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Criticism, Volume 52, Number 3-4, Summer/Fall 2010, pp. 359-372 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.2010.0053>



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REALISM AND UTOPIA IN *THE WIRE*

Fredric Jameson

Generic classifications are indispensable to mass or commercial culture at the same time that their practice in postmodernity grows more and more complex or hybrid. Is *The Wire* a police procedural, for example? No doubt, but it is also a version of the organized crime story. The majority of its actors and characters are black, which nonetheless does not exactly make it a black film (a film for black audiences). There is a political drama going on here, as well, but its nature as local politics reminds us that it is also very much a local series, one framed in Baltimore and very much about Baltimore (something not always to the liking of Baltimore's elites). It is, however, also the case that most detective or crime literature today (as well as its filmic offshoots or inspirations) is local and based on the consumption of a specific landscape (whether a foreign country—Swedish detective stories, Italian ones, even Chinese detective stories—or regional—Montana, Louisiana, Los Angeles, Toronto, etc.). The broadest categories would then be that of the thriller or that of the action film (although there are few chase scenes, no cliff-hangers, few-enough mass action or carnage scenes).

Each of the five years of the TV series is a unit in terms of plot and theme; and there are at least a hundred characters deployed in each season, many of whom carry their own independent plotlines. It may be argued that there is a single major protagonist, the Irish American detective Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West), even though his status fluctuates over the five years of the series and is often eclipsed by other characters. This is to say that a work of this kind challenges and problematizes the distinction between protagonists and “secondary characters” (or stars and “character actors”), in ways most often described, I guess, as “epic” (*War and Peace*, *Gone with the Wind*)—a characterization that does not help to underscore what may be a historical development in the evolution of this kind of plot (see Alexander Woloch on secondary characters).

The episodes in each series are not separate and freestanding as they were in *Homicide* (screenwriter/producer David Simon's previous series,

also set in Baltimore and using some of the same actors); so this is a series, or serial, like those by Dickens, and an inquiry into a specifically televisual aesthetic would want to interrogate the fascination with individual actor-characters (pleasures of recognition and repetition), alongside the development of a distinct plot, where frustration and the week-by-week postponement (even the sense of deliberate retardation and the impossibility of closure)—all of this put back into question by DVD rentals—work in the direction of a difference stamped with a unique temporality, whose rhythm is, however, then reorganized into a repetition. Repetition enhances the function of the television set as consolation and security: you are not alone when it is on in the house with you, and you are not lonely or isolated when your space is peopled by so many familiar faces and characters. On the other hand, since both these features can function as neurotic denial, television carries with it a permanent possibility of boredom and sterile or neurotic repetition or paralysis. The program must then have available a secondary ideological pretext, the window dressing of a “value”: art or quality would be one of those, but also “entertainment” or relaxation-distraction (after a long day at work, for example)—a pseudoconcept if there ever was one. And there is also the alibi of the political or social message, and the “cultural capital” of the cable channel (HBO in this case, which of course claims to be something more than mere television). There could also be an artistic bonus, owing to the fact that each of the episodes is written and/or directed by different people, some of them distinguished visitors (George Pelecanos, Agnieszka Holland).

But initially we approach *The Wire* as a crime story; that is, a struggle between two collectivities: the police and the crime gangs (for the most part, the crime is drug trafficking). Each of these groups has its representational history: it was not terribly long ago in popular culture that the institutional police emerged from the tradition of the private detective, while organized crime gradually became an object of representation during Prohibition (its ethnic identification with the “mafia,” “cosa nostra,” etc., comes later). Mass-cultural representation of this kind is a kind of recognition: it confers something like an institutional status on the group or entity in question, and such groups are accorded objective social reality (and so we understand that real-life members of the so-called mafia regularly watched *The Sopranos* (1999–2007); the incidence of police watching procedurals is unrecorded). At any rate, such recognition confirms a feeling that society is static and stable; its neighborhoods have long since been mapped out, and if there are shifts or changes in this social geography, they will have been well publicized, so everyone knows that Lexington Terrace is no longer Polish but black, etc.

But mapping is not so simple: spatial it may be, but it does not inventory objects and substances but rather flows and energies. Yet the essential raw material of any social representation is bound to be that of social types, of stereotypes as well as generic types (like the “protagonist”) or as psychological ones; and *The Wire* is no exception, multiplying its recognizable entities on all these levels. To what degree it is original and innovative will depend on the revisions it is able to bring to these levels and perhaps even on the new types it is able to invent. A certain modernism was able to deal with the problem of types by dissolving them into individualities and singularities, by approaching them so microscopically that their basis in the general or the universal gradually disappears; yet even this operation must take the familiar type as its starting point and is menaced by the twin dangers of the emergence of new and more subjective types, on the one hand, and of the ironic return to the external social starting point, on the other. The word “type” is of course inescapably associated with Georg Lukács’s theory of realism, but I think we do his immense culture and theoretical sophistication no service by assuming that this was a conception of pre-given social or class types rather than an attention to their historical emergence.

At any rate, *The Wire* dramatically unsettles our typological expectations and habits by at once drawing us into an epistemological exploration that greatly transcends the usual whodunit formula. To be sure, the series begins with a banal murder whose principal novelty lies in the victim’s race (white) and whose solution seems obviously enough related to his forthcoming testimony in another gangland murder trial. But what we are quickly made to understand is that the police themselves are almost wholly ignorant of the structure of the gangs and the very names of the people who control them, let alone the latter’s faces and localities. The uniform cops simply know the neighborhoods and the corners on which the drugs are finally sold to customers by teams of juveniles, some of them too young to be prosecuted. But this is, as it were, simply the *appearance* of the reality, the empirical or sensory form it takes in daily life; it is the most superficial approach to this reality, whose ultimate structure (source, refinement, transportation, sales network, and bulk or wholesale distribution) must remain too abstract for any single observer to experience, although it may be known and studied—and also occasionally sensed in a representational way, as later on in *The Wire* in various forms and probes. But the intermediate reality—the so-called drug lords themselves, here Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris)—are certainly knowable but not yet known by the street cops, who learn his name in an early episode and finally manage to glimpse his face and person when he organizes a basket-

ball game with a rival gang. Is this because his rise to power is so recent or simply because the police have not concentrated on this level of the organization before? Or perhaps, since the drug trade is a business, police observers have not attributed to it the forms and structure of legal businesses before and have therefore not asked the right questions. Whatever the reason, this ignorance of their own city suddenly opens up a space for realism: for seeing things, finding out things, that have not been registered before; and for investigation, for solving problems and tracking down causes as in scientific experiment or classical detective procedures. But here it is not an individual criminal responsible for an enigmatic crime, but rather a whole society that must be opened up to representation and tracked down, identified, explored, mapped like a new dimension or a foreign culture. “Barksdale” is only one component of that whole social complex, which now demands new instruments of detection and registration (just as ever-newer realisms constantly have to be invented to trace new social dynamics).

To what degree is this sociological mystery reducible to the standard plot forms of the detective search or the solving of a puzzle? I tend to think that the deeper motivation of such forms—or, it might be better to say, our pleasure in such forms—has something to do with Freud’s primal scene (which also underpinned the scientist’s passion at unveiling Nature). One would want to add that the Freudian-type satisfaction is never complete: just as no desire can ever really be satisfied, so also this one leaves a sense of disappointment. “Who cares who killed Roger Ackroyd?” famously cried Edmund Wilson in denouncing the detective story as a trivial genre (the reference is to Agatha Christie’s ingenious breakthrough novel [*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, 1926]); and it is certain that there will also be a discrepancy between the passion of the chase and the contingency and triviality of the quarry. But this very discrepancy in the content plays into the form itself—the television serial—for its ultimate satisfactions must never be complete, and we must also be motivated to come back for more in hopes of greater ones. And perhaps the appropriation of these dissatisfactions for high culture or high literature would then consist in affirming that incompleteness: we never do catch the Greek, the ending remains unknown—save that, here, that incompleteness simply means the drug trade will rebound, start all over again, continue, no matter who is finally brought to justice. But *The Wire* inscribes this fatal recurrence in social history when it shows the passionate but superficial Barksdale eventually succeeded by the ruthless and dispassionate Marlo Stanfield (who finally, albeit awkwardly, becomes a bourgeois businessman).

There is necessarily a tension here between the mystery and the agon, since we also see things through the villains’ eyes and thus know some

solutions the police have not yet worked out. Still, what saves the mystery format is that the discoveries are made successively like links in a chain, knots on a cord: they lead us closer and closer, and so some of the suspense is displaced from the Who to the How along with the modalities of legal proof. And here we must remark on the other specificity of *The Wire*.

Not only is the “discovery” or solution a whole milieu, the world of a whole society or subsociety cordoned off from the peace-loving bourgeois civilian public (of whatever color), but the “detective” is also a group and a conspiratorial one at that. The police as a whole is an institution and, as such, moves in the direction of a properly political plot (networks, personal relations either of services rendered or of personal animosity, taking credit, passing the buck, ducking blame, etc.), and it is a political dimension that in the last seasons and episodes will come to the surface and be transformed into an official political campaign.

But this is that institutional police which has little capability of identifying its targets since, on the one hand, it does not even know their names and, on the other, has not yet even grasped the nature of the crimes it is investigating or their interrelationship. The lonely private detective or committed police officer offers a familiar plot that goes back to romantic heroes and rebels (beginning, I suppose, with Milton’s Satan). Here, in this increasingly socialized and collective historical space, it slowly becomes clear that genuine revolt and resistance must take the form of a conspiratorial group, of a true collective (Sartre would call it the fused group forming within the serial mass society). Here Jimmy’s own rebelliousness (no respect for authority, alcoholism, sexual infidelities, along with his ineradicable idealism) meets an unlikely set of comrades and conspirators—a lesbian police officer, a pair of smart but undependable cops, a lieutenant with a secret in his past but with the hunch that only this unlikely venture can give him advancement, a slow-witted nepotistic appointment who turns out to have a remarkable gift for numbers, various judicial assistants, and finally a quiet and unassuming fixer.

This last—the ultimate hero of *The Wire*—leads us to say something about the title, which rarely means a wire you wear on your body, but in general wiretapping as such. The older movies, seen today, make it clear how the introduction of cell phones radically transformed the constructional problems involved in plotting a mystery or adventure film, as well as in tracing calls and wiretapping as such—complexities that are here explored in detail. But it is the genius of Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters) not only to solve these problems in ingenious ways, but also to displace some of the purely mystery and detective interest onto a fascination with construction and physical or engineering problem solving—that is to say, something much closer to handicraft than to abstract deduction. In fact,

when first discovered and invited to join the special investigative unit, Freamon is a virtually unemployed officer who spends his spare time making miniature copies of antique furniture (which he sells): it is a parable of the waste of human and intelligence productivity and its displacement—fortunate in this case—onto more trivial activities that nonetheless absorb his energy and creative powers more productively than crossword puzzles, say. But Lester is also the type of the archivist-scholar capable of spending long hours on minutiae and in dusty files, which ultimately cracks open financial conspiracies all over the city; and he has deep, unostentatious, yet invaluable, roots in the community, as when he first uncovers an old photo of the youthful Barksdale in an old boxing hangout not many of his fellow officers would be likely to have any knowledge of: and to many of them he is also an inestimable mentor. This is then the sense in which *The Wire* not only offers a representation of collective dynamics (on both sides) but also one of work and productivity, of praxis. In both instances, then, there is at work a virtual Utopianism, a Utopian impulse, even though that somewhat different thing, the Utopian project or program, has yet to declare itself.

But Lester's creativity may also be said to have a counterpart on the other side. We have not yet mentioned Barksdale's sidekick, Stringer Bell (Idris Elba), who is something like his executive officer or prime minister in the classic political situation: the police themselves also have a degraded version of this dual structure, where the second in command is however by no means as disinterested or as efficient as Bell. Stringer is in fact a real intellectual, and when the police (and the viewers) finally do penetrate his private apartment, they find modernist furniture and a décor of unexpectedly enlightened artistic taste. Yet, although this figure may thereby come to seem a positive one, he gives all the most lethal killing orders without a moment of remorse. Still, the interplay with Barksdale, to whom he is absolutely devoted, but who envies his intelligence and sometimes seems to resent it, is characteristic of the extraordinarily dense and minute interpersonal situations through which *The Wire* plays out its larger plot.

Obviously enough, not only do the police not initially even know who Barksdale is, they have no inkling of Stringer's existence, save in those rare moments in which he has to visit the corners and monitor the operation on the street personally. Then one day, Jimmy takes it on himself to follow this so far unidentified figure (it will later on transpire that he is administering a whole expanding real estate investment development for Barksdale, something only gradually revealed by Lester's extraordinarily creative curiosity and know-how). At any rate, the car leads Jimmy to a university and thence to a classroom, in which, through the window, he

can observe the drug kingpin and gangster taking a course in the business school and obediently answering questions and doing his homework. To be sure, the comparison of the mafia with a business enterprise is hardly metaphoric or figurative, although we sometimes omit to think historically and to identify those who actually reorganized the crime gangs in this way, along the lines of profitability (Lucky Luciano, I believe, for the mafia; but see Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra* [2007] for a vivid contemporary example). But here, *sur le vif*, we see something of the same well-nigh aesthetic creativity: Stringer will gradually reorganize the Barksdale mob; he uses words like product, competition, investment; he brings the gangs together to eliminate the kind of internecine warfare that is always bad for business (*la douceur du commerce*: its historic taming of feudal savagery). I have deliberately used the word *creativity* several times in this context: how can this element not be seen as somehow proto-Utopian on both sides in a bureaucratic society for the most part static and content to run in the normal time-honored way, with all the old problems and malfunctions? At this early point already, *The Wire* can be observed to be ceasing to replicate a static reality or to be "realist" in the traditional mimetic and replicative sense. Here society, on microlevels of various dimensions, is finding itself subject to deliberate processes of transformation, to human projects, to the working out of Utopian intentions that are not simply the forces of gravity of habit and tradition.

But I want first to situate this discussion of Utopianism within the context of plot construction, and to show that this is not only a purely academic matter (which it also is, of course). I want to situate both these issues within the even larger context of mass culture as a whole. Plot construction is obviously a matter of practical importance in mass culture, as witness all the books and seminars on writing a script or a scenario, but it clearly has a theoretical or philosophical dimension that is not exhausted by these technical recipes and handbooks on the matter.

The philosophical meaning of plot construction has to start from what stands in the way of constructing a plot or story; and that obviously also has its historical side. The literary past—particularly the past of theatrical spectacle but also the surviving popular literature of various bygone cultures—offers abundant examples of plots that would no longer work for us today. There is, for example, the history of feelings and their expression and evolution: Adorno remarks that the teleology of modernist literature was governed by taboo, by what you could no longer use in an artwork because it had become too sentimental and too familiar, too hackneyed and stereotypical; and that teleology no doubt also holds for the history of popular or mass culture, despite the far more central role within it of the

pleasures of repetition. For where the modernist novel sought to flee repetition, or at least to translate it into something more lofty and aesthetically worthy, mass culture thrives on what used to be called the *formulaic*: you want to see over and over again the same situations, the same plots, the same kinds of characters, with enough cosmetic modifications that you can reassure yourself you are no longer seeing the same thing all over again, that interesting twists and variations have freshened your interest. Yet a time comes when the paradigm succumbs under the sheer weight of the cumulative and the fatigue of the overfamiliar.

But I want to look for another kind of explanation for such formal exhaustion—and that is to be found in its raw material. If raw material can be readily adapted to older paradigms, its absence can also modify them in striking ways. We all know the variety of historical and social situations that have provided raw material in the past: country versus city, for one thing, and the growth of the new city as a consequence; industrialism, foreign travel and immigration, imperialism, new kinds of wars, colonization, the country house and the urban slum of the “lower depths,” a “picturesque peasantry” as Henry James called it. (Indeed, his little book *Hawthorne* is a founding document on what the unavailability of certain kinds of raw material does to literary and formal possibility—he is thinking of the advantages of Europe over America.)

But let's turn to a less literary and more conventional mass-cultural genre or subgenre: the detective story. The absence of sleepy English towns and villages, of cloistered settings and vicarages, has obviously made the (older) practice of the English-type detective story difficult in the United States. But we must also enumerate the shrinkage of motives for that indispensable ingredient: the murder. Not only did there used to exist an interesting variety of motives, they could be investigated by an interesting variety of private detectives, a species that seems to have become extinct. Social respectability—that is, the possibility of scandal and its damages; family structure and dynastic or clan systems; passions and obsessions of all kinds, from hatred and revenge to other complex psychic mechanisms—these are only some of the interesting sources for motivation that have become increasingly irrelevant in the permissiveness of contemporary society, its rootless and restless movement and postregionalism, its loss of individualism and of bizarre eccentrics and obsessives—in short, its increasing one-dimensionality. Thus today, paradoxically, the multiplication of consumer niches and the differentiation of “lifestyles” go hand in hand with the reduction of everything to the price tag and the flattening out of motivations to the sheerly financial: money, which used to be inter-

esting in the variety of its pursuits, now becoming supremely boring as the universal source of action. The omnipresence of the word *greed* in all national political vocabularies recently disguises the flatness of this motivation, which has none of the passionate or obsessive quality of older social drives and the older literature that drew on them as its source. Meanwhile, the psychic realm has also been drastically reduced, perhaps in part as a result of the omnipresence of money as an all-purpose motivation, perhaps also as a result of the familiarities of universal information and communication and the flattening of the individualisms. I have observed elsewhere that that universal communicational equality that Jürgen Habermas (in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 1984) associates with the spread of a new kind of reason also makes for a widening of the acts we can now understand; what used to be thought of as pathology, as rarer mental states and acts beyond the pale—all these are now human, all too human, in such a way that the very category of evil or absolute otherness has drastically been reduced, as well. That the organizers of the Holocaust were mere bureaucrats certainly diminishes their chances of representing absolute evil; that most pathologies are pathetic and provincial rather than frightening is a triumph of reason and liberal tolerance but also a loss for those still clinging to some outmoded ethical binary of good and evil. I have elsewhere argued against this binary system: Nietzsche was perhaps only the most dramatic prophet to have demonstrated that it is little more than an afterimage of that otherness it also seeks to produce—the good is ourselves and the people like us, the evil is other people in their radical difference from us (of whatever type). But society today is one from which, for all kinds of reasons (and probably good ones), difference is vanishing and, along with it, evil itself.

This means that the melodramatic plot, the staple of mass culture (along with romance), becomes increasingly unsustainable. If there is no evil any longer, then villains become impossible too; and for money to be interesting, it has to happen on some immense scale of robber barons or oligarchs, for whom, to be sure, there are fewer and fewer dramatic possibilities today, and whose presence in any case recasts traditional plots in political terms, where they are less suitable for a mass culture, that seeks to ignore politics. (Or when it turns to politics, then we may begin to wonder whether something has not also happened to politics itself: the reign of Cynical Reason is also the omnipresence of the disabused conviction about the corruption of the political generally, and its complicity with the financial system and its corruptions—so virtually by definition this universal cynical knowledge does not seem to project any political consequences any longer.)

We therefore have here two converging problems: on the one hand, the repetition of the older melodramatic plot form becomes more and more tiresome, and more difficult to sustain. On the other, the raw material or content for such a practice of form is becoming unidimensionalized: evil is vanishing socially, villains are few and far between, everybody is alike. The Utopian writers already had a problem with the possibility of literature in their perfect world; now we have a problem with it in our imperfect one.

This explains why villainy in mass culture has been reduced to two lone survivors of the category of evil: these two representations of the truly antisocial are, on the one hand, serial killers and, on the other, terrorists (mostly of the religious persuasion, as ethnicity has become identified with religion, and secular political protagonists like the communists and the anarchists no longer seem to be available). Everything else in sexuality or so-called passional motivation has long since been domesticated: we understand it all, from sadomasochists to homosexuals—pedophilia being a minor exception here, to be classed as a kind of subgroup or subpossibility within the larger category of serial killers (who are generally, but not always, understood as sexually motivated). It is true that with mass murderers of the Columbine type we begin to shade over towards the political and here terrorism reappears, but the latter organized in terms of the radical otherness of belief and religious fanaticism, since little else remains. If we really grasped terrorism as a purely political strategy, then somehow its frisson also evaporates, and we can consign it to debates on Machiavelli, on political strategy and tactics, or on history.

I need not add that these two staples—terrorists and serial killers—have become as boring as the villains driven by “greed.” Alas, as with the disappearance of the spy novel after the end of the Cold War, that boredom would seem to betoken an end of melodrama, which threatens to become the end of mass culture itself.

It is in the context of these dilemmas of plot construction that we now turn to season 2 and the first nonvirtual appearance of a certain Utopianism in *The Wire*. This season deals with the port of Baltimore, with labor unions and corruption, and with a whole outside network of drug suppliers (the Greek!). The magnificent landscape of the increasingly obsolescent port and its container technology perhaps requires a detour through the whole question of place and scene (in Kenneth Burke’s sense) in *The Wire*. The place is, to be sure, Baltimore; and anyone’s first and quite understandable impulse would be to classify this series as part of the “post-modern” return to regionalism, and not only in “high literature” (Raymond Carver, etc.). I’ve already mentioned the now constitutive relationship of

detective stories and procedurals all over the world to local or regional commitments; meanwhile, “world cinema” makes those commitments virtually by definition, however its works might strike local audiences, since globalized film festival culture is organized by national production.

But, in *The Wire*, there are some interesting distinctions to be made. For one thing, the regional is always implicitly comparative: not the corrupt old Eastern big cities, but Montana or the South, where we live differently, and so forth, with an emphasis on the small town, or the desert landscape, or even the suburb. Here in *The Wire* nobody knows that other landscapes, other cities, exist: Baltimore is a complete world in itself; it is not a closed world but merely conveys the conviction that nothing exists outside it. (It is not provincial, no one feels isolated or far from this or that center where things are supposed to be really happening.) To be sure, Annapolis (the state capital) is a reference, since it is where budgetary decisions are made (especially for the police force); Philadelphia is a distant reference, since occasionally gang members have to make a drop-off there; New York City is the place you have to hire killers from, in very special instances where you need someone unfamiliar from the outside. Where the Greek gets his drugs is absolutely not a matter of conjecture (or of subjective mapping). Even nature (and the shoreline) does not exist, as witness the bewilderment of the one unhappy youngster (Wallace, played by Michael B. Jordan) shipped off to hide out with his grandmother for a while before going back to Baltimore to be killed. Baltimore is the corners—it is the police headquarters, occasionally the courts and city hall—and this is why the very name of Baltimore is irrelevant (except for local patriotism and the TV viewers) and also why the docks and the port come as a real spatial opening, even though they are fully integrated into the web of interest and corruption as anything else, and even though the distant ports of call or whatever vessels still put in here are also absolutely unrecorded, unimagined, and so irrelevant as to be virtually nonexistent.

The labor leader is a Pole, and this is then also the moment to evoke the ethnic in *The Wire*. “Baltimore” is a nonexistent concept, but the ethnic still very much exists here, particularly if you include the police as an ethnic category, both in some figurative or moral sense, and also on account of the Irish tradition still very much in evidence among them. But are black people “ethnic” in any of these senses? We have already seen that the drug scene, run by Barksdale, is not only black, but exists like a foreign city within the official one: it is a whole other world, into which you do not go unless you have business there (“you” here standing for the officially dominant white culture). So here, in absolute geographical propinquity, two whole cultures exist without contact and without interaction, even

without any knowledge of each other: like Harlem and the rest of Manhattan, like the West Bank and the Israeli cities that, once part of it, are now still a few miles away; even like East and West Berlin today, where older East Berliners are still reluctant to travel to the former West, with its opulent shops they have no tradition of, and with a whole capitalist culture alien to them for most of their lives.

Still, this might be considered essentially as a black series; the bulk of its cast is black, drawing on scores not only of underemployed black actors but also on local nonprofessionals, as well; just as Baltimore itself is a predominantly black city. But as has been observed of its predecessor series, *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–99), this very preponderance means that you see so many different types of black people (social, professional, even physical) as to utterly dissolve the category. Here there is no longer any such thing as “black” people any longer, and by the same token no such thing as black political or social solidarity. These former “black people” are now in the police; they can be criminals or prison inmates, educators, mayors and politicians; *The Wire* is in that sense what is now called *post-racial* (something that might be sure to have its political effect on the U.S. viewing public at large, just as the presence of TV or so many black entertainment celebrities has had its own impact on racial stereotypes and on the unfamiliarity essential to racisms).

But the Poles are still an ethnic group, as witness the ferocious vendetta waged against the labor leader Frank Sobotka by a Polish police major, which is one of the causes of Frank’s eventual downfall. His ethnicity is at some distance, however slight, from his role as labor leader; and it is around this last that a certain Utopianism begins to gather. For the demise of the port of Baltimore has to do with the postmodern technology of containerization (see Marc Levinson’s *The Box*, 2006) and its impact on the labor movement (many fewer workers needed, leading to the fall of once immensely powerful unions like the longshoremen’s), as well as on cities (the postcontainer development of the port of Newark, New Jersey, having suddenly rendered a host of other competing East Coast ports obsolete, very much including Baltimore), the old port now seemingly reserved for police boats, such as the one to which Jimmy has been demoted. This is then an interesting case where the destructive force of globalization has been, as it were, interiorized along with a more general deindustrialization: it is not only the movement of work to other, cheaper countries that has ruined Baltimore, but rather our own technology (which of course amplifies the impact of globalization generally, as containerization develops foreign ports and modifies industrial production and what can be shipped, as well). But this historical story is part of the background of *The Wire*, and not its primary lesson or message.

The message is in part elsewhere, and it lies in the recontextualization of Frank Sobotka's alleged corruption (stereotypically associated with labor unions today, at least since Jimmy Hoffa); and it is certain that Frank is deeply implicated in the drug trade and lets the Greek use his container traffic. But Frank is not interested in money (and I suppose you could argue that Stringer Bell is not interested in money either and, maybe beyond that, that the excitement of finance capital itself is not really about money, in its older sense of riches and wealth). Frank uses the money to build up his own contacts, in view of a supreme project, which is the rebuilding and revitalization of the port of Baltimore. He understands history and knows that the labor movement and the whole society organized around it cannot continue to exist unless the port comes back. This is then his Utopian project, Utopian even in the stereotypical sense in which it is impractical and improbable—history never moving backwards in this way—and in fact an idle dream that will eventually destroy him and his family.

But I mean something more than that, and this enlarged conception of Utopianism has to do with plot construction. Realism was always somehow a matter of necessity: why it had to happen like that and why reality itself is both the irresistible force and the unmovable obstacle. To include Frank's pipe dream in a purely realistic work, we would have to see it (as Balzac so often did) as a mania, a psychological obsession, a purely subjective drive and character peculiarity. But this dream is not like that; it is not only objective; it draws all of objectivity within itself such that, if the plot of *The Wire* were to show its success, the representation would imply the Utopian (or revolutionary) transformation and reconstruction of all of society itself. Nor is it political pleading, a political program cooked up by *The Wire's* writers and producers and endorsed by the public as a desirable political and social improvement. It cannot be all that—no viewer will understand this episode in that practical light, because it involves not an individual reform but rather a collective and historical reversal—but it introduces a slight crack or rift into the seamless necessity of *The Wire* and its realism or reality. This episode then adds something to *The Wire* that cannot be found in most other mass-cultural narratives: a plot in which Utopian elements are introduced, without fantasy or wish fulfillment, into the construction of the fictive, yet utterly realistic, events.

Yet Sobotka's Utopianism would remain a mere fluke or idiosyncrasy if it did not have its equivalents in later seasons of *The Wire*. (We could write it off, for example, by observing that the creators of the show, in their local patriotism, had taken this occasion to add in some more purely local statement.) But in fact it does, and at this point I can only enumerate the later incidence of a Utopian dimension in succeeding seasons. In season 3, Utopianism is certainly present in Major Colvin's "legalization" of drugs; that

is, his creation of an enclave of drug use closed to police intervention. In season 4, on education, it is to be found in Pryzbylewski's classroom experiments with computers and his repudiation of the exam evaluation system imposed by state and federal political entities. Finally, in season 5, the most problematical, it is to be located in Jimmy's invention of a secret source for funding real and serious police operations outside the bureaucracy and its budget—and this, despite the artificial crime panic he deliberately fosters, and also somewhat on the margins of what was to have been a series dominated by the newspaper and the media (for each season of *The Wire*, like Zola's great series, or like Sara Paretsky's Chicago crime novels, is also organized around a specific industry).

The future and future history have broken open both high- and mass-cultural narratives in the form of dystopian Science Fiction and future catastrophe narratives. But in *The Wire*, exceptionally, it is the Utopian future that here and there breaks through, before reality and the present again close it down.

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