**The Paper Bag Compromise: Hiding the Problem of Drug Dependency in *The Wire*'s Hamsterdam**

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“Sometimes the gods are uncooperative”

Major Howard ‘Bunny’ Colvin (3.03)

In Season Three of the acclaimed HBO crime drama *The Wire,* Major Howard 'Bunny' Colvin (Robert Wisdom) experiments with a desperate solution to West Baltimore's irrepressible drug-related crime: drug legalization in three abandoned and derelict neighborhoods. Dealers and users are transported by police into the free zones of "Hamsterdam," nicknamed after the Dutch city known for its liberal drug laws. As a result, felony rates decline by up to 14%, whilst drug-users and sex-workers are able to access medical treatment. Drugs are sold and consumed freely, so long as users adhere to Colvin's social contract: no violence. Yet what also occurs is an intentionally hellish vision of brutality and lawlessness, as children become ensnared in the disorder and misery of the "free zone," which is ultimately shut down after violence and political scandal.

Colvin's “Hamsterdam” experiment offers a powerfully ambivalent portrayal of the consequences of drug legalization in urban post-9/11 America, and the story of its rise and fall encompasses the entirety of Season Three. In this article I propose that the significance and interest of this story-arc lies not in legalization itself but in the sociopolitical and ethical rationale that leads Colvin to construct it. I reassemble David Simon's own tantalizing clues about Greek tragedy and the failure of the “War on Drugs” to re-situate Colvin as a heroic but inevitably thwarted hero whose vain attempts at “reform,” the self-addressed theme of this season, imply the vast sets of forces and institutions which thrive on the corruption and misery of “the game” which *The Wire* dramatizes. Ever wary to avoid explicit political critique, *The Wire*, through Colvin's failure, instead indicates that reform of institutions as they currently stand will be abortive and ineffective without a more substantial political and economic transformation of American society. Colvin's social pragmatism effects merely a temporary truce or social contract, reducing felonies and murders in the Western District in exchange for limited drugs legalization and no violence amongst dealers. The significance of this potent yet abortive intervention is discussed in the first section.

To do real police work, “the kind that's actually worth taking a bullet for” (3.02), Colvin faces the War on Drugs naturalistically, and using a similar conceptual approach as 'Natural Law' political philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Hobbes, but most coherently, Benedictus de Spinoza, a 17th century Dutch philosopher born in Amsterdam, who scorned other political theorists for viewing human societies “not as they are, but as they would like them to be” (*Political Treatise* 680). Colvin shares much of Spinoza's political naturalism, understanding human societies as things of nature, whose stability and happiness are ensured in the security, opportunity and peace of its constituent parts, and the importance of this post-9/11 political naturalism are analyzed in the second section.

Yet Colvin is neither merely a tragic foil nor a hard-headed realist: as I argue, his Hamsterdam experiment and his impossible gesture towards a social contract (in the form of “paper-bag compromise”) allow *The* *Wire* to consider urban post-9/11 American society from two critical perspectives: naturalistically (in the sense of its political and social ecology), leading to an abundance of analogies to nature and ecosystems, analyzed in the second section. This leads to a withering critique of the institutions, legal and illegal, which have failed to provide for basic social needs in postindustrial Baltimore yet which continue to thrive in the grotesque and excessive failure of the “War on Drugs”, which is analyzed in the third section. The tragedy of this struggle, and of the struggle of Colvin to establish a place of compromise within it, leads to the season's second critical perspective, a metaphorical one, from the impossible utopia (whose literal meaning is “non-place”) of Hamsterdam, and of the dramatic divine struggle of individuals against corrupt institutions, assessed in the fourth section. Colvin's subversive intervention will consist not in breaking existing laws, but in legitimizing unwritten laws regarding the game and entrenched social problems of drug use, poverty and unemployment. Through a philosophical detour through the naturalistic ethics of 17th century Dutch philosopher Spinoza, the fifth and final section of the chapter scrutinizes the efficacy and limits of a social contract, and attempts to go beyond the producers' own ambivalence about Colvin's initiative to consider how institutional reforms might aid the problem of drug dependency.

**"The Word From On High"**

As writer David Simon notes in his episode commentary to 3.01, the overarching theme of Season Three is "reform." Yet what is largely operative in this season is the failure of reformers and the impossibility of reform, portrayed through two different leaders on separate sides of 'the game' (3.11). Russell 'Stringer' Bell (Idris Elba) and Major Colvin attempt in vain to reform the institutions that employ and empower them to control, with different priorities, the Baltimore drug trade. In both cases, their attempts at reform involve a naturalistic confrontation with the realities of the drug *trade* and a desire to remove its more violent and socially-damaging effects. For Stringer, this involves an attempt to transfer drug money into property and remove some of the street violence from the game, both within the Barksdale organization and through entering into a co-operative with other Baltimore drug gangs. For Colvin, this occurs in the move to transfer the focus of policing in the Western District from undercover drug stings and corner-raids to improving and protecting communities, through an audacious program of drugs decriminalization. Like Stringer’s initiative, Colvin’s actions stem from a desire to remove street violence from the game. The experiment is called Hamsterdam, and is one of the most memorable story arcs of the show.

In both cases, their attempts at reform are ultimately thwarted by pre-existing and new institutional forces invested in perpetuating this system: these include Avon Barksdale's (Wood Harris) escalating territorial war against Marlo Stansfield's (Jamie Hector) organization, the double-dealing scams of State Senator Clayton 'Clay' Davis (Isiah Whitlock Jr.) or, for Colvin, in Commissioner Ervin Burrell (Frankie Faison) and Mayor Clarence Royce's (Glynn Turman) self-serving schemes for political survival. These intentional obstructions to reform and serve to show the powerful set of modern American institutional forces which act as a 'Fate' against which these tragic heroes vainly struggle against. As writer George Pelecanos notes, Colvin is "the central guy in this season," (3.11, DVD commentary), and his actions are either directly or indirectly pivotal in the establishment of Hamsterdam, the political rise of Councilman Thomas 'Tommy' Carcetti (Aiden Gillen), the wire case of Lieutenant Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick), and ultimately to the betrayal of Avon. As Pelecanos wryly notes,"in true *Wire* fashion, he pays the price for it" *.* Like all *Wire* heroes, Colvin becomes locked into an unwinnable struggle but his heroism liesin his belief that reform can be possible, however unthinkable. Against Žižek's critiqueof *The Wire* as insufficiently radical in its attachment to realism (“Clash of Civilizations”), I propose instead that one of *The Wire*'s most subversive interventions into American culture post-9/11 is in the depiction of its characters like Colvin (or like Detective James 'Jimmy' McNulty's (Dominic West) faked serial killer investigation in Season Five) to think through and beyond the rules of realism and the capitalist real and, in the process, to produce new realities. Confronted with the fate-like impasse of the game, Colvin, Bell and McNulty each strive in various ways to effect reform without (ostensibly) breaking the rules of the game. In the process, they both subversively legitimize those corrupt processes of the game left unreformed whilst, for a brief time, indicating weakened fissures and alternative possibilities within what is considered real. This ideological dimension of reality becomes increasingly thinned as characters like Colvin haphazardly yet substantially transform institutions from minor, conservative or ethically-just premises, often obeying the fact or 'spirit' of the laws beyond just observing the rule or 'letter' of them. These unthinkable story-arcs serve to undermine how thinkable, or acceptable, the contemporary stalemate on the War on Drugs and how a more fundamental social war against the urban poor has operated in the United States.

In order to assess how this operates in Colvin's case, I turn to Hamsterdam and the most radical premise of Colvin's reform: the legitimization of drug use. For Colvin, drug use is an effect of the natural social environment, and is thus one which police should work around rather than target. It is also an affect or emotive expression of the suffering and problems in these communities caused by greater social issues. As viewers may recall, a combination of disasters in the first two episodes of Season Three lead to the creation of Hamsterdam. The failures of the current police approach, basically undertaken in accordance with the principles of the US 'War on Drugs' are indicated by a futile police helicopter chase of a boy acting as a decoy, who later appears in custody badly beaten, but without any drugs. Driving around the once-genteel and proud Afro-American streets of the Western District, Colvin views the decades-long failure of basic social infrastructure like policing, healthcare, housing and social services to aid communities. Instead of reducing the harm of drugs, young “hoppers” rush up to passing cars, including Colvin's, to engage in the only trade still thriving locally. The streets have returned to a violent pre-civil state where the authority of the laws is regularly undermined, and can no longer be effectively enforced: a damning comment on the intensifying failure of successive federal governments to tackle inner city problems of education, employment and basic infrastructure out of which new underground economies have naturally festered. The following day, one of his officers is shot in an undercover sting-op, and the incident reminds Colvin that, in his time, a good night is an "absence of negative." Policing has lost its preventative function. With his retirement and a safe job at Johns Hopkins University looming, Colvin existentially ponders on a broader crisis of the city and on what can he do to address the deeper impact of drugs on the city. Thinking out loud, he says to his friend, the Deacon (Melvin Williams),

"Here's the thing, six months now I'm gone. … But you know what? The shit out there. The city is worse than when I first came on. So what does that say about me? About my life?" (3.02)

The Deacon replies that "drugs are a force of nature." Metaphors of ecology and nature are essential to understanding Hamsterdam. At first Colvin seems unconvinced, but through a series of inquisitorial COMSTAT police chief meetings, it becomes apparent that he will have to redefine crime in some capacity or otherwise lose his job. When “the word from on high” demands that felonies be reduced by 5% and murders capped at 275, Colvin is confronted with the bald corruption of modern policing into political functionaryism. As Deputy Commander William Rawls (John Doman) remarks: "Any of you who can't bring in the numbers we need will be replaced by someone who can" (3.01).

Colvin is situated at the center of the dilemma. He could follow his colleagues and legitimately redefine recorded crime by "juking" his stats, and in the process protect his career. This is what the other commanders do, and *The Wire*'scomment is that this is the only credible option. But Colvin remains stung by his observations and by the Deacon's advice: after all, re-classifying felonies into lesser crimes is what Colvin earlier calls "turning wine into water" (3.02). Instead, Colvin's reform is to redefine not crime itself but the criminalization of just one aspect, drugs. This is the least radical or pervasive redefinition of crime by any of the commanders, yet it is the most subversive. For, if drugs are a force of nature, then they are the effect of specific causes and affects of particular problems in human societies as understood in terms of naturalism: they cannot be subtracted from or taken out of the context of the environment in which they exist. In order to analyze this naturalism more deeply, I now turn to one of its stimulating and provocative articulations in the thought of Spinoza.

**“Like One of those Nature Shows”**

In his 1670 *Theological-Political Treatise* (*TPT*)*,* Spinoza argued that what preceded civil society was a universal "state of nature," without any moral laws, justice or rights, where one individual's desire to stay alive or increase their power naturally comes into conflict with another. Here, paraphrasing St. Paul, “there is no sin before law is established” and “each individual thing has the sovereign right to do everything that it can do, or the right of each thing extends so far as its determined power extends” (*TPT* 195-7). This state of nature exists before civil society, and societal breakdowns lead to a return to this naturally violent, self-seeking state, “the war of all against all” in the words of Spinoza's contemporary Hobbes (30). Spinoza's argument differed from that of Hobbes, however, in that he did not pessimistically endorse the validity of this natural struggle, but explained how and why human societies first formed out of a desire for self-protection and greater quality of life that could only be ensured by mutual assistance in a civil society. Where laws and institutions collapse, these societies will naturally revert to this original struggle. The war of all against all is like the game, a force that naturally permeates beneath legitimate society, decreasingly contained by the faltering institutions which *The Wire* portrays over its five seasons. What Spinoza suggests is that in order to bind individuals together into communities, a social contract functions in which individuals obey the laws of the sovereign power in exchange for security, shelter, and the various benefits of citizenship.

In Baltimore, the social contract is held in place by the local and federal government. However, where that contract fails, other societies function according to their own social contracts, such as those put in place less conventionally, but equally significantly, by a maverick police chief who physically moves drug-sellers and users into three abandoned neighborhoods where drugs are de-criminalized under his supervision, or a by gang-leader who provides the only paid employment and opportunity for valor for young men acting as the sole income-earners in impoverished households. But whilst Hobbes developed an earlier and more well-known concept of the social contract as being an absolute transfer of power from subject to sovereign, secured by verbal expression of submission, it is Spinoza's development of the contract which remains more relevant and insightful. For Spinoza, the social contract is no formal event or agreement, but instead inscribes a socio-political rule: the requirement of 'common consent' by subjects to legitimize the power of the ruler, which can only be realized through the expression, or management, of the basic desires of those that are ruled. Each person has a natural right (equivalent to their power) to electively obey or disobey a sovereign. An effective sovereign secures the 'word' of their subjects by promising and effectively demonstrating that it can allow and protect sufficient freedom for subjects to pursue their own desires whilst maintaining civil stability. If it can manage this rare balance, the sovereign will create the conditions for present and future stability by possessing the unanimous support of the subjects. Like any composition of forces, Spinoza's model of society will survive for as long as it can maintain its own being without any larger forces overwhelming it (*TPT* 73; *Ethics* 251-255; *Political Treatise* 688). Spinoza's social contract is incisive and revelatory in that it empties politics of all moral or juridical imperatives: to represent and express the power of subjects is to share in it. Whilst Colvin makes no attempt to act as a political sovereign of the troubled corners, his response to “the word from on high” is akin to the social contract at its most brutal stage: in order to take control of the re-naturalizing disorder of the corners, he presents a basic agreement with hoppers, dealers and users, which is that they move to the “free zone,” and perpetrate *no violence.* In turn, they are free to do as they wish.To his police officers and to communities, he presents this social contract as the “paper-bag compromise”.

In 3.02, Colvin addresses a packed meeting of his district police supervisors. He brings with him, and places on his lectern, a small rectangular paper bag, the kind that normally street-drinkers would use to conceal a bottle of beer. He explains that the bag and bottle illustrate

"a great moment of civic compromise. That small wrinkle-ass paper-bag allowed the corner boys to have their drink in peace, and it gave us permission to go and do police work.” (3.02).

The paper-bag compromise represents an unwritten social contract between the urban poor ("the corner is, and it was, and it always will be the poor man's lounge") and the police. If they do not openly flaunt public laws, the police will overlook any possible transgression in order to do real police work. If the paper-bag could conceal urban street-drinking, largely by the poor, so that police officers could tackle more serious offenders, its equivalent with the drug trade on the Baltimore street corners would require some similar concealment. Given that the narcotics trade is already an underground economy, Colvin's “free zone” herds together drug-sellers, dealers, and addicts in three abandoned districts of West Baltimore, in a collective paper-bag, of the arrest-free zone.

Colvin's paper-bag compromise conceals the problem of drugs to the benefit of busy police and innocuous users, but legitimizes the fact of drug use as a compromised choice, that is, as a lesser evil. In doing so, Colvin adheres to the three laws of human nature in civil society outlined by Spinoza in his description of the social contract. He argues that all things will naturally seek their own advantage or “conatus” (drug use and trade will continue despite prosecutions, for as long as it remains an accessible outlet for suffering or economic opportunity); that when faced with two options, a person will select the lesser evil or greater good of two (more serious felonies should be pursued over minor drug arrests); and that the security of societies consists in the collective welfare of its people or constituent parts (as a retiring policeman, Colvin is determined that his legacy should be established in clean corners and safer communities, and not merely in “giving Rawls his stats”(3.03) (cf. Spinoza *TPT* 195-201). Colvin's social contract has one condition in return for the *de facto* legalization of drugs, which is that there should be no violence within the free zone. He explains his "new system" to the dealers using the carrot and stick analogy, that as long as they do not return to their old corners, and later, as long as there is no serious violence or killings in the free zones, "you're free to make your drops, collect what need collecting, won't nobody bother you" (3.05). In this temporary suspension of law, a new social contract is established that is based on a verbal agreement. There are frequent references to this: Colvin announces in the same scene that "you got my word on it"; Carver later berates a Hamsterdam crowd after a fight breaks out that the "only rule is no fighting, no cutting, no shooting!" (3.07); and later, he vainly appeals to the dealers after the murder in Hamsterdam: "I'm saying the rules got broke. My people kept their promises … they were as good as their word" (3.09). Of course, an attempt at compromise about drug legalization may seem completely against the logic of the metaphor of warfare upon which the War on Drugs is waged: "you made them an offer?" asks a disgusted Rawls once Colvin’s renegade scheme has become known (3.10). As with the war against terrorism which the series attempts to mirror (Simon, commentary to 3.01), for the sake of war continuing there can be no dialog with the enemy and no official social contract: such a reform would necessarily confer legitimacy on the concealed and unwritten laws of the game.

As the narrative follows Colvin and his assistant Lieutenant Dennis Mello (Jay Landsman) across Baltimore in 3.03, this trope of concealing/unconcealing plays out: Hamsterdam simultaneously hides the drug problem from commercial, residential and school areas as well as from police high command. Colvin repeatedly misinforms his staff, and later Daniels' Major Crimes Unit and a Baltimore Sun journalist, that this is a "new strategic plan" (3.03) and "tactical deployment" (3.07) to round-up and entrap the major drug-sellers. However, just as the paper-bag conceals a social problem without tackling its cause, on a collective scale Colvin's concealment of legalized drugs from the rest of society accommodates a social problem whilst doing nothing for its social causes. Just as mass incarceration for drugs offenses, which vastly disproportionately impacts poor black Americans, has led in effect to a concealment of urban poverty and unemployment through prisons, so at the same time Hamsterdam conceals West Baltimore's drug problems in an abandoned and largely invisible series of neighborhoods. In a broader sense, its act of concealment also ghettoizes and hides the deeper problems of an impoverished, unemployed urban underclass, particularly its large number of idle school-age boys ("hoppers") previously employed by the drug-dealers as look-outs. Colvin's project increasingly veers towards collapse early on for not providing for the social needs of both hoppers and addicts, with a number of improvised gestures, from "unemployment insurance" payments and a basketball hoop for idle hoppers, or a needle-exchange and public health support.

This problem becomes clearer as the Hamsterdam experiment develops. In 3.07, following a desperate scene which shows violence, abandoned children, lack of electricity and water, and open drug usage and sex work, flaunting the usual visual codes of civil order, a fight breaks out in Hamsterdam. Whilst Carver helps break it up, Detective Thomas 'Herc' Hauk (Domenick Lombardozzi) refuses to involve himself in "playing nurse-maid to a bunch of goddamn animals" (3.07). Later, when Carver points out the large number of idle children, Herc compares it to the state of nature: "it's like one of those nature shows. You mess with the environment, some species get fucked out of their habitat." This motif of nature is used by Carver later to describe the vulnerability of the hoppers to "stickup crews" as like being trapped in a "lamb pen," surrounded by "wolves" (3.08). Mirroring Herc's negative naturalism, Carver worries that "we got fifty, sixty kids on the inside been fight or flight since they popped out the chute … all these ex-runners, ex-lookouts, that shit worries me as much as any carnivores out there." While Carver attempts to address the environmental determinative causes that will drive young boys into further crime, through setting up a basketball game, encouraging some hoppers to participate in Dennis 'Cutty' Wise's (Chad L. Coleman) new boxing gym, even organizing a welfare initiative for the boys from the proceeds of dealers, Herc condemns their nature, "like roaches when you turn the lights on" (3.09), bound to scurry back to their corners once the project ends.

However, at the same time, this act of concealing also mirrors an unconcealing: the act of hiding drug use in Hamsterdam – the application of the “paper bag” to the problem – is also a tacit acknowledgment of the problem. Colvin's initiative does not attempt to prohibit consumption, an impossible enterprise given his resources, but to reduce its impact and improve life in the remainder of the district. It treats drug addiction without any notion of warfare: the greater common good is sought. Colvin repeatedly gives up on concealing the truth of felonies. When in local team-meeting in preparation for COMSTAT, Colvin rejects a suggestion to re-classify felonies into minor crimes: "Fuck this. Do it clean. Don't massage anything … we give them the fucking truth. … Fuck them if they can't take a joke" (3.03). In the following episode, Colvin addresses a community meeting where residents are furious about drug crime and daily harassment. Again, the expectation is that Colvin should at least pretend to have reduced crime, or be devising initiatives to do this. Such a gesture would, however, conceal the impossibility of actually removing the whole problem. Against the grain, he offers no answers to the residents: "I can't promise you it's gonna get any better. … This here is the world we got, people. It's about time all of had the good sense to at least admit that much" (3.04). In response to this admission, one of the members of the community asks him what his answer to the problem is, to which he replies: "I'm not sure, but whatever it is, it can't be a lie." Colvin’s response comes with a knowing smile: the paper-bag compromise of the arrest-free zones does not lie about addiction.

As David Simon notes, Hamsterdam is about "societal and political triage, where you reach some sort of accommodation with a social problem rather than pretend you're actually controlling it" (3.03, DVD commentary). At the same time, unconcealing the problem of drug addiction by concentrating all its victims in one location leads to the unforgettably grim and hellish scenes of violence and loss of dignity as witnessed by Reginald 'Bubs' Cousins (Andre Royo) walking through Hamsterdam in 3.07, and later in 3.12. Yet one should be careful not to conclude that legalization might lead to some hellish scenario: the "village of pain" which Colvin creates, to use the Deacon's phrase (3.08), is one in which an already existing problem is no longer dispersed, but concentrated in one place and made plainly visible. As Colvin remarks to Carcetti later during his journey from peaceful, revitalized communities to the degradation of the free zones, what he sees "ain't pretty" (3.12), but it enables a reduction in crime rates, the regeneration of previously-harassed neighborhoods, and drug treatment and HIV prevention initiatives to reach an at-risk community. In typical *Wire* fashion, Hamsterdam offers a pairing and mirroring of concealment/unconcealment without prescribing a moral answer. The problem for Colvin will be that to make peace with an enemy in the War on Drugs will be far too unpalatable for politicians, police officers and drug-sellers, who each in turn contribute to the demise of Hamsterdam, through either serving their own political ambitions (Carcetti 3.12), compromised loyalties to Colvin (Carver's dragging of a murder victim outside of the free zone 3.09, and Herc's betrayal to the *Sun* newspaper, 3.10), or abandoning the no-violence pledge of the free zone (in one boy's tragically meaningless shooting of another for laughing at his shoes, 3.09).

**"This So-called Drug War"**

From the outset of Season One, *The Wire* offers a consistent and powerful social and moral critique of the "War on Drugs" waged by successive political administrations since President Richard Nixon first "declared war" on "public enemy number one," illegal narcotics, on 18th June 1971 (*The House I Live In*). Carver in 1.01 questions how something can be called a "war" if it never ends. Simon explains in an insightful 2007 interview with Nick Hornby that the show was pitched to HBO from the outset as the "anti cop-show," abandoning the harmful moral pretensions of good police against bad criminals in the drug war. Instead, as he states here and repeatedly in other interviews, he is "unalterably opposed to drug prohibition; what began as a war against illicit drugs generations ago has now mutated into a war on the American underclass, and what drugs have not destroyed in our inner cities, the war against them has" (Hornby par. 12). Carver's skepticism about whether it can even be called a "war" sets the scene, as police, dealers, addicts, children growing up in drug-afflicted areas, and later labor unionists, teachers, and ex-offenders are all ensnared in a futile collision of forces which the five seasons follows, the "other America" and the "America left behind" which Simon claims to represent (Hornby par. 9). As the disgraced ex-cop turned public school teacher Roland 'Prez' Pryzbylewski (Jim True-Frost) notes with melancholy, "no one wins. One side just loses more slowly" (4.04). In a war that cannot be won, *The Wire* follows from numerous different vantages how this losing plays out. In this sense one can properly understand why David Simon and others have frequently compared the program to Greek tragedy (Hornby pars. 7-8, Žižek “Clash of Civilizations”).

Colvin's Hamsterdam is therefore offered as one of the clearest critiques of this war, with the rare grace of a possible solution, albeit one the show is keen to underline is currently unworkable. Colvin himself explains to his loyal sergeant Carver his opinion on the failure of modern policing which is the war on drugs:

You call something a war, and pretty soon everybody gonna be running around acting like warriors. They gonna be running around on a goddamn crusade, storming corners, slapping on cuffs, racking up body counts. And when you at war, you need a fucking enemy. And pretty soon, damn near everybody on every corner is your fucking enemy. And soon the neighborhood that you supposed to be policing, that's just occupied territory (3.10).

However, Colvin finds himself isolated from his own superiors and those he commands in rejecting this approach, the conflict in attitudes embodied both in the machismo of Rawls' raid on Hamsterdam to the soundtrack of Wagner’s Rise of the Valkyries (an echo of *Apocalypse Now*) and in Herc and Officer Anthony Colicchio's (Benjamin Busch) understanding of police work as little more than "jack a crew and grab vials" (in Colvin’s words, 3.10). When modern policing is little more than soldiering, "real police work," working with communities rather than against them, disappears. Echoing the sentiments of the show's writers Simon and Pelecanos (cf. 3.11, 3.12, DVD commentaries), Colvin remarks that "the worst thing about this so-called drug war, to my mind, it just ruined this job" (3.10). But once a war of attrition has begun, there is little clear way of ever ending it except for some drastic solution, and given the season's initial metaphor of the collapse of the twin towers of the Franklin Projects and 9/11, war must continue to be waged, whatever the cost, even if fought "on a lie" as Slim Charles (Anwan Glover) states to Avon in their own war against Marlo's organization (3.12). Extrication can be just as ugly and hellish, if not dangerous. Although Colvin has no equivalent peacemaker in Iraq or Afghanistan (one might picture a renegade American general who negotiates an informal power-share and ceasefire with local militia) the analogy is clear: destroying Franklin Towers simply shifts the violence of the game elsewhere. The 'reform' is superficial, concerned only with “self-affirmation” in a groundless world where “rules” are cynically observed but the real facts of power are concealed (Virno 87), according to the logic of the corrupt “postmodern institutions” which Simon repeatedly has criticized (3.03 DVD commentary). Whilst the war on drugs is fought on a lie (efficacy of prohibition and criminality of addiction) only Colvin dreams up a temporary truce or compromise. Part of the intrigue of Hamsterdam is the lingering possibility that such a reform may just succeed. It is with a sharp jolt that the viewer joins Mayor Royce, who is initially willing to let the Hamsterdam experiment run, observing scandalized television reports once it becomes publicly known and is awoken from considering any alternative: "what the fuck was I thinking?" (3.12).

Yet Colvin's social contract expresses itself in a different ethical register to the War on Drugs, in a similar way to that in which Spinoza's own social contract sought to define itself as something beyond a merely Hobbesian model of competitive egoism. This egoism is like that reanimated by early 21st century social Darwinism of contemporary neoliberalism, where economic might is right and wealth is a natural effect of hard work and ambition, with the urban poor justifiably marginalized as criminal, culpable failures. The criminality of drug use is the hegemonic assertion of the War on Drugs, and of the politicians which continue to support it, and is used to defend what *The Wire* critically portrays as an attack on, and criminalization of, largely Afro-American inner-city social life at a time of social and political upheaval in race relations and class demands. Industries of illegal narcotics and state incarcerations each imprison communities into generational cycles of suffering within de-industrializing and decaying cities, whilst at the same time putting to work a largely surplus labor pool. Colvin's gambit, following Spinoza, is to enable this social problem to be concealed in order to improve the standards and welfare of his communities and corners, rather than to legalize drugs or make any comment on them. After all, they are a “force of nature” and not the subject of his reform, which is to re-establish social order. But his heroic paper-bag social contract cannot possibly survive the wrath of the game.

**"The Gods Will Not Save You"**

As Simon notes pessimistically in the DVD commentary to 3.12, "this country's too invested in the failed policy of the drug war to ever seriously contemplate an honest turn" (3.12, DVD commentary). In the failure to reform, the victims of war are not the commanders or politicians, all of whom remain in their posts by the end of the season, but the rank and file soldiers among the police, hoppers and drug gangs' "muscle" killed or wounded across the series. This has led some critics to interpret the program as offering an outlook too bleak and cynical (Atlas & Dreier 4) to be considered politically effective. In contrast others, such as Thompson (110-1), have rightly emphasized the significance of the heroism of certain individuals in struggling against the current of institutional corruption. McNulty, Colvin, and Detective Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters) all exhibit such a heroism, but in the system portrayed in *The Wire*, these acts are necessarily tragic. Whilst Toscano and Kinkle (pars. 10-14) are right to detect a critique of financial capitalism in *The Wire*, it would be misleading to claim that the program offers a political alternative. Whilst the critiques of corrupt institutions are compelling, *The Wire* offers only an exposure of this corruption without prescribing any alternative. Colvin's Hamsterdam project is bulldozed as soon as it is publicly exposed, as police commanders and politicians scramble to save their own careers in the fear of a potential public backlash. Despite the failure of Hamsterdam, however, *The Wire* conveys a potent political message through the dramatic mechanism of tragedy.

Whilst the tragic nature of *The Wire* has already been identified by Simon himself, as well as Žižek and others, less attention has been paid to its specific deployment. The most epic framing of tragedy actually occurs in the COMSTAT meetings of Season Three, in which the protagonist Colvin faces the antagonistic forces of Burrell, Rawls, and their inert, futile war. A number of religious and classic metaphors are consciously deployed in these scenes. This first occurs early in 3.03, when Major Marvin Taylor (Barnett Lloyd) is demoted by Burrell after being unable to address the high crime rates in his district. Having removed Taylor, Burrell asks: "anyone elsehaving trouble with the writing on the wall?" This image is drawn from the Book of Daniel, a mysterious prophetic sign that the final king of Babylon, Belshazzar, will be killed and his city destroyed. Colvin later evokes a similar divine motif when facing Rawls at another COMSTAT meeting, before his creation of Hamsterdam leads to a fall in crime, at which he presents “clean” recorded crime-rates. The failure to bring down the crime rate leads Colvin to declare that "sometimes the gods are uncooperative." As he utters this, Burrell hurries into the room after being further pressured to reduce crime and, seemingly, does not hear what Colvin says. Despite this, he too expresses the heavy influence of the gods to drive human affairs soon after: "the gods are fucking you, you find a way to fuck them back. It's Baltimore, gentlemen. The gods will not save you" (3.03). However, at a later meeting Colvin can offer what Burrell and Rawls desire: a 12% reduction in crime over the previous four weeks, following the establishment of Hamsterdam. "Sometimes the gods do listen, sir," he suggests. "Not in the Western, they don't," Rawls replies (3.08).

As Simon later explains, "stealing" from the Greek tragedians allows *The Wire* to create "doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality … fated by indifferent gods" (Hornby par. 7). Chris Love has closely analyzed this use of Greek tragedy, and claims that in the case of Hamsterdam, Colvin confuses his gods. Rather than cynically assenting to the inevitable gods of "urban crime" of Baltimore's drug trade, and falling in line with his institution ("it's Baltimore, gentlemen"), Colvin instead attempts to appease and fuck back the "gods" which, in his confused perception, are Burrell and Rawls (497). Whilst this is a compelling close reading, Colvin's paper-bag compromise is far more than just an attempt to get back at his commanders. It is one solution to the damage of the war on drugs on his district, and one that he later admits to Carcetti was not heavily analyzed. "I just did it" (3.12), he states, indicating that the experiment was simply an attempt to reassign his police units towards “real police work”. At the same time, it emulates the stories of Oedipus and Antigone through its hapless protagonist vainly attempting to alter the passage of fate. The "gods" instead represent overwhelming institutional forces, which includes the forceful machinations within police, politics and the drugs trade. The gods may seem to cooperate, but this is only an illusory veil when an individual does not challenge their circumstances. The interest of the gods in the welfare of the urban underclass in the Western District is clearly absent. In such a tragic game, to fuck back the gods is simply to survive, as Burrell improbably does by the end of the season. Yet when the powerful leaders in policing and political institutions are determined only to war against drug crime-rates for the sake of political appearances and careerist self-interests, Colvin is the tragic hero who is sacrificed at the end. In turn, he can at least enjoy the private satisfaction of doing what he felt was "right" (3.12). When faced with the wrath of the gods, both McNulty and Colvin on different occasions (3.04 and 3.07) utter the same doomed, yet heroic, war-cry: "fuck the bosses."

**"It's a Different World Down There"**

Whilst Season Three presents the impossibility of Colvin's victory against the gods of postmodern institutions, in this final part I turn to explore a claim made earlier, that the subversive power of the Hamsterdam reform and the paper-bag social contract lies in its abiding attachment to, and legitimization of, the facts and natural laws of the game. Colvin can give Rawls his stats whilst improving life in his communities, without coming into major friction with the drug-sellers on the corners. Like other Baltimore commanders under pressure from the statistical demands of Rawls and Burrell, exemplified in the COMSTAT meetings, he instead redefines crime not in the bureaucratic realm of record-keeping, but in creating a physical place where, concealed, a non-place (*utopia*), is the site within which drug trade can continue to operate along its own natural laws. Yet, whilst openly reckoning with drugs as a “force of nature,” Colvin's utopia is presented from the outset as startlingly other-worldly.

Richard Price, series writer of 3.02, states that Hamsterdam represents the transition from utopia to dystopia, of what "a nightmare an idea can become, no matter how good the intentions" (3.02, DVD commentary). However, this modern definition of utopia as an ideal place is misleading in this instance. Against Clandfield (43) and Jameson (372) it would be a mistake to consider Hamsterdam as an ideal utopia. The squalor of the derelict houses on Vincent Street, the young age of the drug-sellers, the abandoned children left behind, as well as the one remaining elderly resident all point to the inadequacy of the solution. Hamsterdam is not established in one swoop, and it requires several measures across the season, from herding in addicts to setting up a public health program, to make it even remotely functional. It is utopia in the sense of being a non-place, of being an other-world in which, briefly, the rules of the game and the facts of its societal damage are enabled to coexist without contradiction, in a space concealed from a police command and a popular press who are locked into perpetuating the destructive attrition of the War on Drugs. Throughout the season there are other-worldly terms for the free zones: "Gandhi-world" (3.08), "Jurassic park" (3.08), "a soldier's paradise" (3.07), and simply "hell" (3.08). The most memorable name is the corruption of Amsterdam as "Hamsterdam" (3.03). The hoppers who provide the name have no idea of the whereabouts of Amsterdam or Switzerland, the examples which Colicchio gives as places where this kind of toleration has been carried out before. The only thing that is real is "Hamsterdam," a twisting from what is familiar into an initiative unlike any other, an experiment that is impossible from the very outset. Colvin first refers to it as a "joke" (3.03), its results a "statistical aberration" (3.07), and Mello and Rawls ask him, before and after the experiment, if he's "lost his mind" (3.04, 3.10).

If Colvin has lost his mind, other characters struggle to focus their minds on the implications of the initiative. After Avon's first failed attack on Marlo, Stringer narrates to him what he has observed of Hamsterdam: "they got crews over there, twirling dope and coke like the shit was candy. Kids with a lemonade stand, it's a different world down there" (3.06). Such a world might represent the possibility of drugs being just "business," a world in which perhaps he too might advance on more rational, economic grounds. However, his peregrinations are lost on the distracted Avon who dismisses the possibility of sending their crews there. This ambivalence and inability is also expressed by Bubs at the close of the season. I challenge Williams' (536-7) claim that this final "Dickensian" scene of the season constitutes a "recognition of virtue," or that it testifies to Colvin's failure (Nannicelli 202n): instead, following Klein (183), I argue that this scene is entirely devoid of melodrama in its lack of musical accompaniment. Bubs in fact cannot actually tell Colvin whether it was a "good thing" or not (3.12). Hamsterdam thus poses one unthinkable world without endorsing it. The institutional power of the gods has rendered from the outside the impossibility, or otherness, of such an initiative. In his affirmation of the brutalized humanity of the addicts, something which has not been particularly aided by the Hamsterdam project, considering the death of his partner Johnny Weeks (Leo Fitzpatrick) (3.12), Bubs gives no actual answer on the initiative itself. Colvin thanks him at least for that, but as Bubs walks away, the season leaves behind Colvin to continue wandering through the ruins of his utopia, and the impossibility of such an "outrageous," mind-spinning strategy. Whilst Spinoza would suggest the importance of understanding the causes of drug dependency or urban poverty, Colvin's approach is necessarily limited to triage and pragmatically reducing short-term social harm. What he nobly sets out to do is to reduce the impact of a phenomenon that is beyond his control. When he attempts to justify the "hell" he has created to the Deacon, Colvin does not realize that he himself has gone beyond his own boundaries: "Look, I'm a police. So I can lock a man up or I can move his ass of the corner. Now if you want anything more than that, you're in the wrong shop" (3.08). Colvin's angry reply indicates the limit of *The Wire*'s own treatment of Hamsterdam. To simply concede that institutions will always be corrupt, as Simon does, is, in effect, to permit them to carry on as they are, without civil scrutiny. The construction of civil society begins with its institutions. Proposing institutional changes, or devising new institutions and constitutions that express collective desire and the common welfare of the city, or even a common agreement between one group of urban residents, and the police, as Colvin's paper-bag social contract attempts, is one viable political route that Spinoza argues for, and to which Hamsterdam, in its very impossibility, attempts to make some compromise with. There is a certain relief in the story-arc as Hamsterdam is closed down, but lacking is an ethical consideration of whether Colvin's other-worldly utopia is worth the civil cost of drug legalization.[[1]](#footnote-1) Violence and deaths are substantially reduced, but *The Wire* is unable to make any conclusive ethical statement about these unthinkable utopias beyond Bubs’ ambiguous reply to Colvin in the rubble of Hamsterdam when he asks for his verdict: “I'm just saying.” This ambivalence raises the question of what conditions are acceptable in order to create social compromise. In order to make such a reckoning, one must face the game legitimately, as a “force of nature,” and in the process legitimize it, something which few reformers would ever dream of and, against the gods, none have so far succeeded.

The "moral midgetry" of the wider season is confirmed in one brief Hamsterdam scene during a survey of the large number of idle children. The camera shows an adolescent boy drinking beer out of a paper bag, Colvin's very image of civic compromise. Such a concealment is redundant in Hamsterdam, and Colvin's paper-bag compromise may have addressed the symptom but not the cause: the desperate unsupervised life of children who have had to fight or flee from birth, the poverty and deprivation of their communities, and the total lack of opportunities or stable family figures in their lives. Colvin's absurd solution is to give the boys jobs as "auxiliary cops," provided with police bicycles and radios. Whilst *The Wire* depicts the failure of America's "War on Drugs," total legalization without attending to its social causes also results in disaster. As Spinoza would explain, the social contract can only manage, without improving, the collective lot of humanity. Only through understanding the social causes of our actions, and attempting to re-direct them by education, toleration and building peaceful communities, can societies move beyond hiding problems to overcoming them. Like Colvin's Hamsterdam, this first requires America to face its civil problems collectively, however politically unpalatable for Burrell, Royce, Carcetti, or post 9/11 culture more broadly.

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**Biography**

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1. This lack of firm judgement can be compared to the effective decriminalization of drug-selling in Season Four in HBO prison drama *Oz* through a 'no violence' social contract between Em City Unit Manager Martin Querns (Reg E. Cathey) and Simon Adebisi (Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)