

# **“No One Wins. One Side Just Loses More Slowly”: *The Wire* and Drug Policy**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents a cultural analysis of HBO's drama series, *The Wire*. It is argued here that, as a cultural text, *The Wire* forms a site of both containment *and* resistance, of hegemony *and* change with recourse to the regulation of illicit drug markets. In this sense *The Wire* constitutes an important cultural paradigm of drug policy debates, one that has significant heuristic implications regarding both the present consequences and future directions of illicit drug policy. Ultimately, it is demonstrated below that through its representations of the tensions and antagonisms characteristic of drug control systems, *The Wire* reveals larger predicaments of governance faced by neoliberal democracies today.

## **Keywords**

Cultural criminology, drugs, regulation, representations, *The Wire*

## Introduction

Real is pretend, and pretend is real.

From the autobiography of Felicia ‘Snoop’ Pearson (Pearson and Ritz, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

Recent years have seen the significant growth of criminological interest in various forms of media and their symbolic and textual meanings. Photographic images (Carrabine, 2012), children’s cartoons (Kort-Butler, 2012), video games (Groombridge, 2008), and films (O’Brien et al., 2005; Tzanelli et al., 2005; Rafter, 2007) have all been fruitfully investigated with recourse to the role(s) they play in the construction and development of public understandings of crime and justice. Since television programmes are one of the most powerful vehicles driving and informing such popular understandings, their inclusion within criminological analysis is not only justified, but critically important to the continued development of criminology as a field of study. In this article, following Rafter’s (2007) call for the extended exploration of such ‘popular criminologies’, I investigate HBO’s drama series *The Wire* in this light.

Given that *The Wire* only concluded in 2008, the level of interest it has generated from within various academic disciplines is impressive; its sociological significance is now well established (Penfold-Mounce et al., 2011).<sup>2</sup> However, with the exception of Brown (2007), there has been little sustained cultural criminological engagement with its representations of drug markets and drug policy. Considering the centrality of these issues to the show (and the high level of criminological interest in illicit drugs), this oversight is surprising. The present article aims to bridge this void by delineating *The Wire*’s heuristic potential in this context.

To this end I open with a brief introduction to criminological analysis of popular culture which then leads into a discussion of the complexities inherent in the article’s starting point; the epistemic and methodological complexities of analysing *The Wire* as a cultural text. Following that I provide an exposition of existing scholarship on *The Wire* and a brief synopsis of two of the show’s main themes: (1) the unintended consequences of contemporary drug policy; and (2), the role of experimental alternative systems in drug policy’s future evolution. The mainstay of the article then renders these themes – as they are (re)presented in *The Wire* – as indicative of the

show's status as a cultural paradigm of drug policy debates. In this section *The Wire* is presented as a prime example of what Stuart Hall (1981) called the 'double stake' of popular culture, forming a site of both containment *and* resistance, of hegemony *and* change, with recourse to the regulation of illicit drug markets. Finally, I consider how *The Wire*'s depiction of drug policy debates is emblematic of the larger-scale contradictions and complexities of neoliberal governance itself.

## **Criminology, Media and Moving Images**

The relationship between crime and media is one of criminology's most researched subjects (see Carrabine, 2008 and Jewkes, 2011 for excellent overviews). However, it is only relatively recently that the discipline has witnessed what Michael Schudson (1987) once called the 'new validation' of popular culture in academic study. If the irresolvable debates about media-crime causality can be sidelined for the purposes of this article, it is possible to locate the roots of this validation process in the moral panic theories of the 1970s (e.g. Cohen, 1972; Young, 1971). Here sociologists of crime and deviance started to pay attention to the ways in which media 'constructed' crime and criminals. Important as these studies were, however, it is almost certainly the case that the 'media' remained conceptually and theoretically ambiguous in them. Also, such works were more concerned with crime's *misrepresentation* and the formation of dominant knowledges than they were with symbolic and/or textual meaning.

However, the ensuing proliferation of entertainment media from the 1980s onwards was accompanied by growing academic recognition of their relevance. For Hall (1981), an important step in this process involved accounting for 'popular culture'. He argued that it was no longer feasible to view culture as 'monolithic', as an all-encompassing structural entity that simply fed passive consumers ideological frameworks of meaning. Such a conceptual error was evident in the moral panic theories that juxtaposed reality and its representation between the *actual* lives and practices of the Mods and Rockers in Cohen's study, and their representation as *something else* in the media. For Hall, such a polarisation created and sustained a false reality-representation dichotomy. McRobbie and Thornton reached similar conclusions, claiming that: 'media is no longer something separable from society. Social reality is experienced through language, communication and imagery. Social

meanings and social differences are inextricably tied up with representation' (1995: 570). In short, theorists of crime and media increasingly came to recognise the boundaries between the two as being irrecoverably blurred. Representations came to be recognised as sites of knowledge in of themselves, as *the* spaces within which contestations of meaning are continually played out.

Before progressing any further, it is important to assert the critical and generative capacity of this blurring. As Sparks (1992) noted, transcending the simplistic notion of televisual representations being the ideological tools of capital means they can be recognised as sites where meaning is contested and/or generated too. They are sites where traditional notions of law and order can be challenged, where meaning and identification in popular imaginations are far from guaranteed. O'Brien and colleagues (2005) are certainly right when they claim that film:

is not a monolithic site of symbolic interpolation into conventional mores about crime. It is also a space in which law and crime are re-imagined in many different ways and in which it is not inevitable that audiences will identify *with* the law or view film narrative *through* the law.

(O'Brien et al., 2005: 18 emphases in original)

It is not simply that representations play a role in the maintenance and proliferation of *a priori* knowledge about crime, law and order, but rather, that representations are the sites – *as they exist in and of themselves* – through which knowledge and meaning are simultaneously created, maintained, and/or contested.

Taking the above as her starting point, Rafter (2007) argues the current assortment of media representations of crime are best understood through the umbrella concept of 'popular criminology'. She defines this as 'a category composed of discourses about crime found not only in film but also on the Internet, on television and in newspapers, novels and rap music and myth' (Rafter, 2007: 415). Rafter's popular criminological project is the investigation of the relationship *between* representations and academic criminology (see also Rafter and Brown, 2011). Such a view recognises alternative 'ways of knowing, crafting an 'egalitarian epistemology' with the potential to transcend the disciplinary confines of traditional criminology. From this position, a potentially limitless array of topics can be (and have been) researched regarding the ways in which they are culturally represented. However such variety

has also meant that the methods by which such analyses are conducted vary considerably.

In doing research on popular culture there is a subtle yet important epistemic distinction that needs to be made between 'ideological' and 'postmodern' sensibilities (Yar, 2010). Some scholars prioritise the creation and maintenance of hegemonic ideologies (e.g. Adorno, 1991), while others adopt postmodern positions that are sceptical of efforts to affix or inscribe meaning(s) to any given text (e.g. Young, 1996). Such distinctions are evident in the qualitative/quantitative divide within the literature on how drug users and dealers are culturally represented (e.g. Boyd, 2002; Manning, 2007; McKenna, 2011; Shapiro, 2002; Stephens, 2011; Taylor, 2008). Some of these studies adopt a quantitative, 'content analysis' approach that delineates the ideological and discursive construction of drug users as bad/deviant/sick etc (e.g. McKenna, 2011; Taylor, 2008). And then others take a postmodern qualitative approach presenting representations *as* theory themselves, as cultural texts in their own right depicting the conceptual fluidity of notions of, for example, heroin addiction (e.g. Stephens, 2011). Whilst the divergence between these positions may be somewhat slim, such distinctions have important implications for the present analysis.

In reading *The Wire* as a cultural text, the partisan employment of either of these epistemic and/or methodological positions becomes problematic. To treat *The Wire* solely as an ideological conduit renders its viewers little more than passive receptors, as well as relieving the show of its capacity to generate meaning. Yet, to consider it devoid of any inherent meaning would miss its compelling challenges to (and support for) competing ideologies of drug control. As such, the task here was to incorporate *both positions*; to adopt a 'synthetic and critical' (Yar, 2010: 77) framework through which to investigate the show as a cultural product. *The Wire*, in short, plays a *role* in ideological construction/maintenance, while also existing as a space through which hegemony is challenged and meaning contested. It is a cultural paradigm of the drug policy problematic, a cultural space from within which the key questions of drug policy debates are re-appropriated and re-imagined. As a result, it can be read as a potentially unrivalled representation of drug policy dilemmas, of the 'genuinely hard questions' (MacCoun and Reuter, 2011) surrounding what is to be done about drug control. However before engaging with these matters, *The Wire* itself requires some attention.

## Reading *The Wire*

As noted above, *The Wire* has generated considerable interest from within various academic disciplines. At a 2008 seminar on *The Wire* for instance, the sociologist William Julius Wilson claimed that it has done more to advance understandings of contemporary urban life than any other media representation or scholarly work has, ever, including those of social scientists!<sup>3</sup> However it is not just Wilson who holds *The Wire* in such high esteem; in drawing attention to the show's pedagogic potential, Kennedy and Shapiro (2012: 10) list nine university courses currently being taught on it, while Taylor and Eidson (2012: 281-2) count twenty-one. Clearly it is not through simple 'fandom' that Penfold-Mounce and colleagues (2011) designate *The Wire* a form of 'social science-fiction'.

This programme is widely regarded as ground breaking, as a show that demonstrates just how good broadcast television can be. Over its five seasons an array of writers and producers worked on *The Wire* under the supervision of its MacArthur award-winning creator and executive producer, David Simon, and his long-term collaborator Ed Burns. The former was a journalist with the *Baltimore Sun*, the latter a police detective turned schoolteacher in the same city. As such, *The Wire* is best considered a work of creative non-fiction, as being equally predicated on their collected experiences *and* imaginations. Žižek (2011) usefully draws attention to this nuanced intersection of imagination and experience, to the complexities of *The Wire*'s 'realism' (also, see Jameson, 2010). It is not so much realist in an objective sense, simply presenting objectively realistic material, but *subjectively* realist in that it offers its viewer realistic accounts of the unreal. That is, of scenarios which have not (or could not?) happen, but which *do* happen – for example, a serial killer being fabricated by a reporter and homicide detective; a police chief legalising drugs; or two detectives piecing together the sequence of events at a 'cold case' murder scene using nothing but some photographs, a tape measure, and the word 'fuck' (or variants of) thirty-eight times in a row. In this sense *The Wire* is able to distance itself from crude realism yet still foster a status as more than fiction.

There are numerous ways in which this status is skilfully maintained. The show's cast is littered with real Baltimore police officers, reporters, drug dealers and politicians. The viewer sees a former mayor of Baltimore, Kurt Schmoke, make two

appearances, while one of the city's former drug king-pins, Melvin Williams, features regularly too. On-location filming frequently features highly symbolic panned views of Baltimore's divided cityscape. The viewer is regularly presented with life 'in the pit' – a rundown housing estate – as overshadowed by the affluence of the downtown buildings; the opulent roof of Baltimore city hall can be clearly seen from some of the most impoverished areas of the city. Likewise, shots of the Western district's drug corners frequently intersect episode scenes, reinforcing this strong sense of locale. As with many of the show's actors, these are real locations, the actual sites of drug dealing, murders, and urban degradation.<sup>4</sup> It is through the above that the show conveys an authenticity that transcends mere 'fiction'.

Such authenticity was of paramount importance to the show's creators. For Simon, it was about exposing the hypocrisy of the 'American dream'. In his most definitive account of his motivations surrounding *The Wire* (in Alvarez, 2010), Simon outlines his desire to realistically depict 'the America left behind'. It was about making clear the adverse consequences of neoliberal capitalism on communities, about showing how multiple processes of exclusion operate concomitantly under such systems of governance to the advantage of a few and the detriment of many. It is an angry piece of television – '*The Wire* was not merely trying to tell a good story or two. We were very much trying to pick a fight' (Simon, 2010: 3). The provocative intent on the part of the writers regarding the myths of meritocracy is perhaps most evident in the show's continued references to 'the game'. From the drug corners to the offices of city hall and the Baltimore police department, 'the game' is the quest for success, as synonymous with distinction as it is with survival.

Ultimately *The Wire* leaves its viewers with little room for manoeuvre here. The show (and its resulting critical reception) gave its creator a platform to shout from and he used it to pursue a distinct political agenda. Failure to recognise this political motivation would severely hinder an analysis of the show such as this one: but crucially, it is also the case that any meaningful engagement with *The Wire* as a cultural text *must* ascend over and above authorial intention. As Barthes concluded, reliance upon an author 'is to impose a limit on that text ... to close the writing' (1977: 147). *The Wire* is no exception. A meaningful analysis of it requires *recognition* of its creator's intent, *but must not be restrained by it*. For example, considering *The Wire* solely a polemic against the drug war leaves no room for investigating the extent to which it actually achieves this aim. Not long ago in the

UK, then shadow Home Secretary (and the now current Conservative Secretary of State for Justice) Chris Grayling made a much-publicised comparison between Moss Side in Manchester and *The Wire*. He claimed the UK was experiencing *The Wire*-like ‘urban warfare’, and that ‘*The Wire* has become part of real life in our country’.<sup>5</sup> His solution? A tougher application of law and order policies, more people in prison, for longer, under harsher conditions. This response is hardly congruent with Simon’s vision. It is however indicative of the ways in which this show *generates meaning* – whether it is an academic postulating about its potential to move drug policy debates forward, *or* a politician invoking it negatively whilst electioneering, *the process remains the same*.

*The Wire*’s potential to generate meaning is highlighted through the above example, and this is precisely why the synthetic and critical epistemology alluded to in the previous section is so crucial: meaning must not be inscribed upon *The Wire* (through its creators’ intention *or* its viewers’ interpretations), yet it must not be considered devoid of it either. In terms of achieving this balance, the show’s ‘more than fiction’ status is key; it must be recognised as an already existing cultural component of on-going debates about the issues it (re)presents. *The Wire* is certainly a conduit of pre-existing ideologies, but one where meaning is far from guaranteed – *it is also a space through which the future shape of debates can be reconfigured*. Knowledge and meaning are created, contested and/or confirmed by a whole host of parties in their reading of *The Wire*. It is the above combined that render this programme ‘more than’ mere ‘representation’. Penfold-Mounce et al. forcefully argue it ‘is able to provide a *social science*-fiction; an “inexistent” tale that produces a “real being” in a form that inspires the sociological imagination’ (2011: 156 original emphasis). *The Wire* needs to be understood as *more than* ‘just’ a realistic TV programme; it is *transcendental television*. It is a visual embodiment of the antagonisms between reality and representation with the capacity to simultaneously challenge and/or enhance understandings of the multitude of topics it depicts.

### ***The Wire*, Drugs and Drug Policy**

There are many themes that could be gleaned from *The Wire* for analysis here, but two are most pertinent: its representations of street-based heroin and crack cocaine



dealing, and ‘Hamsterdam’, an experiment in harm reduction-based market regulation. The following brief synopses are included for the unfamiliar reader.

### *Drug Dealing in The Wire*

*The Wire* shows a city where for many people the sale of drugs is a fact of everyday life. It shows the residual aftereffects of prohibitive drug policy; a violent black market for heroin and crack cocaine that is aggressively policed. Most strikingly, the drug trade is shown to be thoroughly bound-up with the workings of the city: in one form or another, drugs and drug-money transverse Baltimore’s entire social strata. Avon Barksdale’s ‘crew’ are engaged in street-level distribution in sophisticated and effective ways; Omar Little makes his living ‘rippin’ and runnin’ (robbing drug dealers, see Jacobs (2000) on this); the Union of Stevedores keep the port alive by facilitating the passage of drugs into the city; and lawyers, state senators and other political figures reap the financial rewards of the trade. Most frequently though, *The Wire* shows characters like Wallace, Bubbles, and Preston ‘Bodie’ Broadus falling victim to the various forms of violence connected to the sale of drugs. We see, counter-intuitively, that drug policy can do more harm than good – the viewer witnesses what MacCoun and Reuter (2001) term the ‘unintended consequences of prohibition’. *The Wire* depicts a core paradox of contemporary drug policy; this market only exists in the form it does as a response to the legal arrangements implemented to counter it. Ultimately, *The Wire* presents a city where the drug trade is inextricably bound up with socio-economic marginalisation and political corruption; where good and bad, victims and criminals, exist on either side of the law in a violent market system.

### *On ‘Hamsterdam’*

In addition to the above however, in Season Three, *The Wire* presents an experiment in the reformation of drug policy at the ground level – ‘Hamsterdam’ (a term coined by Baltimore’s young drug dealers upon being told that drugs are legal in ‘Amsterdam’). Yet in Hamsterdam (much like in Amsterdam!) drugs are not legal. Rather, providing certain rules are adhered to, the sale of heroin and crack cocaine is temporarily ignored by Baltimore’s police force. In specified locations a policy of non-enforcement was enacted, and measures were introduced with a view to

facilitating the market's *self-regulation*. This sequence of events unfolds as Major Howard 'Bunny' Colvin, disillusioned after the realisation that his thirty years of policing West Baltimore have enacted no significant effect upon the drug trade, decides the time has come to try something new – to introduce what he terms a 'brown paper bag for drugs'.<sup>6</sup> The drug dealers in his district are rounded up and moved to deserted areas of the city where, under police supervision, they are free to ply their trade without fear of arrest. Eventually however, the Chief of Police discovers Hamsterdam and Colvin is ceremoniously sacked.<sup>7</sup> Yet, while these 'free zones' function, crime and anti-social behaviour fall at unprecedented levels, the violence associated with the drug trade is significantly reduced, and aid workers are able to reach scores of previously hidden/hard to reach populations. What Hamsterdam does – albeit temporarily – is effectively reduce some of the many harms that this particular drug market engenders. In this storyline, *The Wire* not only maps the 'discursive closings' of the war on drugs, as Brown (2007) quite rightly contends, but it also forms a cultural reference point from within which an alternative future direction of drug policy becomes discernable too.

### ***The Wire* as a Cultural Paradigm of Drug Policy Debates**

The show's representations of some drug policy problems, and their possible solutions – when considered in tandem with academic discourses on these subjects – can be used to substantiate *The Wire*'s position as a cultural paradigm of drug policy debates. It is to such a task that the remainder of this article is devoted.

### ***The Unintended Consequences of Prohibition in The Wire***

With a few exceptions (e.g. McKeganey, 2011), drug policy analysts tend to believe that the current system of prohibition operated at a national and international level is ineffective at best, and dangerous and damaging at worst (MacCoun and Reuter, 2001; Seddon, 2010; Stevens, 2011). Internationally, barring the numerous historical conflicts that brought the system to be (see Courtwright, 2001), drug control is reasonably straightforward in that prohibition is dictated by three UN conventions: The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs; The 1972 Convention on Psychotropic Substances; and The 1988 Convention Against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs. However at a national level, signatories to these conventions have

ample freedom regarding how exactly they implement them. This is why, for example, in Sweden it is a criminal offense to *smoke* cannabis, in the UK the breach of the law is its *possession*, in Portugal *neither* is treated as criminal if the amount is small, and in the Netherlands it can be bought and consumed in certain cafés.

Such divergences can be understood by locating national drug policies in their respective politico-economic contexts. For Seddon (2010), the UK's drug policy is best understood in relation to the changing phases of liberal governance – thus, by extension, other national drug policies are inextricably bound up with their particular governmental contexts too. In locating the development of prohibition's substantive technologies within the transitions of liberalism, culturally specific implementations of the UN conventions can be accounted for. For example, the neoliberal doctrines of individual responsibility and risk-management are strongly embraced in the U.S., thus it is home to some of the world's most aggressive prohibition measures: conversely, many European nations have resisted the same adoption of neoliberal socio-economic imperatives, and as such, have more tolerant attitudes towards drug control.<sup>8</sup> The fluidity of prohibition policies has implications for their efficacy as well as their impact, both positive and negative. *The Wire* makes its first contribution here through the ways in which it represents the unintended consequences of these policies in relation to drug users' health, drug market violence, and social exclusion.

Prohibition necessitates and maintains black markets. Drug markets are, at their most basic level, a response to the socio-legal arrangements instigated to counter them. *The Wire* neatly depicts the dialectical nature of this process – prohibitive drug policy and drug market harms are inextricably linked *and* mutually constitutive. The programme wastes no time in making this point, in Season One Episode Three (1.3 hereafter), Stringer Bell exemplifies it whilst giving D'Angelo Barksdale a lesson in drug market economics. As D'Angelo (a lower level dealer) complains about the poor quality of the heroin he is being asked to sell, Stringer (his superior) counters with the assertion that this does not matter. He claims, 'no matter what we call heroin it's gonna get sold. Shit is strong, we gonna sell it. Shit is weak, we gonna sell twice as much'. Here, Stringer, (whose copy of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* has pride of place on his bookshelf) neatly illustrates an attractive feature of the drug trade derived from its illicit nature. The sale of poor quality produce in drug markets is not only harmful to users' health, but can also result in their need to procure more drugs. If users are reliant upon crime to do this (as many in *The Wire* are) then the

consequences are even wider. In this vignette *The Wire* forcefully presents one of prohibition's most pressing unintended consequences: a system created to control a market force ultimately ends up strengthening and maintaining said market's commercial viability, and increasing its potential to cause harm in the process.

Similarly, if the existence of drug markets in their present form is an unintended consequence of their regulation, then so too is their associated violence. There are two main variants of drug market violence shown in *The Wire*: violence perpetrated by the police against drug users/dealers, and violence perpetrated by dealers against other dealers. The former hinges on *ideology*, the latter on *culture*. Regarding police-perpetrated violence, *The Wire* directs attention to the early rationale of drug control and its ideological basis. Prohibition was – and in part at least, *still is* – founded on the ideological basis that drug use was 'wicked' and would 'corrupt' individuals. However, the evolution of prohibition has seen these ideologies transcended the substances in question; they are now directed more at users and dealers than they are at 'drugs' themselves. This ideological transcendence is key to *The Wire's* resonance as a cultural paradigm of drug policy debates; the show subverts and challenges it through depicting the *vulnerabilities* of drug dealers to the police.

For example, episode 3.1 sees detective Elis Carver on top of his police car screaming at a young drug dealer who has just escaped in a failed bust: 'you do not get to win shit-bird, we do', he vehemently declares. He promises to beat the youngster if he does not immediately surrender himself, an oath he subsequently fulfils. Such violence – depicted frequently in *The Wire* – has its roots in prohibition's false ideological juxtapositions, in the mythologised notion of a righteous police officer fighting a 'war' against 'evil' drug dealers. Here violence is initiated, legitimised and maintained through the ideological distinctions inherent in prohibition praxis.

However *The Wire* goes much further than this, it also depicts the 'cultural maintenance' of drug market violence. Episode 5.2 sees Detective William 'Bunk' Moreland claim 'you can go a long way in this country killing Black folk, young males especially'. His point being (partially at least), that as the people in question are mainly involved in the drug trade, they render themselves 'undeserving victims', semi-complicit in their own fate. In this example, *The Wire* reveals drug market violence as a response to racial, socio-economic and cultural distinctions. Omar

Little neatly exemplifies this point – he is the ‘honourable thief’, the man who holds-up drug dealers with a shotgun, yet takes his aunt to church every Sunday morning. He is also the only character never to swear. The viewer is led to respect, admire even, his most frequently stated moral imperative – that he would never raise his gun to a ‘civilian’ (someone *not* involved in the drug trade). Yet, such a code only serves to further *legitimise* the use of violence against those who *are* engaged in the drugs trade. In *The Wire* drug market violence is legitimised and maintained within such systems through the well developed cultural distinctions drawn between those who exist ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of them. Here the show demonstrates its capacity to reconfigure this debate; violence is not *just* ‘systemic’ of drug markets due to their illicit nature (cf. Goldstein, 1985), but a more nuanced phenomenon, primarily responsive to sophisticated cultural and ideological distinctions drawn *within* these market spaces, on *both* sides of the law.

Finally, *The Wire* neatly situates the above in the appropriate context of politico-economic marginalisation and social exclusion. Political ethics *de-politicise* their holders in *The Wire*. As alluded to above, drug control systems are inextricably bound up with the development of neoliberalism. However in this show, so too is drug dealing. The ethics of neoliberalism are thoroughly entrenched in the subjectivities displayed throughout the drug crews: from D’Angelo giving speeches to his charges about how ‘Mr Ronald McDonald’ reaps the financial rewards from the invention of chicken nuggets rather than the inventor who will have been quickly sent back to the basement to work on ‘some shit to make the French fries taste better’ (episode 1.2); to the infamous ‘King stay the King’ explanation of chess (episode 1.3);<sup>9</sup> right up to Stringer Bell’s undertaking of economics classes at his local college. Whilst the show’s drug dealers distance themselves physically and culturally from mainstream socio-political systems (just as such systems concomitantly do the same to them) they still demonstrate a firm reliance upon individualised, capital accumulation-based, market-orientated understandings of their worlds. In *The Wire*, Baltimore’s drug market takes its current form as a result of the socio-legal arrangements initiated to counter it. However, it also operates through allegiance to the very same socio-political systems that underpin the control arrangements. *The Wire* neatly gets to the core of the issue here – *the law responds to the game as the game responds to the law*. Crucially, the show is explicit on two points: (1) it positions the system of regulation at the very core of the problems posed by drug

markets; and (2), it demonstrates the situation as not only self-replicating, but also in its current form, as precluding any real chance of significant change.

### *The Wire and the Future of Drug Policy*

Despite the above it is crucial to recognise the fact that *The Wire* is not *just* a representation of the *problems* of prohibitive drug policy, it also has significant heuristic potential surrounding possible *solutions*. *The Wire's* representation of drug control is one of *contestation*; it concomitantly supports, challenges, and reconfigures the various positions in this debate. This contention is returned to below, but as a precursor to the ensuing analysis two points must be stressed, firstly the limitations of the arguments herein, and secondly the claim that a drug market *is* a market. To clarify, simply 'reverse engineering' solutions to complex social-structural problems through representations alone is ontologically unsound.<sup>10</sup> The arguments presented below are only intended to highlight *The Wire's* capacity to *frame and reframe the debate*, rather than end it altogether through the provision of '*the solution*' *per se*. In terms of the second caveat, to understand the system of drug sales in *The Wire* as anything *but* a market is to miss a crucial aspect of its nature. Undeniably there are emotive and transcendental factors resonant, as cultural criminologists would surely contend (e.g. Ferrell et al. 2008). But what *The Wire* makes clear is the importance of conceptualising drug dealing operations as the end components of highly developed, responsive and sophisticated *market spaces*. Such a conceptualisation is vital. Bluntly put, it is the epistemic basis through which the programme's capacity to shift drug policy debates can be realised.

Others have recognised *The Wire's* potential in this respect (Beilenson and McGuire, 2012: Ch. 4; Žižek, 2011) yet have failed to follow it through sufficiently. It is *not* simply that 'free zones' (as sites where the sale of drugs could be permitted) *should* actually be introduced, or that they would necessarily be effective or even desirable. But rather, that this is the direction in which drug policy debates should be heading – that the prohibition-legalisation stalemate can (and must) be transcended through the consideration of 'radical' alternatives such as this. Some of the most progressive developments in drug policy, theoretically and pragmatically, have come from similarly 'unconventional' approaches in recent years. For example, the Swiss programme of heroin prescription and supervised consumption facilities came about

through the introduction of quasi-free zones in Zurich. Ultimately, these ‘drug parks’ proved untenable and undesirable, but their *role* in the formation of current Swiss policy – *in shifting the terms and parameters of the debate* – was significant (Uchtenhagen 2009). Furthermore, research on amphetamine-type stimulants in the Netherlands is also pertinent. Through circulating pictures of poor-quality ecstasy pills throughout dance venues it was observed that the low-quality products disappeared from the market. As the distribution of better quality (and as such, *safer*) produce became linked to the sellers’ commercial interests, the market reacted in such a way that reduced its capacity to cause harm (see Spruit, 2001).

These are policy interventions that recognise *markets as markets*, and crucially, as being responsive to various strategies of regulation not *just* the application of the criminal law. There is a strong literature-base supporting such contentions in the growing and influential field of regulatory theory (see Black, 2002; Braithwaite, 2008; Braithwaite and Drahos, 2000). ‘Regulation’ is defined within this paradigm as any ‘sustained and focused attempt to alter the behaviour of others according to defined standards or purposes with the intention of producing a broadly identified outcome or outcomes’ (Black, 2002: 26). Importantly here, *drug policy is nothing if not regulation*. As such, regulatory theory’s potential in the context of drug policy has been noted before (Ritter, 2010; Seddon, 2007, 2010, 2013). One of the key benefits these works sought to highlight is the ability of a regulatory conceptualisation to ‘broaden the field,’ to recognise the need to think about more than the law when it comes to drug policy.

*The Wire* too renders this clear, in the absence of large-scale legal changes significant effects *can* be enacted quickly through the manipulation of existing market systems to produce less harmful results. Through *Hamsterdam* *The Wire* demonstrates the possibilities inherent in a system of governing *through* over and above one of governing *against*. This particular storyline strongly resonates with cutting-edge social research. Specifically, with the concept of ‘nodal governance’ (see Burris et al., 2005; Wood and Shearing, 2007; Shearing and Froestad, 2010). Nodal governance is a model strongly linked to regulatory theory that examines power’s operation through governance in complex, *networked*, social systems. It is ‘[a]n elaboration of contemporary network theory that explains how a variety of actors operating within social systems interact along networks to govern the systems they inhabit’ (Burris et al., 2005: 33). There are two ontological assertions central to

it: (1) that state-centric, ‘top down’, governance is ineffective in networked social systems; and (2), in social systems comprised of ‘nodes’ (interlinked points on networks that facilitate and influence the transference of power), there will be inequalities. That is, some points (nodes) within networks will demonstrate a ‘governance deficit’ and lack the cultural, social and economic capital necessary to effectively govern their own circumstances (Burris et al., 2005).

What we see in Hamsterdam is the possible beginnings of an alternative system of governance congruent with this conceptualisation. *The Wire* reframes questions of drug policy here, asking not simply what measures can be put in place to enact control *over* this market?, but rather, what measures can be put in place to enact control *through* this market? The core premise of Hamsterdam – in a manner very similar to that of nodal governance – is that marginalised and excluded populations like *The Wire*’s drug users/dealers can play a significant role in the improved governance of their present circumstances, *if they are provided with the means to do so*. There is empirical evidence to support such a claim, specifically Clifford Shearing and colleagues’ work in impoverished areas of South Africa. Their ‘Zwelethemba model’ (see Shearing and Froestad, 2010; Wood and Shearing, 2007) shows how non-punitive community groups – dispute resolution groups, or ‘peacemaking’ groups – reduced conflict in their communities by empowering disenfranchised populations and reducing their respective governance deficits. The same principle is inherent in Hamsterdam; this is a programme in which a failed and harmful system of regulatory governance (the prohibition of drugs) is replaced by an alternative system intricately connected to the lives and worlds of the population it seeks to govern/regulate.

As an alternative technology of governance, Hamsterdam harnesses collective resources to address collective problems. For example, aid workers are able to set up stations within its boundaries and better coordinate their efforts to address the health issues associated with drug use, effectively strengthening this particular ‘node’ within the network. Similarly, in episode 3.2 when it becomes apparent that there are many unemployed children in the zones (they are no longer needed as lookouts since the market is no longer illicit), Detective Carver initiates a ‘tax’ on the drug crews, instructing them that everyone must still be paid, ‘shit is like unemployment insurance’ he claims. Later he uses a similar tax to purchase sports equipment to occupy the youngsters. In these examples, collective resources are combined to



address collective problems, neatly representing Braithwaite's (2008) regulatory notion of 'active responsibility'. The onus is upon 'taking responsibility for putting things right in the future', rather than the 'passive responsibility' of 'holding someone responsible for what they have done in the past' (Braithwaite, 2008: 76-77). Hamsterdam, in effect, positively responsabilises drug dealers.

However Hamsterdam is so much more than this. *The Wire* does not *just* critique prohibition, or support alternative regulatory arrangements; it redefines the parameters of the whole debate producing a cultural representation of the future direction of drug policy in the process. *The Wire's* ability to do this, to shift the debate, is most evident, paradoxically, through its depiction of *failure*. Ultimately, these interventions do not work, Hamsterdam is disbanded, the sports equipment quickly destroyed. *No side really wins*. However a critical reading of Hamsterdam offers an alternative interpretation – it was never supposed to 'work', it was never intended to (re)present *the* solution to the problem. Rather, Hamsterdam's role was to recalibrate the terms of the debate, to focus it in a different direction. To exemplify this point take Herc's disbelief at Carver's 'tax' in Hamsterdam and his snide questioning of his partner's motivations: 'what are you, a fucking communist?' (episode 3.2). Crucially, in negatively invoking notions of *communism*, he directs critical attention towards *capitalism*. It is through this brief exchange, this single nonchalant quip, that *The Wire* positions itself as *the* site through which drug policy debates can be reconfigured – the core problem of drug market regulation is not *just* the systems and technologies of governance employed, *but the political ideologies that underpin them*.

The implication here is this – the problems of drug markets cannot be solved with recourse to the ideologies of governance that support and maintain their very existence. Just as liberal democratic systems of governance are seemingly incapable of restraining the imperatives of capital (Badiou 2012; Žižek, 2008, 2010), so too are neoliberal drug control strategies incapable of restraining drug markets which are underpinned by identical socio-political principles. Neoliberalism cannot be reformed from within its own discursive and conceptual boundaries, *and neither can drug policy*. Just as radically divergent systems of governance are required to address the destructive nature of capitalism (Badiou 2012; Žižek, 2011), systems of drug control also need to be completely re-imagined and re-conceptualised to reduce the harm they cause. True, there are amendments to the regulatory systems employed

that can improve things on the ground right now, and they should of course be pursued, but ultimately they will not suffice alone. *The Wire* makes clear this point in its representation of the drug policy problematic – the entire system needs to be re-evaluated both ideologically *and* pragmatically. If drug control is to ever effectively eliminate the harms associated with the use and sale of illicit substances, then its purpose, principles and methods – that is, its *very existence* – requires a thorough critical interrogation.

## Conclusions

By way of a conclusion I hope this article has gone some way towards strengthening the position of cultural analyses such as this within criminology, particularly with recourse to television programmes. Whatever the subject of criminological debates, the capacity of televisual representations to challenge and reconfigure them should never be underestimated. In support of this claim this article has positioned *The Wire* at the core of on-going debates about illicit drug policy. This programme – as a cultural text – has been shown to constitute a cultural paradigm of the drug policy problematic, one that provides an important visual representation of the many tensions and antagonisms inherent in systems of drug control. Importantly in closing though, it must be noted that *The Wire* has contributions to make far beyond drugs and drug policy. Space precluded a more detailed exploration of the show's treatment of race, gender, sexualities, and childhood for example, yet all of these and more are features of *The Wire* that merit further investigation.<sup>11</sup>

*The Wire* has been shown above to contest the terms of drug policy debates, and in so doing, draw attention to some of the larger issues of governance facing the late-modern world. While Prez's claim about the football match from which this article gleaned its title, 'No one wins. One side just loses more slowly' (episode 4.4) is a pessimistic metaphor for the drug situation, it can also be understood as an invitation that is potentially resistant *and* generative at the same time. If nobody can win when the game is played like this, then we urgently need to change the rules, or better yet, *play a different game*. In this sense, *The Wire* resonates with so much more than drug policy debates. Like all great 'fiction' it provides a space through which its viewers/readers/listeners can begin to think differently about the worlds they inhabit.

Bluntly put, regarding drug policy and the larger ordering of our social systems alike, *The Wire* is emblematic of the crucial need for new thinking.

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## Notes

1. Felicia ‘Snoop’ Pearson played a character modelled on herself in *The Wire*, a ruthless ‘enforcer’ in Marlo Stanfield’s drug ring. However in ‘real life’, not only is Snoop her real name, but she also professed to being involved with the sale of drugs whilst filming the show, and she has spent time in prison for second degree murder (Pearson and Ritz, 2007). Part of *The Wire*’s legend is her claim that it ‘saved her’ from this life. However it seems that the legend remains just that – in March 2011 she was arrested on charges of supplying heroin and crack cocaine in Baltimore, narrowly escaping imprisonment through a guilty plea.
2. There have been *The Wire*-themed conferences at universities in the UK and the US; special editions of the journals *Darkmatter* and *City* (as well as a themed section in *Criticism*); a monograph from Beilenson and McGuire (2012); and edited collections from Potter and Marshall (2009) and Kennedy and Shapiro (2012). Other notable contributions have come from Dreier and Atlas (2009), Sklansky, (2011), Sheehan and Sweeney (2009), and Ault (2013). Moreover, the debate between Atlas and Dreier (2008), and Chaddah, Wilson and Venkatesh (2008) in *Dissent Magazine* is highly indicative of the show’s resonance with numerous pre-existing academic concerns, as too are the three responses to Chaddha and Wilson (2011) in *Critical Inquiry* (see Jagoda, 2011; Warren, 2011; Williams, 2011).
3. The event where Wilson made this claim is viewable online at: <http://dev.forum-network.org/lecture/wire-compelling-portrayal-american-city>

4. See <http://welcometobaltimorehon.com/the-wire-a-streetview-tour> for an online ‘walk through’ of the Baltimore streets where the show was filmed.
5. See <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/graylings-comments-on-moss-side-condemned-928267>
6. Following the famous subversion of U.S. liquor laws preventing alcoholic beverages being consumed on the streets by concealing them in ‘brown paper bags’.
7. In one of *The Wire*’s finest moments, Colvin’s last words to his superiors as they fire him, ‘get on with it motherfuckers’, are the exact same words used by the gang boss Stringer Bell as he is gunned down by Omar Little and Brother Mouzone. Again, ‘the game’ is played on *both* sides of the law.
8. However things are changing here – the development of a more ‘collective EU voice’ regarding stricter drug control has evolved alongside an increasing reliance upon neoliberal economic policies (see Bergeron and Griffiths, 2006).
9. In this famous scene D’Angelo teaches the young dealers the rules of chess through an analogy of the drugs ring that is highly representative of US political systems; it is impossible for anyone other than the king to ever become the king, and in the game, ‘pawns’ are quickly felled.
10. Importantly here I recognise the problems depicted in *The Wire* as being rooted in large-scale structural inequalities and as such, as requiring much more than just drug policy revision to address. On this point I am particularly indebted to Keith Hayward for steering my thinking.
11. Investigations that are, to a greater or lesser degree, already underway elsewhere. The interested reader is directed towards Kennedy and Shapiro (2012) regarding *The Wire* and race, and then Ault (2013) for a compelling account of *The Wire*’s representations of African American motherhood, as two excellent examples of such work.

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