Before, and at a notably accelerated pace since the unfortunate events of 2001, the notion of “life” in the United States has been reduced to an abstract reference to health and safety. Security has taken precedence over quality of life, used as an excuse for the growing poverty and inequality facing people in the US today. This obsession with security, coupled by an increasingly superficial news media has resulted in an essentialist approach to political questions, while complex portrayals of life inside the United States are few and far between. HBOs television series *The Wire*, as an intricate, multi-layered portrayal of life in post-industrial America, works as an exception to this rule. In the following contribution I will attempt to describe the ideological construct of the biopolitical nation-state and its role in the creation of racialized risk-objects, and how *The Wire* serves as an antidote this essentialist, depoliticized, and absolutely repressive political formation. For the scope of this particular article I’ve chosen to forgo an in-depth analysis of the series in order to focus on the meta-functioning of the program in the current political and media landscape in the US.

**Biopolitics**

In Foucault’s lecture “Society Must be Defended” he discusses what he perceives to be a historical development of political right as practiced by the state. In essence, this change is characterized by the transition from the right of the sovereign state to what he vaguely refers to as the biopolitical state. He explains that “The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die.” With regards to policies of the state towards its population, he describes the biopolitical as dealing “with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem” Society was no longer something to be only disciplined, but to be regulated as well.

Governmentality can be thought of as the modus operandi of the biopolitical state. Judith Butler, discussing the ways in which sovereign power emerges within the context of governmentality, writes:

> Governmentality is broadly understood as a mode of power concerned with the maintenance and control of bodies and persons, the production and regulation of persons and populations, and the circulation of goods insofar as they maintain and restrict the life of the population. Governmentality operates through policies and departments, through managerial and bureaucratic institutions, through the law, when the law is understood as “a set of tactics”, and through forms of state power, although not exclusively.

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The biopolitical realm that is administered through the system of governmentality is that of the mass - not society in the sense that it is comprised of individual social beings, but rather a mass of biological beings, even though the effects of policies or institutions that come into being on the level of the biopolitical have effects on the individual and the social relationships between individuals. Foucault maintains:

…the mechanisms introduced by biopolitics include forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures. And their purpose is not to modify any given phenomenon as such, or to modify a given individual insofar as he is an individual, but essentially, to intervene at the level of their generality. …There is absolutely no question relating to an individual body, in the way that discipline does. It is therefore not a matter of taking the individual at the level of individuality but, on the contrary, of using overall mechanisms and acting in such a way as to achieve overall states of equilibration or regularity…

The biopolitical consideration of a population in turn serves to legitimize the abstract concept of nation-state. Notions of health, safety, and prosperity (for example) are abstracted from the individual and re-introduced on the level of national superstructure. Biopolitical speech appropriates the word “we” and empties it of all specificity and personality, conjuring up a mass that is essentially “… a new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that while they might not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted.” It is important to note that the biopolitical state is legitimized by diverse societal actors who are not necessarily direct representatives of the elected government. Butler writes:

Governmentality thus operates through state and non-state institutions and discourses that are legitimized neither by direct elections nor through established authority. Marked by a diffuse set of strategies and tactics, governmentality gains its meaning and purpose from no single source, no unified sovereign subject. Rather, the tactics characteristic of governmentality operate diffusely, to dispose and order populations, and to produce and reproduce subjects, their practices and beliefs, in relation to specific policy aims.

In this sense, the notion of the nation-state as biopolitical abstraction is the ideological end product of governmentality.

Foucault argues that biopolitical governmentality does not exclude the disciplinary however, but rather incorporates it. As Foucault asserts: “What is more, the two sets of mechanisms - one disciplinary and the other regulatory - do not exist at the same level. Which means of course that they are not mutually exclusive and can be articulated with each other.” Butler identifies the emergence of sovereign power within a system of governmentality as heterogeneous and unpredictable, like the rogue police officer enacting sovereign power in a temporary suspension of the law:
...because our historical situation is marked by governmentality, and this implies, to a certain degree, a loss of sovereignty, that loss is compensated through the resurgence of sovereignty within the field of governmentality. Petty sovereigns abound, reigning in the midst of bureaucratic army institutions mobilized by aims and tactics of power they do not inaugurate or fully control. ...Governmentality is the condition of this new exercise of sovereignty in the sense that it first establishes law as a “tactic”, something of instrumental value, and not “binding” by virtue of its status as law.9

The contemporary strategies of the “war on drugs” and the subsequent “war on terror”, both waged by US government simultaneously on and with its citizens, represent biopolitical campaigns that rely on and employ the tactics of governmentality to simultaneously fulfill particular policy aims while reinforcing and legitimizing the existence of the nation-state.

In an attempt to reconcile the use of disciplinary techniques within the logic of biopolitical governmentality, which is concerned with life and the maintenance of an abstract, superstructural equilibrium or homeostasis, Foucault introduces the notion of threat as rationale for the killing of individuals - killing not referring exclusively to actual death, but “every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection and so on.”10 The biopolitical threat exists on the abstract level of the superstructure, which then in turn justifies individual disciplinary use of power. “This is not, then, a military, warlike, or political relationship, but a biological relationship. And the reason this mechanism can come into play is that the enemies who have to be done away with are not adversaries in the political sense of the term; they are threats, either external or internal, to the population and for the population.”11

This depoliticization of threat is achieved through the biopolitical ideological rhetoric of public health, safety, and security that serves to refuse, suppress, and neutralize questions of inequality and political injustice of any nature. The notion of the existence of a biopolitical threat characterizes both the war on drugs and the war on terror in that while in both cases, race (more specifically the visual markings through which race is supposedly identified) and cultural identity play explicit roles in the identification of the risk-object, a biopolitical rationalization for the existence of the threat - to national health and security for example - serves to shroud otherwise blatantly racist, xenophobic policies, articulating, with the help of the media, the legitimation of these policies.

In his article “From Biopower to Biopolitics”, which is a further exploration of Foucault’s notion of biopolitical governmentality, Mauricio Lazzarato suggests that the development of biopolitics can be seen as “the necessity to assure an immanent and strategic coordination of forces.”12 The stage for the immanent and strategic coordination of forces that became known as “the war on drugs” in the US was set by the administrations of the late sixties and early seventies, partially as an excuse to integrate federal power with local policing. From the beginning, the war on drugs took on a biopolitical form in that illicit drugs were construed as a threat to the general health and safety of the national population.
as biopolitical mass. In a 1969 Presidential address regarding the threat of drugs to the nation, Richard Nixon clearly outlined the biopolitical nature of the future war on drugs:

> Within the last decade, the abuse of drugs has grown from essentially a local police problem into a serious national threat to the personal health and safety of millions of Americans. … A national awareness of the gravity of the situation is needed: a new urgency and concerted national policy are needed at the federal level to begin to cope with this growing menace to the general welfare of the United States.¹³

The creation of this national myth¹⁴ about the dangers and effects of drugs was accompanied and legitimized by the creation of government bodies and agencies such as the then Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (what is now the Drug Enforcement Administration - DEA) and the modification and introduction of laws such as the Hobbs Interstate Commerce Act and the RICO Act¹⁵ that facilitated the functioning of the justice system and law enforcement agencies in relation to drugs and drug crimes. During the early eighties, the Reagan administration put the war on drugs into full swing with the creation of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force Program and the infamous Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984, which included the first mandatory minimum sentences, increased maximum fine levels for drug cases, and included new assets forfeiture statutes. The asset forfeiture statutes “expanded the governments ability to seize property and cash from convicted - or even accused - drug dealers, in civil or criminal court”¹⁶ and proved to be a great motivation (as a source of income) for police forces around the country to “fight” drugs.

The criminal justice aspect of the drug war was accompanied by fervent anti-drug social campaigns like Nancy Reagan’s famous “Just Say No” campaign, the DARE program (Project Drug Abuse Resistance Education), project STAR and project ALERT.¹⁷ These programs educated children and adults alike on the supposed biological and social effects of drug use, along with its criminal consequences, laying the responsibility on the individual/would-be potential user to ensure the health and safety of the population/nation. More importantly, these social crusades ensured that drugs became a codified societal threat.

Drugs do not act on their own, however, and the success of the war on drugs relied heavily on the creation of an object of risk, someone or group of people who could bear the signification of threat. Allen Feldman, in his essay “On the Actuarial Gaze: From 9/11 to Abu Graib”, refers to Ulrich Beck and the creation of symbols of risk:

> Ulrich Beck’s cultural symbols through which society ’sees’ risk, are not solely cognitive ideations, but have to be fabricated from concrete circumstances and bodies, and then forcefully retro-branded onto social subjects and spaces that are seen as originating and circulating risk.¹⁸
The object of the war on drugs was what criminologist Steven Spitzer referred to as "social dynamite". Social dynamite, as Christian Parenti goes on to describe it in his book “Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis”, refers to:

...those who pose an actual or potential political challenge. They are that population which threatens to explode: the impoverished low-wage working class and unemployed youth who have fallen below the statistical radar, but whose spirits are not yet broken and whose expectations for a decent life and social inclusion are dangerously alive and well. ... This is the class from which the Black Panthers and the Young Lords arose in the sixties and from which sprang the gangs of the 1980’s. ... Thus social dynamite is a threat to the class and racial hierarchies upon which the private enterprise system depends. ....controlling them requires both a defensive policy of containment and an aggressive policy of direct attack and active destabilization. ... This is the class, or more accurately the caste, because they are increasingly people of color - which must be constantly undermined, divided, intimidated, attacked, discredited and ultimately kept in check with what Fanon called the 'language of naked force.'

In the case of the war on drugs, the bearers of threat, the cultural symbols of risk that fueled the biopolitical discourses of public health and safety with regards to drugs were for the most part (although not exclusively - Asian and Latino youth are also included) young, poor, urban, male and black.

The creation of a risk object - the bearer of biopolitical threat - implicitly involves the de-acknowledgement of the right to have rights. Rights, or human rights, are the set of codified principles through which an individual is assured full and equal participation in the social and political life, and the denial of these rights is a form of killing according to Foucault. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt clarifies the consequences of the denial of the right to have rights:

The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective. Something much more fundamental than freedom and justice, which are rights of citizens, is at stake when belonging to the community into which one is born is no longer a matter of course and not belonging no longer a matter of choice...This extremity, and nothing else, is the situation of people deprived of human rights. They are deprived not of the right to freedom but of the right to action.

While referring to the condition of statelessness - of legally not belonging, or being legally dispossessed of the right to belong to and participate in the nation-state one finds themselves in - this condition essentially describes the growing prison population (including ex-prisoners) in the US. The war on drugs
has played a significant role in the creation of a body of rights depraved people - people who no longer fully belong, but who are ‘amongst’ us.

Most recently, the Pew Center on the States released a report stating that one out of every one hundred American adults is currently behind bars in the US. Breaking these statistics down categorically, they reveal that one out of every nine black males between the ages of twenty and thirty-four are imprisoned. Additionally, according to the Department of Justice, at the end of 2006, over five million adults were under some form of parole or probation. Of these five million, more than a quarter were under supervision for a drug law violation. Of those released who had been convicted of a drug violation, over 60% are likely to be re-incarcerated. The productivity of the war on drugs is manifested in this growing body of rights-deprived people, the rest-product of this biopolitical campaign, who on a whole represent the racism institutionalized in the war on drugs.

Feldman goes on to write that “Bio-political policing does not eradicate its object, but requires its managed reproduction within discreet security and publicity apparatuses; the ongoing retrieval and presentation of threat-profiles legitimates the security archive.” This ongoing presentation and retrieval has as its aim and result the training of the visual evidence of suspicion. Skin color undoubtedly plays a significant role as a visual signifier of potential risk in the war on drugs.

**The Wire**

The proliferation of all forms of media over the past decades has aided in codifying the existence of a national biopolitical entity, as well as the supposed threats to it. Television in particular has played a significant role in the formation of the risk object, and more particularly, the racialized risk object. Examples include weekly television doku-dramas like *Cops, LAPD,* and *True Stories of the Highway Patrol* that consistently present the police officer - often white, but not always - as the representative of order and public good, the guardian of national health and safety, venturing into the “bad” neighborhood or stopping the suspicious car. The persons they’re pursuing - the young, poor, non-white - are supposedly, in the eyes of the law, “innocent until proven guilty”. On the contrary, these depoliticized individuals are already guilty of being the object of risk, the biopolitical threats to health and safety, long before they enter the courtroom.

The war on drugs is a biopolitical construction of the state as a response to a constructed, and depoliticized biopolitical threat, a construction that produces a reality that people are subject to and exist inside, where those considered to be the objects of risk are usually deprived the chance to represent themselves as something other than that. It is within the political and social reality created by the war on drugs that the HBO television series *The Wire* takes place - both on screen and as part of the political and social reality of viewers in the US.
The Wire, unlike the aforementioned programs that rely on and reinforce the normalization of the war on drugs and the overall dehumanization of the object of risk, is a dramatization of life inside this constructed biopolitical conundrum. The Wire is set in the city of Baltimore, Maryland. According to the Baltimore Sun, of the 23,342 people incarcerated in the state of Maryland, seventy percent are in on drug and drug-related offences, and of these seventy percent, ninety-two percent are African American. Over the past 30 years, the city of Baltimore has:

...lost 28 percent of its population, and manufacturing jobs declined from 20 percent of available work to 8 percent. In 2006, 19.5 percent of Baltimoreans lived in poverty, and, as of 2000, 43.4 of blacks were absent from the labor force (the city is 64.4 percent black). Poverty is a fact of life for 22.9 percent of blacks, 30.6 percent of black children, and almost half of all female-headed black households with children five years old and younger. Only 35 percent of Baltimore students graduate high school within four years. It has the nation’s second highest increase in new aids cases. A massive drug economy serves an estimated 50,000 addicts, and there are roughly that number of vacant housing units. And Baltimore’s 2006 homicide rate of 43.3 per 100,000 residents was one of the highest in the country, behind only five cities, including New Orleans and Detroit.

The Wire embraces these facts and makes the complexity and inter-relatedness of them its focus. It functions as critique of the nation-state administered through the logic biopolitical governmentality in-so-far as it deconstructs the notions of national health and safety, revealing the social effects of policies that are designed to ensure the survival of the nation-state at the expense of the population.

In The Wire, objects of risk - for the most part young, inner city black men - are transformed into living, breathing people who actively struggle with questions of ethics as well as survival. In fact, the majority of the characters and situations reflect the contradictory (yet prevalent) condition of simultaneous subject/object positioning - both agent and victim. Which is not to pass judgment upon or to say that the existence of these simultaneous positionings denotes equality of individuals, on the contrary, but rather, to quote Patricia Williams in The Alchemy of Race and Rights, to imply the fact “That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance.”

In The Wire, it is nearly impossible to form absolute alliances with characters based upon their status as threat or non-threat, precisely because those categories are rendered unintelligible. Instead, the viewer is asked to take a closer look at the subtleties and interplay of race, class, gender, sexuality, education, ability, and status as user/non-user, while at the same time understanding the larger framework of institutionalized inequality based on these same categories.
In *The Wire* there is no such thing as good and evil as clear-cut moral categories. There is no heroine or hero, but a cast of at least thirty significant central characters. The police, a far cry from the guardians of national health and safety, are a non-unified mass of non-uniquely dysfunctional individuals plagued by racism and sexism, not to mention alcoholism, prone to deploying sovereign power. The drug dealers are well-organized and ruthless business people with highly developed codes and refined business practices. Government officials are mostly corrupt and drug addicts mostly kind-hearted. Some of the most principled characters are queer, and most of the characters struggle with relationship issues or love drama of some kind. It is through this ambiguity and contradiction that the characters are humanized, allowing the viewer to empathize with each of them on some level despite, and most likely because of their flaws.

The structure of the programme itself is that of an epic novel. It is a text that can be read from beginning to end, interwoven with sub-plots and sub-text. Each 60 minute episode is a chapter in the novel, each one leading from and into the next from beginning to end. Through its sixty chapters spread over five seasons, the Wire constructs a city in the midst of the crisis of the war on drugs as it is related to poverty, failing industry, unemployment, drug addiction, failing schools, corrupt politicians, and insincere media institutions. Fiction allows for the combination of the real and the fantastical, in this case resulting in the strikingly metaphoric, prophetic creation that is often compared to social realist texts like Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. The world of *The Wire* closely resembles the outside world, from the locations to the local dialect to the music flowing out of the open window of a passing car. The issues the characters grapple with - relationship issues, addiction, unemployment - are real issues. The program as a location in televisual space functions as a sort of Foucaultian heterotopia, where “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”

According to media theorist Alexandra Juhasz, realism as a strategy in filmic narration:

> …can function in any of a number of ways, including, but not limited to, the confirmation, perpetuation, and reflection of bourgeois, patriarchal reality. It can testify to alternative, marginal, subversive, or illegal realities; it can critique the notion of reality. To portray the world with a realistic film style is not necessarily to imply that one believes that the “reality” portrayed is fixed, stable, complete, or unbiased, although it probably means that one has an opinion about what this reality means, what it feels like, how it functions, or how it might change.

What fiction allows for is the structuring of these reals into a story that will draw the reader/viewer in and keep their attention. Paolo Carpignano writes that “the space of television can only be analyzed as a cultural construct, as a space that can only be understood in terms of social relations of communication, and defined by the sense of place of its inhabitants.” Indeed the act of watching and listening to television involves an active process of mediation by the viewer. In the case of *The Wire*, this mediation involves the intimate
confrontation with the lives and situations of characters who reflect the complexities and contradictions of contemporary US society, serving as an antidote to the depoliticized, depersonalized rhetoric of good and evil characteristic of the biopolitical nation-state. Overall, The Wire is not about resolution. It is not a prescription for how to fix a broken society. The resolution is elsewhere, in the residue of affect that lingers long after the television is turned off, and in the viewers’ relationship to the characters, which is an empathetic relationship exactly because the characters are flawed, ambiguous and contradictory figures.

Empathy with others, as Homi Bhabha has noted,\(^{35}\) is what creates the condition for the possession of rights (what we would call human rights). Empathy is essential for the acknowledgement by others of one’s right to have rights. The creation of the risk object involves the de-acknowledgement of the right to have rights, doing so at the level of the multiplicity. *The Wire* gives faces and lives to this multiplicity, inviting the viewer to engage with characters who never fully satisfy and more often than not disappoint, leaving the viewer to empathetically contemplate situations and decisions which resemble the real world. With this in mind, *The Wire* as a televisual text is a small step in the reversal of the ideological construction of the biopolitical nation-state, filling the currently too empty void between good and evil, and undoing some of the stereotypes and myths constructed by the institutionalized racism of the war on drugs in the process.

Notes

2. Foucault: 245. \[\text{\footnote{[\ref{fn:2}]}\]
4. Foucault: 245-6. \[\text{\footnote{[\ref{fn:4}]}\]
5. In the sense that biopolitical concepts such as birthrate, deathrate, average age, etc. assume and therefore legitimize the nation-state as a “natural” biological entity. \[\text{\footnote{[\ref{fn:5}]}\]
6. Foucault: 245. \[\text{\footnote{[\ref{fn:6}]}\]
7. Butler: 52. \[\text{\footnote{[\ref{fn:7}]}\]
8. Foucault: 250. \[\text{\footnote{[\ref{fn:8}]}\]
10. Foucault: 256. \[\text{\footnote{[\ref{fn:10}]}\]
11. Foucault: 256. \[\text{\footnote{[\ref{fn:11}]}\]

14. Roland Barthes, “Myth Today” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984) In this usage of the term myth I refer to Roland Barthes’ explanation in Myth Today, specifically the passage where he refers to myth as depoliticized speech: “(myth) abolishes the complexity of human acts … it does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them … It gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but a statement of fact. … it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.” [↩]

15. Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*. (London: Verso, 2001), 9-13. The Hobbs Interstate Commerce Act was redefined to make drug trafficking a federal crime and the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act introduced secret grand juries and targeting was used against the political left. [↩]

16. Parenti: 50. [↩]


19. Parenti: 46. [↩]


21. In this instance, the deprivation of rights refers to, for example, the fact that in 47 states in the US, prisoners are denied the right to vote, 32 states disenfranchise felons on parole, in 29 states those on probation as well, and 10 states felony offenders are stripped of their voting rights for life. For more information, see for example the report “Losing the Vote: The Impact of Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States” published by The Sentencing Project and Human Rights Watch. Available at http://www.hrw.org/reports98/vote/. And that fact that per the “Aid Elimination Provision” of the Higher Education Act enacted in 1998, people convicted of drug crimes are not eligible for federal student aid. See the ACLU article Injustice 101: Higher Education Act Denies Financial Aid to Students with Drug Convictions, available at http://www.aclu.org/drugpolicy/youth/10753res20020614.html. [↩]


24. According to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, the recidivism rate in 1994 for drug offenders was 66.7%, the most recent statistic to be produced by the government. The report is available at http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/reentry/recidivism.htm.


26. In the sense that the issue of drug addiction could be addressed in a way that does not include criminalization and incarceration.

27. By that I mean as a risk object, although the other extreme is also true—that they are portrayed only as victims, which also serves to deny agency and responsibility, and is just as unjustified.


29. I owe the inspiration for this quote to Avery Gordon, who introduces her book Ghostly Matters with it.

30. There is a large body of scholarly work on empathy, much of it related to psychology. For my purposes here I associate my use of the term empathy with the four characteristics that Amy Coplan describes in her article “Empathetic Engagement with Narrative Fictions” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 62, No. 2, Special Issue: Art, Mind, and Cognitive Science (Spring, 2004): 141-152.


34. This is not to exclude other forms of media, in fact the computer screen may be more significant than the television screen given the proliferation of peer-to-peer exchange of media files.


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