Common Ground: The Political Economy of The Wire

Judd Franklin | 29 May 2009 | 4-The Wire Files [May 09]

There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America. There’s the United States of America. There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.
- Barack Obama

If Snot Boogie always stole the money, why’d you let him play?
Got to. This America, man.
– Dialogue from episode one, The Wire

When, after much hectoring, my friend Winston finally watched The Wire, he asked my wife and I why ‘two nice, well-to-do white people, who live in the suburbs, like the show so much.’ My awkward answer was as ‘white’ as it could possibly be: that watching The Wire alleviated a sense of neglect, guilt and fear that had built up within me over the years. My wife’s answer was subtler: she grew up in Oakland. Her response and mine both reflected a sense of cross-cultural sympathy, but where mine depicted a world of differences that need to be overcome, hers depicted a shared world that is somehow not shared enough.

Now that he’s watched The Wire and is attached to the show as we are, Winston uses its stories as a sort of political shorthand. For instance, when he talks to people about the intelligence required in the drug world, Winston points to Stringer Bell, who he describes as ‘a two-bit drug dealer and a two-bit businessman and not really that good at either.’ The Wire offers a great many such transitional figures: people whose principles are at odds with the organizational systems in which they find themselves. Bell’s ambitions for legitimacy leave him alienated both inside and out of the drug world; detective Jimmy McNulty’s restless desire to combat intelligent criminals eventually costs him his job and his family; police captain Bunny Colvin’s disgust at the decay of his neighborhood drives him to try legalizing drugs, bringing the wrath of the police establishment and unprecedented depths of despair; Frank Sobotka’s desire to bring work to his union brings corruption to the piers and ultimately costs his life. These characters emphatically reinforce the point that anybody trying to change business as usual in an American city grapples with corrupt and ruthless systems. As The Wire’s blind bartender Butchie says, ‘conscience do cost.’

The show’s approach, rooted in Greek tragedy, allows the viewer to see such outsider individuals not as representatives of races or classes, but as cogs in complex institutional machines. David Simon, creator of The Wire, described these tragic characters as ‘doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality.’ Simon does not shy away from discussing the political implications of this tragic narrative structure. He notes that he writes for the people living the event, people to whom he and the show’s other writers can relate: ‘we are of the other America or the America that has been left behind in the postindustrial age.’ Here, Simon is evoking the language of Democratic senator John Edwards in his description of ‘two
Americas’. The key difference between Simon’s use of the ‘two Americas’ concept differs from Edwards’ in the same way my wife’s response to Winston differs from my own: Simon draws himself into the ‘other America.’

My brother, a man preternaturally careful about the opinions he draws pointed out that the show was written by, and most likely for wealthy, well-educated, mostly white Americans who have had precisely the sort of opportunities not available to the ‘other America.’ My brother extrapolated from this point that one should not take too much to heart the supposed political implications of the story, but this point reflects precisely Simon’s political objective: to devalue the division between the ‘two Americas’ by bringing the America that he was born into to the same community meeting as the one he now lives amidst.

This effort on the part of Simon and the rest of The Wire team requires an effort to reduce the primacy of racial divisions. The people within each institution depicted in The Wire are shown perpetually subsuming racial difference beneath the effort to survive against the system. Some of these points are made in joking asides, such as when detective Bunk Moreland is mocked for wearing a lacrosse sweatshirt to work, to which he responds, ‘what, a brother can't run around with a stick?’ or when one drug dealer tells another that business is ‘slow as a white man in slippers.’ At other times, these lines are politically charged, but undercut, as in a union meeting in which a black union leader draws resentment when he calls a crooked business man ‘that Polock motherfucker.’ Amidst jeers, he audits the comment, out of deference for the union. Race is always a presence and an issue, but it is subsumed in the bigger problems of the social environment.

All this is not to say that race disappears as an issue in The Wire, just that it is a particular difference that does not matter to the system. Sobotka has to hold together the racially divisive politics of the stevedores union in order to continue running illegal drugs through the piers to raise money for the union. At one point, he uses harsh rhetoric to convince a black stevedore to support him as union president for one more year: ‘Black, white. What’s the difference, Nat? Until we get that fuckin’ canal dredged, we’re all niggers, pardon my French.’ In this vision of the world, racial tensions do not disappear, but they are only a peripheral pressure on Sobotka, who finds himself a hinge in the drug trade that is devastating inner city Baltimore - which in turn threatens the futures of his son and nephew. Sobotka sees his crisis as a matter of class rather than race. He berates the lobbyist he has hired with the drug money: ‘…down here it’s still who’s you’re old man ‘til you got kids your own, and then it’s whose your son. But after the horror movie I seen today: robots. Piers full of robots. My kid’ll be lucky if he’s even punching numbers five years from now…. It breaks my heart that there’s no future for the Sobotkas on the waterfront.’ Sobotka’s efforts are made in the name of family and class, but they are all subsumed in institutional change. As his situation completely unravels, Sobotka complains that ‘we used to make shit in this country. Build shit. Now we just put our hand in the next guy’s pocket.’ Simon, in a conversation with conservative thinkers, makes this point explicitly.
For 35 years, you’ve systematically deindustrialized these cities. You’ve rendered them inhospitable to the working class, economically. You have marginalized a certain percentage of your population, most of them minority, and placed them in a situation where the only viable economic engine in their hypersegregated neighborhoods is the drug trade. Then you’ve alienated them further by fighting this draconian war in their neighborhoods, and not being able to distinguish between friend or foe and between that which is truly dangerous or that which is just illegal. And you want to sit across the table from me and say ‘What’s the solution?’ and get it in a paragraph? The solution is to undo the last 35 years, brick by brick. How long is that going to take? I don’t know, but until you start it’s only going to get worse.10

The philosophy that Simon is expressing here is summed up in a hip-hop aphorism: ‘don’t hate the player, hate the game.’ This universalizing - albeit harsh - message is central to the great political value of *The Wire*: no matter your race, creed or profession, the system will have its way with you.11

Recently, Barack Obama cited *The Wire* as his favorite television show. Obama called the show fascinating, likely recognizing elements of its depiction of the American city from his time as a community organizer in south Chicago. But in its unflinching perspective connecting politicians, drug dealers, businessmen and all sorts of institutional corruption, the show could never overtly inform national policy in America. Still, Obama noted that he was particularly fascinated by Omar Little, the gay drug thief. Obama cited Omar’s capacity to embody seemingly contradictory qualities: ‘He’s a gay gangster who only robs drug dealers and then gives back. He’s sort of a Robin Hood. And he’s the toughest, baddest guy on the show, but he’s gay.’ Obama seems taken by the idea that a person can maintain an ethical standard outside of the system, alienating both people in his own community - through his homosexuality and willingness to cooperate with the law12 - and in society at large - through his illegal activities. *The Wire* posits, through Omar, that there is a way of functioning in American politics that transcends the relative pettiness of race-bating and class warfare. The show kills Omar in the final season, a casualty of changing times. For his own part, Obama is careful to hedge the implications of his ‘fascination’ with Omar: ‘That’s not an endorsement…he’s not my favorite person.’13

Notes

4. Hornby, Nick. ‘Interview with David Simon.’ The Believer, August 2007, 72. ‘The Wire is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces’. [→]

5. Hornby 72 [←]

6. Hornby 72 [←]


8. ‘Backwash.’ The Wire. HBO, July 13, 2003. The black leader does not disagree, but also does not back down on the racial language, respond ‘Or Polocks, pardon mine’. [←]

9. ‘Bad Dreams.’ The Wire. HBO, August 17, 2003. [←]


11. Put another way, when Cedric Daniels explains to his wife why he took on a complex murder investigation, he proclaims: ‘I love the job. I can’t help it.’ To which his wife replies, ‘The job doesn’t love you’

   (‘Backwash.’ The Wire. HBO. July 13, 2003. [←]

12. views such as these are prominent throughout Internet chat on The Wire: ‘hey dat nigga omar was a faggot and a snitch but he was so gangsta he didnt even giva a fuk….. any nigga had a problem wit dat shit he put gun 2 they head and itll b over…he was loyal 2 his niggas, wasnt afraid wut ppl had 2 say bout him and wasnt afraid 2 b him self and dats wut makes him a real nigga’ hayward101. YouTube - The Wire - Omar: Let’s Bang

   Out. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gLvic55FXs, September, 2008. [←]


   Mon, Jan 14, 2008. [←]

Article printed from darkmatter Journal: http://www.darkmatter101.org/site

URL to article: http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/common-ground-the-political-economy-of-the-wire/