent reading of one scene from the finale of Season 3. There, detectives Moreland and McNulty enter the apartment of the dead drug lord Stringer Bell, the self-made man and arch-entrepreneur of the series. They look in disbelief at the classy interior that reflects a sophisticated higher-middle class lifestyle. McNulty takes a book from the shelf – Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations – and comments: “Who the fuck was I chasing?” (“Mission Accomplished”). As Kraniauskas notes, the detective’s problem is that there is “nothing to be decoded, no clues,” there are no traces of crime in this scene, and no culprit. “This is because Stringer has ‘laundered’ his lifestyle,” and made all the connections to the ways in which his wealth was accumulated invisible, Kraniauskas concludes (31). The detective’s confusion and the volume in his hands suggest that what the unfolding of the plot had made visible up to that point was precisely the processes of accumulation of capital. In retrospect, the criminal investigation turns out to have been revolving around the process of primitive accumulation.

The detective’s question also alludes to the representational strategy of The Wire: namely, its intention to delineate the economic process, in which the characters with their identifiable characteristics figure as almost incidental embodiments, or local effects of a more general and

impersonal process. Of course, a story can hardly be told without protagonists, but The Wire's emphasis on what Jagoda termed the "distributed system of social relations" follows from its dialectical privileging of the dynamic process or structure over subject position. That is why Toscano and Kinkle can say that The Wire allows us to explore "something like a 'realism of abstraction'" – it delineates an "abstract" structure of capital, which is shown in its specific historical and local articulation.

In other words, the economic process is shown to be the force shaping the reality The Wire represents, as well as the force shaping the structure of its narrative. By thus putting on display the formative force of capital, the series enables its viewers to begin to "cognitively map" not only the world of The Wire but also their own, to the extent that they too inhabit a social reality structured by the processes of capital. This emphasis on the processual character and formative power of capital allows The Wire to operate on a level of generalization that enables it to realize its didactic intention, and engage viewers with different histories and from distant localities. The trans-national movement of The Wire, carried by the digital technologies of globalization, can despite its open pessimism be understood as a step in the process of cognitive mapping in Jameson's sense.

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[1] We do not have any data about the importance of this informal economy for Croatian higher education and academic research, although that would certainly be interesting to know.

[2] The topic of US The topic of US cultural production and the economy of file-sharing would certainly deserve a separate and larger research. Still, the significance of this pervasive practice for The Wire's popularity has not gone unnoticed. In a brief but significant commentary, Becky Hogge suggests the series' "unlikely success" in the UK depended on "illicit file-sharing." She asks: "[I]s it possible that, in the case of Wire illicit file-sharers, p2p did more good than harm? ... A show that demands so much from its audience could well have been lost in the irregular broadcast slots it originally occupied on HBO – let alone on FX over here. ... And if it was illicit file-sharing that facilitated the oh-so-slow amplification of critical acclaim, then do the sales that the series-makers are now seeing in DVDs make up for any lost, legal viewers at the time?" She argues that the case of The Wire demonstrates that "the relationship between online copyright infringement and the creative arts is just as complex as that between the criminals, police and elected officials of Baltimore" (45).

[3] This argument basically falls in line with those readings of The Wire which insist on its political-economic thematic focus (cf. Kraniauskas, Toscano and Kinkle).

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