

ASSESSING THE PROGRESSIVE PROMISE OF HBO'S THE WIRE

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ABSTRACT

HBO's *The Wire* garnered critical acclaim for its portrayal of the urban problems of the city of Baltimore, particularly its Black population, specifically those engaged in the street-level drug trade. One of the main accolades was the show's realism in its portrayal of life on the streets. It also received praise for giving its characters more depth in comparison to shows that had come before it. This was seen as giving a more compassionate and less stereotyping view of those characters. This article will address the issue of stereotypes, whether the show's realism furthered the reduction of stereotypes of Blacks, and will assess the critical acclaim the show has received in the two decades since it premiered.

Keywords: stereotypes, critical acclaim, realism in a dramatic portrayal

INTRODUCTION

HBO's *The Wire*, which ran from 2003 to 2008 was a show with a purpose. It sought to unmask the problems of the city of Baltimore. According to the show's creator, David Simon, it was about "what stories get told and what don't." (O'Rourke 2006) Simon was angry at this situation (Bowden 2008) and wanted to tell the stories that otherwise would not get told. The unique perspective he aimed to take was a "street level" rather than a "birds eye" view of the story. The focus was to be on the characters and their personal perspectives and stories rather than that of an omniscient narrator. "We are allowed to participate... we are more than just tourists or voyeurs.... we grow conversant in street corner microhistories... The series encourages the viewer to explore this imagined city." (Hsu 2011) This street-level view was intended to provide a realism that other portrayals could not. If viewers could see things through the eyes of the characters in the show, then they could attain a more empathetic perspective on characters such as street-level drug dealers who are usually stigmatized in the media, thus expanding Peter Singer's (2011) circle of empathy so that viewers could include previously excluded groups in their circle of empathy. Simon's stated intent here was to reduce the stigmatization that stereotypes of these types of people had built up over the years. This garnered critical acclaim for the show (Williams 2014), despite its ratings and viewership being so low that the show fought to stay on the air. (Abrams 2022)

Did the show's realism give an empathetic portrayal of the characters (specifically the Black drug dealers who comprised a large part of the cast)? Did the show deserve the critical acclaim it received? Instead of being a sensitive portrayal of African Americans in underserved parts of Baltimore which could have widened Singer's circle of empathy (at least amongst educated liberals), HBO's *The Wire* was instead a vehicle through which embedded stereotypes of

Blacks were further strengthened in the very audience the show was purportedly enlightening. (López 2013) It did this by portraying “reality” without the context in which those facts on the ground became reality, which does not convey anything real at all. Instead, such portrayals strengthen the fermentation of stereotypes in the minds of the general public. For example, Reid (2015) sites studies that perceptions of Blacks are only positive when they are “softly” black (Barak Obama) rather than forcefully black (Malcom X). There is a body of literature praising the show for the light it sheds on Baltimore’s Blacks. Here are some ways in which that literature fails.

First is the notion that only conservatives will have their stereotypes solidified by the show because they are “more racist” than we progressives. The show may indeed inflame conservative racism, but it also strikes the chord of unconscious bias in liberals. One of the show’s most praised aspects is its “realism.” No other shows, it is asserted, have been able to “tell it like it is” on the gritty streets of Baltimore the way this meticulously researched show has. This paper will expand on the fact that giving snapshots of street level scenes without context does not show things as they are but perpetuates things as they are said to be. The fact that the show received an outsized amount of critical acclaim is also garrisoned in its defense. I will show here why this is one in a long line of “critically acclaimed” efforts that do not warrant such applause. Critiques of the show are laid out here. But that does not mean that the show was without positive aspects. This article will conclude with some positives that resulted from the show’s airing.

Conservatives—the only ones susceptible to stereotypes?

One common notion amongst us progressives is: only conservatives will have their stereotypes strengthened and that we in the progressive community will be able to look “deeper” as a result of the show’s “long-form” treatment of its characters and the issues their struggles embody. One example of this stance is embodied in the statement that “Liberals...are satisfied with the small ray of hope in some of these characters, like Bubbles, who maintain their dignity and pride amid such turmoil. Conservatives have their stereotypes reinforced, since the show depicts most blacks as dangerous criminals, drug addicts, or welfare recipients—culturally damaged, a class of people whose behavior and values separate them from respectable society.” (Atlas and Dreier 2008, 81)

To assess this statement, it is necessary to look at the data on racism. Who exactly is racist? The answer is, almost everyone. (Harvard 2011) And everyone means everyone. It is not surprising that on tests of racist tendencies, most importantly implicit bias, whites almost universally test “positive,” including liberals. What is more surprising is that the long history of the stereotyping of Blacks has even biased many Blacks against Blacks (though in lesser, but significant, numbers) (Nosek and Banaji 2002). So Blacks are often likely to subscribe to the same stereotypes about Blacks than Whites are prone to. A grim real-world manifestation of this is that there is some evidence that black police officers may be even more prone than their white counterparts to use excessive force in encounters with African Americans. (Vitale 2017)

Another thing to remember when talking about liberals and conservatives on race is that liberals may be more likely to deny adherence to the stereotypes, which is why *The Wire* is so lauded in our ranks. Liberals have the same stereotypes as conservatives, but instead of attacking the

objects of the stereotypes with overt bigotry as conservatives are purported to do, liberals embrace the objects of stereotypes with pity, which may ultimately be even less helpful to minorities in that it may delay minorities seeking true remedies for the racism that hinders their prospects in life because they feel they have a reliable ally in liberal viewers of shows like *The Wire*. So stereotypes of both liberals and conservatives are strengthened through the portrayal of black criminals in the show. What is likely to differ is the emotions evoked in the two groups. Conservatives will be more likely, on average, to condemn and want to punish the criminals whereas we in the progressive community will be more likely to empathize with the criminals and seek to understand those who have been corralled into a life of crime.

Atlas and Dreier do, though, join George Lipsitz (2011) in correctly criticizing *The Wire* for not including organizations like “ACORN, BUILD, the Algebra Project, and Justice for Janitors... [Which] don’t exist in the Baltimore depicted in *The Wire*. Without them... we are left with a view of Baltimore’s poor as people sentenced for life to an unchanging prison of social pathology. This, in fact, is how *The Wire* views the poor.” (Atlas and Dreier 2008) It should be noted, however, that Atlas and Drier say that in the show Mayor Carcetti petitions for aid to schools when in reality it was ACORN that did the heavy lifting.

To this on-the-mark criticism needs to be added that while Lipsitz, Atlas, Dreier, and others correctly note these absences, the biggest problem with the omissions they site is not simply their absence, but the fact that their absence strengthens stereotypes, stereotypes that are not alleviated by watching the show—for either liberals or conservatives—despite the “in-depth” treatment the program’s sixty hours and five seasons gives many of its characters. How is it that they are not alleviated? The show develops a large number of characters whose complex circumstances are given ample time to unfold in front of the eyes of the viewer. Why does this not do anything to disabuse viewers of their stereotypes? The two main reasons have already been touched upon. First, there is no context given that informs viewers about how the city came to be the particular type of place these characters—particularly the street-level drug dealers and their bosses—inhabit. Second, there are virtually no examples of characters actively engaged in improving their lives. There are no characters engaged in the social activism like legendary educator, Charlie Dugger or any appearance of groups like BUILD that are (and, having been founded in 1977, were at the time of the show) very active pushing for positive change in the city. The closest the show gets is Dennis "Cutty" Wise, an ex-convict who establishes a gym for local youth. But, as will be explained later, even this propagates unhelpful stereotypes.

FAQ: But isn't it just reality?

Another defense of the way the show is structured takes the form, but isn't the show just “telling it like it is?” Hey, this is reality. We can't help it. We don't create the facts. We just record them. It's our duty to show on the screen life like it is on the streets. What we present is a “colorblind reality.” It just happens that a good portion of the population of Baltimore is black. It's just a fact. We can't “cherry pick” the good because that would not be “telling it like it is.” We are not making any specific commentary about any one group of people. If the drug dealers and corrupt politicians are black in the show, it's because they're actually black in Baltimore's reality. We're just telling it like it is. We are equal opportunity critics. We're just filming the balls and strikes.

In fact, I encountered this type of thinking while living in and traveling in places from New Orleans to Charleston. Probably the most constant and consistent refrain I heard from people I talked to was some version of, “I’m not a racist, but it’s just a fact. When Blacks move into the neighborhood, everything goes downhill. Crime goes up, cleanliness goes down. It just becomes a worse place to live.” I have heard this from people of the full spectrum of society, including (unexpectedly at the time) from black people that I talked with. Everyone was adamant, often angrily so, that they were not racists. They were just “stating facts.” Just look at the statistics, they said. Numbers don’t lie. I’m not a racist. I’m just giving equal treatment in criticizing wrongdoers, whoever they may be.

The logic in the show isn’t necessarily that of the people those I talked to, who were attempting to empirically justify their idea that Blacks were somehow inherently bigger troublemakers than others. The logic in *The Wire* is more that criticism needs to be leveled at wrongdoers in general. And if those wrongdoers just happen to be black, well that’s just who they happen to be, and we have to go after them just as we would anyone else. It’s just fair. In fact, it would be a sort of reverse discrimination to give blacks a pass. That logic all sounds appealing—until it breaks down. And the breakdown comes in the form of the fact that giving “equal treatment” to those who have received unequal treatment in the past turns out not to be equal treatment at all, but instead a continuation of the propagation of well-established stereotypes.

There is no such thing as “equal treatment” when it comes to stereotyped groups. What “equal treatment” for stereotyped groups actually means is multiplied emphasis. The logic of being an “equal opportunity” critic—criticizing not just Blacks, but Whites, Latinos, Jews, Muslims, etc. — breaks down because a critique of an already stereotyped group is never equal. It piles onto that which starts out being far more strongly ingrained in the minds of viewers and thus ends up being far more strongly emphasized and doing far more damage. In his book *Why We Can’t Wait*, Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “...if a man is entered at the starting line in a race three hundred years after another man the first would have to perform some impossible feat in order to catch up...” In the case of shows like *The Wire*, it is just the opposite. Blacks have a three-hundred-year head start in America (and a longer history in the world (Kendi 2016)) of being stereotyped. They are three hundred years ahead in the race of being typecast into the mold of people who deserve their negative image. So “equal treatment” in this context is not just stereotyping, but stereotyping plus 300 years.

A prime example of this is the focus state senator Clay Davis who was mentioned previously. The standard defense for this critique would be, as described above, that he is a wrongdoer and we have to address wrongdoing, wherever it occurs. If the transgressor just happens to be a black man, we can’t help that. We are just exposing wrongdoing and wrongdoers. And, as also described above, that logic breaks down under the weight of the fact that blacks have been so overrepresented as wrongdoers for so long that it is impossible to claim that exposing the corruption of this particular black individual is “equal treatment”—especially with the plethora of white wrongdoers who could have been focuses of the show.

Herein lies the danger of “telling it like it is.” It doesn’t look beyond a few surface visibles to see what the broader reality is. Creators of shows like *The Wire* are of course free to make whatever kind of show they wish. But if their stated goal is any kind of substantive social critique, portraying things “how they really are,” then the absence of history, context, and

counterstereotypical examples—all of which are part of the actual reality of the history of Baltimore—results in a “reality” that is invalid, a reality which is, in fact, very unreal. (We also should not make the mistake of claiming that Blacks are without blame, though.) (McWhorter2003)

Assessing the show’s critical acclaim

Considering all this, how is it that the show was so effective in garnering so much critical acclaim, much of it from the “liberal” media? The numerous accolades given to other shows that purport to deal with complex issues but which end up doing just the opposite (see, for example, Sarah Nilson’s pinpoint dissection of the popular series, *Mad Men*—Nilson and Turner) make it no surprise that *The Wire* has received similar accolades despite the fact that it reinforces long-held stereotypes of black people. Part of the answer is that the show actually did depict some reality, some of it beyond the street. There are lawyers and judges whose decisions about criminal cases that come before them are influenced not by a sense of justice, but by how politically advantageous their actions might be. There is a property developer who gives campaign donations to the mayor in exchange for preferential treatment for his projects. There is a very important critique in the show, one that really does address a substantive issue: the fact that the vast majority of those who face any consequences for their wrongdoing are low-level criminals rather than individuals of higher socioeconomic status like the corrupt property developer. And then there is probably the most important contribution the show makes: portraying the experiment of a zone in which drug laws are not enforced as a relative success, mirroring real life successes in decriminalizing certain drugs or engaging in selective non-enforcement for certain drug offences. Unfortunately, this most promising aspect of the show is derailed by the caricatured portrayal of the zone as it is depicted as a den of debauchery in which laughable people do laughable things rather than the serious good that real drug free zones could be.

On the other side of the criticism coin are the praises, positive portrayals of characters who may be stereotyped in other venues, like minority characters who are portraits of integrity and commitment to doing what is right. There is Detective Kima Greggs, who not only refuses to engage in the questionable actions of some of her fellow officers, but nearly dies playing a courageous role in an undercover operation. Actress, Sonja Sohn, who played Detective Greggs went on to do some substantive charitable work in Baltimore after the show aired. (Zabriskie 2012) Another example is Major Howard Colvin, who devised and implemented the drug non-enforcement zone. These are bona fide positive contributions of the show for which it deserves rightful praise.

The presence of these positive role models in the show, though, is marred by another purportedly positive portrayal which turns out to be just another stereotype. As mentioned earlier, the character Dennis “Cutty” Wise is a reformed drug dealer who, fresh out of prison, has no desire to get back into “the game,” but reluctantly accedes to Avon Barksdale’s overtures to return to his old activities. After finding out through a string of incidents that he is no longer cut out for it, he opts to change course and open a boxing gym. There is of course nothing wrong with opening a gym where youth who might otherwise engage in nefarious activities can come to instead. But there is also nothing more stereotypical than the ever-present inner-city boxing gym. What does the boxing gym represent? It may be a place to “get kids off the

streets,” but, crucially, it is nothing more than that. Boxing gyms in cinema are rarely roads to higher education or paths to prosperity. They are just what they are. Black kids get some wholesome activity in gyms like this, but they are never seen as the equivalent of, say, rowing clubs for white kids in prep schools, where real roads towards upward mobility are paved with gold. So having a character start an inner-city boxing gym may seem like a fostering of a positive image, it is actually a perpetuation of the stereotype of the inner-city gym, a hangout for kids on the road to nowhere. Add to that the fact that Cutty can’t cut it when it comes to figuring out all the bureaucracy (city permits, etc.) that is necessary to negotiate when starting a business, that the GED is too difficult for him, and that he engages in some womanizing—again, the stereotypical activity of the hypersexual black man—and all vestiges of a positive portrayal are relegated to the annals of the stereotype.

But there are just enough of portrayals of reality that actually matter for society—examples of dysfunction, corruption, and criminality at the supra-street level combined with positive characters like Detective Greggs and Major Colvin—that the show’s creators (and commentators) can claim a larger project than one simply revolving around street-level drug dealing and corrupt unions. With these tokens—and tokens they are—in place, the show is enabled to proceed comfortably with its main plotline: the actions, reactions, trials, and troubles of black criminals, all acting and reacting in the contextless reality that is the setting for the show.

Typical of a set of favorable commentary on *The Wire* is the statement that “...part of the appeal of *The Wire* is that it privileges the worldview of the block.” (Neal 2010). The worldview is indeed of the block, but it is not privileged in the way that the term, privileged is supposed to be understood. The worldview of the block in the show is privileged only in that inhabitants of the block are at the center of a good amount of the storyline. It is not privileged in the sense of the actual action taking place on the block attaining to the status of something that audience members see as somehow legitimate in the way that the word privileged is correctly understood, as for example when the worldview of a detective is privileged over that of a homicidal maniac she is trying to catch. In that case the worldview is actually privileged. The worldview of the block in *The Wire* instead perpetuates the stereotype of “life on the streets” reinforced by action without context, as was done more explicitly in Simon’s earlier work, “Homicide: Life on the streets,” in which a similar lack of context similarly perpetuated stereotypes of blue-collar criminals.

Another motif in the praise the series has garnered is that because of its realism, it doesn’t have to be “didactic.” It can just “tell the story.” It can show things “the way they are.” But showing something does not equate to critiquing it. The only way that showing something constitutes a critique is if that which is shown has already been sufficiently critiqued to immediately invoke a critical reception in the minds of viewers. A scene where a character hurls a racial epithet at another character is an immediate and actual critique because racial epithets have been sufficiently critiqued as to evoke negative reactions in the majority of the general public. What has not achieved a critical mass of criticism is the stereotype of the inner city black criminal. That stereotype still persists and thus just showing lives of characters that fit that description cannot constitute a critique of the stereotype that veils them—no matter how much one goes into “depth” about their daily struggles—unless the context of how the “inner city” came to be what it is in *The Wire* and countless other movies and TV shows. No matter how much dramatic

devices draw us into empathy with the struggles of the characters, they are still no more than stereotypes until we know how they got to where they are.

There is importance in exegesis. There is importance in working hard to delve below the surface. There is importance in overcoming first emotional reactions and adjusting one's mind towards a more enlightened viewpoint. But this is most effective in artworks that plumb the depths of the universal soul. So the merits of the play itself and the literary scholarship of something like *The Merchant of Venice* override stereotypes that play may have fostered.

When it comes to *The Wire*, though, visceral, surface reactions are what permeate the mind of the viewer. What you see is what you get. In that regard, *The Wire* reinforces all the old stereotypes. Sure, you can do all kinds of intellectual gymnastics to try to uncover deeper significances to try to shrug off initial visceral reactions. But the damage has already been done. Just as the constant repetition of the video of Senator Allen's racist tirade activated the unconscious networks of racism and xenophobia instead of the conscious ones of fairness and inclusion, the stereotypes are what stick in the show's contextless commentary in which some of the surface stereotypes are washed off the Teflon coating. But the substance of the stereotypes remain as stubbornly persistent as ever.

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