

SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU

FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

Odsjek za anglistiku

Američki studiji

Representation of The Penal State in HBO's *The Wire*

Diplomski rad

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Akademska godina: 2017./2018.

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Abstract

This master's thesis explores the representation of the penal state in HBO's acclaimed TV show *The Wire*. After dismantling the welfare system in the 1990s, the United States of America has shifted to a punitive regulation of poverty. This is evidenced by the fact that the incarceration rate has increased four times in the span of 25 years, while the crime rates remained stagnant. The restriction of welfare was justified by invoking the ideology of personal responsibility and stereotypes such as the "welfare queen." By illustrating the systemic urban inequality of the inner city which limits its characters' individual autonomy, *The Wire* positions itself against the ideology of personal responsibility. Its vast array of complex, three-dimensional characters serves to dispel stereotypes of African American residents of the inner city. However, the stereotypical representations still persist when the show's focus shifts to African American mothers. They are represented as irresponsible and their desires are linked directly to their sons' negative outcomes. In a rare didactic moment, the series encourages nuclear patriarchal families as the antidote to the decaying institutions of the dilapidated American inner city.

Key words: *The Wire*, penal state, welfare, prisonfare, African American, personal responsibility

Introduction

The United States of America has the highest incarceration rate in the industrialized world. This was not always the case; the rate grew exponentially after the revolutionary 1960s in the post-Civil Rights era. This phenomenon cannot be called ‘mass incarceration’ because this would imply proportional incarceration across all social groups. Instead, sociologist Loïc Wacquant suggests using the term hyperincarceration in order to capture the reality of the carceral expansion that has unevenly targeted poverty-stricken African-American males. This expansion cannot be explained by a rise in crime since studies have shown that crime has actually declined in this period. Neither can it be explained by the concept of the ‘Prison Industrial Complex’ since, according to Wacquant, it constitutes a fiscal drain and composes a negligible part of the economy. What he suggests instead is that the contemporary prison is at its core a political institution installed to absorb the shock of the crash of the ghetto, normalize precarious wage labour, and stage the sovereignty of the state. This phenomenon of hyperincarceration is inextricably linked to the hyperghetto which serves as an instrument of ethnoracial control in the city and the primary recruiting grounds for prisons. These two stand in a linked relationship of structural continuity which is exemplified by the fact that seven in ten American convicts are rearrested.

One of the causes of hyperincarceration was the breakdown of public institutions such as welfare, which was replaced by workfare and prisonfare. The disintegration of public institutions is one of the main overarching themes in *The Wire*, an American crime drama television series set and produced in Baltimore, Maryland. Each of its five seasons introduces a different institution and its relationship to law enforcement. The two major groups of characters that remain constant throughout the entire show are the Baltimore Police Department and the Barksdale criminal organization. These aspects make it a suitable narrative for analysing the penal state, which is the goal of this master’s thesis. The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter provides a historical overview of the welfare system in the 20th century. It also examines the ideological justifications for welfare reform, such as the stereotype of the “welfare queen” and the ideology of personal responsibility. The second chapter provides an overview of the penal state in the USA. It is mostly based on the work of Loïc Wacquant who argues that the aggressive rolling out of prisons and its

extensions is a response to the failure of the state on economic and social fronts as well as a way to neutralize the social insecurities of the post-industrial era. The final chapter examines the representation of the penal state in *The Wire*, focusing on the ideology of personal responsibility. It asserts that the series positions itself against that ideology by illustrating the systemic urban inequality which prevents characters from acting according to their moral values and beliefs. The only exceptions to this representation are African American mothers; they are represented through stereotypes of the black matriarch and the “welfare queen” which were promoted by the Moynihan Report and proponents of punitive welfare reform in the 1990s.

1. History and Cultural Representation of Welfare in the USA

1.1. A Brief Overview of Welfare Reform in the 20th century

When Bill Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 “ending welfare as we know it,” it was not without controversy. He was criticized by Democrats and Republicans alike, as well as labour unions, religious groups and organizations representing women, minorities and immigrants. Their criticism was justified – the bill ended a six decades old entitlement that guaranteed any eligible impoverished family to receive cash assistance and shifted the responsibility of welfare from the federal level to the states. In order for such a historic and controversial bill to have passed, it had to have been supported by an electorate which held negative views of welfare recipients. These negative public views were bolstered by racist and discriminatory stereotypes such as the “welfare queen” and by equating welfare recipients to drug addicts.

Bill Clinton was not the first president who compared welfare to addiction. When he spoke of the “cycle of dependence,” he was merely echoing the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt who said (in his 1935 State of the Union address) that “continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fibre.” He continued: “To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit.” However, Roosevelt made it clear that there were

two groups of unemployed people dependent on welfare. The first group consisted of about a million and a half people who could not support themselves “for the most part, through no fault of their own.” He expressed that they had to be cared for as they were before, on the local level. This included states, counties, towns, cities, churches and private welfare agencies. The second group was comprised of around three and a half million employable people: “This group was the victim of a nation-wide depression caused by conditions which were not local but national.” There was no talk of “welfare queens” or “teenage moms.” However, the Social Security Act was also not without fault. This is where the racist attitudes towards welfare recipients had started.

In order to understand the racist attitudes towards contemporary welfare recipients, we need to comprehend the circumstances of welfare reform at the beginning of the twentieth century. There were three major welfare reforms in the twentieth century that preceded PRWORA; the social policies of the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and the Great Society. In the Progressive Era, African Americans were “almost universally excluded from state-level Progressive social policies such as mothers’ pensions” (Lieberman 24). Most of them lived in the South and were denied civil and political rights under the violent repression of Jim Crow segregation. The Social Security Act of 1935, signed in by President Roosevelt, created the first permanent national welfare policies. It was a part of the New Deal, which pursued an agenda familiar to that of many European countries; social insurance, labour rights, and economic regulation. The Roosevelt administration proposed the following:

(...) a widely inclusive set of social policies under national control, combining fully national social insurance for all workers with financial support for state public assistance policies such as mothers’ pensions, under terms that would give the federal government substantial administrative and political leverage. (Lieberman 36)

Southern congressional leaders found this unacceptable because it would enable southern African American workers to come into direct contact with the national state, thus mobilizing a class coalition against the racial hegemony. At this time, as in much of the twentieth century, white southerners had disproportionate influence over national politics due to the organization of Congress. They controlled key congressional committees,

generally voted with other Democrats and perpetually re-elected Democrats in the one-party South. This mechanism allowed the segregated, white supremacist South to disenfranchise African Americans. Thanks to this mechanism, they denied the majority of African Americans access to Social Security coverage by excluding domestic and agricultural workers. Furthermore, they removed federal controls over state public assistance. The result was “a structurally limited, decentralized, and bifurcated welfare system that perpetuated African American dependence on local political and economic elites for their livelihoods” (ibid.). What made this possible were cross-class coalitions formed by whites in order to shape national politics and pursue their interests. Coalitions like these were central to the development of the American welfare state:

(...) even though African Americans were nominal partners in the New Deal coalition (although not solidly until 1936 or even after), the imperatives of racial dominance outweighed conventional class position in defining interests and cleavages in the social politics of the 1930s. (ibid.)

The most important program introduced by the Social Security Act was the Aid to Dependent Children, later renamed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). This was the primary source of assistance for poor children and their parents. However, states were given control of AFDC benefits and eligibility, which enabled them to heavily discriminate against African Americans. For example, receipt of aid was often denied to children of poor African American women if a man was living in the house. By doing this, the states punished women for their sexual behaviour and controlled their sexuality. This discrimination at the state level was greatly expanded in the 1990s, which prompted social scientists to conclude that “federalism has been one of the chief bulwarks of racial domination in the United States” (Brown 56). Nevertheless, the situation was much different during the 1960s in the time of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society.

During this time, the AFDC caseload more than tripled. This was enabled by “a number of social and political forces, including the acquisition of political power by African Americans, the massive waves of urban political violence, the welfare rights movement, and the liberal mood of the 1960s” (Fording 75). The Great Society liberals raised the federal contributions to grants-in-aid, launched new programs and removed the federal cap on

public assistance payments to states. By doing so, they stimulated spending by state and increased public investment in education, job training, and neighbourhood facilities in poor ghetto communities. Furthermore, the Supreme Court rectified the state control of female sexuality by limiting the state authority to “arbitrarily deny poor women benefits or make a woman’s sexual behaviour a condition of aid” (Brown 60). As a result, the number of poor women and children receiving aid rose “from about 3 million in 1960 to almost 11 million by 1973” (Brown 61). These liberal reforms and their consequences received criticisms that AFDC created work disincentives, which eventually fuelled the backlash of the 1990s.

Another preconceived notion that provided intellectual justification for the backlash was the belief that the structure of the African American family was to blame for black poverty. This debate was famously ignited by *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, better known as the Moynihan Report, named after its author, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The report, originally published in 1965, has remained controversial to this day. There have been contrasting interpretations of the author’s original intention, evidenced by the fact that the report has been invoked by Barack Obama as well as Paul Ryan to support their arguments. Moynihan himself has been clear about at least one thing: his assertion that the matriarchal structure of the African American family “retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.” According to him, the matriarchal structure was not problematic in itself; he saw the problem in the fact that the minority group of African Americans operates on one principle while the majority of the population operates on the opposite principle. In the broadest terms, he suggested that there should be a “national effort” which would “strengthen the Negro family so as to enable it to raise and support its members as do other families.” The ambiguity of the report opened it to multiple contradictory interpretations. The left embraced its call for new federal policies but criticized it for providing “scientific legitimacy and government sanction to a view of black families as pathological” (Klug). Conservatives, who ignored Moynihan’s call for a federal intervention in the labour market, used the report to blame America’s racial problems on black communities themselves, rather than institutional racism. In short, the Moynihan Report was short-lived as policy, but it greatly shaped the discourse on race in the post-Civil rights era, including the discourse preceding PRWORA.

According to the official narrative, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was supposed to address the work disincentives created by the Great Society and particularly the AFDC. Conservatives argued that AFDC encouraged laziness, unemployment, dependency, and a decline of moral values and personal responsibility. PRWORA was supposed to curb this by helping welfare recipients (especially African American single mothers) attain personal responsibility by entering the workforce. However, it is clear from the results of the reform that its goal was exclusively to reduce caseloads and spending on welfare. It became obvious that Conservatives had no interest in eradicating poverty; doing so through a work-conditioned policy would possibly be even more expensive than an open-ended grant because forcing poor women into the labour market would require “substantial public investment in day care, employment training and education, health services, and a variety of social services” (Brown 50). What they have done instead was replace the AFDC entitlement with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)—a block grant—and added requirements such as “time limits on the receipt of aid, work requirements for able-bodied adult recipients, and a host of other requirements designed to force welfare recipients to act more ‘responsibly’ while receiving aid” (Fording 72). Since states can keep the federal money from the block grant which they do not spend on welfare, they are incentivized not only to reduce caseloads, but also to reduce spending. Furthermore, the new regulations allowed states more discretion in reallocating the funds, which also allowed them to reduce spending on welfare programs. For example, states like Wisconsin and Connecticut shifted federal dollars into welfare and reduced state spending (Brown 66). Another study found that six states used TANF funds “to pay for services previously funded with state monies and then used the savings for tax cuts among other gifts to the middle class” (ibid.). Other states have simply failed “to spend all allocated federal funds and have accumulated large unobligated balances” (ibid.).

Even though the caseloads plummeted, a comparable decline in poverty rates has not occurred and neither has an increase in wages. Whites have left the rolls faster than blacks, which resulted in a caseload composed mostly of women of color. This was due to the discriminatory practices on the state level, but also due to the actual concentration of poverty in the USA. The causes of racialized poverty are well-known among researchers: “loss of jobs in inner cities, declining demand for unskilled labour, racially segregated neighbourhoods” and “public disinvestment in ghetto communities” (Brown 50). However,

these causes do not appear to be that well-known to whites, who tend to view poor blacks through racial stereotypes:

Among white Americans, black people are more likely to be seen as lazy (Gilens 1999); if poor, they are more likely than whites to be judged personally responsible for their poverty (Iyengar 1990) and less likely to be seen as deserving public assistance. (Fording et al. 10)

Due to racialized poverty, any race-neutral policy will fail to provide benefits to those who need them the most; poor inner city black and Latino communities. In order to truly eradicate poverty, a nation-wide race-specific policy that targeted the racially segregated urban communities where poverty is concentrated would have to be established. However, the anti-black stereotypes have resulted in a significant portion of whites opposing race-specific policies. This is why state politicians have no incentives to create a policy that would truly address the roots of poverty and why “only national policies can address race and poverty” (Brown 70).

2.2. Cultural Representations of Welfare

So far we have analysed the welfare reforms in the twentieth century and the political mechanisms underpinning them. However, in order for these welfare policies to be made into law, they have to be supported by the electorate. We have concluded that the welfare reform of the 1990s was a return to the racist and punitive measures of the 1930s after a period of the rule of law in the middle of the century. According to the official narrative, welfare created dependency and perpetuated poverty by creating a lazy, immoral, irresponsible underclass that would rather live off government money than find work. We know that this is not the true cause of poverty, which begs the following question: why are these racist attitudes and stereotypes so widespread among whites? Social scientists argue that these longstanding racist stereotypes were partly bolstered by the mass media (TV and newspapers) from the sixties onwards and partly by politicians who wanted to capitalize on white fears in order to build a new conservative majority.

In his analysis of the news media from the 1950s to the 1990s, Martin Gilens concluded that the representation of African Americans in news articles on poverty increased when articles were critical and decreased when the coverage was more sympathetic. As a direct consequence, this helped associate African Americans with the “undeserving poor” in the eyes of white America and perpetuated racist stereotypes that black people were lazy. Prior to the analysed period, black poverty was ignored by whites even though African Americans have always been disproportionately poor. As Gilens proves, this has changed dramatically in the middle of the twentieth century, even though the average percentage of African Americans among the poor remained constant at around 30 percent: “From only 27 percent in 1964, the proportion of African Americans in pictures of the poor increased to 49 percent and 53 percent in 1965 and 1966, and then to 72 percent black in 1967” (“Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform” 110). Several things have happened in the 1960s that facilitated this shift in representation. Historical changes such as black migration to the North (particularly to the cities), the civil rights movement and the urban riots of the mid-1960s all helped increase the visibility of African Americans. Another factor that enabled the racialization of poverty images was the changing racial composition of AFDC:

The percentage of African Americans among ADC/AFDC recipients increased steadily from about 14 percent in 1936 to about 45 percent in 1969, after which point the proportion of blacks declined slowly until it reached 36 percent in 1995. During the middle to late 1960s, then, African Americans made up a very substantial minority of AFDC recipients. (Gilens, “Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform” 105)

However, these were merely the conditions and not the causes that enabled the racialization. The actual cause of the racialization was the increase of negative stories on poverty, which disproportionately featured African Americans. As the public opinion on War on Poverty turned negative, many stories about waste, inefficiency or abuse of welfare were published. Gilens theorized that newsmagazine writers, editors and photographers associated these negative stories with African Americans due to the longstanding stereotypes that blacks are not committed to the work ethic and ideas of personal responsibility. He claims that white opposition to welfare stems from the misperception

that it rewards the “undeserving poor:” “Whites oppose welfare not because they think it primarily benefits blacks, but because they think it benefits blacks who prefer to live off the government rather than work” (Gilens, “Why Americans Hate Welfare” 4). These misperceptions, bolstered by racist media images, influenced public policies and shaped the punitive system of PRWORA. It is also important to notice that the views represented in these media images primarily reflect the values of the upper class since media organizations are privately owned and operated for profit. Consequently, if the attitudes of the working and middle class differed from those of the upper class, they would not be equally represented in the news media.

Who are the “undeserving poor” that comprised the majority of welfare recipients according to white Americans? This is not a novel concept; the division of poor people into moral categories is a nineteenth century invention. In order to distribute limited resources allocated for the poor, a category of the undeserving poor was conceived. This subset of the poor was considered undeserving of public assistance due to their perceived moral failings and irresponsible behaviour. The concept was reinvented in the twentieth century through the notion of the “underclass.” This notion also assumed the existence of a subset of the poor deemed undeserving due to high levels of drug abuse, criminal behaviour, unemployment, and teenage pregnancy. Since social scientists were unable to formulate an alternative concept for the disintegration of inner cities and their communities, the underclass became a widely accepted term. This term, however, is not neutral - it deflects attention from the structural origins of poverty by ascribing it to the moral failings of the impoverished and thus blames the victims. This, in turn, constrains the formulation of constructive policy. Furthermore, the “underclass” is not a class in any of the senses and lacks intellectual substance. It is misleading because it confines structural transformations that are reshaping the entire country to a small segment of the population (Katz).

Another manner in which stereotypes and racist attitudes are perpetuated is by way of “controlling images.” These are socially constructed images “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Sparks 176). They serve as a shorthand for “interpreting, shaping, stigmatizing—and thereby controlling—the actions of marginalized groups” (ibid.). Holloway Sparks argued that four controlling images dominated the discourse of the reform debate in the 1990s. These are the “welfare queen,” “teenage mom,” “deadbeat dad,” and

“noncitizen.” The most influential one was the image of the “welfare queen,” which targeted poor women of color. Ronald Reagan is often attributed as the original author of this stereotype, since he invoked it in numerous speeches. Although journalists refuted the veracity of his story, it still prevailed. Similar to it was the news story of the “Chicago 19,” a story about five African American welfare mothers and one African American man abusing nineteen children in Chicago. This story was not false but events like these were certainly not a widespread phenomenon as the news outlets made it seem. Still, the public selectively gravitated to images like these “in order to validate [their] own race and gender perceptions” (Sparks 194). These controlling images painted the recipients of welfare programs as the villains and not the victims, which dissuaded them from participating in the welfare debate. Of the nearly 600 witnesses that participated in the congressional hearings, only 17 were welfare recipients, and only four of them were still receiving AFDC (Sparks 184).

Even though the discourse of welfare reform appeared neutral, upon closer inspection it revealed discrimination hidden underneath. It purports to apply the neutral standard of “personal responsibility” equally to all members of society, which fails to address race, gender, and class privileges. Proponents of PRWORA posit that the only way to assume personal responsibility and self-sufficiency is by taking paid employment. This is discriminating towards women, African-Americans and impoverished communities because paid employment is not equally available to all citizens due to the way existing social relations are structured. It is much harder for poor women of color to conform to this idea since the jobs available to them may not pay enough to support a family or may require them to leave children without parental supervision and care. Furthermore, the discourse of personal responsibility implies that raising children is not work. The result of this discriminatory welfare policy is that the stereotype of the welfare queen becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy:

As Barbara Cruikshank has emphasized, overly stringent and punitive rules, elaborate procedures for determining eligibility, extensive reporting requirements, surveillance, behavioural standards, work requirements, and the like all combine to create the near-impossibility of being on welfare and not being seen as a rule-violating welfare queen. (Schram 55)

The welfare queen is not real, but the myth itself has real consequences, as well as ideological purposes. Sanford Schram asserts that it is used in order to “delegitimize welfare use by single mothers and to perpetuate the ideal of the traditional two-parent family and the maintenance of the family-wage system” (29). It serves to dissuade poor African American women’s dependence on the state by reinforcing the idea of their dependence on men. Furthermore, the family-wage system is also not neutral. It is biased in favour of “middle- and upper-class, male-headed, white families that tend to be able to conform to this model” (Schram 27). However, the most important reason why its proponents perpetuated this myth was because the discourse of personal responsibility needed a scapegoat:

As an abstraction disconnected from the real lives of people, personal responsibility desperately needs to be able to associate itself with embodied identities in order to make itself credible. (Schram 53)

In itself, “personal responsibility” is nothing but a “cultural placeholder that the culture can fill as it deems appropriate,” which is exactly why it needs a personification in the form of a welfare queen (Schram 33). Since it is no longer socially acceptable to be openly racist, such views and policies need to be encoded in euphemisms in order to be disseminated. The idea of personal responsibility poses as neutral but discriminates on the basis of gender, race and class because it is applied evenly to all citizens without taking into account the uneven distribution of social capital. Furthermore, it is paradoxical because it implies “being willing to take responsibility for what the dominant culture has already assigned as one’s responsibility, and on terms predetermined by the culture” (Schram 31). Similarly, the discourse of citizenship invoked by the proponents of PRWORA was also discriminatory. It was based on the influential ideas of political scientist Lawrence Mead who claimed that “most vulnerable Americans need obligations, as much as rights, if they are to move as equals on the stage of American life” (Sparks 188). Inspired by his ideas, proponents of PRWORA insisted on a contractual account of citizenship. Their idea of a contract was paradoxical, Holloway Sparks argues, because a contract implies a free exchange between equals. In their contract, the state had all the power and the other side was positioned only

to accept or refuse the “agreement.” Since they were often lacking even the most basic means of subsistence, they were not in the position to refuse the discriminating contract. Schram concludes:

In this sense, personal responsibility is not a rational, coherent, objective, neutral idea so much as a culturally acquired, and culturally biased, understanding of what it means to be a person in a given social order. (32)

The consequences of the 1996 welfare reform and the discourse that followed it are still felt more than twenty years after it was enacted. TANF was successful in getting families off welfare rolls (especially white families) – the number of families receiving aid decreased by 75 percent from 1996 – but not in reducing poverty rates (Edin). The funding for TANF remained at \$16.5 billion per year but due to inflation this amount has declined by 30 percent. Only a fraction of poor American families are receiving help from the program – the national average is around 22 percent (Carter). The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has discovered that only a half of federal and state TANF funds are being spent on providing aid to families in need through child care, meeting the essential needs of families and connecting families to work. The rest is spent on filling budget holes and on programs that do not support low-income families (Schott et al.). Poor Americans have responded to this by developing what Kathryn J. Edin has called survival strategies. Some are selling metal and aluminium to scrap dealers. Selling plasma has reached an all-time high in 2014 (Edin). Food pantry user rates have nearly doubled since 1999 (Barocio). An alternative economy has developed in inner cities, with drugs as the main commodity. This broken welfare system has not erased the racist stereotypes; seventy-one percent of Americans still agreed in 2003 that “welfare benefits make poor people dependent and encourage them to stay poor” (Gershon). It is safe to say that the system reinforced those stereotypes:

Rather than eliminating the myth of the welfare queen, these reforms codified it by shaping policy choices around the prevention of willful idleness and criminal behaviour. As a result, welfare reform created a system that expects the worst from families seeking assistance, and in so doing further entrenches a presumed link between poverty and poor character in popular discourse. (Black)

America's safety net has been shredded, and in the next chapter we are going to see how it has been replaced by the prison system.

2. Overview of the Penal State in the USA

2.1. The Shift from Workfare to Prisonfare

In the previous chapter we have analysed the contraction of the welfare state, which culminated in the 1990s with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. This contraction was complemented by another phenomenon - the expansion of the penal state. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, also signed into law by Bill Clinton, marked the single largest increase in penal sanctions in the history of the United States. This expansion was funded by the No Frills Prison Act of 1995, which also eliminated incentives to rehabilitation. The simultaneous contraction of the welfare state and expansion of the penal state was not a coincidence; it was a deliberate shift from the single regulation of the poor by the maternalist arm of the social state to "the double regulation of poverty through the paternalist action of restrictive 'workfare' and expansive 'prisonfare'" (Wacquant, "Wedding of Workfare and Prisonfare Revisited" 207). Before the expansion of the penal state, poverty was managed by expanding or contracting the state relief programs according to the ups and downs of the economy; the expansions of welfare programs subdued the threats to the social order while the restrictions aimed to enforce work norms by pushing recipients back onto the labour market. In his 2009 book *Punishing the Poor*, sociologist Loïc Wacquant asserts that this model explained the two major welfare explosions and worked well in the 20th century but no longer holds true:

In the age of fragmented labor, hypermobile capital, and sharpening social inequalities and anxieties, the "central role of relief in the regulation of marginal labor and in the maintenance of social order" is displaced and duly supplemented by the vigorous deployment of the police, the courts, and the prison in the nether regions of social space. (Wacquant, "Bordieu, Foucault, and the Penal State" 118)

Instead of cyclical contractions and expansions of public aid, we have been witnessing the continual contraction of welfare (replaced by workfare in 1996) and expansion of prisonfare since the 1990s. Wacquant describes prisonfare as “the rolling out of the police, the courts, and custodial institutions and their extensions to contain the brewing urban disorders that the state itself has spawned or aggravated by retracting the social safety net and deregulating the low-wage labor market” (Wacquant, “Prisoner Reentry as Myth and Ceremony” 616). These extensions of prisons include probation—community supervision of adult offenders through a probation agency—and parole, the conditional release of prisoners who serve the remaining portion of their sentence in the community. Both probationers and parolees can be under active supervision, which means they must regularly report to a probation or parole officer. Just like recipients of workfare, adults under community supervision have to fulfil certain conditions of their supervision (e.g., payment of fines, fees or court costs, participation in treatment programs) and adhere to specific rules of conduct; otherwise they risk reincarceration. Prisonfare also includes surveillance through computerized criminal databases. One of those is the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) - the national DNA database from crime scenes and convicts compiled by the FBI. Its reach has doubled from 2005 to 2010 to contain eight million offender profiles. These databases, combined with probation, parole and laws restricting access to public housing, welfare support, educational grants, and voting to ex-inmates extend the reach of the penal state far away from prisons. Furthermore, both probation and parole are more likely to lead back to imprisonment than not. This can be due to offenders committing a new offense but also due to failing to meet an administrative condition of their release. This can include “failing an alcohol test or losing a job, missing an appointment with their parole officer, or traveling outside of their county of assignment without permission” (Wacquant, “Class, Race and Hyperincarceration” 76). As we have seen in the first chapter of this thesis, overly restrictive and punitive conditions regulating welfare recipients only reinforce the negative stereotypes of them. The same is true for adults under community supervision. Apart from reinforcing negative stereotypes, these conditions often result in their reincarceration:

The purpose and functioning of parole have changed drastically over the past thirty years, from spring toward rehabilitation to penal trap, so that parole is now properly construed as an *extension* of the custodial system, rather than an *alternative* to it. (ibid.)

The double punitive regulation of poverty through workfare and prisonfare is not at all surprising when we consider the structural, functional, and cultural similarities between these two strands of government action. First of all, both the institutions of poor relief and penal confinement have been developed in the sixteenth century in order to regulate the dislocations caused by the transition from feudalism to capitalism. This was evident in the last two decades of the twentieth century when both institutions were overhauled to regulate the socioeconomic dislocations of the post-Civil rights era. Secondly, both institutions use behaviourist methods such as deterrence, surveillance, abridgment of privacy, and graduated sanctions in order to produce desired behaviour. These methods stigmatize their recipients because of the implication that they are “guilty until proven innocent,” which reinforces the negative stereotypes. Thirdly, both institutions are tasked with regulating the people at the bottom of the class and ethnic hierarchy:

Recipients of AFDC (the main targeted welfare program until 1996) and jail inmates both live near, or below, 50% of the federal poverty line (for one-half and two-thirds of them, respectively); both are disproportionately black and hispanic (37% and 18% for inmates versus 41% and 19% for welfare recipients); the majority did not finish high school and are saddled with serious physical and mental disabilities interfering with their participation in the workforce (44% of AFDC mothers as against 37% of jail inmates). (Wacquant, “Bordieu, Foucault, and the Penal State” 119)

This socioeconomic structure of welfare recipients and inmates shows that they are the two gendered components of the same population, living in the same neighbourhoods and households; the maternal arm of the government forces women into insecure employment while the paternal arm encloses their boyfriends, brothers, husbands and sons. Lastly, both workfare and prisonfare are people processing institutions; Along with the “penalization” of welfare described in the first chapter, the prison has undergone a process of “welfarization”

over the past 30 years, which has facilitated their convergence into a single institutional mesh. While the penal turn in welfare has been characterized by restricted entry into the system, shorter stays on the rolls and faster exits, the prison system has followed the opposite route: entry into jail and prison has been greatly expanded, stays have been lengthened and releases curtailed:

The operant purpose of welfare shifted from passive “people processing” to active “people-changing” after 1988 (...) while the prison has travelled in the other direction, from aiming to reform inmates (under the philosophy of rehabilitation, hegemonic from the 1920s to the mid-1970s) to merely warehousing them (as the function of punishment was downgraded to retribution and neutralization). (ibid.)

The replacement of welfare with prisonfare is best illustrated by examining the funding for each program over the years. In 1980, the combined funding for AFDC and food stamps, two main assistance programs, was 22 billion dollars, which was three times greater than the carceral budget in that year (\$7 billion). Conversely, by 1996, the carceral budget jumped to 54 billion dollars while AFDC and food stamps amounted to \$20 billion and \$27 billion respectively. Likewise, during the 1990s, the government reduced funding for public housing by 61 percent and increased the carceral budget by 171 percent, “effectively making the construction of prisons the nation’s main housing program for the poor” (Wacquant, “Class, Race and Hyperincarceration” 77).

The main result of the shift to prisonfare is the explosion of the inmate population. The number of inmates went from around 380,000 in 1975 to 2 million in 2000, making the USA the undisputed leader in incarceration in the industrialized world. This incarceration rate has remained at around the same level since then. In 2016, probation and parole affected additional 4.5 million Americans which brought the total number of persons supervised by U.S. correctional systems to over 6.5 million (Kaeble). As opposed to previous periods of carceral inflation, when the surge has been fuelled by lengthening the average sentence, this one has been fuelled primarily by the increase in jail and prison admissions.

2.2. Hyperincarceration and the Hyperghetto

The coupling of workfare and prisonfare in the 1990s was followed by another phenomenon; the coupling of hyperghettoization and hyperincarceration. In order to understand this second convergence, we have to point out the similarities between the two institutions. As previously mentioned, the prison was not developed to prevent crime, but to “dramatize the authority of rulers, and to repress idleness and enforce morality among vagrants, beggars, and assorted categories cast adrift by the advent of capitalism” (Wacquant, “Class, Race and Hyperincarceration” 80). Similarly, the ghetto is not an accidental creation; it is a “socio-spatial contraption through which a dominant ethnic category secludes a subordinate group and restricts its life chances in order to both exploit and exclude it from the life-sphere of the dominant” (ibid. 81). It follows from this that both prison and the ghetto are institutions of forced confinement, used by the dominant class/ethnic group to subjugate lower class groups (in the case of prison) and groups at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy (in the ghetto). Both institutions use stigma, constraint, spatial confinement and institutional encasement in order to achieve their goal of social ostracization. The ghetto was the third “peculiar institution,” coming after chattel slavery and Jim Crow, entrusted with “defining, confining, and controlling African Americans in the urban industrial order” (ibid.). When it imploded in the 1960s, the government rolled out the prison and its extensions in order to contain a population widely regarded as dangerous.

The reasons for the collapse of the ghetto as an ethnoracial enclosure are threefold. Firstly, the post-industrial economic transition made African American workers redundant because it shifted employment “from manufacturing to services, from central city to suburb, and from the Rustbelt to the Sunbelt and low-wage foreign countries” (ibid.). Secondly, their political influence diminished due to migrations of white middle-class populations to the suburbs. White flight weakened cities in the national electoral system and enabled state disinvestment from inner city communities. Lastly, African American protest facilitated the breakdown of the ghetto through the urban riots that shook up the country between 1964 and 1968. These riots, combined with growing frustration over stagflation and social insecurity, prompted whites to support “law and order” measures that facilitated the convergence of prison with the hyperghetto. Therefore, the collapse of the ghetto was not a

result of a concerted government effort; it was left to crumble onto itself under the weight of poverty, unemployment and crime caused by the “joint withdrawal of the wage-labour market and the welfare state” (ibid.).

The convergence of hyperincarcerization and the hyperghetto is evident in the statistics; seven in ten convicts that leave American prisons are rearrested. As described in the previous subsection, American inmates are some of the most disadvantaged members of the society; they are disproportionately homeless, mentally ill, addicted to substances, uneducated, and poor. This social profile points to the fact that they were not integrated into society before incarceration. There can be no talk of “pathways of reintegration” into the society if most of the inmates were not integrated in the first place, since there is no viable social structure for them to be integrated into. Instead of reentry or reintegration, most inmates experience on-going circulation between prison and the hyperghetto:

For lower-class black convicts, who supply the largest contingent of admissions, the bloated prison and the barren hyperghetto stand in a linked relationship of structural continuity, functional surrogacy, and cultural syncretism. (Wacquant, “Prisoner Reentry as Myth and Ceremony” 611)

2.3. Causes of the Penal Turn

Before we explain what caused the double convergence between workfare and prisonfare on one side and hyperincarcerization and the hyperghetto on the other, we should consider the ways in which researchers previously tried to explain this phenomenon. The traditional explanation is that the stupendous rise in incarceration is a result of the increase in crime. This is not the case; the data shows that the crime rates remained stable from 1975 to 2000, which means that the country became around four times more punitive in 25 years. The data also shows that the punitiveness for “index crimes” (violent crime and major categories of property crime) has increased by 495 percent, which means that most of this increase in punitiveness has targeted marginal delinquents committing lesser offenses (Wacquant, “Class, Race and Hyperincarceration” 80).

The second popular explanation is that the number of inmates has increased in order to generate profit for private prisons and companies exploiting inmate labour. This explanation, labelled the “Prison-Industrial Complex” in analogy to the Military-Industrial Complex, also falls apart upon a closer investigation. First of all, there is no justice equivalent for the Pentagon; legal punishment in America is governed not by a single entity but through a decentralized network of agencies. The components of the penal chain (the police, courts, and corrections) are fragmented not only geographically, but also institutionally and bureaucratically. Secondly, even with the grotesque overcrowding of publicly owned prisons, private prison firms managed to house only 6% of total inmates at their peak. Finally, none of the companies involved in prison labour rely on it; at its peak, fewer than 5,000 inmates were employed by private firms, which constitutes less than one percent of the total inmate population. The reason why the state has not abdicated its power to imprison its constituents is because the prison is a political institution, not an economic one; its main function is in “dramatizing collective norms, asserting political authority, and staging the sovereignty of the state” (Wacquant, “Prisoner Reentry as Myth and Ceremony” 611). This conclusion leads us to the actual reasons for the rise in incarceration in the USA.

The key to understanding the causes of hyperincarceration is in the composition of the incarcerated population; it reveals that the penal state has not indiscriminately targeted all groups across the class or race continuum as the term ‘mass incarceration’ misleadingly implies. It has been common knowledge for some time that African Americans are disproportionately represented among the population behind bars. This is certainly true, since blacks represent 33 percent of the sentenced prison population even though they constitute only 12 percent of the U.S. adult population, according to data from 2016 (Gramlich). However, this should not obscure the fact that inmates are first of all poor people. As previously mentioned, two-thirds of inmates come from households with an annual income less than half the poverty line. Only 13 percent of inmates have postsecondary education and fewer than half held a full-time job at the time of arrest. Furthermore, African American males without completed secondary education are twelve times as likely to serve time in prison as African American males who went to college (58.9 percent versus 4.9 percent); the data undeniably shows that “class disproportionality inside each ethnic category is greater than the racial disproportionality between them”

(Wacquant, "Class, Race and Hyperincarceration" 80). The composition of the incarcerated population has not always looked like this; from 70 percent white at the close of World War II, the ethnoracial composition has completely reversed to 70 percent African American and Latino by the end of the century. This is especially confounding if we take into account the fact that the criminal population has both shrunk and become whiter during that period:

(...) the share of African Americans among individuals arrested by the police for the four most serious violent offenses (murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) dropped from 51 percent in 1973 to 43 percent in 1996, and it continued to decline steadily for each of those four crimes until at least 2006. (ibid. 79)

If crime has not increased, what can explain the fourfold increase in punitiveness of the country, finely targeted at specific class and ethnic groups? When we consider the fact that the specific class and ethnic group targeted by the penal state are lower-class blacks, who are no longer enclosed by the ghetto, it becomes clear that the penal turn was initiated as a response to the post-Civil rights urban riots and the collapse of the ghetto as an ethnoracial container. The penal turn was fuelled by demands for "law and order" measures in the wake of anti-war protests, racial upheavals and street crime but it was a response to social insecurity, not criminal insecurity; penal confinement was not meant to offer relief to the poor but relief from the poor. The catalyst that facilitated the abrupt ascent of the penal state in the USA is the unique racial segregation that isolates African Americans in physical, social and symbolic space. This rigid spatial isolation of an ethnical minority group makes it easier to pass punitive regulations that mostly affect those groups since the majority of the electorate does not identify with them; they are perceived as "undeserving" and non-citizens under the new contractual definition of citizenship. The same factors that influenced the contraction of welfare have influenced the expansion of prisonfare:

the generalized degradation of labor and the depth of social inequality, the bureaucratic splintering and rampant commodification of public goods, the unusually high levels of both class and ethnic segregation in the metropolis, the hold of a religiously inflected moral individualism, and the categorical and castigating

character of state programs aimed at the poor, who are suspected by definition of being “undeserving” (Wacquant, “Wedding of Workfare and Prisonfare” 205).

Prisonfare as explained here is not an accidental creation; it is one of the core components of the new neoliberal state. The three components other than prisonfare are market rule, workfare and the cultural trope of “personal responsibility” that provides justification for other components. All of these taken together prop up the new neoliberal state that can be described as liberal-paternalist because it advocates deregulation at the top of the class hierarchy while being disciplinary at the bottom. Since the neoliberal state has failed to fulfil its social and economic roles, it is trying to assert its authority by rolling out the prison and its extensions. This also serves to normalize precarious wage labour as the modal employment situation for the post-industrial proletariat.

The penal turn in America, characterized by the double coupling of hyperghettoization and hyperincarceration on the one hand and workfare and prisonfare on the other, is severely damaging to the communities it attacks, but also to the American society as a whole. It is self-defeating because it creates more inmates when striking the communities it is supposed to reform (according to Foucault, producing new criminals is exactly the role that modern prisons have been assigned) and perpetuates the disorders and insecurity it is supposed to alleviate. The penal turn is also financially counterproductive because it consumes the funds needed for essential public services such as healthcare, education, and social protection. The state chose to penalize the emerging form of poverty in the post-Civil rights era but this was not the only method. It could have also chosen to socialize it by addressing its structural causes or medicalize it by treating individuals. Research has shown that rehabilitation is superior to retribution, but this is still not widely accepted, which is why a public campaign is needed. A deep justice reform is also necessary but in order to be successful, it needs to be followed by the restoration of the social and economic wings of the state. This can be done by investing in healthcare, education, social services and institutions providing drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Another way in which restoration of inner city communities could be achieved is through a “Works Progress Administration-style public works program aimed at the vestiges of the historic Black Belt” that would help to “rebuild its decrepit infrastructure, to improve housing conditions, and to offer economic sustenance and civic incorporation to local residents” (Wacquant, “Class,

Race and Hyperincarceration” 85). Other ways for dismantling the penal state would be restoring prison college programs (a college degree has shown to be the best antidote to reoffending), treating mentally ill low-level offenders in medical facilities, re-establishing programs such as educational release and work release that help inmates return to the civilian life and stopping the self-defeating policy of re-arresting inmates for technical violations of the administrative conditions of their release.

3. Representation of the Penal State in *The Wire*

American cultural production has had to keep up with the reality of the carceral boom that has affected millions of its citizens. Plenty of new cultural products have arisen in response to this phenomenon. The most disheartening of those is the introduction of a new character whose father is incarcerated to Sesame Street, a popular children’s show. More than 2.7 million American children were able to relate to Alex, the new character, since this was the number of children who had a parent in jail or prison. Other than that, there have been many successful fictional and non-fictional works of art set in the prison in the last 25 years. Some of the more popular fictional TV shows in this setting include *Prison Break*, *Oz*, and *Orange is the New Black*. The latter has been lauded as an accurate portrayal of incarceration but critics have also noted its tendency to ascribe causes of imprisonment to character flaws rather than structural inequality. Other new TV shows, such as *Atlanta*, are not set in the prison but convincingly illustrate poverty and unemployment in the inner city. American TV drama *The Wire* is another one of those TV shows concerned with crime and punishment in modern USA.

Set in Baltimore, Maryland, *The Wire* explores various institutions of a post-industrial American city throughout its five-season run. These institutions are law enforcement, the city port, City Hall, the public school system and the print news media. Much has been written about *The Wire*, both inside and outside of academia. It has been lauded for its complex and three-dimensional characters, multi-layered plots, and realistic style. The latter is one of the most praised aspects of the series. This realism was achieved by casting local actors that were not familiar to viewers, casting real-life ex-offenders, and avoiding stylistic figures such as voice-overs, flashbacks or extradiegetic music, except in final montages. It

was also bolstered by the fact that its creators, David Simon and Ed Burns, were participants in the institutions depicted by *The Wire* – Simon was a police reporter for *The Baltimore Sun* and Burns was a former homicide detective and a public school teacher. The series comments on many broad themes – some of them are deindustrialization, the war on drugs, and the collapse of institutions.

The series can be described as a police procedural at first glance but it is much more complex than that – it has been compared to the Greek tragedy, the visual novel, and the Victorian novel. Its scope allows it to address systemic, interconnected issues that plague the modern American city in ways that scholarly research cannot because it has to focus on a single aspect of the city. This is why *The Wire* is being taught in college courses on anything from public education or criminal justice to sociology. Its scope also allows it to capture the systemic urban inequality that arose as a result of concentration effects; urban sociologists have found out that “various processes associated with concentrated poverty work together to produce uniquely severe disadvantage for residents of these neighbourhoods” (Chaddha and Wilson 174). Even though there are few scenes set in the prison in *the Wire*, the show is still an accurate illustration of the penal state. This is because it shows the structural causes of poverty in inner-city African American communities, which serve as the primary recruiting grounds for the nation’s prisons. These structural causes, as described in the first chapter, are economic, social, and political. More precisely, they include racial segregation, deindustrialization, white flight, inadequate public schools, lack of political representation, and disproportionate incarceration of African Americans.

Since *The Wire* tackles the structural issues of the hyperghetto, it provides a truthful and accurate representation of systemic urban inequality that is perpetuated by the penal state. For example, the series shows how African Americans involved in the drug trade are repeatedly arrested. Young black males selling drugs on the streets (“corner kids”) like Preston “Boadie” Broadus, Randy Wagstaff and Little Kevin are often brought to the interrogation room, where the investigators are trying to elicit confessions, mostly to no avail. These low-level arrests are useless in abolishing the drug trade but they are a necessity in order to strengthen the statistics which falsely show that the city is safer. High-level police commanders are repeatedly asked by politicians to produce measurable decreases in crime, which is why they focus on these futile arrests. These statistics, measured by the CompStat system in *The Wire*, determine much of the police work. High

ranking police officers like Major William Rawls are focused exclusively on clearance rates and openly resist the protagonist Jimmy McNulty in his initiative to investigate the Barksdale organization, which would lead to significant disruptions in the drug trade. They are not interested in making the city safer, only in creating that illusion, in order to serve politicians' and consequently their own interests. Since these arrests have harmful economic and social consequences on offenders and their families, they only perpetuate the systemic urban inequality. Even when the highest ranking gangsters in the drug trade like Avon Barksdale and Marlo Stanfield are arrested, the communities are not shown to be safer. The drug trade continues with different players and the communities still struggle with addiction and other concentrated effects of disadvantage.

Some of the other major causes of disadvantage in the hyperghetto shown in the series are joblessness and social isolation. *The Wire* shows that deindustrialization has had devastating consequences on both black and white communities, but makes it clear that black communities have been hit harder. Season 2, which follows the mostly white community of stevedores in the city port, shows how deindustrialization has negatively impacted the blue-collar working class. In absence of work, they have turned to illegal activities in order to survive. However, they still maintain an attachment to jobs, the union, and political representatives. This provides them with access to a social network and institutions that inner-city residents do not have. As a result, the latter have engaged in dealing drugs, which is the only source of income for many black characters in the show. The deep unemployment and the resulting poverty of the residents of the hyperghetto also caused their social isolation:

As joblessness climbed, formal organizations that had depended on the support of middle-class residents were weakened, thus undermining social organization in the inner city, including important institutions such as churches, schools, businesses, and civic clubs. As a greater percentage of the residents were jobless, they had fewer social ties to individuals employed in the formal labor market who could provide information on and access to job opportunities. (Chaddha and Wilson 173)

There are many examples of social isolation in *The Wire*. The corner kids and other participants in the drug trade are almost never seen outside of the hyperghetto or the

prison; the rare occasions when they are, like when Michael Lee, Duquan “Dukie” Weems and Bug go to an amusement park, only underscore this social isolation (5.03). Another instance of this is when Major Howard “Bunny” Colvin takes three of the corner kids from the special program to a high-class restaurant; they are overwhelmed by the atmosphere and fail to understand the proper etiquette (4.09). Social isolation is perhaps most powerfully expressed in a poignant exchange between Dukie and Dennis “Cutty” Wise in Season 5:

Cutty: World is bigger than that, at least that’s what they tell me.

Dukie: Like, how do you get from here to the rest of the world?

Cutty: I wish I knew. (5.05)

Both characters are trying to leave the world of drug and crime. Cutty is an ex-convict who used to be a “soldier” in the Barksdale organization. After leaving the prison, he tries to find gainful employment but the only job opportunities are in the underground economy – the first job he takes is again from the Barksdale empire. He cannot be reintegrated into society, as Wacquant explains, because there was no social structure to accommodate him even before he went to prison. Dukie is an eight-grader who tries his best to stay off the streets. He tries to get a job in the shoe store but is rejected because he is underage. At the end of the last season, he is shown using heroin. Due to joblessness and other structural disadvantages, death is the only way for most of the participants to leave the drug game, like in the cases of D’Angelo Barksdale and Wallace. According to the discourse of PRWORA, the only way to attain personal responsibility is by finding gainful employment. *The Wire* shows that this is impossible for many residents in the inner city.

The Wire serves as a powerful indictment of the personal responsibility ideology because it shows how structural disadvantages combine to create a systemic inequality unique in the history of the USA. This context of systemic urban inequality, in turn, shapes the actions, beliefs and attitudes of those trapped in it. This idea that outcomes of poor blacks are shaped by structural inequality is not universally accepted; almost half of all Americans (49%) still believe that blacks who can’t get ahead in the USA are mostly responsible for their own condition (Pew Research Center). This percentage is largely shaped by Republicans; seventy-five per cent of them believe that statement to be true. *The*

Wire proves that these views are incorrect by showing that institutions, circumstances and social settings, rather than the work ethic and moral values, shape the actions of the poor. It also proves this by showing complex, three-dimensional characters like Dukie and D'Angelo who want to leave the drug trade but fail to do so, not through their personal flaws but due to their relationships to their families, institutions, and neighbourhood. Similarly, individuals working against the corrupt and decaying institutions also face insurmountable obstacles. Detectives McNulty and Lester Freamon are sabotaged in their desires to do actual police work by their superiors. Mayor Thomas Carcetti starts out planning to change the corrupt system but becomes part of it when he finds out he relies on the public and a wide variety of political coalitions to stay in power. Professor Roland Pryzbylewski and Major Colvin are held back from their attempts to teach and reform children in the public school – they are forced to teach the children to memorize standardized test questions instead, in order to improve the school's score in official metrics by which they are measured. Gus Haynes, the principled editor of the *Baltimore Sun* in Season 5, wants to report on important stories from the city but is prevented by the editorial board focused on impact journalism and winning awards. Furthermore, all of these institutions struggle with a lack of resources – a direct result of Reagan's New Federalism policies and cutting fiscal support to city governments. This vast array of interconnected storylines and characters build *The Wire's* argument that policies based on personal responsibility are damaging because individuals have little individual autonomy due to the institutions and social settings that govern their actions. However, there is one group of characters that is not given the same charitable treatment as others – African American mothers.

Black men have often been stereotypically represented in news media, popular culture and political discourse as dangerous, devious, and sexual predators. Similarly, black women have been represented as either too dependent, as in the case of the “welfare queen” or too independent, as in the stereotype of the matriarch. *The Wire* takes great effort to dispel stereotypes about black men by building a cast of complex characters on both sides of the law. While most of the women in the series are represented in their relationship to men (e.g. as lovers or family members), there are also some remarkable female characters. The most notable of them are Shakima Greggs, a black lesbian detective, and Felicia “Snoop” Pearson, a cold-blooded killer whose appearance, behaviour and actions are defying traditional gender roles. However, African American mothers are not granted

the same representational ambiguity as other characters in the show. While the series shows why the characters make the choices they do without casting judgement, black mothers are reduced to “stereotypes of pathological non-normativity: irresponsible, irrational, and emasculating” (Ault 388). Furthermore, their desires and attempts for self-preservation are directly linked to their sons’ negative outcomes. Most of these depictions are in Season 4, which is focused on the fates of four fatherless boys. This season builds a powerful argument that the outcomes of young black males are already sealed from the start and have nothing to do with their work ethic or moral values. Instead, they are victims of systemic urban inequality and decaying institutions in the dilapidated inner city. One of the factors influencing their outcomes, according to the series, is the black family structure. This view echoes the Moynihan Report by asserting that black matriarchy is causing the negative outcomes of black youth. According to the report, encouraging proper black fatherhood is the solution for a variety of issues plaguing the inner-city, including high levels of crime and unemployment as well as low levels of academic success. *The Wire* agrees with this by showing that the only way the protagonists of Season 4 can be saved is through heteronormative and patriarchal domesticity.

Namond Brice, Randy, Dukie and Michael – the protagonists of Season 4 – are fatherless, much like the other “soldiers” in the Barksdale criminal enterprise. Furthermore, their mothers failed “in one of a mother’s primary duties: creating a safe domestic space for their sons” (Ault 393). However, the first prominent example of bad African American motherhood comes in the first season. Detective Jimmy McNulty and Lieutenant Cedric Daniels visit Darcia Wallace, mother of a low-level drug dealer referred to as “Wallace” in the series. The police officers went out looking for Wallace, a drug dealer turned informant, because they sensed that he was in danger. His mother, however, is oblivious of this danger; she is more concerned about the ten dollars that he took from her (in order to support his addiction). While she is talking to the police officers, a male voice is heard from the room, asking what’s going on:

Unidentified male: What’s going on out there?

Darcia Williams: Nothing. Couple of police interrupting me while I'm trying to get my drink on.

Cedric Daniels: Look, your son might be in some danger.

Darcia Williams: He gonna be in some danger right here if he shows up. Snatched that ten out of my purse without asking. I'll slap the bright out of his eyes. (1.12)

The presence of an unidentified male (implying sexual deviance), along with a disregard for her son's well-being, paints Darcia Wallace as a typical "welfare queen." This uncaring attitude is shown to directly influence Wallace's death; the scene described above is shown immediately after the scene of his murder.

The second example of bad African American motherhood is shown in the fourth season. Michael's mother is a drug addict who cannot be trusted with the family's food stamps. As a result of her irresponsible behaviour, Michael is the primary caretaker to his younger stepbrother Bug. His mother, who is not even given a name in the series, is a typical example of the "welfare queen" stereotype, evidenced by her drug addiction, uncaring attitude towards her children, and unemployment. When Bug's father returns from the prison, she accepts him in the house despite Michael's objection:

Michael: You swore he wasn't coming back.

Michael's mother: This is a good thing, Michael. It's going to be back the way it was.

Michael: The way it was?

Michael's mother: We a family again. (4.08)

The last comment by Michael's mother can be read as an assertion that matriarchies are not real families; they became a family again only when Bug's father returned. However, since Bug's father is not Michael's father, their new family is not conforming to standard norms of patriarchal and nuclear families. This non-normative sexuality is another stereotype typically applied to figures of "welfare queens" and matriarchs. Later in the series, she expresses the same uncaring attitude and obliviousness to the danger her child is in like Darcia Wallace does in the first season:

Cutty: You Michael Lee's mother?

Michael's mother: He got papers on him?

Cutty: I ain't police. I'm just looking for him.

Michael's mother: You ain't alone. He booked on out of here, got his own spot, took his little brother with him.

Cutty: You know where he stay at?

Michael's mother: He ain't tell me. You find the boy, you let him know I need some help. I popped him and Bug out my ass and now they forgot where they came from.

(4.12)

This sequence paints her as a typical "welfare queen" who cares about her children only because they guarantee her federal and state aid (Ault 394). Since Michael was sexually abused by Bug's father, he seeks protection in the criminal organization led by Marlo Stanfield. This creates a direct link between his mother's sexual behaviour and his involvement in the drug trade.

One of the examples of a matriarch in *The Wire* is Brianna Barksdale. She discourages her son D'Angelo from joining the Witness Protection Program and forces him to plead guilty to charges against him in order to protect the Barksdale criminal organization. She stresses the importance of the drug trade not only for providing them with the means for survival but also for enabling them to be a family in the first place:

Brianna Barksdale: This right here is part of the game, Dee. And without the game this whole family would be down in the fucking Terrace living off scraps. Shit, we probably wouldn't even be a family. Start over? How the fuck you going to start over without your peoples? Without your own child, even? If you ain't got family in this world, what the hell you got? (1.13)

In the last sentence, the family she refers to is the Barksdale organization. Ironically, she encourages him to take the fall for his Barksdale "family" which results in his murder and prevents him from having a heteronormative, nuclear and patriarchal family with his girlfriend Donette and their son. Since Brianna encouraged him to do this, she is directly linked to his death. Due to her power and influence over her son, Brianna represents the stereotype of the black matriarch.

Perhaps the most prominent example of a black matriarch in the series is Namond's mother, De'Londa Brice. When her husband, Roland "Wee-Bey" Brice, is incarcerated, she

tries to push Namond into the drug trade so she can continue to pursue her lifestyle of material luxury:

De'Londa Brice: You gonna have to step up now, Na'.

Namond: A'ight.

De'Londa Brice: Be the man of the family. You older than your daddy was when he went out on the corner. (4.06)

De'Londa pressures him to attain personal responsibility and become “the man of the family” by finding employment. She is shown to be unwilling to take responsibility for herself, choosing instead to depend on her husband and son for her luxurious lifestyle – a stereotype applied to the “welfare queen” figure. A more charitable reading of De'Londa, and by extension the show's writers, is expressed by Courtney D. Marshall. She asserts that, in absence of a legitimate economy in the inner city, African American mothers are forced to encourage their children to participate in the underground economy. In capitalism, mothers are assigned the responsibility to ensure the system a steady supply of labour and teach their children civic values, even if those values and labour are criminalized. When we take the season's ending in account, the first reading seems more in line with the intentions of the show's writers; Namond is taken away from De'Londa with Wee-Bey's approval and adopted by Colvin, who is now retired. As opposed to De'Londa, Colvin's wife “takes care of household tasks and speaks softly: she knows her place” (397 Ault). Unlike Michael, Dukie and Randy, Namond is saved from the streets. He is saved by the combined fatherly efforts of Colvin and Wee-Bey. In a rare didactic moment, *The Wire* encourages patriarchal and nuclear families as the antidote to corrupt and decaying government institutions. In doing so, it paints African American mothers as irresponsible and blames them for their sons' negative outcomes. These stereotypes perpetuate the ideology of personal responsibility, an important aspect of the penal state.

Another example of the show encouraging patriarchal families is the sheer number of surrogate father figures in the show; Wallace is the primary caretaker for a group of orphans; Michael is his brother's primary caretaker; Bubbles takes young boys under his wing and teaches them how to survive in the streets; Major Colvin adopts Namond; Cutty tries to keep corner kids from the streets by providing them with his gym; Sergeant Ellis

Carver tries to adopt Randy but is unable due to the failure of institutions; Professor Pryzbylewski washes Dukie's laundry and buys him new clothes. All of these examples of caring and nurturing men trying to keep the young boys on the "straight and narrow track" are in stark contrast with the African American mothers of the show. They are depicted as irresponsible, uncaring and selfish, and these characteristics are directly linked to the young boys' suffering. Unlike the mothers, some of these men managed to create a safe domestic space for the corner kids. While the series goes to great lengths to show us why the African Americans trapped in the inner city make the choices they do, the same empathy is not extended to black mothers. This may be in part due to the fact that female writers were greatly outnumbered by male writers on the show.

Along with the ideology of personal responsibility, another very important aspect of the penal state is surveillance. As mentioned in the second chapter, the government monitors and thus controls the targeted population not only through incarceration but also through criminal databases, probation, parole, police patrolling, CCTV cameras and so on. Likewise, surveillance is a very important aspect of *The Wire*, which is emphasized in the title of the show. The titular wire refers to the wiretap – a surveillance method employed by the series' protagonists. The wiretap, according to Carlo Rotella, is a new addition to conventional crime-story forms – street policing and "the box" – that invites viewers to question these old forms and see the bigger picture. In the 1970s and 1980s, series such as *Kojak*, *Police Story*, and *Hill Street Blues* represented law enforcement to mostly rely on street policing – patrolling the streets, gathering knowledge, recruiting informants, and monitoring suspects. These series investigated the possibility of a social contract endangered by the urban crises. In the 1990s, another form dominated the police procedural – the interrogation room, colloquially known as "the box." This aspect problematized the question of narrowing individual rights in a time of crisis by showing police officers creatively violating suspects' rights. Both of these forms are present in *The Wire*, but they are shown to be ineffective in dealing with the root of organized crime in Baltimore – the symbiosis between high-level drug dealers and corrupt politicians, lawyers and businessmen. *The Wire* shows us that these old forms of policing that result in imprisonment of low-level offenders only perpetuate the ailments that the War on Drugs was nominally supposed to alleviate. Instead, it invites the viewer to mistrust genre pleasures (e.g. action sequences, dramatic interrogation) of the police procedural and

engage in the structural analysis of deep crime that the wiretap enables. This is best illustrated in the character of Lester Freamon, who brings the corrupt Senator Clay Davis to trial by “following the money.” This involves actions that make for great police work but dreadful TV – investigating corporation charter papers, records of political contributions, and real estate transactions. Meanwhile, the busts of low-level corner kids, apprehended by equally low-level officers such as detectives Herc and Carver, bring nothing of value and only serve to perpetuate inner-city problems.

The Wire offers a critique of surveillance but its stance differs from traditional ideas in surveillance studies. The latter contends that “proliferation of security cameras in public spaces denotes a concurrent proliferation of the power structure behind the lens” (Ravenscroft 303). It also views this proliferation as proof of a panoptic society. On the other hand, *The Wire* argues that society has turned a blind eye on “the dark corner of the American experiment,” as homicide detective Sergeant Jay Landman puts it (3.03). As evidenced by the cracked CCTV camera in the title credits sequence of the show (and in the final montage of the very last episode), security cameras do not have the same function in all public spaces. In this sequence, shown at the beginning of every episode, a low-level drug dealer in the Barksdale organization by the name of Boadie Broadus throws a rock at the CCTV camera in the public housing projects and cracks the lens. This event is never brought up in the series and Boadie is never punished for it. That is because the CCTV in the inner city does not serve to normalize behaviour or as an instrument of the panopticon; it serves as an empty threat of punishment. It even invites subversion of authority by the observed residents. While security cameras serve as a guarantee of security in places such as shopping malls, the cameras that overlook street corners and housing developments in this section of Baltimore only illustrate the lack of control by the law enforcement and the abandonment by the government. Instead of offering protection and monitoring where it is most needed, the State has shifted its gaze to its most vulnerable citizens – welfare recipients – whose surveillance has increased with “computer registration, drug tests, and documentation of sexual behavior, among other things” (Ravenscroft 306). As opposed to visions of a panoptic society, *The Wire* shows that surveillance has failed to “fulfill the liberal democratic goal of making the socially hidden visible” due to systemic blindness to the impoverished areas of the city (Stacy 173).

Conclusion

At the end of the 20th century, the United States of America has shifted from a welfare state to a penal state. This is evidenced primarily by a four-fold increase in incarceration while the crime remained constant. The welfare system was overhauled three times before the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Those reforms were preceded by discussions that often relied on stereotypical representations of impoverished African Americans. The punitive welfare reform of the 1990s was provided justification by invoking the stereotype of the “welfare queen” and the ideology of personal responsibility. The latter, according to Loïc Wacquant is one of the cornerstones of the new neoliberal state, along with prisonfare, market rule, and workfare. This new neoliberal state failed to provide social and economic security so it relies on prisonfare – the aggressive rolling out of prisons and its extensions – to re-establish the sovereignty of the state, normalize precarious labour and alleviate the social insecurity of the post-Civil rights era.

As evidenced by a plethora of academic texts written about it, *The Wire*'s extensive scope and depth make it a valuable text for examining many aspects of the modern American city. There are many ways to explore the penal state in *The Wire* - in this thesis I have focused on the ideology of personal responsibility because it is an important aspect which provides justification for the penal state. In illustrating the life conditions of poor black inner-city residents – primary targets of the penal state – the show successfully portrays the systemic urban inequality concentrated in this place. It shows how this concentrated disadvantage restricts their actions and impedes their individual autonomy. *The Wire* shows that, contrary to beliefs of half the Americans, blacks who can't get ahead in the USA are not mostly responsible for their own condition. This is how the series positions itself against the ideology of personal responsibility – except in the case of black mothers. They are shown as irresponsible and their desires are directly linked to their sons' negative outcomes. They are represented through the stereotypes of the black matriarch and the “welfare queen,” which follows the discourse of the Moynihan Report and PRWORA. The only way their children can survive, according to the series, is through heteronormative, patriarchal and nuclear families. The series also comments on surveillance, another

important aspect of the penal state. It rejects the view that we live in a panoptic society since the state remains willfully blind to the impoverished areas of the city.

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