RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Reflections on Teaching *The Wire*:
Developing a Radical Pedagogy

by Lawrence Johnson

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"*The Wire*," declared my dissertation advisor, "is a documentary about my hometown!" The proud Baltimorean delighted in discussing how the show had brought attention to the city's economic devastation and social isolation. As a sociology doctoral student during the later years of the show's run from 2002 to 2008 on HBO, I soon realized how well regarded *The Wire* was in academia. Before, I simply enjoyed discussions among friends. We debated favorite characters, which season was most compelling, and how it represented certain dynamics of the cities we are from. I was influenced by the increasing use of the show in the classroom and the show's elevation as more than entertainment and as a bona fide companion to instruction in the social sciences and humanities.[1]

Since the series' run, the show has continued to gain in popularity and is widely considered one of the best television series ever made (Owens 2010). However, after much reflection on my attempts to use *The Wire* in two different courses, I find, for all the acclaim and progressive bona fides*, The Wire* may not be inherently subversive and so may be an inappropriate text for radical teachers*. The Wire* may break certain shopworn racial stereotypes and challenge some aspects of late capitalism (the failing "war on drugs" and the myth of individualism), but these virtues may be less compelling for students. The show leaves certain stereotypes fully intact, and in that failure risks reinforcing them because of the show's acclaimed truth-value

and status as simultaneous beguiling entertainment and faithful documentation of life in the Baltimore ghetto. Without a critical perspective on the show's white racial framing, I contend, the show is not an effective teaching tool despite its appeal to those seeking vivid contemporary illustrations of fundamental concepts in sociology. Many fruitful lessons can be developed from *The Wire*, but instructors need to be wary of how the show perpetuates the naturalization of the ghetto and other interpretive frameworks rooted in liberalism. Consequently, this experience helped me rethink how to use course materials to aid students in deconstructing their implicit worldviews, especially to grasp the subtle mechanisms of systemic oppression.

Students and the White Racial Frame

The general tension that I experienced with *The Wire* is the disparity between the show's popularity, particularly with people who think of themselves as progressive, and its suitability for radical pedagogy. Popular culture depictions of blackness receive wide acceptance in the mainstream as a matter of style, capitalist consumption, and symbols of inclusion and diversity, rather than as depictions of a system based on disparate life chances and white privilege (Gallagher 2003). A primary obstacle preventing an understanding of racism as a form of systemic oppression is the dominance of what Joe Feagin (2010) describes as the white racial frame (WRF). It is the

dominant racial frame that shapes our actions and thinking in everyday situations, ultimately rationalizing racial hierarchy within a framework of American exceptionalism and triumph. The WRF, from a pedagogical standpoint, alerts us to how students' viewpoints, emotions, interpretations of imagery, and ideologies are rooted in a history of racism that students are often unaware of but express consciously and unconsciously. Put another way, mainstream discussions of race and the tendency toward colorblindness in society among students (Bonilla Silva 2014), instructors (Pollock 2009), politicians (Logan 2011), and the media (Wingfield and Feagin 2013) function discursively to minimize the salience of racism and this presents an immediate challenge when teaching about race. Because the WRF has developed from pre-colonial times to the present, it is deeply embedded and malleable and requires a pedagogy that goes beyond the teaching of concepts to help students develop competing frames. The consistent features of the WRF can be summarized as follows: (1) assumptions about the moral authority of whiteness and European civilizations, (2) rationalizations of oppression contradicting liberal values, (3) justifications of racial capitalism and the unjust enrichment of whites, and (4) viewpoints that social reforms are adequate solutions for racial, economic, and gendered hierarchies. Particularly valuable in Feagin's development of the WRF is the attention he gives to the radical counter-frames of African Americans that have historically challenged the dominant racial frame. This is where *The Wire* is most insufficient: A counter-frame does more than critique; it provides an alternative understanding of social reality.

The pervasiveness of the WRF, even at a school as diverse as Brooklyn College, is an achievement of neoliberalism, which has been effective in reducing the most significant social problems to a belief in the fulfillment of education in a capitalist framework. Students vary significantly in terms of citizenship status (Bank Munoz 2009), religion, family responsibilities, and parental status among other categories, such as class, age, and sexuality. The college is also tiered in that certain privileged programs might be predominantly white, while disproportionately non-white transfer students from the City University of New York (CUNY) two-year colleges populate less prestigious programs. Many students who are disadvantaged based on several interrelated measures (income, previous education, housing) are shunted aside as the student population is being whitened based on discriminatory admissions standards (Hancock and Kolodner 2015). Despite these dynamics, standard student values such as capitalism, individualism, merit, and opportunity, described by scholars (Brunsma, Brown, and Placier 2012) as "the walls of whiteness," resemble those of students at predominantly white universities in some ways.

Students are generally cautious when navigating a topic they perceive as racially sensitive, and they often rely on using colorblind frames identified by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014): naturalization (especially concerning segregation), culture (to explain differences in position based on behavior rather than structure), abstract liberalism (a dismissal of oppression based on normative values), and minimization (usually relegating discrimination to the past). The diversity in the classroom often leads to students not wanting to offend other students, but students easily distinguish between different racial and ethnic groups based on neighborhoods and stereotypes. Racial and ethnic diversity results in the expression of subframes that adhere to the dominant frame with certain levels of skepticism. Pervasive is the juxtaposition of virtuous whiteness (stable families, safety, and good neighborhoods) and deviant blackness (broken families, violence, bad neighborhoods, and sexual deviance). I view students constantly negotiating and internalizing what Feagin describes as a "strong and obsessive focus on black Americans as the dominant issue, menace, problem, and reference point in an array of institutional arenas of U.S. society" (2010:94). How students negotiate the dominant frame is related to their familiarity with counter-frames, radical interpretations of history, or lack thereof.

Students at Brooklyn College are distinct in that their daily lives often involve dealing with a variety of social problems. In the two courses that I describe below, I used *The Sociological Imagination* by C. Wright Mills as a framing text. Although my students' experiences are quite different from Mills's, they could relate to his statement that "Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps" (Mills 1959:3). They experience higher tuition and increasing student loan debt like many students, but they also deal with the stress of living in New York City, where most of them juggle work and school while constantly exposed to life's hardships. While explaining the historical context in which Mills wrote the book, I highlighted how students in the 1960s and 1970s eventually responded in protest. Attempting to be provocative, I insinuated that today's students are more apathetic. One student responded, "We know they keep raising tuition; it's not that we don't care, but who has the time to protest, go to work, and read all these chapters for every class?" When Mills predicted that conformity and greater access to material comforts would lead to a society of "cheerful robots," one student scoffed and characterized himself and his peers as "more like broken robots."

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Students recognize the grinding mechanisms of neoliberalism and their lack of agency, perhaps less than previous generations, but neoliberalism is also their mode of interpretation and coping; students reflect the general trend of seeking individual market responses to broader social problems (Szasz 2007). Students' responses are based on a white racial frame that convinces them that their aspirations are a matter of individual achievement rather than social transformation. School is regarded as a means to an end, and most students are understandably defensive about their means to achieve the American Dream or at least some idea of a comfortable life. They understand that life is hard; what is less clear is that they experience a particular condition that people have resisted for centuries. Unaware, most students submit to a disposition of "this is just how it is." This disposition is resistant to alternative explanations because it would require reconfiguring their understanding of reality. Yet their understanding of reality is often comprised of controlling images and symbols that lack historical substance, erasing radical figures and movements that provide alternative viewpoints and relevant modes of social change. In hindsight, *The Wire* was more likely to reinforce their current frame rather than provide a counter frame.

Limitations of *The Wire*

My critique of *The Wire* as a productive text for radical pedagogy is twofold and interrelated: (1) Whatever the writers' intentions were, students interpreted the show based on their thinking, and the critical aspects of the show were not as valuable to them as I had perceived they would be; (2) *The Wire* has problems in terms of representation that is conducive to the WRF, especially in terms of presenting the agency and resistance of black men and women subjected to the ghetto. The value of the show is that it makes social problems vivid, but these problems are presented only in their contemporary manifestation, in ways that do not expose the social processes that created the problems. Especially to viewers like my students who lack a firm sense of history, this limitation makes *The Wire* a spectacle of black poverty such that the residents become indistinguishable from the conditions of the ghetto.

I chose twelve episodes from season 3 in my courses because they depicted the connection of local politics in Baltimore to real estate development, as well as the escalation of violence between rival drug organizations amid the dysfunction of the police department ordered by city hall to produce statistics and illusions of progress rather than dealing with poverty. This season is perhaps the most dramatic in depicting street-level characters (drug dealers and officers) meeting tragic fates related to larger institutional dysfunction that makes for compelling storylines, likened to Greek tragedy by the show's writer David Simon and scholars (Love 2010). Although we view the tragic inevitability of individuals meeting their demise in the face of larger social forces, film critic scholar Linda Williams (2014) argues that *The Wire* is best described as good serial melodrama. It depicts modern institutions to elicit moral outrage but ultimately relies on emotional

attachments to characters. This can be seen in the development of two of the most central characters: Omar Little (who is given substantial complexity to demonstrate that drug dealers are not necessarily the "bad guys") and Jimmy McNulty (whose development shows that police officers are not necessarily always the "good guys"). In essence, *The Wire* is a tale of cops and robbers but more complex. Despite all of the show's complexity, almost all of the women are depicted in very predictable ways, especially the black women who are usually just props for drug dealers and often depicted in stereotypical imagery (Jones 2008).[2]

However important the cast is, the ghetto itself is the main feature; problematically, *The Wire*'s value in depicting some of the ghetto's inner workings does not reveal how it was constructed. Mitchell Duneier (2016), in his research into the invention and the idea of the ghetto, finds the term commonly used by politicians, media, and social scientists to refer to an autonomous site of behaviors and characteristics rather than a structural manifestation based on external politics, economics, and racism. The ghetto becomes a signifier of racism and a particular idea of black criminality dating back to the late 19th century (Muhammad 2011). *The Wire* must be understood within the context of Michael Bennett's identification of anti-urbanism as related to the "visible effects of invisible forces" (1999:176). Thus, the spatialization of race for places like Baltimore's ghettos is attached to a racialized mental schema. George Lipsitz describes this cultural reproduction: "The white spatial imaginary portrays the properly gendered prosperous suburban home as the privileged moral geography of the nation. Widespread, costly, and often counterproductive practices of surveillance, regulation, and incarceration become justified as forms of frontier defense against demonized people of color" (2010:13). Film and television presentations of these spatial imaginaries are likely maintained when adopted for classroom use.

The Wire's popularity at elite universities like Harvard and Berkeley is troubling for some of the universities' faculty. Professor Ishmael Reed, recognizing the show's white racial frame, suggests that "HBO should tackle something new. How about depicting the family life of a suburban gun dealer who is sending illegal weapons into city neighborhoods?" (2010:3). Elijah Anderson criticized the show's bleakness and how it elides the decent people in the black community with its emphasis on drug dealers (Parker 2010). Scholars (Daniels 2008) criticized him for suggesting that church-going and law-abiding citizens should be seen more instead of valuing the realism that is depicted. However, this contention must be tempered from the standpoint of what students will interpret and how political resistance by residents is largely absent. The issue is less a problem of respectability than of framing. As Feagin explains, the WRF is flexible enough to make exceptions based on individual cases to maintain its existence. A crooked white politician or racist police officer can exist as an exception, but the drug dealer, who we might sympathize with because of his moral and ethical dilemmas depicted in *The Wire,* does nothing to challenge the dominant frame.

This is not to suggest that the struggles of drug dealers cannot be depicted. How do they fit into a larger storyline that meets pedagogical goals to deconstruct and replace basic racist imagery? Here Lipsitz (2010) is most on target: "For all of their attentiveness to local circumstances in Baltimore, the producers of *The Wire* evidently did not notice that in the middle of the show's run (in 2005) a federal judge presiding over the Thompson v. HUD case found the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development guilty of creating, promoting, and exacerbating racial segregation in Baltimore in violation of the 1968 Fair Housing Act" (105). This court decision was the outcome of decades of political mobilization by black women tenants in public housing, demanding equitable housing and government redress (Williams 2004). Based on my experience, a radical pedagogy is best served by material highlighting radical actors. I proceed to demonstrate how *The Wire* was counterproductive to that end.

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Contested Instruction

I taught *The Wire* in consecutive semesters, first in an honors elective and then in an introductory sociology course. I designed the courses based on an application of the sociological imagination, conceptualized as a quality of mind that develops the ability to understand the interplay between the individual and society, while grasping one's situation within its historical development (Mills 1959). The sociological imagination requires students to distinguish between personal issues experienced by individuals and social problems in society. I emphasized reflexivity for students to understand their perspectives by attempting to see themselves from other standpoints (Stalker, Hardling, and Pridmore 2009) while emphasizing the big picture (Dandaneau 2001). The sociological imagination is a valuable approach, but its application requires understanding how history is utilized to displace social problems onto individuals. In my application, I found it extremely difficult to use this text to help students understand historical perspectives so that they could grasp important concepts like social structure. Although the courses differed in level and rigor of content, the goals were the same: (1) Identify social institutions and how they relate to social problems; (2) understand different factors that structure and organize society; and (3) critically assess one's social location, personal values, and beliefs.

The honors course Exploring Urban Life and Inequality, in which I first used *The Wire*, was a special topics, junior-

level, interdisciplinary seminar with 19 students, mostly pre-med majors. Although the class was majority white, the general composition was diverse. The course was designed with *The Wire* in mind, but students engaged a variety of texts, including ethnographies, speeches, essays, and sociological studies relating to urban experiences of the 20th century. All of the readings were related to *The Wire*, which we mostly watched and discussed in class. The Introduction to Sociology course was mostly freshmen and sophomores with a variety of majors and no clear racial majority among the 35 students. To make use of *The Wire* productive for this class*, I decided to limit the scope of the material to include excerpts from seminal sociological texts on issues such as class, gender, race, culture, deviance, and globalization, while creating lectures on topics that I felt were necessary for their viewing of *The Wire.* As this was a lower-level course, we watched less content during class time because I spent more time lecturing and showed clips where appropriate. I made my copy of the series available for students to watch on campus on certain days and times.

In terms of organization, the introductory course was more challenging because students watched most of the season on their own time. They did not benefit from being able to watch it together as a class. However, the most significant problem was not organization but content. I noticed how students interpreted *The Wire* through the WRF and how it conflicted with a structural analysis. The greatest difference between the two courses is that the honors students were generally more enthusiastic and prepared; however, because the introductory course was the following semester, I often modified assignments and instruction based on the previous semester. How the courses went can be best explained comparatively through how they dealt with similar assignments.

The first assignments in both classes required students to use library resources to examine the front page of the *New York Times* newspaper on the day of their birth. The assignment was based on the reading of an excerpt from *The Sociological Imagination*. I directed students to use the front page to demonstrate a basic understanding of social institutions and related social problems. They responded to three questions: (1) What are the reoccurring social institutions discussed in the front page stories? (2) What are the social problems discussed? (3) What are the roles of the social institutions in relation to the social problems? Prior to the assignment, I lectured about social institutions in both classes and how institutions are central to a sociological perspective. Few students struggled in the honors course and to offset the difference in skill I would emphasize insights in the following semester that were gleaned from the first semester. When I discussed the assignment in the introductory course, I used some of the previous semester's stories as examples. As a practice, I use the class in which I return assignments to discuss them in some detail. In neither course did I experience any real

difficulty with students analyzing the newspaper articles, and identifying institutions and social problems. The common experience was that they recognized multiple institutions and issues that made it difficult to determine the main social problem as they are often related to others.

There were differences between the two classes in outcomes for the second assignment. When students had to analyze the actions of individuals in relation to structure, many students substituted analysis of structure with their opinions. In the honors course, I used a story from a 1994 article discussing the Clinton administration's plans for
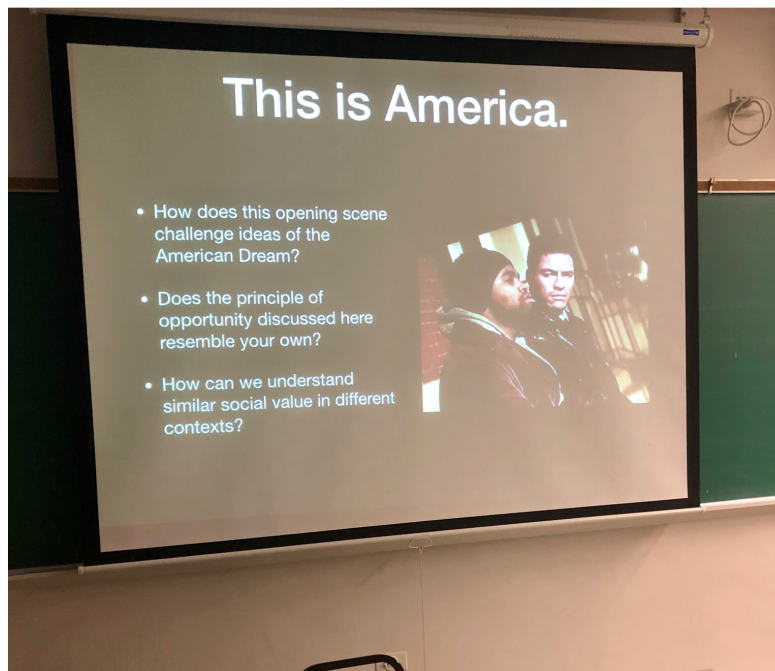

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welfare reform. To demonstrate Mills's idea of historical process, I related this story to the 1930s New Deal policies and how the passing of legislation was subject to the interests of different political actors to the exclusion of certain groups. I then demonstrated how ideas about welfare stigmatizing those very groups have been produced over time and how our understanding of welfare has been shaped by these different institutions and the discourses they produce. Using my example, I asked students to analyze the interplay of structure and individual agency based on their assigned text, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio.* The author, Phillipe Bourgois, discusses the dominance of Finance, Investment, and Real Estate (FIRE) sectors and the employment prospects of Puerto Ricans in East Harlem. The two questions I asked of students they did fairly well with, and I did not have to comment much: (1) How do you understand the changes in the economic structure described in the reading? (2) Choose one of your stories from the *New York Times;* how is this story related to the economic structure discussed in the first question (making sure to identify the social institutions)? I did not anticipate that so much of the discussion would focus on the last question: (3) Based on your understanding of structure, how do you understand

the available choices confronted by Dennis "Cutty" Wise in the episodes of *The Wire* so far?

Cutty is a central character in season 3. We first see him in the season premier, interacting in prison with members of one of the drug organizations who offer him employment when he is released and returns to West Baltimore. After many years in prison, he is confronted with minimal options based on a lack of work experience, a criminal record, and little formal education. He chooses a manual labor position, but, by the fourth episode, it becomes increasingly clear that he will return to crime. I anticipated answers to my questions related to labor exploitation or the difficulty finding work based on obvious factors. However, about half of the answers focused on his character and his ability to make the "right" choices, even when acknowledging the difficulty of his situation. Some students asserted that his present options are a consequence of previous bad decisions. Very little is shown about Cutty's background, except that he lives with his grandmother and that he turned himself in after a drug-related murder. However, students projected a background where he did not value school, he associated with the wrong people, and/or he was seeking an easier route.

As I prepared the lecture to address some of these answers in general, I recognized the tension in what I wanted them to understand and how *The Wire* was a poor example. I had explained that residents experiencing poverty and high rates of employment, among other factors, wrestle with tough decisions on a daily basis. I directed students to passages from *In Search of Respect* as examples, but in *The Wire* and the text, the primary focus was on criminals. I emphasized that a sociological analysis has to understand the broader social forces and that individual choices are made within contexts. A student objected, "But people still know what is illegal no matter the context." The ensuing discussion divided the class, making me realize that more students were perceiving it from a different perspective. I took stock of most of the students' comments in the debate so that I could distinguish opinions and beliefs from analysis of structure. I addressed the main contention, "individuals need to be held accountable," by pointing to events where institutions are not held accountable. I used the Great Recession of 2008 as an example of the damage done to human lives and how a focus on individual borrowers misses the mark. When I attempted to engage the students in the effects of the recession, most of the students who were adamant about personal accountability seemed disengaged, based on body language and participation. This disengagement was mirrored the following semester.

The introductory course reading was based on an excerpt from *Corporate Nation* wherein Charles Derber explains how the government's failure as a countervailing force against corporations leads to economic instability and anxiety for a large sector of the population. I used the welfare example from the previous semester, which was even more fitting for this reading. To make sure students understood the interplay between individual and structure, I explained the idea of the "anxious class" of workers subject to the vagaries of the market and asked how the broader structural changes might have affected some of the decisions students have made. Students answered easily, stating that they chose Brooklyn College so they could live at home, they selected certain majors to make more money, they were working through school to have less debt, and one student's idea of starting her own business resonated with others. I then played a video of David Simon explaining how the conditions faced by many of the characters in *The Wire* force them to ask existential questions related to poverty and drug addiction and how even a police officer's decision to create a legal drug zone was an attempt to give his job meaning against the devastation of capitalism and the drug policy as an act of containment for the black poor. The first two questions were the same as above, but I modified the third question from the previous semester to make sure students did not individualize a particular character instead of analyzing structure. I asked, (3) How would you compare the different circumstances faced by those in the anxious class compared to people experiencing poverty depicted in *The Wire?* Most students articulated different structural positions, from seeking stability versus being desperate and hopeless. What was common, however, was a sense of optimism from students; examples were usually of the nature "things are difficult, but we just have to keep making progress" or "things are bad but not like they were in the past." These answers certainly fit Bonilla-Silva's minimization frame, but they also reveal an attachment to the idea of progress.

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When I returned the papers, it became very clear in the discussion that the progress that students were talking about was a belief in racial progress. This started a conversation that eventually became painful for the students, and I felt like I was scolding. Instead of preparing a lecture, I chose to have an open conversation to see if we could give a definition to the idea of progress that could be useful going forward. I asked students, "By a show of hands, how many of you think that the country is making progress?" They were hesitant at first, as if they thought I might be asking a trick question. I urged, if you do not raise your hand, I will assume you do not believe we are making progress, and I will want to hear from you. In the classroom, all but four students raised their hands. I asked them, what did they mean by progress? From the reactions, most of the students were incredulous of the question. Earlier in the semester, I had critiqued the symbolism of a Barack Obama presidency, and a white woman asserted, "I feel like you want us to say Obama." A Dominican woman who did not raise her hand tried to alleviate the faltering conversation: "We have a black president and professor!" A few students laughed, and I

wrote diversity on the chalkboard. I then asked for more examples. Students were hesitant to speak, but a male Pakistani student said, "Most of my professors are women." I pointed to diversity on the board and asked whether this captured what they meant by progress, racial and gender inclusion. In classes when there is an open discussion, students are usually more forthcoming in giving their opinions, and students are less inclined to discuss when they feel the need to be defensive.

I attempted to redirect the conversation based on the reading. "What does diversity or progress mean based on *Corporate Nation?*" Silence. I asked them to consider this question based on the reading: "If most people are working longer hours under the threat that they will be easily replaced, more people are working contract jobs with no benefits, it is difficult for people in the middle class to save money, the unemployment rate is twice as high for black people, and that does not count the people who have given up looking, can we say any of that represents progress?" As in the previous course, students who felt their commonsense idea was being challenged had already disengaged. When I asked one of the students who did not raise a hand, a black man, he stated, "People aren't really getting lynched anymore, but we still have places like Baltimore and parts of Brooklyn, and then there's Rikers or upstate. It's hard to say." I asked what people thought about his statement. No one wanted to speak. I asked, "Who can say they have never thought much about it?" The same Dominican woman asked, "So you're saying we haven't made any progress?" I answered, "Maybe in some ways; people generally live longer in the US, but I do not think we value life more. Can anyone remember a time when the US was not in some type of war?" A Jewish woman who was quiet throughout the conversation became exasperated and said, "You want everything to be perfect!" I sensed that she did not actually want to engage, but I wanted to give some idea of what progress might look like. Therefore, I responded, "Not perfect, but if we made sure everyone had food and safe housing, wouldn't that be progress?" I gauged the non-verbal reactions from most of the students as a sign to move on, but I said that is something that we can measure periodically to see how we are doing as a nation.

In the first semester, I realized there was a conflict trying to use *The Wire* in a critical way, but the conflict was disguised by other readings that students found more substantive, which they expressed. The following semester, because the course was a lower-level class, I did not choose readings that students found as immersive. I also realized that learning particular concepts is less important than introducing students to radical frames that would help them recognize certain assumptions and become less defensive. Although the sociological imagination emphasizes history, I underestimated how important critical understanding of history is for students who have little to no concept of the past. It is not enough for me to cover history condensed in a lecture to arrive at a point of understanding. I need to guide them through their reading of radical historical narratives that help them understand how seemingly race-neutral processes are steeped in histories of oppression that people continuously fight

against. This would at least make students aware of continued resistance. Just as any introduction to historical events would give students a critical perspective, I realize that the narratives of individuals appeal to students in a way that can also deliver a radical perspective, if the figure has a compelling story that models social change.

Even when students demonstrated achieved learning goals based on *The Wire,* the students were generally espousing neoliberalism with the WRF frame still intact. Of course, part of the solution is to set different goals, but that would also necessitate appropriate content as well. Take, for example, a student's answer to the question that asked students to distinguish between different social positions in relation to criminality. This was based on a scene in *The Wire* when white collar crime (by developers) is discussed as more consequential than drug dealers (the character Stringer Bell). A student stated:

> *I try not to judge anyone because everyone is different. I had it easier than some but worse than a lot of people who assume things about me because I went to one of the best high schools. People don't know I have a brother who was an addict who served prison time. He went to a school and associated with that crowd. He made the same choices that a lot of black people made who went to that school. It was a joke. My parents made sure to send me to better schools.*

This answer is from a white man who expressed his enjoyment of the course. His answer recognizes the advantages that come from his education, and he could differentiate the structural disadvantages that his brother and black people experienced. However, the student, without being prompted, focused on not wanting to judge and on school as a solution that prevents bad choices. I did not have the time to unpack most statements, but the reason certain answers often felt uncomfortable was because I knew there were underlying rationales of an adequate answer. Most students believe that school is the answer to the social problems depicted in *The Wire.* This answer does not indicate a change in thinking, but the ability to place what he saw in *The Wire* into his existing frame. This example is remarkably different from how students engaged recent texts that were more conducive to an application of the sociological imagination.

Alternatives to Teaching *The Wire*

I have improved my pedagogy in recent semesters by implementing texts that are more appropriate to the development of the sociological imagination, in precisely the ways that *The Wire* was inadequate. The use of radical biographies and histories provides the necessary counter-frames that allow me to facilitate student understanding through reading assignments and discussions. I explain that the course is an attempt to understand what is going on in the world, what has led them to this place as students in the current time, and as the professor I strive to communicate why the sociological imagination is vital. I explain the role of the history and biography texts as

critical factors to understand how they relate to social structures.

Where many students understand education as primarily a means for employment, I reiterate throughout the course that much of what we want to accomplish is to figure out how most of them have come to view education that way. For instance, in a redesigned introductory course, I assigned the autobiography of Assata Shakur (1987). I explained to them that we are reading about her not to determine her guilt but to understand the position of a revolutionary fugitive in exile and what makes her similar and different from any of us. I assured students that they would be assessed based on analyzing how her experiences related to the students' own and being able to analyze both experiences sociologically. The impulses of many students were to make personal judgments and they often felt very strongly about statements Assata made throughout the text. However, it was easy to challenge students by asking, "How does she explain why she thinks that way?" or "Does that make you right and her wrong?" Instead of engaging in defensive arguments, they had to turn in short assignments in which they analyzed the statements they found most provocative and applied reasoning based on data that I often provided in class. An example of such interaction can be described when a white female student responded to Assata's statement: "For the most part, we receive fragments of unrelated knowledge, and our education follows no logical format or pattern. It is exactly the kind of education that produces people who don't have the ability to think for themselves and who are easily manipulated" (Shakur 1987:35). The white female student's response is a good example of her working through her dissonance about education and Assata connecting it to imperialism: "She makes me mad, and I [want] to dislike her, but there are times when she says stuff that I have thought about at one point…age and race are important for sure, but the real difference is that she is definitely braver." This statement is typical in its conflicting message. The most resistant students commented on perceived character flaws but they would also recognize her honesty and other characteristics they deemed positive. During a discussion, one student referred to her as "crazy," commenting on her decision to have a child while in prison, but he described being "crazy" as a necessary characteristic of people who make social change. Student resistance was dramatically different; they did not immediately eschew normative values. On the contrary, they demonstrated their ability to personalize Assata Shakur and in commenting on how she described her experiences they were able to engage her framing of imperialism, education, and many other issues with less defense while also articulating their own positions.

The incorporation of historical texts provided more flexible conversations, and most texts can be used in a variety of courses. I have begun using radical histories to frame my courses for the first month of the semester, which allows for more meaningful conversations throughout the semester and gives students a shared understanding. I have used Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* in classes ranging from Introduction to Sociology and Classical

Theory to even the Sociology of Sports. In a course like Classical Theory students can appreciate Dunbar-Ortiz's (2015) colonial frame to analyze Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim and the Eurocentric assumptions that connect their theories of modern society. Less anticipated would be how well students learned to adapt the colonial frame in their understanding of the critical issues when it comes to sports.

Previously when I taught Sociology of Sports, a freshman level general education course, student interests revolved around casual conversations about sports and they were less inclined to engage the issues with any sociological substance. When I assigned readings and discussed social contemporary issues in the sports world they often relied on opinions and less on how the issues were sociologically framed. When I taught the course using an *Indigenous People's History of the United States*, I grounded the first month of the semester in a radical understanding of history. Before we focused on any sports content, they had to complete assignments that applied their understanding of the colonial frame discussed in the reading in contrast to common ideas about U.S. history. This approach produced substantially different conversations early in the semester compared to what was achieved during the previous semesters. For example, in previous semesters when we discussed the use of American Indian mascots students often centered their opinions on moral considerations of right and wrong, and were often inclined to argue that NFL franchises, like the Washington Redskins, were too invested in merchandising and tradition to change racist names. After a discussion of historical framing, students offered more analysis based on the text and were able to identify obvious racial slurs like the Redskins but also less controversial names that are still associated with genocide, like the San Francisco 49ers and New York Rangers. Moreover, rather than rationalizing the economic status quo, students grasped the significance of American Indian land claims and the concept of restitution. Students demonstrated the sociological imagination realizing that a focus on stolen land would require a restructuring of society and would force them to consider their position as workers, students, and people struggling to pay rent. Most importantly, the WRF that was reinforced in *The Wire* became an object of critique rather than a reinforcement.

Conclusion

David Simon's attempt to depict "the other America," left behind by late capitalism, is powerful television in ways intended and unintended. For many people like myself who came to enjoy *The Wire*, I appreciated its ability to combine multi-dimensional characters in a depiction of the consequences of poverty and the struggle of Baltimore residents to survive. It involves intricate plots and storylines that primarily revolve around police officers and drug dealers. I became more sensitive to one of the unintended consequences of *The Wire*, the perpetuation of the WRF that became painstakingly obvious when I attempted to implement it as part of radical pedagogy. Although scholars may continue to debate the merits and

the value of the show, in my attempt to transform student's thinking about the social structures in their lives and the ideas they perpetuate, *The Wire* was more likely to reinforce normative ideas of individual achievement against a backdrop of black criminality, violence, and licentiousness. The Baltimore ghetto, in *The Wire's* depiction, is far from radical; it is a prop that confirms the viewers existing racial logics and motifs, which students regularly demonstrated.

The fundamental problem in *The Wire* is the lack of historical framing that further obscures the ghetto, along with the show's conduciveness for students to individualize the social problems it depicts. The examples I have given of radical histories fill the voids in students' understandings of the past and helps them interpret contemporary events in ways that transform their thinking. Furthermore, the use of autobiographies that use individual narratives in a radical framing of reality is both relatable and challenging. In both cases, students became more aware of not just the issues discussed in class, but the significance of the issues as they continue to manifest in societal conflicts. Students who were earnest in their reading of Assata Shakur's autobiography showed concern about the New Jersey governor's recent increase in the bounty for her capture and whether the United States' diplomatic thaw with Cuba will threaten Shakur's asylum. One student said she now follows the Hands Off Assata Campaign on Facebook so that she can be more aware. A sense of history gave students a greater interest in issues beyond their immediate experiences. They are more likely to engage in current events, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline protest, and, more importantly, they have a critical interpretation beyond how the media frames it.

When determining if I will use any content in my courses, especially television and videos, there are specific guidelines that I consider: is it conducive to a radical historical narrative; does it have a deliberate counter-frame; and how well does it relate to current events? History cannot be taken for granted as it forms a foundation for student understanding and how they engage normative ideas that I require them to critique. A radical counter-frame will challenge students' understandings about race, class, gender, and sexuality in the ways that *The Wire* failed to accomplish, and an appropriate autobiography is especially effective. Lastly, I have to determine as best as I can that the material I use will help students think differently about the events that they interpret in their daily lives, things that are both explicit and implicit. If students can recognize the WRF and develop a counter frame, they will have grasped the sociological imagination enough to make sense of their reality, which may potentially constitute a social transformation in thought.

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Notes

[1]Chaddha, Anmol and William J. Wilson. 2010. "Why We're Teaching 'The Wire' at Harvard." *The Washington Post*, September 12. (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2 010/09/10/AR2010091002676.html). This work is certainly the most influential declaration of the value and merits of *The Wire* for sociology. Dillon, Karen and Naomi Crummey. 2015. *The Wire in the Classroom: Pedagogical Approaches in the Humanities*. Jefferson: McFarland. This work is an example of the broader use of *The Wire* in academia.

[2]Stereotypes of black women in *The Wire are* exemplified by one character in particular, Squeak. She is present in five episodes in season 3. She is the girlfriend of a low-level drug dealer and her hostile and sexual behaviors serve as distractions to her boyfriend, leading to the arrest of the characters in one drug organization. After her second appearance on screen, every time she would appear, several students in my honors course would gesture to indicate that they anticipated some type of clichéd behavior.