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Consensus Narratives on the State of Exception in American TV Shows

by

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Abstract

The TV show is a central focus of American life, one that not only reflects but also produces social imaginaries for the American audience that support the way people interact and engage with reality. It is the nation's most influential storyteller, which dominates the nation's imagination and understanding of reality. This dissertation explores the political and cultural meanings of four TV shows from the George W. Bush era: *The West Wing* (1999-2007), *Deadwood* (2004-06), *The Wire* (2002-08) and *Heroes* (2006-10). In examining these TV shows, this dissertation aims to shed light on both the origins of the state of exception, its conduct, its purpose, and the possibility of meaningful critique of or resistance to the state of exception.

Chapter I discusses *The West Wing*, focusing on President Bartlet's decision-making process regarding the assassination of Abdul Shareef, so as to elucidate the decisive actions of a sovereign figure in a state of exception. Chapter II explores *Deadwood*'s resurrection of the nineteenth-century mining camp in our twenty-first century, in terms of the capitalist state of exception. In discussing the show's portrayal of the conflicts among the main characters, this chapter reveals that the same sovereign logic of exception is innate in the expansion of capitalism. Chapter III examines *The Wire*'s depiction of rebellious petty-sovereigns such as Major Colvin, Detectives McNulty and Freamon. According to *The Wire*, the claims of equality are deeply urgent in the bleak reality of contemporary America. With their commitment to equality and justice, the petty-sovereigns intervene in the bleak reality in their subversive ways. Chapter IV explores *Heroes*'s rendering

of the main characters' struggles against a fictional national emergency, the Company's conspiracy to blow up half of New York City. In this chapter, I argue that *Heroes* portrays a political subject that attempts to constitute itself outside biopolitical sovereign power—what Hardt and Negri would call the advent of the multitude. While explicating the struggles of the main characters, I argue that its limitation in envisioning a new world underscores how contemporary critics fail to see past sovereign politics when they imagine another world.

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Consensus Narratives on the State of Exception in American TV Shows

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter I – President Bartlet’s Two Decisions on The War on Terror.....	35
Chapter II – A Capitalist State of Exception in <i>Deadwood</i>	73
Chapter III – The Wasted Lives and the Politics of Equality in <i>The Wire</i>	115
Chapter IV – The Revolt of Bare Lives and the Return to Normality in <i>Heroes</i> Season One: Genesis.....	154
Conclusion	191
Works Cited	196

Introduction

On May 1, 2003, President George W. Bush announced to the nation:

“Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed” (“Major Combat”). Far above him was the *USS Abraham Lincoln*’s giant banner proclaiming “Mission Accomplished.” And he went further, saying :

The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11th, 2001 and still goes on. That terrible morning, 19 evil men, the shock troops of a hateful ideology, gave America and the civilized world a glimpse of their ambitions. They imagined, in the words of one terrorist, that September the 11th would be the beginning of the end of America. By seeking to turn our cities into killing fields, terrorists and their allies believed that they could destroy this nation’s resolve, and force our retreat from the world. They have failed. (“Major Combat”)

This controversial speech by President Bush epitomized the optimism and triumphalism that came in the immediate aftermath of the invasion on Iraq. And more importantly, this carefully orchestrated media event on an aircraft carrier is one of the Bush administration’s most grandiose attempts in collaboration with the US broadcasting network to overcome the damage and defeat in the dimension of spectacle, caused by the attacks of September 11. However, such a propagandistic view on the War on Terror did not last long, as it was supplanted by frustration and anger towards the Bush administration’s military and counterterrorism

strategies. Since then, the phrase, “Mission Accomplished,” has been mocked repeatedly as a paramount example of the preposterousness of the Iraq War, though Bush never mentioned it in his speech.

This televised address by President Bush and the controversy that followed epitomize struggles in the realm of spectacle mainly dominated and played by television since the attacks of September 11. In the turmoil after September 11 and the following War on Terror, despite considerable social dissent brewing around the world, American television projected a normalizing of exceptions. In the short term, American TV in general and TV shows, in particular, promoted a uniform jingoism. In *The Late Show with David Letterman*, on September 17, 2001, CBS NEWS anchor Dan Rather spoke to his American TV audience: “George Bush is the president, he makes the decisions, and, you know, as just one American, wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where, and he’ll make the call.” And in the same venue, “TV entertainment shows,” Douglas Kellner claims, “peppered its [*sic*] programs with flags as regular series like *The West Wing* and *Law and Order* used computer-generated flags inserted into their dramas to help capture viewer attention and spread the new patriotism” (67). In addition, for months, American TV networks hammered the public with the Bush administration’s discourse on the necessity of the Iraq War. We can find a unified strong warmongering voice on American TV right after the attacks of September 11 and during some pivotal moments of instant military victories in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, this kind of pro-war inclination of TV was not long-lasting. As public opinion on the War on Terror almost diverged evenly, TV

became a conflicting field of interests and values regarding the War on Terror, particularly as seen in various TV shows that lie about and confess, affirm and disavow, obfuscate and enlighten September 11 and its effects, as they are seeking to stylize everyday changed reality.

Every political system requires its own theatre, which draws upon the rituals of everyday life in order to legitimate its norms, values, institutions, and social practices. As “a primary generator and the most everyday source of narratives in contemporary culture” (Thornhham and Purvis ix), the TV show is the most popular and influential theater for the largest proportion of people from all sections of society. This dissertation explores select TV shows from the George W. Bush era—*The West Wing* (1999-2007), *Deadwood* (2004-06), *The Wire* (2002-08) and *Heroes* (2006-10)—to see how they represent the changed reality of America after September 11.

The changed reality refers to the age of global terrorism in which, arguably, the state of exception becomes the dominant paradigm of government. In analyzing how each TV show represents the state of exception—a state in which we can no longer rely on the law as the authority on decision-making process—this dissertation examines how the shows incorporate the state of exception into reality in which the main characters often struggle to legitimize their controversial and often transgressive actions. My interpretations of the shows are guided by the imperative of expanding our capacity to understand the world after September 11, and to read politically cultural texts that give insights into that world. While considering them as paradigms for more precisely understanding our present

situation, I examine these shows as embedded within the political condition and imagination of our times. The readings in this dissertation propose that the political imagination of these shows normalizes the state of exception. However, in doing so, they also affect critiques of existing realms of political justification, necessity, and legitimacy. With these readings in place, this dissertation argues that the selected American TV shows from the Bush era are consensus narratives that account for America's understanding of the state of exception paradigm dominant after September 11.

In "Television as an Aesthetic Medium," David Thorburn hypothetically identifies "consensus narrative" as that which could best characterize the narratives of television:

Consensus narrative, in contrast [to popular narrative], operates at the very center of the life of its culture, and is in consequence almost always deeply conservative in its formal structures and in its content. Its "assignment" – so to say – is to articulate the culture's central mythologies, in a widely accessible "language," an inheritance of shared stories, plots, character types, cultural symbols, narrative conventions. (57, italics in orig.)

Unlike popular narratives, which can address exclusive sub-groups in society, Thorburn's consensus narrative aims to be "the chief carrier of the lore and inherited understanding of its culture, as well as society's idealizations and deceptions about itself" (61). The narratives and messages of the TV shows are socially mediated and constructed. In this social consenting process, what then is

the function of criticism? While taking his cue from Thorburn's idea, in *Switching Channels*, Nilanjana Gupta points out that, though consensus narrative is essentially conservative, it can incorporate with criticism:

Yet, this consensus narrative can be truly successful only when it adequately represents and contains a polyphony of voices and discourses. Dissent and difference can also be made part of the consensus if properly contained or managed. In countries like America or Britain, the consensus narratives accommodate discordances within themselves.... The consensus narratives of these cultures attain a high level of legitimization by allowing space for difference and discordances. (14-5)

From Gupta's perspective, the consensus narratives can be a dialectical realm of the dominant ideology and its dissenting voices. So, "any analysis that characterizes the role of television as merely that of reinforcing the dominant ideology may seem to be extremely simplistic and naïve" (Gupta 14). However, as Jacques Rancière argues, "Consensus means much more than the reasonable idea and practice of settling political conflicts by forms of negotiation and agreement, and by allotting to each party the best share compatible with the interest of other parties" ("Rights" 306). Rancière claims that "Consensus means closing the spaces of dissensus by plugging the intervals and patching over the possible gaps between appearance and reality or law and fact" ("Rights" 306). From this perspective, consensus is where criticism fails. Basically, this dissertation reads the TV shows through this lens of consensus. However dissident the shows may

appear, they are all consensus narratives, which legitimate and ritualize the norms, values, institutions, and social practices in America after September 11. In exploring the TV shows along with critical thinkers, ranging from Agamben to Žižek, this dissertation examines how the shows normalize exceptions and how their critical imagination fails to overcome the state of exception.

How did American TV shows represent the state of exception, probably the most problematic concept in politics and law, after the attacks of September 11? And how did they portray the actions of the sovereign figures in the state of exception? According to Carl Schmitt, the most notable legal scholar in Nazi Germany who conceptualized the state of exception in the early 1920s, “The exception appears in its absolute form when a situation in which legal prescriptions can be valid must first be brought about. Every general norm demands a normal, everyday frame of life to which it can be factually applied and which is subjected to its regulations” (PT 13). To Schmitt, the state of exception is a temporary situation before a return to normalcy. In this sense, we could name it a provisional and exceptional measure in politics and law. In *State of Exception*, however, Giorgio Agamben argues with regard to the War on Terror: “Faced with the unstoppable progression of what has been called a ‘global civil war,’ the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics” (2). In *The Signature of All Things*, after showing his research’s affinity to Foucault’s archeological studies, Agamben also emphasizes that the state of exception is a paradigm (31). As Foucault defines the panopticon as the paradigm of the modern power system in *Discipline & Punish*,

Agamben uses the state of exception as a paradigm of government

When I say ‘paradigm’ I mean something extremely specific—a methodological approach to problems, like Foucault’s with the panopticon, where he took a concrete and real object but treated it not only as such but also as a paradigm so as to elucidate a larger historical context. (qtd. in De la Durantaye 218)

If we bear in our mind that the state of exception is a paradigm, we can critically revisit the increasingly prevalent, but also controversial, idea that, since September 11, 2001, we have moved into a permanent state of emergency. In “The Problem with Normality,” Mark Neocleous notes that “the argument that we have recently moved into a state of emergency is a poor one” (194). Many governments in the twentieth century, ranging from the Weimar Republic to Roosevelt’s New Deal administration, incorporated emergency powers much in the way that the Bush administration declared the state of exception on September 14, 2001.

Neocleous argues that historically speaking,

emergency rule has been crucial to the consolidation of capitalist modernity.... What appear initially to be extraordinary powers developed under the auspices of emergency very quickly and easily infiltrate the ordinary legal system.... Because of this, it is more or less impossible to distinguish emergency powers from normal law, as the former slips and slides into the latter. (204)

In this sense, the Bush administration after September 11 might be just one of many governments that declare the state of exception. However, there is also the

paradigmatic singularity manifested in the action of the Bush administration, in that it exposes the function and capacity of the state of exception that permeates contemporary politics and life. In other words, the Bush administration is not the first or only government that incorporates exceptional emergency powers. Rather, the administration is paradigmatic in that its singularity exposes the dominance of the state of exception in contemporary politics. The administration is paradigmatic in that it unveils a whole problematic context which it both constitutes and makes intelligible. Thus, we haven't suddenly moved into the permanent state of exception after September 11. Rather, through September 11, we more fully realize what Walter Benjamin famously wrote more than a half century ago: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" ("PH" 257).

Agamben's state of exception is also a theory of inclusion and exclusion that explores how the sovereign power creates *homo sacer* through its total domination of law. However, the sovereign power and its legal authority are not the only power mechanism that produces the figures of *homo sacer*. Though Agamben never explains the role of capitalist social relations in constituting the state of exception, capitalism not only promotes the condition for the production of *homo sacer* but also directly produces its own version of *homo sacer* that can be dubbed as the proletariat, disposable people, slaves, or "human waste." In *Wasted Lives*, Zygmunt Bauman aims primarily to produce a social theory about the production and disposal of "human waste" in order to examine human inclusion and exclusion in contemporary society. For Bauman, modernization and

globalization are brutal processes of creating wasted lives. And his “human waste” includes Agamben’s *homo sacer*: “*Homo sacer* is the principal category of human waste laid out in the course of the modern production of orderly law abiding, rule governed sovereign realms” (32, italics in orig.). For Bauman as for Agamben, refugee and illegal immigrants are primary examples of “human waste.” However, in addition to them, Bauman provides a category of “human waste” that Agamben does not note—“surplus population”:

‘Surplus population’ is one more variety of human waste. Unlike *homini sacri*, the ‘lives unworthy of living’, the victims of order-building designs, they are not ‘legitimate targets’ exempted from the protection of law at the sovereign’s behest. They are rather unintended and unplanned ‘collateral casualties’ of economic progress. (39, italics in orig.)

Modernization and the globalization of the world economy have shattered the traditional social and economic structure that many rely on for their sustenance. Peter Linebaugh’s *The Magna Carta Manifesto* and Arundhati Roy’s *The Cost of Living* well demonstrate that the forced shift, ranging from the loss of various commons to government policies, has helped bankrupt millions of the marginalized and drives them from their place of living.

Since the advent of neoliberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, economic and social polarizations have been more severe, enhancing the interests and privileges of the global elite, but at the same time producing more bare lives. In *Rogue Economics*, Loretta Napoleoni also discusses this proliferation of bare

lives in the globalized world in very stark terms: “As democracy spread, so did slavery. By the end of the decade [2000], an estimated 27 million people had been enslaved in a number of countries, including some in Western Europe.... slaves have become an integral part of global capitalism” (1). And Kevin Bales’ description of modern slaves as “disposable people” also insinuates how capital produces bare lives. In *Disposable People*, Bales writes:

Slavery is a booming business and the number of slaves is increasing. People get rich by using slaves. And then they’ve finished with their slaves, they just throw these people away. This is the new slavery, which focus on big profits and cheap lives. It is not about owning people in the traditional sense of the old slavery, but about controlling them completely. People become completely disposable tools for making money. (4)

Bales’ disposable people are the very bare lives of global capitalism. In the globalization process of the world, capital acts in the same ways that sovereignty does through the logic of exception. As Arne de Boever rightly puts it, “there is a sovereign logic of exception at work in the capitalist relation” (261).

Napoleoni also criticizes the deep-rooted relation of capitalism to war and terrorism:

Even taking the highest terrorist casualties, which occurred in 1995, when over 6,000 people died worldwide, this figure is a fraction of the 50,000 to 100,000 people who die every year from snake bites, never mind the 10 million children who perish from

preventable causes, such as malnutrition and malaria. So why are we so scared? The answer must be sought in the mythology that politicians constructed to legitimize the market-state. (*RE* 206)

The fear of terrorism, according to Napoleoni, is obviously exaggerated for certain political-economic purposes. This claim provides an insight into the people who often forget the economic aspects in arguing about the War on Terror and the state of exception. As many argue, the War on Terror creates and justifies a certain political culture that can normalize crisis to produce a totalitarian “situation in which the repealing of measures brought in to deal with an emergency becomes unimaginable (when will the war be over?)” (Fisher 1).

Napoleoni’s argument helps us envision how the state of exception should be also viewed and examined in relation to capital’s production of bare lives, in that it is also employed as a means of government by certain political-economic interests and purposes, instead of being a result of a total war. As Bauman rightly writes, “Causes of exclusion may be different, but for those on the receiving end the results feel much the same” (40). Thus, in this dissertation, the normal usage of the state of exception is expanded beyond its original realm of law and politics so as to incorporate the capitalist production of bare lives. In addition, such integrated modes of analysis are crucial when we are witnessing not only a return of sovereignty in the realm of government, but also an oscillating transition of sovereignty, from the form of the nation state to a certain form of global capitalist Empire; life is abandoned not only in the name of national security, but also due to the investment and distribution decisions of trans-national corporations. This

understanding and re-conceptualizing of the state of exception also results from the following reading of critical thinkers' responses to September 11.

As many argue, September 11 was a groundbreaking event. In her speech "Reflecting on 9/11," Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein famously claimed, "America will never be the same again. The changes are visceral and they are real." There could be diverse implications and interpretations of this threshold. In "A Bear Armed with a Gun," British political scientist David Runciman argues that September 11 marks a post-Hobbesian age "in which a new kind of insecurity threatens the familiar structures of modern political life.... And since they are not designed to deal with this sort of threat, even the most powerful states don't know what to do about it." According to Runciman, this unprecedented post-Hobbesian age implies an extreme increase of confusion and uncertainty in international politics, such that "a bear armed with a gun" can threaten the most powerful country's security (though most Americans would feel that everyday routine has changed very little, if at all).

In *Terror and Liberalism*, Paul Berman situates September 11 as an extreme act of Islam totalitarianism that is a deformed reaction to liberalism. He equates the notorious Islamic fundamentalism with a mode of totalitarianism that prevailed in the early twentieth century in Europe; so he sees the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as versions of "the war between liberal society and the anti-liberal rebellions" (xvi). From his perspective, the claimed final victory of liberal democracy over totalitarianism—he sees communism as a variant of totalitarianism—after the end of the Cold War is an illusion from which we need

to be awakened: “Totalitarianism in decline? It was a spectacular error to have imagined any such thing in 1989—a curious error, an almost laughable example of the self-absorbed delusions of the Eurocentric imagination. As if the Muslim world didn’t exist!” (156).

The arguments made by Berman have their points. However, I do have a strong reservation, particularly concerning Berman’s equating totalitarianism and Islamic fundamentalism. Although, in appearance, the War on Terror might seem like a clash of civilizations or religions, in contemporary society support for Islamic fundamentalism is a reaction that reflects the widespread anti-western consensus of the marginalized in the context of the capitalistic globalization promoted by the West and US. Sociologist and Lutheran theologian, Peter L. Berger argues:

A purely secular view of reality has its principal social location in an elite culture that, not surprisingly, is resented by large numbers of people who are not part of it but who feel its influence

Religious movements with a strongly anti-secular bent can therefore appeal to people with resentments that sometimes have quite non-religious sources. (11)

It is true that religious organizations and fundamentalism intervene and mediate the horrendous side effects of globalization but they would be less powerful if there were not the disasters created by the exploitation of capitalistic globalization in the world: “We [Haider al-Abadi, Iraq's Minister of Communication] know that there are terrorists in the country, but previously they were not successful, they

were isolated. Now because the whole country is unhappy, and a lot of people don't have jobs . . . these terrorists are finding listening ears” (qtd. in Klein, “Baghdad”). In other words, instead of regarding it as totalitarianism that threatens “the American way of life,” we should understand Islamic fundamentalism as indeed a reaction to the globalization of capitalism and democracy. In this sense, the more substantial reason for confusion and uncertainty is that September 11 is the event that undermined the default system of capitalism and democracy, acclaimed by Francis Fukuyama as the dominant, unassailable hegemony after the demise of communism in normative politics.

In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Jean Baudrillard provokingly claims that “The West, in the position of God (divine omnipotence and absolute moral legitimacy), has become suicidal, and declared war on itself” (7). From Baudrillard’s perspective, current global terrorism is a reaction to the globalization of the West in which the system of power and exchange perpetuates an endless chain reaction without exit (9). Thus, what we witness as a result of September 11 is not just the proclaimed increase of confusion and uncertainty but “a resurrection of history beyond its proclaimed end” (Baudrillard 28). This perspective would eventually lead us to agree with Žižek’s following claims:

For me, 1989 was not the end of utopias, as is commonly claimed, not the end of communism, but rather the unleashing of the great utopia of liberal capitalism, marked by Francis Fukuyama’s ‘End of History.’ And September 11 is the answer to it; if it means anything at all, it means that this utopia is today dead. (Badiou and

Žižek, *PP* 96-7)

If this first global event in the twenty-first century provides many with an opportunity to think narrowly about America's foreign policies or broadly about the globalization of Western democracy and capitalism, the most valuable contribution of the Bush administration to humanity would be that, however unintentionally, it actually encourages people to contemplate the fantasy-nature of capitalism and democracy due to its senseless War on Terror after the attacks of September 11.

The attacks of September 11 and the ensuing War on Terror also activate the reevaluation and criticism of the postmodern society in which the categorical proposition of "consume and enjoy" only resonates after the demolition of totality. The fragmented postmodern condition means that society does not allow for a total point of view that will cover its entirety. In such a society, communication is reduced to the size of a small interest community, and thus, the perspective for the wholeness of the society is absent. From a Lacanian perspective, the power of the symbolic is abating in postmodern society. People who develop their identities in this situation know only something very intimate to them or very extrinsic. In effect, they are interested in the objects of enjoyment in front of them or something Other such as the alien or the end of the world. This is a strange conjunction of the very personal with the very abstract. Lacan would say that today's generation remains glued to only the imaginary and the real. And the result of the lack of the symbolic is the enfeeblement of the public sphere and its discourse in regard to the state and society. September 11, however, seemed to

contribute to the revitalization of the symbolic in America as it demystified the dominant pair in Fukuyama's idea of the end of history: capitalism and democracy.

The Net-generation's energetic participation in the Obama campaign in 2008 can be seen as an example of the rehabilitation of the symbolic. However, can we conceive a revolutionary possibility in the Net-generation oriented to political participation? The Net-generation pays the most expensive university tuition in US history and contains probably the most dependent youths in American history: "Including school expenses, the average American receives \$38,000 a year from her or his parents between the ages of 18 and 34" (Tapscott 31). Can we really envision a possible way of overcoming capitalism and representative democracy from the ethos of this new generation? The radical Leftists believe that the order of capitalism and representative democracy will not prevail forever; rather it will implode due to ecological risk or some other factors internal to the dominant system. Thus, they share a Marxist faith that we need to be prepared for the end of capitalism and representative democracy. However, where is their alternative?

In today's society, the alternative community movement based on small collective production, hobbies, academic interests, or religions seems for many agonized Leftists to be the only palpable choice left by the hostile urban environment created by the culture of neoliberalism. However, could this small community movement be a real alternative for the Left? The most challenging problem for the local alternative commune movement is that it depends on a naïve

notion that someone would be in charge of the state. In other words, this type of movement simply gives up the most important focal point of political struggles. Abandoning the state reduces any possible revolutionary elements by confining them to the ethical realm of individuals; put another way, the ideology of tolerance displaces the matter of politics onto the realm of individual ethics. In terms of revolutionary alternatives, the contemporary Left comes to a deadlock in the contemporary society of capitalism and representative democracy after the end of communism in real politics. We might call it the age of impasse.

In this milieu, the recent critical interest in Walter Benjamin's writings on violence, law and history deserves our attention. In *Welcome to the Desert of Real*, Žižek writes, "Walter Benjamin defined the Messianic moment as that of *Dialektik im Stillstand*, dialects at a standstill: in the expectation of a Messianic Event, life comes to a standstill" (7, italics in orig.). Multiculturalism or tolerance used to be considered the only viable ideology, but isn't it already revealed that we can be tolerant only so far as we are willing to behave according to our Western common sense, which is only a way of regulating our aversion to the Other? We love the exotic Arabic belly dancers, but we cannot allow Muslim women to wear the burqa in public. Such is exactly what happens in Sarkozy's France in early 2010, for example: as Žižek argues, "In short, the Other is just fine, insofar as this Other is not really other" (*Violence* 41). Multiculturalism or liberal tolerance is the only ideology in the post-political age. However, isn't its viable limit already disclosed when many governments in the world officially adopt multiculturalism as an official policy? And aren't we awaiting a Messianic

event, particularly after the attacks of September 11?

In the past twenty years, there is no essay by Benjamin that has been discussed as much as “Critique of Violence” (1921). Benjamin was most famous as a literary critic and a cultural critic of modernity until Jacques Derrida presented “Force of Law” (1989), in which he carefully analyzed Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” at Cardozo Law School. As a result of Derrida’s essay, Benjamin suddenly became one of the most important modern theorists of law, violence and justice. The Berlin Wall was also torn down in 1989. Were the two events—the rise of Benjamin’s essay and the fall of communism—purely coincidental? The reason people are fascinated by “Critique of Violence” is not just because of its esoteric style or original insights on the relation of law to violence. In this short essay, Benjamin inscribes the idea of revolution and liberation in the form of messianic violence as an irreducible constituent of politics, which, after the fall of communism, constructs a new cause of politics. At a point when the Left badly needs a new program that proceeds beyond a sequence of negatives, when the excess of violence promoted by rampant neoliberalism ruptures in the twenty-first century version of concentration camps—the slum, the detention facilities for illegal immigrants, and the impoverished areas in the Third World—it isn’t so surprising that Benjamin’s message, the possibility of revolutionary messianic violence, receives the attention of many intellectuals.

Along with the discussion of law, justice and violence triggered by Derrida’s analysis of Benjamin’s essay, Žižek’s latest call for a return to Lenin is another topical subject on the Left. It is well known that Žižek is today’s most

vocal supporter of Lenin. In the introduction of *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, Žižek and his co-editors write as follows:

For us, “Lenin” is not the nostalgic name for old dogmatic certainty; quite the contrary, the Lenin that we want to retrieve is the Lenin-in-becoming, the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old reference points proved useless, and who was thus compelled to *reinvent* Marxism.... This dialectical return to Lenin aims neither at nostalgically reenacting the “good old revolutionary times” nor at the opportunistic pragmatic adjustment of the old program to “new conditions.” Rather, it aims at repeating, in the present global conditions, the “Leninian” gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of imperialism, colonialism, and world war— more precisely, after the politico-ideological collapse of the long era of progressivism in the catastrophe of 1914. Eric Hobsbawm defined the concept of the twentieth century as the time between 1914, the end of the long peaceful expansion of capitalism, and 1990, the emergence of the new form of global capitalism after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. What Lenin did for 1914, we should do for our times. (3-4)

Right after publishing his short book about September 11 in 2001, Žižek also published *Revolutions at the Gate: Žižek on Lenin The 1917 Writings*. Though his books and essays on Lenin began to be available to us around 2001-02, it seems

he already conceptualized his basic ideas of “repeating Lenin” in the 1990s. Why Lenin again, especially after September 11? As the above quotation shows, to Žižek, Lenin is the very philosopher in the time of dialectical standstill. If September 11 is, as I argue above, the event that unveils how we live in the age of impasse, then the time is right to return to the most revolutionary figure in the twentieth century. The Leninian gesture or posture means that what we really need is to question and rethink the liberal democratic and post-ideological consensus that has prevailed since the fall of Berlin Wall. From Žižek’s perspective, in our globalized capitalistic world, if this consensus can be maintained, any radical or violent claim would be allowed. Thus, in this postmodern era, what we need is a certain fundamental stance that he calls the politics of truth.

Žižek’s close colleague, Alain Badiou, also diagnoses the contemporary situation in a similar way:

In many respects we are closer today to the questions of the 19th century than to the revolutionary history of the 20th. A wide variety of 19th-century phenomena are reappearing: vast zones of poverty, widening inequalities, politics dissolved into the ‘service of wealth’, the nihilism of large sections of the young, the servility of much of the intelligentsia; the cramped, besieged experimentalism of a few groups seeking ways to express the communist hypothesis ... Which is no doubt why, as in the 19th century, it is not the victory of hypothesis which is at stake today, but the conditions of its existence. This is our task, during the

reactionary interlude that now prevails: through combination of thought processes—always global, or universal, in character—and political experience, always local or singular, yet transmissible, to renew the existence of the communist hypothesis, in our consciousness and on the ground. (“CH” 41-2, ellipsis in orig.)

According to Badiou, there are two important sequences in the history of the communist hypothesis: “The first sequence runs from the French revolution to the Paris Commune; let us say, 1792 to 1871” (“CH” 35). “The second sequence ... runs from 1917 to 1976: from the Bolshevik Revolution to the end of the Cultural Revolution and the militant upsurge throughout the world during the years 1966-76” (“CH” 36). If the 19th century dreamed of the communist hypothesis, the twentieth century tried to realize it. What we are facing is another interlude after the second sequence, and here “What is at stake in these circumstances is the eventual opening of a new sequence of the communist hypothesis” (“CH” 37). This is not just a simple return to Lenin or back to the 68 Revolution. What greatly matters here is “to bring the communist hypothesis into existence in another mode, to help it emerge within new forms of political experience” (“CH” 37). What then is Badiou’s communist hypothesis? Badiou further explains it in his same titled book:

The decisive issue is the need to cling to the historical hypothesis of a world that has been freed from the law of profit and private interest – even while we are, at the level of intellectual representations, still prisoners of the conviction that we cannot do

away with it, that this is the way of the world, and that no politics of emancipation is possible. That is what I propose to call the communist hypothesis (63).

Badiou's communist hypothesis is probably the most radical diagnosis and approach to our world. From my perspective, it is too early to tell whether his hypothesis will be realized. And it is also too far away to envision its concrete details in reality. I may be one of the "prisoners of the conviction that we cannot do away with it [the law of profit and private interests]" (63). However, nobody knows how Badiou's hypothesis will be enacted. Nobody knows how we can overcome contemporary capitalism and representative democracy. One thing that is certain is that, in order to enact this hypothesis, as Badiou claims, we need to examine its conditions of existence—the state of exception, as it becomes the dominant paradigm of government and capitalistic exploitation in our age.

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, Americans and the US Congress arguably accepted, or at least tolerated, an exceptional presidential role in the decision-making process for the sake of national security. However, eight years is not a short term. Over the Bush administration's eight years, the President's approval ratings drew one of the most dramatic graphs in modern politics, ranging from 92% to the near record-low of 19%. It was a volatile historical period in which the complex of the state of exception, the sovereign and other closely connected ideas of justice, violence and law were buoyed up by innumerable debates about the attacks of September 11 and the War on Terror. The legacy of the Bush administration consists, in large part, of first panicking the nation—"the

very fundamentals of our way of life are threatened!”—and subsequently the world with the attacks of September 11, then arguably renormalizing the situation with two wars in his two terms, and concluding the presidency with another panicking event, the financial meltdown in 2008 (Žižek, *Tragedy* 23). To examine the state of exception, this dissertation delves into the seemingly renormalization process in this time period, discussing the critical thoughts of previously mentioned theorists concerning the time of dialectical standstill.

To explore this renormalizing process, I will focus on select American TV dramas during the Bush administration. There are a couple of reasons why this dissertation focuses on television, the primary generator of capital’s spectacle. In the Westernized world, everyday practice is endlessly saturated by the spectacle of various mass media that deliver the mandates of capital. In *The Society of Spectacle*, Guy Debord nihilistically claims:

By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise ... if the administration of society and all contact between people now depends on the intervention of such ‘instant’ communication, it is because this ‘communication’ is essentially *one-way*” (19, italics in orig.).

It was 1967 when Debord published his pessimistic and anarchistic aphorism about the world of mass media. It remains compelling. However, isn’t his idea of spectacle somewhat anachronistic in the contemporary society of spectacle, considering our interactive media environments?

In 2004, *New Left Review* published “Afflicted Powers” by Retort, a radical collective from the San Francisco Bay area. This highly inflammatory essay emphasizes the importance of Debord’s arguments of spectacle in understanding the age of terrorism:

We start from the premise that certain concepts and descriptions put forward forty years ago by Guy Debord and the Situationist International, as part of their effort to comprehend the new forms of state control and social disintegration, still possess explanatory power—more so than ever, we suspect, in the poisonous epoch we are living through” (5-6).

However, the events of September 11 drive their arguments in a different direction from the irresistibility of Debord’s one-way spectacle:

the dimension of spectacle has never before interfered so palpably, so insistently, with the business of keeping one’s satrapies in order. And never before have spectacular politics been conducted in the shadow—the ‘historical knowledge’—of defeat. It remains to be seen what new mutation of the military-industrial-entertainment complex emerges from the shambles. (Retort “AP” 21)

Against Debord’s idea of spectacle’s one-way communication, what Retort argues in this article is “At the level of the image (here is premise number one) the state is vulnerable; and that level is now fully part of, necessary to, the state’s apparatus of self-reproduction” (“AP” 14).

The attacks of September 11 wounded the US at the level of the spectacle,

and the state cannot endure this image of death or defeat. The society of spectacle, according to Debord, is “the colonization of everyday life” by capitalism: it is the submission of ever more facets of human sociality to the “deadly solicitations of the market” (“AP” 8). As many thinkers point out, September 11 is the perfect image of the negation of capitalism and the American empire. And it is also the first global event or the prologue to the first global war in the twenty-first century. It seems very difficult to anticipate another event, image, or spectacle that can replace and overcome the spectacle of September 11, no matter how hard America tries to overcome it. In this sense, Retort claims, “Spectacle is here characterized as both the baleful enemy of social interaction and the mode of opportunity, obstructing imperial power” (Stallabrass 96). However, it is not an easy task to appropriate spectacle for the sake of the Left’s cause. Through the War on Terror, the US has enacted an oil war in pursuit of the empire’s original or primitive accumulation but has at the same time not been negligent in performing the effort to repair the spectacle and normalize the wartime situation in the minds of American citizens.

When Debord examined the society of spectacle, his primary concern was television; he did not anticipate the two-way media developed in recent decades. The society of spectacle has become more complicated and ambiguous since Debord’s criticism in 1967, due to many social-technological changes in media and communications. We see the rapid growth of television’s main rival, the Internet, in expanding its territory in the society of spectacle; in 2008, Google’s advertising revenues were almost equal to the combined advertising revenues of

major five American networks, CBS, NBC, ABC, FOX, and CW. However, despite such media competition, Americans seem to watch more television than ever; according to Nielsen Media Research, in 2009 the average American watched more than 151 hours of TV per month, an all-time high. The same average American spent 68 hours per month online.

Television is still the most powerful generator of spectacle, and thereby mass-producing mesmerized spectators for a nation-state and capitalism, the weak citizens and gullible consumers. In addition, TV broadcasting in America is, rather, a pure product of capitalism. In *Switching Channels*, Gupta argues:

It is no coincidence that right from the very beginning of radio broadcasting and telecasting in the US, large corporations like General Electric, AT&T, Westinghouse, United Fruit and others founded the broadcasting companies which have evolved into the major national networks. Because of their commercial considerations, they used the networks initially to sell the products made by them and gradually, with the development of advertising, to sell products or services of all kinds. (Gupta 8)

Simply put, in America, the fundamental function of television, since its beginning, is promoting the spectacle of capitalism.

In our age, the rules of branding and the mega brand-corporations have become the norms of everything if the political is subjugated to them. The major difficulty in criticizing the spectacle of capitalism's corporate culture, in which virtually everyone is deeply embedded, is that this culture expands the realm of its

power as if criticism is its fodder: “In this complicated context [of branding], for brands to be truly cool, they need to layer this uncool-equals-cool aesthetic of the ironic viewer onto their pitch: they need to self-mock, talk back to themselves while they are talking, be used and new simultaneously” (Klein, *No Logo* 78). Global corporations, such as Nike, Apple, and Starbucks, love criticism as they thirstily absorb social critiques and political movements as their resource in increasing the semiotic web of their brand power. In *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher successfully conceptualizes this paradoxical condition of capital’s proliferations of its self-criticism as “precorporation”: “the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture” (9). Fisher provides the exemplary case of Kurt Cobain’s desperation. The champion of early alternative rock acts was precisely aware that his music of opposition, resistance and rebellion was nothing but a commodity. And what made his musical expression more desperate was that his critical awareness was also part of the commodity. In other words, the music industry (capital) commodifies not only Cobain’s opposition but also his consciousness of opposition being commodified. The result is an inescapable impasse.

Many Left-oriented critics analyze how TV media univocally endorsed and reproduced the wartime ideology of the Bush administration after September 11. Their activities are not without value, but in a way they give an odd sentiment that reminds me of Žižek’s idea of symbolic exchanges: “The magic of symbolic exchange is that, although at the end we are where we were at the beginning, there is a distinct gain for both parties in their pact of solidarity” (*HL* 13). Isn’t it

obvious that television works as a spectacle machine to repeat the ideology of capital and American empire? So, why criticize television that faithfully performs its own duties? Didn't we expect that NBC, owned by GE, would promote warmongering sentiments and messages? From this perspective, it makes us wonder if the critics and conservative networks exchange empty gestures in which nobody really aims to give real damage to each other, while actually enhancing their positions and identities in America.

If television and its critique are practically inextricable and can even be seen as symbiotic, what is the critical worth of a dissertation criticizing TV shows? If we push further the idea of Žižek's symbolic exchanges with regard to criticizing TV shows, we might reach a conclusion that the messages which we can infer from TV shows are already part of the game, no matter how radically we interpret them. However, this neither discourages nor prevents interpretation. Rather, this paradoxical, seemingly impossible situation of criticism is the condition of criticism. There is no criticism that can be fully detached from capital; today's criticism is embedded in capitalistic culture. The belief in the possibility of pure radical criticism is rather a fantasy that disavows the fact that every criticism is more or less corrupted in its relation to capital. However, if criticism is essentially contaminated, couldn't we also argue that capital, or more precisely the symbolic system created by capital, necessitates criticism? Capital always needs to have its opponents or criticism because it will open a new realm, which is necessary for capital's reproduction. From this perspective, criticism cannot but fail. But what really matters is not that it fails but how it fails: how we

understand this failure. This is the fundamental aim of this dissertation in exploring select American TV shows.

Horace Newcomb's *TV: The Most Popular Art* (1974), Raymond William's *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) and John Fiske and John Hartley's *Reading Television* (1978) are pioneering academic works on television in the 1970s. However, to see research on individual television shows, we needed to wait until the late 1980s and early '90s. For the past two decades, with the advent of quality TV, American TV dramas have attracted more academic interests than ever. TV shows used to be dominated by advertising agencies, and shows' sponsors created and provided these most capitalistic artifacts; Procter & Gamble, for example, literally created the soap opera. However, the deregulation policies in the 1980s provided a more competitive telecasting environment in which many networks were motivated to find means beyond advertising revenue. One result of this new competition is the beginning of the often-called quality TV or well-financed original programs. On the one hand, people's attitudes toward TV drama have been drastically changed, as watching a particular TV show often becomes a global social phenomenon. On the other hand, in the academy, as Christopher Anderson argues,

We're used to thinking of television programs as seductive attractions designed to coax viewers into the grasp of advertisers. With the rise of academic television and cultural studies, we've learned that television programs can be interpreted as cultural symptoms, expressions of profound, if often obscure, social

meanings. (23)

Many television series have provoked diverse interests and responses from a great range of American viewers over the years, and nowadays, some even seem to achieve cultural consecration as works of art. There is no doubt that recent publications of academic books on popular TV shows such as *24* (2001-10), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Desperate Housewives* (2004-), and *Mad Men* (2007-), to name a few, foster this particular cultural consecration.

This dissertation focuses on four TV shows: *The West Wing*, *Deadwood*, *The Wire* and *Heroes*. Each text represents its own understanding of the state of exception or changed reality after September 11 in America while exploring strategies to overcome this exceptional situation. Through close examination of these texts, this dissertation explores how these consensus narratives represent the state of exception and how they depict the actions of the sovereign figures in the state of exception. Those four shows can be divided into two categories: one concerned with searching for the nature of the state of exception (*The West Wing* and *Deadwood*), and one concerned with determining what should be done in the age of impasse (*The Wire* and *Heroes*). Thus, the first two chapters examine how we define the nature of the state of exception respectively in terms of politics and economics, while the latter two chapters delve into two contrasting figures, the petty sovereign and *homo sacer*, in order to examine our imagination of overcoming the state of exception.

The West Wing offers insights on the origin of the state of exception in terms of politics. After September 11, this show provides timely reflections on the

War on Terror in its ongoing narrative. To foreground the sovereign character of President Bartlet, it creates a fictional national emergency that requires the president to transgress law. And the president's controversial decision-making process is enacted in a melodramatic way that assuages anxiety over the transgression and conveniently sutures controversies over the emergent situation. Thus, this popular NBC drama justifies the controversial acts of President Bush, the Commander in Chief, so as to define the president's transgression as a necessary evil. However, the show's political imagination, aiming to see beyond real politics, can be read as a constructive criticism of the Bush administration.

If *The West Wing* examines the state of exception within the realm of politics, *Deadwood* shows a state of exception in terms of capitalism. The show features a mining camp outside the state but also included in the state as a form of exclusion. In this drama, the state of exception is positioned in the myth of the Western not so much to mythologize the show's contemporary reality or the Bush administration, but as a strategy of delving into the origin of the state of exception and of depicting how order comes before law in American history. Portraying the interactions between the founding figures of the camp, Al Swearengen and Seth Bullock, and George Hearst, a new driving force representing unfettered capitalism, this show contemplates the origin of the state of exception in terms of capitalism.

The West Wing and *Deadwood* are both consensus narratives, which means they are both basically conservative narratives that try to justify exceptional measures in a time of national emergency and to prove the necessity of choosing

the lesser evil. What is really compelling here is the result we can imagine as we read them in tandem. If *The West Wing* argues that the state of exception belongs to the realm of politics, *Deadwood* seems to tell us that, by contrast, the thing that truly matters here is capitalism. In *The Parallax View*, Žižek argues that “The relationship between economy and politics is ultimately that of the well-known visual paradox of the ‘two faces or a vase’: one either sees the two faces or a vase, never both of them—one has to make a choice” (56). Accordingly, “any direct translation of political struggle into a mere mirroring of economic ‘interests’ is doomed to fail, just as is any reduction of the economic sphere into a secondary ‘reified’ sedimentation of an underlying founding political process” (55).

However, this does not mean that we need to develop a view of the social totality that would simultaneously embrace these two incompatible realms. Rather what we need, according to Žižek, is to be faithful to this type of parallax view, because it is “the only way to approach the totality of our experience” (“PV”134). Žižek borrows the idea of the parallax view from the Japanese literary critic and philosopher Kojin Karatani’s *Transcritique* (2001). He also incorporates this concept in his *Iraq* (2004) to argue that truth is rather the movement of perspective instead of what we see as a result of a certain perspective; in this sense, it is naïve to ask whether the true reason for the War on Iraq is to secure stable oil reserves or to reaffirm the American empire’s hegemony. Inspired by Žižek’s argument, the chapters on *The West Wing* and *Deadwood* collaborate to enhance our understanding of the state of exception in America from a parallax view.

The third and fourth chapters focus on what could be done in the state of exception or how we can resist in the age of standstill. *The Wire* and *Heroes* respectively represent how the ethico-political action can be made in the state of exception. To exemplify a concrete action in the state of exception, *The Wire* narrows the scope of exception into a specific locale, the slums in Baltimore while raising the following questions: What agencies are capable of regulating and controlling impersonal structures? How is it possible to chastise a corporate structure? As it portrays Detective Jimmy McNulty's action of controversial decisions, the show explores the possibility of ethico-political practice in the state of exception. In one episode, McNulty boldly claims that "a patrolling officer on his beat is the one true dictatorship in America" ("Misgivings"). If McNulty acts as a petty sovereign, what justifies McNulty's transgression of law? This chapter argues that the petty sovereign's revolt cannot evade the vicious circle of sovereign politics.

If *The Wire* tries to find an ethico-political solution within the state of exception from a sovereign's standpoint, *Heroes* explores the revolt of *homo sacer*, a topological counterpart of the sovereign in Agamben's works on the state of exception and sovereignty, by focusing on a group of biopolitical outcasts. Through its rendering of the main characters, *Heroes* portrays a political subject that attempts to constitute itself outside biopolitical sovereign power. In examining the ethico-political action of the main characters against a mysterious organization named the Company, this chapter argues that the group of bare lives in *Heroes* is a heroic collective that metaphorically represents Hardt and Negri's

multitude confronting Empire. Considering the heroic collective as an exemplification of the multitude, it critically examines the validity and limit of Hardt and Negri's political subject in relation to the state of exception.

This dissertation's examination of the consensus narratives of select TV shows sheds light on the social imaginary toward the state of exception in America after September 11. In a contemporary society, television is the most powerful generator of social imaginary that create and reaffirm the collective practices of the society. The Bush era after September 11 opened a field of contest in regard to the values and ideas of neoliberal capitalism and representative democracy. The TV shows represent, as the primary exemplars of the most successful—at least in terms of the number of audience—storyteller of this age, the limit of social consensus regarding the state of exception in America. And this understanding of consensus will enlighten us about where we stand concerning the state of exception, which is the dominant paradigm of government and capitalistic exploitation.

Chapter I:

President Bartlet's Two Decisions on The War on Terror

The NBC network's popular TV serial drama *The West Wing* was broadcast in America from 22 September 1999 to 14 May 2006. The main characters of this show consist of President Josiah Bartlet and his White House senior staff—Leo McGarry, Josh Lyman, Toby Ziegler, Sam Seaborn, and C. J. Cregg. The show mainly provides audience members with a view of the internal workings of the White House, while depicting the main characters' sincere initiatives and actions in Washington D.C. politics. As a political TV drama, *The West Wing* directly or indirectly represents the contemporary American presidency, including the second term of Clinton's presidency and both terms of the Bush administration, and even predicts the first non-white president in US history. By unraveling the internal working of President Bartlet's White House, the show interweaves diverse, concrete social-political issues of the contemporary presidency, ranging from media-oriented politics to the War on Terror. How then does it reflect the Bush administration, particularly after September 11? This chapter delves into two questions: 1) how does *The West Wing* frame the reality after September 11? 2) what are the implications of the show's political imagination of the American presidency and politics in a world of violence and terror? In exploring these questions, this chapter sheds light on President Bartlet's decision-making process in order to clarify how this show portrays the decisive actions of a sovereign figure in a state of exception.

The violence of the September 11 attacks ignited highly heated public debates on America's foreign policies and use of violence. After September 11, *The West Wing* provided timely reflections on the War on Terror in its ongoing narrative. Before the third season of the show officially launched in October 2001, NBC aired a non-sequential episode of *The West Wing*, titled "Isaac and Ishmael," which is a direct response to the attacks of September 11. And more importantly, the show incorporates timely themes, such as terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in its ongoing narrative. In Season 3, the show develops a fictional national emergency as it introduces the Shareef story arc. Abdul Shareef is first mentioned in the third season episode, "The Black Vera Wang," which originally aired on May 8, 2002. Though he is Defense Minister of Qumar, a fictional ally of America in the Middle East, he is the mastermind behind an attempt to blow up the Golden Gate Bridge. In the two episodes that followed, "We Killed Yamamoto" and "Posse Comitatus," the show portrays the president discussing with his Chief of Staff and military consultants various methods to remove Shareef. As the show portrays President Bartlet's distress over the decisions that lead him to transgress law, it not only foregrounds the moral dilemma that a sovereign in a state of exception might face, but also reveals the controversial, expansive use of presidential power that many claim took place during the Bush administration.

Roughly two years after the Shareef story arc aired in America, *The West Wing* developed the Israeli-Palestinian story arc that began with the fifth season's last episode "Gaza," which originally aired on May 12, 2004. In this episode, two

American congressmen and retired Admiral Fitzwallace are killed while touring Gaza, and Josh Lyman's senior assistant, Donna Moss, is left in critical condition. After a four-month break, this story arc continued at the beginning of Season 6, and culminated in the second episode of Season 6, "The Birnam Wood," which originally aired on October 27, 2004. This story arc portrays President Bartlet's effort to bring the Israeli and Palestinian leaders together for a peace summit at Camp David. Although Bartlet has unilateral, bi-partisan support from Congress and the majority of American citizens on executing military retaliation for the deaths of American delegates, he chooses forgiveness over retaliation. In order to explore *The West Wing's* political imagination of the world after September 11, these two story arcs will be closely examined and juxtaposed in what follows.

Although the overall public reception of *The West Wing* might indicate that this show has a certain critical distance from the Bush administration, the show's timely portrayal of the presidency after September 11 reflects and justifies George W. Bush's view of the presidency. In "The Decider: Issue Management and the Bush White House," Andrew Rudalevige notes:

In Spring 2005 President George W. Bush was asked to describe the office he held. He responded, "It is a decision-making job. When you're dealing with a future president, you ought to say, 'How do you intend to make decisions? What is the process by which you will make large decisions and small decisions? How do you decide?'" (135)

However natural it may sound, President Bush's description of his job deserves

our attention, in that his decision-making invests the presidency with exceptional power at a time in which the law has been suspended by a sovereign power in the name of a national emergency or a national security issue. As many argue, “The Bush administration has been far more aggressive than its predecessors in arguing for expansive powers within Article II’s vaguely defined ‘executive power’ and concurrently for the notion that the executive would draw the boundaries between the branches” (Campbell et al. 9). And arguably US Congress fully supported President Bush’s use of expansive powers, particularly in the vaguely and controversially defined War on Terror. In *The American Presidency*, Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson write:

In October 2002, at the President’s request, Congress passed a resolution authorizing him to use military force against Iraq “as he determines to be necessary.” In doing so, legislators sustained Bush’s revival of the cold war-era belief that any overriding cause—the containment of communism then, the war against terrorism now—justifies the expansive use of presidential power around the globe. (434)

Through the Iraq War Resolution, Congress authorized the president’s role as Commander in Chief, the most powerful decision maker in a state of emergency with the proviso “as he determines to be necessary.” This war resolution revealed an often disregarded, nuanced aspect of liberal democracy, which has evolved so as to reduce the power of the decision maker since the age of Enlightenment. For example, in envisioning the rational community, Hegel proposes a constitutional

monarchy in which “the monarch often has nothing to do but sign his name” (P. Singer 51). From Hegel’s perspective, the monarchy’s constitutional stability would make the sovereign’s personal make-up unimportant. The US Constitution’s separation of powers was also conceived to prevent the abuse of power by any one branch. In addition, its federalist structure also secures the diffusion of sovereign power, which would reduce the risk of tyranny. However, the stability of constitutional democracy can always be threatened by people who claim that exceptional times require exceptional measures. And this is exactly what we witnessed after September 11 in the Bush administration as well as in the Bartlet administration.

In this chapter, I consider the decision-making process as a focal point, in that this process reveals how America responded to September 11 and executed the War on Terror. In juxtaposing the Bartlet administration with the Bush administration, this chapter argues that this popular NBC drama supports the controversial acts of President Bush regarding the War on Terror particularly through its Shareef story arc. In this story arc, the show explicitly represents President Bartlet’s controversial decision over Abdul Shareef, while enacting this decision-making process in a way justifying Bartlet’s transgression of law. President Bartlet finds himself in a Schmittian situation of the political: a time of emergency always brings out unavoidable moral dilemmas, and, in this situation, we face the greater evil threatening our own existence, so we cannot but commit lesser evils. In effect, the show provides Americans with a coping strategy for dealing with a dangerous and controversial reality, which seems full of violence

and terror, so as to define the president's transgression as a necessary evil that nobody can evade or fault. In this sense, this show endorses the Bush administration's controversial use of presidential power, while resonating with the Bush administration's official discourses on the War on Terror, such as the Bush Doctrine.

However, *The West Wing* can be also read as a constructive criticism of the Bush administration, aiming to see beyond the realm of politics in reality. In the Israeli-Palestinian story arc, the show reflects some elements of Derridian undecidability in Bartlet's decision-making process, which is seemingly impossible within the horizon of realpolitik. For Derrida, undecidability is the very condition of justice. In "Ethics and Politics Today," Derrida argues "One must, in some way, arrive at a point at which one does not know what to decide for the decision to be made" (298). This does not mean that notions of decision and resolution should be abandoned in favor of a generalized indecision. In Derrida's thought, this undecidability of decision can guarantee the true decision, which we need to make to be righteous. Though justice is undecidable, it nonetheless demands action. However, any action or decision will always already be not enough for justice, and thus be unjust. If it is the true condition of justice, though it might sound a bit churlish, we should ask some questions: 1) why should we decide or act? 2) why should we penetrate this rather impossible condition of justice? In *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, John D. Caputo explicitly answers these questions:

Undecidability is taken, or mistaken, to mean a pathetic state of

apathy, the inability to act, paralyzed by the play of signifiers that dance before our eyes, like a deer caught in a headlight. But rather than an inability to act, undecidability is the condition of possibility of acting and deciding. For whenever a decision is really a decision, whenever it is more than a programmable, deducible, calculable, computable result of a logarithm, that is because it has passed through “the order of undecidability.” One way to keep this straight is to see that the opposite of “undecidability” is not “decisiveness” but programmability, calculability, computerizability, or formalizability. Decision-making, judgment, on the other hand, positively *depends upon* undecidability, which gives us something to decide. Like everything else in deconstruction—here comes a nutshell—deciding is a possibility sustained by its impossibility. (137, emphasis in orig.)

In effect, the logic Derrida incorporates in his discussion of decision takes the form of a contradiction or a double imperative; we must decide something which we cannot decide. On the one hand, we have the logic of *realpolitik* and legal action. On the other hand, we also have infinite responsibility to the other, which resists and cannot be included in the pragmatic logic. Thus, the truly responsible political action and decision making consists in the negotiation between the two irreconcilable yet indissociable demands. From Derrida’s perspective, we cannot be righteous, but we can progress towards justice as we make this type of negotiation. In other words, we cannot claim that this is a true decision of justice, but we can continue to work towards a just decision.

Žižek makes a similar argument about the impossibility of decision. From his perspective, the true decision is always beyond existing coordinates. Only when the decision maker breaks the coordinates in which the decision process would reside, can he or she make a true decision. In *On Belief*, Žižek writes, “I do not merely choose between two or more options WITHIN a pre-given set of coordinates, but I choose to change this set of coordinates itself” (121, emphasis in orig.). From Žižek’s position, liberals who suggest revisions of the current American Empire, rather than making a true free choice, follow a pre-given mechanism of decision or coordinates. A true decision cannot help failing within the given coordinates, so it becomes only possible when we break the coordinates.

However, there is also a difference between Derrida and Žižek. Though both stress the true decision, which is a decision beyond decidability and calculability, their idea of decision diverges with respect to whether or not we can identify our decision as a true decision. From Derrida’s perspective, although we make a seemingly impossible decision, our decision is always not enough to be a decision of justice; for him, the true or just decision always remains in the realm of “to come.” However, to Žižek, we can, or rather should, identify a true decision, as he would argue that we need to find and believe in the truly radical ethico-political act of revolution.

The specter of the true decision haunts many important moments in *The West Wing*. In a way, the show approves President Bartlet’s politically expected decisions, as if to claim that, in the age of terrorism, our choices are not between good and bad but between greater and lesser evils. However, it also reveals how

Bartlet tries to overcome the insurmountable condition of justice in a world of violence and terror. To understand Bartlet's political decisions, we first need to see how political decisions get made in contemporary politics. Contemporary politics is dominated by political engineering, though this term is often used in pejorative ways alongside its variations, such as political technology and political manipulation. While dubbing it "divine science," former President of the American Political Science Association Austin Ranney defines political engineering as follows: "And by 'political engineering' I mean the application of empirically derived general principles of individual and institutional behavior to fashion institutions intended to solve practical political problems" (141). Because of its overtly empirical character, statistics is one of the principal tools for political engineering from its very beginning. Here, as Ranney points out, it is noteworthy to remark that "in its original seventeenth-century usage, [statistics] meant simply 'an empirical, comparative approach to the study of politics without any necessary or exclusive numerical emphasis'" (144). Statistics is originally the state's science that processes data about the state for the purpose of government.

The technological development of statistics makes it more than a tool that politicians might incorporate for their political decisions. In an interview with Russian Philosopher Mikhail Ryklin, Paul Virilio insists that statistics has become the foundation of modern decision-making:

If governmental officials in the past had been drawn into intuition and insight, which may equal to the inspiration of philosophers and musicians, [in order to make decisions], we find statistics machines

in the base of cotemporary decision-making.... A massive statistical phenomenon dominates. André Malraux excellently described it: ‘we have a philosophy more powerful than Marxism. It is statistics.’ (216, My translation)

Government officials are obsessed with statistical data to support particular policies or political decisions made by their government. However, it is the political culture corrupted by constant polling that makes the modern political atmosphere dominated by statistics really dismal. In *Rouge Economics*, Loreatta Napoleoni writes that “Opinion polls have become *vox populi* and politics no longer represents a battleground of ideas, but is a confrontation of marketing strategies between successful pollsters” (189). And, in this political culture, “Stripped of their own intellectual and ideological attributes, politicians are nothing more than political ‘performers.’ Their act plays out in a series of great illusions through which they make the masses believe that these policies reflect what the nation needs” (Napoleoni, *RE* 190). Indeed, we live in an age in which politics is transformed into statistics.

At a glance, *The West Wing*’s representation of American politics affirms Napoleoni’s claims, especially when the show portrays presidential campaigns. However, this show also advances a critique of political engineering. President Bartlet is infuriated when he finds out that his staff contracts a poll about where the First Family should spend Thanksgiving Day (“The Indians in the Lobby”). On the same episode, Deputy Communication Director Sam Seaborn is also frustrated by his job; though the new formula for poverty will help many

Americans in need, it will also increase the number of destitute people, and thus, adopting the new formula conflicts with the president's reelection campaign, so he cannot endorse it. However, the show often juxtaposes the sincere initiatives of President Bartlet and his senior staff members to the manipulative politics of professional campaign managers and pollsters. More importantly, after September 11, *The West Wing* shows some episodes that advocate a Schmittian claim "that a constitutional regime characterized by institutional diversity that does not have recourse to a constitutionally unimpeded executive agent is an overly technified complex that, as such, cannot withstand the challenge of a political exception" (McCormick 19). As depicting a state that cannot exist without a sovereign authority, the show underscores the linkage between the state, politics and sovereignty. In this sense, while showing that contemporary American politics is compromised by political engineering, *The West Wing* also represents a certain restoration of the political as a realm of decision-making while devaluing the statistical aspect of modern politics.

What then is the political? One answer originates in Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*. Simply put, for Schmitt, the political is the arena of authority rather than general law and requires decisions which are singular, absolute and final. To understand this somewhat obscure concept, we need to follow Schmitt's idea of war, which has rather existential implications and values in his political theory. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt writes:

War is neither the aim nor the purpose nor even the very content of politics. But as an ever present possibility it is the leading

presupposition which determines in a characteristic way human action and thinking and thereby creates a specifically political behavior. (34)

As an ever present possibility, war is a human condition that makes us draw the line of friend and enemy: “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy” (Schmitt, *CP* 26). War is the most drastic emergency among any social entities. In this state of emergency, the social structure that constructed the entities is reduced to the antagonistic relation of friend and enemy. From Schmitt’s perspective, this distinction of friend and enemy is the essence of politics: “A world in which the possibility of war is utterly eliminated, a completely pacified globe, would be a world without the distinction of friend and enemy and hence a world without politics” (Schmitt, *CP* 35). Schmitt thus identifies the key political distinction as equivalent to the distinction of good and evil in the ethical, and of beauty and ugliness in the aesthetic. And as he privileges this distinction, for Schmitt, fighting and the possibility of death are necessary for politics.

The West Wing restores this version of the political to a liberal democracy paralyzed by political engineering by introducing the potential threats of a terrorist organization. And President Bartlet resides at the center of this restoration. In the show, the president is portrayed as the most righteous and sincere person in his job, in the face of various crises such as the threat of terrorism and conflicts in the Middle East and Asia. Many on the Left might find Bartlet righteous in his progressive, liberal agenda, which is drastically different

from the agenda of the Bush administration. However, advocating progressive liberal values does not simply make President Bartlet righteous. In addition, the show's portrayal of President Bartlet puts the righteousness of the president to the test as it elaborates a moral dilemma.

In Season 3, the Golden Gate Bridge has been the target of a terrorist plot. What is more surprising is that the mastermind of the threat is Qumari Minister Abdul Shareef, who is supposed to visit the White House as a diplomatic representative of Qumar. After being briefed in the White House Situation Room, President Bartlet clarifies that he wants to bring Abdul Shareef to a US court for justice. He wants to respond to the leader of a terrorist organization, legally and righteously. However, the situation does not favor Bartlet's position against the threat of terrorism: "The judge would throw out the case. The entire chain of evidence leading us to Shareef originates with the testimony of the Chechnyan prisoner [who was tortured by Russian soldiers]" ("We Killed Yamamoto"). In face of this situation, President Bartlet refuses to take an immediate action: "Well, I'm no lawyer, but I'm pretty sure that's inadmissible. We'll come up with a less aggressive way. We'll cancel his trip here, obviously, but we'll come up with something. That's the ball game" ("We Killed Yamamoto").

After the president leaves the Situation Room, the White House Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry, and Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs, Admiral Fitzwallace, reflect on the War on Terror. In this conversation, Fitzwallace rants about the limit of law:

We measure the success of a mission by two things. Was it successful,

and how few civilians did we hurt? They measure success by how many. Pregnant women are delivering bombs. You're talking to me about international laws? The laws of nature don't even apply here. I've been a soldier for 38 years, and I found an enemy I can kill. He can't cancel Shareef's trip, Leo. You've got to tell him he can't cancel it. ("We Killed Yamamoto")

Fitzwallace's arguments echo the Bush Doctrine, which proclaims the necessity of preemptive strikes:

"If we wait for threats to materialize," Bush declared in a June 1, 2002, graduation address at the United States Military Academy at West Point, "we will have waited too long." Because "the war on terrorism will not be won on the defensive," he added, "we must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge." (Milkis and Nelson 437-38)

Representing the Bush administration's understanding of the world after September 11, Fitzwallace's arguments sound compelling and in a way reasonable when we consider the exigency of America's national security concerns. In a world where even the laws of nature do not apply, President Bartlet's insistence on legitimacy and justice based on the law, regardless of its appeal for a higher form of justice, would have appeared unrealistic to many.

In the last episode of Season 3, Bartlet finally orders the assassination of Shareef. Though Bartlet is deeply aware of the illegality and unrighteousness of his action, he needs to say "Take him," because, as Leo points out, Bartlet is the

president of the United States; he has the privilege and the duty to protect the country from the threats of terrorism, to protect America and Americans from the enemy. How should we evaluate Bartlet's decision? Can we say that he makes a righteous decision? What can President Bartlet do when confronted with innumerable warnings of terroristic attacks from all over world? Leo and Bartlet's conversation shows an understanding of the reality America faces after September 11.

BARTLET. There are moral absolutes.

LEO. Apparently not. He's killed innocent people. He'll kill more, so we have to end him. The village idiot comes to that conclusion before the Nobel Laureate.

BARTLET. *El Principe* has justified every act of oppression.

LEO. This is justified. This is required.

BARTLET. Says who?

LEO. Says me, Mr. President. You wanna ask more people, they'll say so too.

BARTLET. Well, a mob mentality is just...

LEO. Not a mob. Just you. Right now. This decision. Which, by the way, is one of self-defense. Let Shareef come here and we have options. Cancel the trip and we have none. That's all we're talking about right now. ("We killed Yamamoto")

In the modern state system, the concept of justice is historically tied to the idea of law, though it is to some extent rhetorically (or more than rhetorically) associated

with the idea of God or the law of nature. However, this kind of justice can be very unstable and even controversial in that the executive power compromises and even purposely transgresses law for the sake of realistic and vital interests in the state of emergency.

From Schmitt's perspective, claiming righteousness in the state of emergency totally disregards the political reality of war:

War, the readiness of combatants to die, the physical killing of human beings who belong on the side of the enemy—all this has no normative meaning but an existential meaning only, particularly in a real combat situation with a real enemy. There exists no rational purpose, no norm no matter how true, no program no matter how exemplary, no social idea no matter how beautiful, no legitimacy nor legality which could justify men in killing each other for this reason. If such physical destruction of human life is not motivated by an existential threat to one's own way of life, then it cannot be justified. Just as little can war be justified by ethical and juristic norms. (*CP* 49)

Schmitt's theory of the political can justify President Bartlet's transgression of law. In the Shareef case, there is no vision of justice that Bartlet could use and understand to decide upon violence as a course of action. Violating international law and assassinating a defense minister of an ally might be the only reasonable choice an American president can make. As President Bartlet claims, it is an absolutely wrong decision, but *The West Wing's* rendering of this decision-making

process makes it look like the only possible and right decision because America is exposed to numerous existential threats: “Anyway, 20,000 specific threats are made against U.S. targets every year, and with all that, it’s still the ones who don’t give you advance notice that you’re worried about” (“Evidence of Things Not Seen”). President Bartlet commits a lesser evil in light of the belief that America faces the greater evil of its own destruction. After September 11, America needs to protect its homeland from unanticipated, unimaginable future harms. The machinery of legislative deliberation and judicial review moves slowly, but national emergencies like the attacks of terrorists require rapid action.

In light of *The West Wing*’s portrayal of the Shareef plot, it is insightful to compare two Presidents’ different reactions to the Shareef assassination. After assassinating Shareef, a US Special Forces team manipulates all the evidence to disguise it as an accident. However, the Qumar government re-opens the Shareef case and claims Israel enabled the assassination behind the scenes. In addition, Danny Concannon, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post* journalist, encounters and eventually divulges the Shareef story when President Bartlet’s youngest daughter, Zoey, is kidnapped by the members of the Bahji terrorist organization in retaliation for Shareef’s death. President Bartlet then signs the document to resign his duty temporarily, because he feels his ability to lead the country conflicts with his personal interests as a father.

After the *Post* publishes Cocannon’s story, the US government responds to the public about the Shareef assassination. House Speaker Glen Allen Walken,

who temporarily takes the Presidency¹, answers White House reporters as follows:

REPORTER 1. Doesn't this murder undercut our moral authority to condemn human rights violations in China?

WALKEN. We live in the real world. Our value systems only work if everybody plays by the same rules.

REPORTER 2. Mr. Speaker?

REPORTER 3. President Walken? But didn't it violate the Neutrality Act protecting citizens of friendly nations?

WALKEN. Terrorists aren't nations. The Neutrality Act doesn't give a free pass to people who support murder.

REPORTER 3. Is there concern about the appearance of a superpower flouting international law?

WALKEN. International law has no prohibition against any country, superpower or otherwise, targeting terrorist command and control centers. Abdul Shareef was a walking command and control center.
("No Exit")

If President Walken's press conference reflects the official voice of the Bush administration's policy against terrorism, the following conversation between President Bartlet and Leo represents a kind of internal voice of the nation:

LEO. Shareef ordered the slaughter of innocent women and children. He wasn't a nationalist or a fledgling democrat, he was a

¹ The ordinary successor should be the Vice President, but Vice President Hoynes resigned his executive office due to a sex scandal, which indirectly reflects President Clinton's impeachment.

cold blooded murderer.

BARTLET. Six more American boys are dead.

LEO. And that doesn't make you angry?

BARTLET. Of course that makes me angry! The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral. Returning violence with violence only multiplies violence adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.

LEO. Dr. King.

BARTLET. I'm part of that darkness now, Leo. When did that happen?

LEO. Dr. King wasn't wrong. He just didn't have your job. ("No Exit")

In a way, this juxtaposition of two drastically different responses to the Shareef assassination in a single episode reflects two sides of a coin. On the one side, President Walken rationalizes the state's illegitimate power. On the other side, President Bartlet refuses this illegitimate power, the original violence of the state, showing his human regrets about the past decision while making amends for his crime because of his daughter's kidnapping. The show's rendering of these responses suggests that a strong President, the leader of the nation, would do whatever it takes for the security of America though he might greatly suffer as a person for his decision. And the representation of a tormented Bartlet supplements Walken's image of the able-to-be-brutal leader so as to provide the president with a great sense of moral authority.

The two opposing positions are resolved into a single idea of presidentialism that offers viewers an affective reconciliation of intellectually incompatible alternatives. And this kind of presidentialism, at least as *The West Wing* represents it, seems broadly accepted in America during the Bush administration. In an interview with the British journal *Imprints*, Michael Walzer, a prominent American public intellectual, declares: “Rules are rules, and exceptions are exceptions. I want political leaders to accept the rule, to understand its reasons, even to internalize it. I also want them to be smart enough to know when to break it” (“The United States”). According to Walzer, in extreme situations, political leaders might find themselves having to break the law; they can approve torture as a last resort. However, the leaders also should “have to bear the guilt and opprobrium of the wrongful act [they] ordered” because this is “the only guarantee they can offer us that they won't break it too often” (“The United States”).

In *American Vertigo*, French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy criticizes Walzer's position as casuistry. From Lévy's perspective, many intellectuals in America “may remain trapped in this blindness, sunk in the black hole of this casuistry and in another culture of excuse ... while in fact condoning, those exceptional zones and procedures to which a democracy at war is always wrong to consent” (274-75). However, this famous anti-anti-American does not forget to announce his expectation of America: “they [American intellectuals] will both wage implacable war against terrorism and also indefatigably defend the rule of law—then, yes, America would once again show the way by providing us,

through its intellectuals, with a lesson in democratic daring and lucidity” (275). One of the questions indissociable from Lévy’s exhortation, and which interests us no less, concerns the essential contradiction inherent in the relation of the law and violence. Simply put, we cannot but ask, is it really possible to fight against terrorists while not transgressing the law? Lévy, probably the most celebrated defender of the US from America-bashers in European intellectual circles, might expect something supremely ideal from the US due to his proclivity, but isn’t he too naïve about the complicated relation of the law and violence, unveiled by Benjamin in his “Critique of Violence,” about what Schmitt would call the exceptional status of the sovereign in relation to the law? In other words, shouldn’t we consider President Bartlet’s transgression of law as a part of his job as an enforcer of the law? Isn’t this the true reason why the show portrays an unlikely reconciliation of President Bartlet and President Walken?

Lacanian psychoanalysis’s understanding of two father figures can shed light on this improbable reconciliation of two opposing images of president. First, we have the father who symbolizes law, who introduces us to the symbolic world of law. What seems contradictory here is that, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, we have another father who actually resides outside law, is never subject to law, the very primordial father Freud discusses in *Totem and Taboo*. These two father figures represent the contradictory double side of superego:

He [the father] is simultaneously the agency of authority and a figure outside the law who actively transgresses the law that he imposes upon others. The subject, therefore, is faced with its

subordination to authority and the regulation of its desires through the internalization of a signifier that is itself beyond the law.

(Homer 59-60)

To punish entails the desire to transgress. In other words, Lacan's superego needs the desire of transgression to be the superego symbolizing the law. Here what is remarkable is that the very desire to transgress is also a part of the superego. Thus, for Lacan, the superego is located in the symbolic order and retains a close but paradoxical relationship to the law. Isn't this the very relationship that Bartlet as a sovereign, or any president has with the law? President Bartlet is eager to follow the law and wants to punish people who transgress the law. President Walken is a president who is willing to transgress the law for the sake of the law. These two representations of president constitute the sovereign and its paradoxical relationship with the law, which is also epitomized in Schmitt's famous thesis: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (PT 5). Why does then *The West Wing* unravel this paradoxical relationship?

In *The Metastases of Enjoyment* Žižek argues that "What 'holds together' a given community most deeply is not so much identification with the Law that regulates the community's 'normal' everyday circuit, but rather *identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, the Law's suspension* (in psychoanalytic terms, with a specific form of *enjoyment*)" (55, italics in orig.). In transgressing the law, there is jouissance. We really become a member of a certain community, or a certain nation, when we transgress the law and share jouissance. When President Bartlet transgresses the law, when he endorses the Russians'

torture, when he orders the assassination of Shareef, we share his transgression of the law and the jouissance that results from such transgression. Americans become true, real Americans when they endorse President Bartlet who approves torture and the assassination of a foreign political leader.

The obscene law of the superego emerges at the point where the law fails. When the law fails, the dark underside that always necessarily accompanies the law finally emerges. Sharing this obscene law of the superego is an act of confirming one's position in the community. From this perspective, the true reasons or real motivations behind the establishment of the Guantánamo Bay detention camp are not that the Bush administration really wants to justify its special treatment of enemy combatants through the creation of a detainment facility outside U.S. legal jurisdiction; when the CIA began operating secret prisons at a Soviet-era compound in Eastern Europe, did it seek any public or official endorsement? Simply put, if the Bush administration wanted to incorporate extreme measures in its War on Terror, it could have done so without the notorious Torture Memos and Military Commissions Act of 2006. Even without the Patriot Act, the US could have extended surveillance mechanisms and suspended civil liberties. Before the Bush doctrine, the US had preemptively waged war against many countries. In a way, nothing was changed with these drastic measures. Their real purpose, rather, is to make us part of illegal actions in the War on Terror through the official sanction of transgressions. Thus, much as such formal doctrines legitimize the Bush administration's transgression of laws, doesn't *The West Wing* also justify the Bush administration through the show's

emotional rendering of President Bartlet's decision-making process or transgression of laws?

In the 20th episode of Season 5, President Bartlet's daughter, Zoey Bartlet, is miraculously rescued. Bartlet resumes his presidency with the following speech:

I wish that I could tell you that there's some new policy, some new weapons system, a silver bullet, perhaps, that could meet this moment that could keep us safe from the terror that's now among us. But if I were to say that, I'd be lying. All I can promise you is that I will fight with every fiber of my being with every weapon in our arsenal and with every ounce of God's grace to keep us strong and free and safe.

("No Exit")

In this emotional speech, President Bartlet seems more righteous than ever, not because his decision and action in regard to Shareef were really righteous in terms of morality or religion, but because he always tries to do his best, although, on many occasions, he fails to do what he believes due to the constraints of reality.

Watching a man of such great achievements and qualifications in agony over his powerlessness in politics, but still spoiling for a fight for justice, would make many wonder who would dare criticize Bartlet's sincerity in undertaking his duty. And this emotional persuasiveness aroused by Bartlet's struggles seems to account for the show's ability to make its audience assent to Bartlet's righteousness, while simultaneously avoiding any complicated discussion of justice beyond argument. In other words, instead of delving into the underlying

reasons for the attacks of September 11 and the broader terrorist threat, the show creates a terror mastermind modeled on bin Laden and executes him. It is not surprising that a national TV drama as popular as *The West Wing* reflects conservative values in a way that can provide its viewers with the common sense required to be members of the nation's community. In addition, it should be noted that NBC was one of the most inflammatory networks in terms of framing September 11 for the Right Wing's positions, while greatly simplifying the US's complicated history within the Middle East.

As we have seen, *The West Wing*'s timely reflection of the War on Terror echoes and further endorses the Bush administration's policies. However, two years later, this show advances a constructive criticism of the Bush administration through its Israeli and Palestinian story arc. President Bartlet's bold decision to bring "a just end to this senseless cycle of violence" in the Middle East represents an example of Derridian decision ("Gaza"). At the end of the fifth season, a deadly bomb blast shatters the congressional delegates' car in Gaza, and two American congressmen and retired Admiral Fitzwallace are killed. This story arc continues at the beginning of Season 6, while showing President Bartlet's effort to bring the Israeli and Palestinian leadership together for a peace summit at Camp David, which recalls President Carter's 1978 Camp David Accords and Clinton's 2000 Camp David Summit. Although Bartlet has unilateral, bi-partisan support from Congress and the majority of American citizens on executing military retaliations for the deaths of American delegates, he chooses forgiveness over retaliation.

Consider America's reactions after September 11. When America sees itself as a victim, its expansionist politics explode, because it can easily legitimize its violence through its victimhood. However, unlike President Bush, President Bartlet decides to embrace forgiveness in service of permanent peace in the Middle East. Many wonder what the President has in his mind:

LEO. Mr. President, please, Congress, the Joint Chiefs, the American public, your own staff, everyone disagrees with your assessment of this situation.

BARTLET. Killing Palestinians isn't going to make us feel safer. They'll kill more of us, then we'll have to kill more of them. It's Russian roulette with a fully loaded gun.

LEO. We can't allow terrorists to murder our citizens.

BARTLET. Why would they do it? Why would Palestinians murder American government officials? They never have before? They're deliberately provoking us.

LEO. They know we have to retaliate. They've studied us. They want us to overreact. This isn't over-reacting. It's the appropriate, balanced...

BARTLET. Tell me how this ends, Leo. You want me to start something that will have serious repercussions on American foreign policy for decades, but you don't know how it ends.

LEO. We don't always know how it ends. The Lincoln will be in position in a few hours and then you are going to give the go-

ahead for the bombings.

BARTLET. Or what? (“NSF Thurmont”)

His senior staff proposes a regime change in the Palestinian territories, taking out Farad, Chairman of the PLO, as America’s response to “an act of war.” The Deputy National Security Advisor, Kate Harper, is the only dissenting voice; she is the only figure among the staff members who wonders about the future ramifications of America’s immediate military response to the deaths of delegates in the Middle East. Somehow, Bartlett turns down his staff’s relentless proposal and firmly decides to bring about the peace summit at Camp David. Why does he decide to bring peace into the Middle East, especially after American officials are killed in Gaza? How should we understand his gesture of reconciliation and forgiveness? Is it a true decision or a mere example of political calculation? In “On Forgiveness,” Derrida claims that “There is always a strategical or political calculation in the generous gesture of one who offers reconciliation or amnesty, and it is necessary always to integrate this calculation in our analyses” (40). Can we identify Bartlett’s decision to bring about peace in the Middle East as an example of a true decision? Should we consider Bartlett’s decision as an example of what Derrida calls negotiation, the negotiation of the conditional and the unconditional?

To Derrida, responsible political action and decision making consists in the negotiation between the two irreconcilable yet indissociable demands of the conditional and the unconditional. Pragmatic political or legal actions are always conditional in that they can be made only within the realm of politics and the law.

However, these actions have to be related to the unconditional, which is the infinite responsibility to the other. Otherwise, the political or legal decision would be nothing but a cog in a machine. This is also why we need to forgive something we cannot forgive:

If there is something to forgive, it would be what in religious language is called mortal sin, the worst, the unforgivable crime or harm. From which comes the aporia, which can be described in its dry and implacable formality, without mercy: forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. (Derrida, "Forgiveness" 32)

The Bush administration or America could not forgive those responsible for the attacks of September 11. Such reaction was realistic, and the world sympathized and endorsed US retaliation. In contrast to the Bush administration, President Bartlet envisions a different political decision that is based on a moment of universality that exceeds the pragmatic demands of the specific context. And this can be understood as *The West Wing's* critique of the Bush administration.

At this Camp David summit, the future of Jerusalem is the most important topic. Both parties' agreement on Jerusalem is the essential precondition to reaching a peaceful resolution between the Israelis and the Palestinians. As with the real Camp David Summit in 2000, the summit meetings face deadlocks, and Bartlet's effort to bring peace in that region seems to have failed. On the last night of the peace summit, however, Kate Harper provides an idea that might make both parties agree to share Jerusalem:

HARPER. After the Six-day War, the Israelis offered to give the

U.N. diplomatic status and immunities in the holy sites in Jerusalem.

BAILEY. So?

HARPER. So if they were willing to do it in '67, why not now?

They give the Muslim holy sites the status of diplomatic missions. The Israelis can keep all the sovereignty they want, they still can't enter without permission from the Palestinians.

BARTLET. So the Palestinians would have a sovereign-like state that was inviolable like a foreign embassy. ("The Birnam Wood")

Though radical conservatives from each party might disapprove, Harper's proposition is a realistic compromise between the two hostile parties. President Clinton actually provided a similar proposition to Chairman Arafat in 2000 Camp David Summit. In *The Missing Peace*, Dennis Ross writes:

As usual, Chairman Arafat had equivocated.... All this in response to an unprecedented set of ideas that would have produced a Palestinian state in all of Gaza and nearly all of the West Bank; a capital for that state in Arab East Jerusalem; security arrangements that would be built around an international presence; and an unlimited right of return for Palestinian refugees to their own state, but not to Israel. (3)

In a 2008 interview with *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Ehud Olmert, who was then the outgoing, lame duck Prime Minister of Israel, also proposed sharing Jerusalem as a solution:

We must reach an agreement with the Palestinians, meaning a withdrawal from nearly all, if not all, of the [occupied] territories. ... including Jerusalem – with, I'd imagine, special arrangements made for the Temple Mount and the holy/historical sites. ... This decision is difficult, awful, a decision that contradicts our natural instincts, our deepest yearnings, our collective memories, and the prayers of the nation of the Israel for the past two thousand years. (“Time”)

As we see, it is not impossible to imagine Harper's idea even in the real world, though for some people, it might be very controversial to advocate it in public. The real course of political action in regard to Jerusalem is certainly more complicated than *The West Wing* suggests. And, even with the probable solution, still, it seems next to impossible to persuade both parties. In his “The Never-Ending Story: Palestine, Israel and *The West Wing*,” Philip Cass introduces a Palestinian viewer's response to this fictional summit meeting: “I think that the producers/writers made a great effort for these episodes to be balanced ... too balanced actually. I don't think that the Palestinian and the Israeli parties would have been too easily fooled with ‘promises’ and ‘deals’ made with the American government” (43). This viewer's response reveals that something more than the viable solutions might be needed to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Here, Žižek's insights on the conflict can shed light on this somewhat incomprehensible deadlock.

In *Violence*, Žižek observes that “The big mystery of the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict is why it has persisted for so long when everybody knows the only viable solution: the withdrawal of the Israelis from the West Bank and Gaza, the establishment of a Palestinian state, as well as some kind of a compromise concerning Jerusalem” (122). And he speculates that “The Middle East conflict has taken on the cast of a neurotic symptom—everyone sees the way to get rid of the obstacle, and yet no one wants to remove it, as if there is some kind of pathological libidinal profit gained by persisting in the deadlock” (123). Žižek further argues that “Perhaps the solution everybody knows ... will not do, and one has to change the entire frame, shift the picture with the one-state solution at the horizon” (123). From Žižek’s perspective, “the one-state solution” is a true political act because it “renders the unthinkable thinkable” (126). However, isn’t his stance on the true political act paradoxical? Doesn’t his true political act actually reduce the radicality of the true political act? In other words, as Žižek’s political action makes the unthinkable thinkable, doesn’t it make the unthinkable of a true political action, just one more mere political suggestion in the realm of realpolitik? In this sense, shouldn’t he rather argue that a true political act remains in the realm of the real?

We cannot understand how Bartlet succeeds in persuading Israelis and Palestinians to agree on a tentative peace accord. The show never portrays how Bartlet achieves this seemingly impossible agreement. What are the implications of this political gesture? This unthinkable achievement of President Bartlet for the peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis can be more elucidated if we juxtapose it with Bartlet’s decision on the Shareef assassination. In the

uncomfortable, even hateful decision on Shareef, what Bartlet embodies is a kind of original violence constitutive of every state and its sovereign. The Shareef case is an example of the state of emergency in which the sovereign of the state would perform and justify exceptional powers for the protection and safety of the state. One problem in this type of execution of power is, as we see through Bartlet's agony over the Shareef case, that the claim of legal authority becomes murky at best. Such situations expose the speciousness of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence.

Žižek's reflection on Israel is of special interest to us insofar as it provides a clue to understand the relation of Bartlet's agony over legal authority to his effort for the peace agreement. In *Violence*, Žižek reflects:

In all honesty I have to admit that every time I travel to Israel, I experience that strange thrill of entering a forbidden territory of illegitimate violence.... But what if what disturbs me is precisely that I find myself in a state which hasn't yet obliterated the "founding violence" of its "illegitimate" origins, repressed them into a timeless past. In this sense, what the state of Israel confronts us with is merely the obliterated past of *every* state power. (117, italics in orig.)

The show's rendering, Bartlet's effort to establish peace in the Middle East entails a symbolic gesture to overcome the state's obscured legal authority over violence in that the conflicts between the Israelis and the Palestinians reflect the remains of the original, unjustified violence of the state. In other words, President Bartlet exonerates his deeds of illegitimate violence through an overarching gesture of

forgiveness that tries to overcome the paradoxical relation of law and violence and the illegitimate origins of the state. The state of exception is decided by the sovereign. It is the very repetition of the illegitimate origin of the state in that it exposes the speciousness of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence. The Bush era after September 11 is haunted by the specter of this illegitimate origin of the state. And President Bartlet in *The West Wing* tries to expiate this illegitimate origin through his decision of forgiveness.

Bartlet succeeds in bringing the two opposing sides together. However, we do not know how he achieves what President Clinton failed in his own Camp David Summit. *The West Wing* only shows Bartlet having two separate meetings with Chairman Farad and Prime Minister Eli Zahavy on the day of their departure (“The Birnam Wood”). Bartlet’s art of conciliation or threat is never fully explored in the show. In a certain sense, the implausibility of Bartlet’s persuasion does not seem to matter at all, if we consider how the show usually idealizes the American presidency. *The West Wing*’s depiction of President Bartlet’s hard decisions often has some grave flaws. And there is always strong sentimentality covering an odd failure in basic literary technique. For example, the way in which Bartlet successfully finishes his MS (multiple sclerosis) press conference at the end of Season 2 is never explained. Somehow, Bartlet manages his MS scandal and wins the Presidential election again. Somehow his kidnapped daughter safely returns to her parents. Somehow, Bartlet manages to persuade two opposing parties, Israel and Palestine, to reconcile, even after he made a potentially politically suicidal decision.

This implausibility of the plot, largely caused by the idealized presidency, is often a target of criticism. Though *The West Wing*'s portrayal of American presidency is, in general, highly acclaimed due to its realistic rendering of the political reality in America, the show is very melodramatic in that it often makes the president an object of pathos because he is constructed as a victim of a force beyond his control and understanding. Melodrama is a mode of expression that originated in the early 19th century. In *Melodrama and Modernity*, Ben Singer argues that melodrama is a socio-cultural response to the chaos of modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "With its exaltation of virtue and ultimate poetic justice, melodrama offered a kind of compensatory faith that helped people cope with the vicissitudes of modern life" (135). As a coping strategy, "Melodrama thus affirmed the certainty of a kind of cosmic moral adjudication. Justice was meted out by a higher power that never failed to reward the humble and good and eradicate or reform the greedy, lustful, and corrupt" (B. Singer 137). By providing a clear-cut narrative of victimization and retribution, *The West Wing* entails such melodramas, exaggerating sentimentality to idealize the American presidency. And through this melodramatic narrative of an idealized president, *The West Wing* attempts to provide the audience with a coping strategy to live in a world of moral chaos and violence after September 11. In doing so, this show diminishes the possibility for realistic interventions in politics, while negating any constructive critique of politics. Seen from this perspective, *The West Wing* might be nothing but a manifestation of the Bush administration's ideological state apparatus, serving to provide the nation with a sense of security

after September 11 (Finn 114).

However, isn't the implausibility of this show its most political aspect? As David Thorburn argues, "television melodrama often becomes more truthful as it becomes more implausible" (83). When it is most melodramatic, when it appears furthest from reality, *The West Wing* could be most political in that the irrationality or implausibility of the show's plot also represents the impossible challenges of politics. President Bartlet makes it public that he has not revealed his MS during his first Presidential campaign ("Two Cathedrals"), shuts down the Federal Government after failing to come to an agreement on the annual budget negotiation with the Republican Majority Leader ("Shutdown"), and also decides to devote seemingly senseless effort to the peace summit ("NSF Thurmont"). All these actions are seemingly impossible decisions in the given circumstances—yet, as such, don't they reflect Derrida's idea of justice?

In "Force of Law," Derrida claims that only God's justice or the other's justice can really justify violence: "*But who signs violence [qui signe la violence]- will one ever know it? Is it not God, the wholly other? As always, is it not the other who signs?*" (262, italics in orig.). Taking his cue from Walter Benjamin's and Emmanuel Lévinas' ideas of justice, Derrida often writes of the messianic justice or the other's justice, which he contrasts with the justice of law. Derrida associates true justice with that which is infinite, incalculable and unknown to us. Unlike the justice of law, the other's justice is not something we can claim or define, for God's justice exceeds our reason and control. And so, Derrida proposes that justice is an experience of the impossible.

For Derrida, the true decision has to be responsible to the other, but it is always impossible for humans to be responsible to the other, and thus, the true decision always remains impossible. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida writes:

I can respond only to the one (or to the One), that is, to the other, by sacrificing the other to that one. I am responsible to any one (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice, I must always hold my peace about it. (70)

However, what Derrida emphasizes through this kind of impossibility is not a pessimistic situation that a subject cannot but face in regarding the other, but a kind of a priori condition for a true decision: “a certain undecidability ... is the condition or the opening of a space for an ethical or political decision” (“Ethics” 298). And due to the undecidability of decision, the instant of true decision is also madness, beyond rationality and calculability. Taking a cue from Kierkegaard, Derrida writes: “It is a madness; a madness because such decision is both hyper-active and suffered, it preserves something, passive, even unconscious, as if the deciding one was free only by letting himself be affected by his own decision and as if it came to him from the other (“Force” 255).

In case of the Shareef assassination, Bartlet makes a reasonable decision within the present coordinates, as President Bush did in reality. However, his decision to bring a peaceful settlement in the Middle East is an impossible decision or a decision of madness. This decision is as impossible as it would have been for President Bush to lead a peace summit after September 11. President

Bush reacted to the attacks of September 11 as he was supposed to, deploying military actions against terrorism. In contrast, President Bartlet searches for a decision nobody expects from him. Through his gesture of forgiveness, Bartlet tries to be righteous in a Derridian sense. In this sense, *The West Wing* provides a political imagination of decision that is radically different from that of the Bush administration.

The West Wing represents the possible but also impossible of politics in the US, of the reality Americans encounter after September 11. When the show reflects realistic aspects of America's politics, as Patrick Finn claims, it might be just "an extremely efficient way to market the United State's number one global export: a normative form of democratic rule based on individual property rights" (124). From this perspective, *The West Wing* is an example of political illusions Napoleoni harshly criticizes:

Political illusions complement the market matrix because they contribute to blurring the divide between reality and fantasy.

Political illusions lie at the core of the market-state's propaganda engine; politicians manufacture and the media endorse them. The most powerful illusion to date is the fear of terrorism, carefully constructed to fill the ideological vacuum created by the disintegration of Communism. (RE 198)

However, the show's political imagination also reflects the impossible realm of the political through Bartlet's decision of forgiveness. It does not really matter whether Bartlet's contribution to the permanent peace in the Middle East is

jeopardized in following episodes and eventually disappears from the narrative arc of the show. As Derrida points out, the true moment of decision “demands a temporality of the instant without ever constituting a present” (*GD* 65). Though it might sound paradoxical, the true decision cannot but fail because justice always remains in the realm of the “to come,” and because justice is in the never-ending process of negotiations. Thus, we cannot yet claim that this exemplary sovereign embodies the truly radical ethico-political decision, which would end the state of exception. This is where *The West Wing* fails to penetrate the state of exception, and, according to the show’s rendering of Bartlet’s decisions, this is also where we fail.

Chapter II:

A Capitalist State of Exception in *Deadwood*²

President Bush's overt use of Western metaphors in the public realm after September 11, 2001 reaffirms the ongoing and central importance of Western mythology in American culture. Few might have imagined that "Wanted: Dead or Alive" would be revived by an American president: "I want justice. There's an old poster out West as I recall that said, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive.'" In regard to President Bush's usage of Western metaphors, Stephen McVeigh claims:

Bush's metaphorical use of the Western meta-narrative proved to be a highly successful rhetorical strategy then during the initial months of the War against Terrorism. He successfully packaged the themes of the archetypal heroic cowboy, the ideals of the American nation, and the existence of a primitive enemy to unite the American people behind his post-9/11 leadership and security strategy. (218)

On the surface, the rhetoric's measure of success is the Bush administration's approval ratings, which reached over 90 percent in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11. Still more successful, however, is that President Bush's adoption of the Western metaphor and narrative provided many Americans with a binary ideological framework of good and evil so as to justify the US's political and military retaliation and their aftereffects.

In this circumstance, *Deadwood* can exemplify exactly the opposite of the Bush administration's ideological use of the Western, in that the show demystifies

² A version of this chapter has been published. Kim 2011. *Studies on English Language and Literature*. 53. 1: 105-36.

the Western in its attempt to make people confront the visceral, obscene controversies of the Bush administration that were often left behind in the administration's Western-influenced rhetorical justification of the War on Terror. In a 2006 interview with the *New York Daily News*, Ian McShane, who plays the leading character Al Swearengen in *Deadwood*, rather poignantly reveals the show's reflection on the Bush administration: "In 'Deadwood,' we dramatized the back room deals, the rigged elections, and the treachery that shows how American capitalism started. . . . It does smack of a certain similarity that has been occurring in certain quarters in the last few years." And more importantly, in his book *Deadwood*, the show's critically acclaimed creator, David Milch, notes "I wrote *Deadwood* to illuminate the present by setting it in the past, since the events of the present are too immediate and pressing in our minds right now to make for good drama" (53). In this chapter, while considering this TV show as a revisionist Western that reflects the Bush administration's official discourse of the War on Terror, I argue that *Deadwood's* representation of struggles over sovereignty, law and individual self-interests reveals to us an understanding of the state of exception. In doing so, the show not only offers a critique of the emptiness of the Bush administration's ideologies on the War on Terror, but also unveils the dominant paradigm of capitalistic exploitation in our present time. What I am proposing we see through this TV show, which recapitulates the real history of the Deadwood camp in South Dakota, is a reiteration of a certain past that persists in our present: the resurrection and repetition of Marx's primitive accumulation in our contemporary form of capitalism, whether dubbed neoliberalism, unfettered

capitalism, or disaster capitalism.

Thus, by examining the show's description of the Deadwood camp's growth and transformation, this chapter attempts to reveal how primitive accumulation, which is mainly embodied by the George Hearst figure in the show, constitutes the state of exception in the Deadwood camp. This state of exception is not created by a sovereign who decides on the exception, as Carl Schmitt argues (*PT 5*). Rather, it is driven by the logic of unfettered capitalism, which produces its own version of bare lives in the process of primitive accumulation. As Joshua Barkan claims, in our contemporary society, "life is [also] abandoned either in the name of the security of markets and private property or by the investment and distributions of corporations" (244). In this chapter, I name this type of capitalist abandonment of life the capitalist state of exception in which the capitalist, such as George Hearst, becomes a sovereign figure: "Gold confers power. Power comes to any man who has the color" ("Unauthorized Cinnamon").

The capitalist state of exception is a redirection of Agamben's critical engagement with the state of exception to the capitalist social relation. Agamben's state of exception is mainly related to controversial concerns about law and politics evident in the aftermath of September 11 and the War on Terror. And, as Barkan notes, "Agamben never directly explains the role of capitalist social relations in constituting the state of exception" (246). However, as Arne de Boever argues, "Reconsidered through the lens of Agamben's argument, Marx's account of prehistory of capital reveals that there is a sovereign logic of exception at work in the capitalist relation" (259). In Marx's account, "So-called primitive

accumulation ... is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (874-75). And this process involves nothing less than atrocities. In *Capital*, Marx writes (with more than a little irony):

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black-skins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. (915)

The process of primitive accumulation means that capital or the capitalist acquires wealth initially through violent and underhanded means, in which the state often takes the active role in constructing the conditions for primitive accumulation, rather than through thrift and personal virtue. We can witness it in the capitalistic ventures of many notables in David Milch's *Deadwood*, as the show represents one of the chief historical moments of primitive accumulation: the discovery of gold in the Indian Territory. The show's representation of the Deadwood camp from 1876 to 1877, however, is more than a historical reconstruction of an American atrocity based on the destruction of countless Native Americans, just as Marx's primitive accumulation is more than a historical process in the development of capital. Let us get at this in a roundabout way; we need to take a short detour to Peter Osborne's argument over the translations of Marx's primitive accumulation. Marx's "ursprüngliche akkumulation" has a couple of English

translations with different connotations: primitive, previous, or original accumulation. Ben Fowkes translates it “primitive accumulation” in his translation of Marx’s *Das Kapital*, probably the most widely-read English edition of Marx’s *Capital* (1976). In *How to Read Marx*, Peter Osborne argues that “primitive accumulation” is a problematic translation because it gives us so strong an impression that the accumulation only occurred in the pre-historic past (104-05). So, instead of primitive accumulation, Osborne proposes “original accumulation”:

I have translated the phrase more literally as ‘original accumulation’. The concept of origin *Ursprung*, has an important place in German philosophy, especially in the twentieth century.... Its literal meaning ‘source’ – etymologically, *Ur-Sprung*, first leap or jump – should be kept in mind, since it implies a constantly renewed production. Original accumulation is original in this precise sense: it lies at the basis of capital accumulation wherever and whenever such a process begins. (105, italics in orig.)

In this context, Osborne argues that the processes of original accumulation “are [also] at the forefront of current transformations in global capitalism” (105). What *Deadwood* allegorically portrays through its ingenious resurrection of the nineteenth-century Deadwood camp is how the process of original accumulation returns to our era in the form of current global capitalism, while constituting the capitalistic state of exception. As Michael Perelman rightly observes, “After a long period when expropriation in Western democratic nations seemed to be a

thing of the past, today it is on the rise” (51). In “Primitive Accumulation from Feudalism to Neoliberalism,” Perelman writes:

The forces behind the administration of George W. Bush are promoting something they call “the ownership society.” This benign-sounding expression is a cynical cover for a plan to demolish every existing social support. The idea is that leaving individual citizens to fend for themselves puts them at the mercy of the job market in a manner reminiscent of the dispossessed peasants. Like the classical primitive accumulationists, their modern disciples are clear about the outcome. (60)

The Bush administration has revealed that we are all potential bare lives, not only through its War on Terror but also through “the Ownership Society” campaign. In this sense, it makes that the state of exception the dominant paradigm of government, and also of capitalistic exploitation.

The first part of this chapter explains how *Deadwood*, as a revisionist Western, demystifies the source of sovereign authority through its representation of the historical materiality of Deadwood in South Dakota. The show’s resurrection of the 19th-century mining camp is pertinent to our era, as I show in the second part of this chapter, through its interweaving of the show’s description of Deadwood with the state of exception, which became a focal point of critical discourse after September 11. The final part of this chapter delineates the capitalist state of exception as it explores the main characters’ motives and struggles over the Deadwood camp’s annexation to which a drastic capitalist

reform of the camp leads. My exploration of the drastic capitalist reform, mainly driven by George Hearst, reveals how this show responds to the reality in the US after September 11.

Deadwood revisits a crucial part in the history of Deadwood in South Dakota, a Western town legendary but also notorious in American popular culture. The show describes the birth and development of the Deadwood camp while focusing on its notable historical personages. Most main characters, including Seth Bullock, Al Swearengen and George Hearst, are celebrated figures in Western US history, though the show's representations of them do not always adhere to the historical facts of the characters. Public reception of this show was strong when it first aired on HBO in the US in 2004 with about one million regular viewers, but the show was also very controversial, even notorious, because of its inordinate rendering of visceral images and profanity. Many major characters curse whenever and wherever they have a chance. The show's overuse of some obscene words like "cunt," "fuck" or "asshole" is notorious, though some find that it is not only amusing but also very creative. As much as profanity, disgusting and visceral images saturate the show: man-eating-hogs, the muddy main street full of sewage and excrement, men gulping down whiskey from early morning and half naked whores watching those men from the balcony. In this wild camp in *Deadwood*, people often get into brutal fights over petty disputes, eventually end up slashing throats, and putting the dead bodies in a pigsty. Then, they eat the pork for their dinner, fuck someone and fall asleep after drinking whiskey from bottles to quench their thirst. As I will argue below, such excess

bears on the state of exception at issue in the show.

David Milch's show proceeds with this type of realistic, vile representation of a wild Western camp. According to the show, a multitude of all sorts rushes into the Deadwood camp for two reasons: "no law at all in Deadwood, gold you can scoop from the streams with your bare hands" ("Deadwood"). Deadwood, or Deadwood Gulch in which the camp is located, was originally a forbidden territory for Whites. The camp was created in the Indian Territory where American law and government did not apply. In the late nineteenth century, the rumor of gold in this gulch was publicly affirmed as a result of General Custer's 1874 expedition in the Black Hills region. Custer's expedition was followed soon after by what today's historians refer to as the Black Hills Gold Rush and the establishment of the Deadwood camp. The show begins to describe this historical camp from 1876.

Reflecting the White supremacy of the late nineteenth century, nobody in the show cares or even recognizes that Deadwood and more importantly the gold in Deadwood originally belong to Sioux Indians. Although the US government established treaties with the Indians, the Indian Territory was never considered as a territory of a foreign sovereign nation that would have its own legal system and rights: "The Indian experience with treaties was an experience of betrayal, bad faith, and lies" (Linebaugh 248). Deadwood's community is in a lawless territory, falling outside the realm of law like many other camps or towns in the Western where we often find people struggling for order and justice. The gradual transformation of the camp in the show captures the pivotal period of Deadwood

from 1876 to 1877 and portrays how a camp without laws transforms into a stable and ordered place ruled by laws. Thus, *Deadwood* basically shows how people in a space without laws create order out of chaos. Milch observes that “*Deadwood [sic]* is a show about how order arises out of the mud” (135). He further articulates his intentions or more precisely driving questions in an interview with Heather Havrilesky. For Milch, two prime questions drive the show: 1) “how we govern ourselves,” 2) “how we improvise the structures of governance in an environment which acknowledges that it is the abrogation of everything but brute force.” In his own version of the *Deadwood* story, Milch seems to conclude that through multiple agents’ cooperation and evolution, order comes out of nowhere before the law. This type of theme prevails in the Western genre and, more broadly, in American culture because of America’s national, historical singularity, one we can trace back to the Declaration of Independence, with its celebrated application of John Locke’s idea of popular sovereignty: “That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government” (Declaration of Independence).

In the birth of the republic, America historically needed its own way of creating the source of sovereign authority. In *Territory, Authority, Rights*, Saskia Sassen argues, “The medieval lineage of the major European states contained an original source of legitimacy in the divinity of the monarch—itsself derived from an earlier church-linked divinity—and thereby made sovereignty the source of

law. But this did not hold for the American republic” (126). In the process of creating the source of sovereignty and legitimacy in America, Thomas Jefferson is arguably the most important figure. In his reading of Jefferson’s republicanism, Michael Hardt postulates two distinctive traditions of sovereignty in political philosophy:

The history of modern European political philosophy can be divided, simplifying the matter a great deal, by two basic notions of sovereignty. The first line is born of a thoroughly modern notion of freedom that posits the autonomy of the multitude and its social relations against any preestablished or divine conceptions of social order or hierarchy. According to this conception, sovereignty is secondary; it arises only from a relationship between the rulers and the ruled, and in this relationship the multitude is always primary over the sovereign.... The second line, which is in many ways the victorious line historically, views sovereignty as primary. In the most extreme examples of this line ... sovereignty or majesty is conceived as an autonomous substance, and thus the multitude of its subjects follow from the sovereign’s power.... What is central to this second line, in short, is that sovereignty always remains primary. (“JD” 59)

From Hardt’s perspective, Jefferson’s republicanism was closely associated with the first line of thought on sovereignty in that it finds the source of sovereignty in the multitude, “the good People of these Colonies.” More importantly for Hardt,

though, it is the most radical exemplar in that tradition due to Jefferson's idea of resistance and freedom that famously inflamed Abigail Adams; Jefferson believed that "Citizens must periodically rise up against their own government, spilling both their own blood (patriots) and that of the government's forces (tyrants)!" (Hardt, "JD" 62). Hardt writes that "his pronouncements about freedom are so radical, in fact, that some of his contemporaries thought them irresponsible and dangerous, and indeed many today find them no less shocking" ("JD" 58). From Hardt's perspective, although Jefferson's ideas of citizens, men, or people would be unacceptable from today's perspective, what makes these ideas still radical, especially in terms of the source of sovereignty, is his unwavering belief in "the capacities of the multitude, even though it is born ignorant, to become intelligent and rule itself autonomously" ("JD" 66). It is controversial to the extent that we can agree with Hardt's reading of Jefferson in light of Negri's Spinoza-inspired multitude. Regardless of its credibility, Hardt's reading of Jefferson at least enlightens us to the fact that the multitude's primacy over the sovereign makes America struggle greatly to find the source of sovereign authority.

In *The Letters of the Republic*, Michael Warner explores how the new republic constituted its legal and political foundation in terms of print and textuality. And Warner suggests that the eighteenth-century public sphere constituted and utilized by the dominant print culture was crucial in establishing the source of sovereign authority, as it accounts for how people consent to law and retroactively become the source of sovereignty. This historical process of establishing the source of sovereign authority in the public sphere, in a way, never

ends. In other words, America actually keeps re-creating this consensual foundation of sovereign authority in its public sphere. And it seems indisputable that the Western's imaginative reinscription of history has played an important part in helping constitute this source of sovereign authority. In his genealogical study of the Western, Doug Williams claims, almost piously, "The West is the ritual altar of American identity, and the form in which it is manifested is an affirmation of particular visions of American society" (111). It is arguable whether the Western in the twenty-first century could hold the same gravity it held in the middle of the twentieth century. However, though it, as a popular genre, is long past its zenith, President Bush's use of Western metaphors after September 11 seems to signal the persistency of the Western's function in the imaginative location of American political discourse.

If we consider the Western as an ideological and cultural reflection of the constitutive process of an American sovereignty that does not have the given divinity or the source of authority that can be granted by a long, historical, lineal development of a political system in a region, the Western in contemporary American culture becomes a key source of political, ideological formation for the sovereign authority that then contributes to the rule of law: "The cowboy film was typically the vehicle America used to explain itself to itself. Who makes the law? What is the order?" (qtd. in Langford 26). David Milch also incorporates and revives those fundamental questions of the source of sovereignty and legitimacy in his show. However, the way Milch represents and explores this theme in his Western TV show is radical and subversive. In the Western, we often find a

stereotypical-mythic male hero who represents the righteous power and ideals of America. And this type of the White male heroes, epitomized by Will Kane in *High Noon* (1952) or Shane in *Shane* (1953), becomes a subject of justice who overcomes the lawless chaos, evil and injustice of a small town in the West. Though Milch's *Deadwood* provides physically powerful and dexterous male figures, such as Wild Bill Hickok and Seth Bullock, none of them reflects or embodies this type of mythical heroism. Rather, the show inherits a view of the Revisionist Western that is, arguably, fully blown in Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980), in which the class conflicts between land barons and European immigrants in Wyoming in the 1890s are melodramatically rendered.

As a revisionist Western, *Deadwood* begins with the proclamation of the death of White male heroism, calling our attention early in the show to the fact that arguably the most famous historical gunfighter in the history of the West, Wild Bill Hickok, was killed in the Deadwood camp. Hickok's death and its early introduction in *Deadwood* indicate in one way the nostalgic, historic or even tragic loss of the archetypal male hero, in that this type of figure can no longer fulfill his duty in the West. However, what the show unveils through Hickok and other masculine and heroic characters is rather the fictionality or falsehood of heroism—the hero's justice—in the Western in that it foregrounds a certain dubious nature in justifying the hero's murder but also contingency in gunfights. When Hickok kills a road agent in Nuttal's saloon, Bullock rationalizes Hickok's murder with false witness: "He was going for his gun. I saw it" ("Deep Water"). And the legendary gunfighter Hickok is killed by a scoundrel named Jack McCall

whom nobody would remember if he had not shot Hickok in the back of the head. When Bullock, arguably the most heroic figure in *Deadwood*, is on his way to becoming the camp's first sheriff, Dan Dority sarcastically encourages Bullock: "You ought to pin that [the tin star] on your chest. You're hypocrite enough to wear it" ("Sold Under Sin"). In this sense, instead of dramatizing the code of honor in gunfights, the show's rendering of the gunfighters and lawmen demystifies the legend of the West: "It [Hickok's death] allows *Deadwood* to exist outside the shadow of Western myth" (Milch 179).

In effect, Milch's *Deadwood* launches its story of *Deadwood* in a place where the myth of the Western hero dies. What is left behind after the death of the classical Western hero is a camp without laws and government and the collective efforts and struggles of the people of the camp to overcome their community's illicit status and adverse circumstances. As Kyle Wiggins and David Holmberg argue, "Milch bluntly discards the Western genre's foundational ideology of self-determination, considering these principles a delusion that obscures the material realities of the late nineteenth century" (283). The realistic rendering of the show depicts the materialistic condition of a burgeoning town in the late nineteenth century West. As such, Milch's *Deadwood* explores how and why the people of this historical camp put their energy together to overcome adverse materialistic conditions and more importantly the *Deadwood* camp's illegality. However, the show's representation of "the material realities of the late nineteenth century" is not an act of tracing back or re-constituting a certain aspect of the *Deadwood* camp's historicity. Rather, its re-exploration of a camp in the nineteenth century

and the way it resurrects the historical materiality of the Deadwood camp are a critical attempt to reflect America after September 11.

In watching *Deadwood*, what the audience would first notice or experience is the stark contrast between the world of law and of lawlessness. Its first episode delivers a sheriff who will do whatever it takes according to the law, though this might put his life in danger: "I'm [Bullock] executing sentence now, and he's gonna be hung under color of law" ("Deadwood"). The lawman, Seth Bullock, moves from Montana to Deadwood, and his passage embodies the contrast between the worlds of law and lawlessness. Unlike Montana, which seems calm and peaceful under the rule of lawmen like Bullock, the Deadwood camp is overtly energetic, noisy, filthy, and disorderly. The show's description of Deadwood might be just an extremely realistic, historical representation of the notorious town, but it is almost impossible not to ask why so many characters in *Deadwood* never cease to employ so much profanity and why the show never ceases showing brutal and visceral images: one of the founding images of Deadwood is the vivid scene that portrays, without any censoring, Doc Cochran, oriented to his medical interests, penetrating a dead man's temple with a long needle and pulling it out in the show's pilot episode. The excess of violence and profanity in *Deadwood* is not just a reflection of historical realism. Rather, this type of excess is more related to the show's understanding of the state of exception, as it embodies the singularity of the Deadwood camp in the judicial-political topography.

The excessiveness of its rendering and the obscenity, profanity, and

viscerality of the show together constitute the very symptom of human excess that transgresses normalcy. Žižek's understanding of Kant's indefinite judgment provides us with a reference that gives an insight into the symptom of human excess in *Deadwood*. Žižek argues:

The indefinite judgment opens up a third domain that undermines the distinction between dead and non-dead (alive): the 'undead' are neither alive nor dead, they are precisely the monstrous 'living dead'.... 'He is not human' means simply that he is external to humanity, animal or divine, while 'he is inhuman' means something thoroughly different, namely the fact that he is neither human nor inhuman, but marked by a terrifying excess which, although it negates what we understand as humanity, is inherent to being human. (*HL* 47)

Žižek argues that the undead is defined and signified by the excess of human being. In other words, what we see in the undead is something human but too human to be accepted as normal. The undead is not a living human being but neither is it the dead. Thus, the undead dismantles the distinction between the dead and the living being as it dwells in a zone of indistinction. The Deadwood camp is not a society, but it does not represent the state of nature. Rather, we need to say the Deadwood camp is a non-society. No laws at all in Deadwood. However, life in Deadwood is always overshadowed by the law. There is no government in Deadwood, yet there is always the shadow of government, as Lincoln's framed portrait hung up high on the wall of the Gem Salon symbolizes the presence of government that has not arrived. While laboring for the camp's

stability, Deadwood's notable inhabitants desire the arrival of law and government. This seems paradoxical to the extent that they came to Deadwood because there was no law at all. Consider Swarengen's case. He is an outlaw who kills a police officer in Chicago and flees to the woods before resuming his outlaw career and business ventures in Deadwood. It seems contradictory that such a wanted man would desire laws in Deadwood, and would devote his money and effort to secure the region's annexation by the US. How can such a contradiction happen?

The Deadwood camp breaks out due to the Gold Rush in the Indian Territory. The only way people can secure their property permanently in this camp is the region's annexation by the US. Their acts of illegal or extra-legal accumulation paradoxically require legal sanction. In other words, the camp, the zone of indistinction, should be integrated into the political-legal realm and recover its normalcy. And this is what the notables of the camp sincerely want. Other possibilities, such as building a city-state or similar self-governing body, are considered insane because in that case the US might annul every previous claim with its military force. This is why the Deadwood camp cannot have a righteous trial for the death of Wild Bill Hickok:

SWEARENGEN. We're illegal. Our whole goal is to get annexed to the United fucking States. We start holding trials, what's to keep the United States fucking Congress from saying, "Oh, excuse us, we didn't realize you were a fucking sovereign community and nation out there. Where's our cocksucker's flag?"

Where's your fucking Navy or the like? Maybe when we make our treaty with the Sioux, we should treat you people like renegade fucking Indians, deny your fucking gold and property claims and hand everything over instead to our ne'er-do-well cousins and brother's-in-law?" ("The Trial of Jack McCall")

Still, reflecting the wishes of people who admire the legendary gunfighter, the camp has its own trial of Jack McCall, who murders Hickok. This trial, however, is manipulated by Swearengen because "Swearengen worries that the creation of the municipal organization will suggest to the United States government that Deadwood considers itself a sovereign political entity, resulting in the camp being seized rather than annexed. The result of such action would be the seizure of all assets in Deadwood" (Drysdale 143).

If Deadwood behaves like a state, it might risk its annexation to the US. For that reason, the real trial and execution of McCall could never happen in Deadwood, so Bullock runs after McCall and takes him to Yankton for trial. Deadwood does not have laws, which means it is outside of the jurisdiction of the US. If the camp in Deadwood has its own trial and executes a death sentence, it could imply that the camp constitutes its own legality. This is not the kind of signal or image the camp wants to send to the US government. So, the execution of McCall, as an outcome of the trial in Deadwood, is not the result that the influential men like Swearengen in the camp expect to have, though they might love to kill McCall by their own hands. The contrast between the state and the state of nature in a Hobbesian formula cannot properly account for Deadwood and

its relationship with the state. It is problematic to say that the camp is a society because it does not hold abstract systems or mechanisms like laws and government. However, considering the camp to be the state of nature is as problematic as calling it a society in that the symbolic system of the state, such as the laws and government of the US, always looms over Deadwood. In this manner, like Žižek's undead, Milch's Deadwood camp also occupies this zone of indistinction in the judicial-political topography.

According to Agamben, such a zone is the state of exception. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes:

If one wanted to represent schematically the relation between the state of nature and the state of law that takes shape in the state of exception, one could have recourse to two circles that at first appear to be distinct ... but later, in the state of exception, show themselves to be in fact inside each other When the exception starts to become the rule, the two circles coincide in absolute indistinction. (38)

As Agamben shows in his genealogical studies of the state of exception since the Roman Empire, the concept describes a common condition exemplified repeatedly in the Western history of war or civil war, particularly in the form of the concentration camp. Thus, in *Means without End*, Agamben argues that "The camp is the fourth and inseparable element that has been added to and has broken up the old trinity of nation (birth), state, and territory" (44). In *Homo Sacer*, he also claims that the camp where the legal order or law is suspended is one of the

elemental constituents in the modern political system. As arguing that the camp is the “hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity” (*HS* 123) and the “hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living” (*HS* 175), he urges us to recognize the camp’s many metamorphoses throughout contemporary society.

For example, the construction of the camp was not exclusive to Germany in World War II. The US and Canada also deprived many Japanese descendants of their rights as citizens of another country and imprisoned them in internment camps without trials or warrants. It is true that the operation and function of the internment camps in North America might have been much more humane than those in Nazi Germany; however, in terms of creating bare lives, it is hard to see any difference. In addition, when we consider many temporary camps in the twentieth century in Asia or Latin America, such as those created by dictators like Pinochet in Chile or Chun Doo-hwan in South Korea, it is more credible to say that in the modern sovereign state, even without the conditions of war or civil war, the state can always turn into the state of exception if the sovereign or dictator so decides.

In a way, the singularity of lawlessness in the Deadwood camp, leaving its inhabitants unprotected by laws or US government at all, seems to deprive the people of Deadwood, the bare lives, of any legal rights just as in Agamben’s camp. However, there are also important differences between the Deadwood camp and Agamben’s camp. To Agamben, the camp’s exemplar par excellence is the Nazi concentration camps, but the Deadwood camp is basically an illegal mining camp created as a result of people’s desire for gold, and therefore situated in the

circuit of capital. Most people come and stay in the Deadwood camp of their own volition; Seth Bullock and his partner Sole Star have decent lives before they come to Deadwood. They see the Deadwood camp as a chance to invest their fortunes while taking risks: “Camp looks like a good bet” (“Here Was a Man”). Like other outlaw figures in Deadwood, Al Swearengen settles there to avoid arrest warrants. Bullock and Swearengen stay in the town for their own sakes, so in a way they willingly become bare lives. In addition, in Agamben’s thought, the state of exception does not indicate a certain temporary time and space. On the contrary, it “tends increasingly appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics” (SE 2). However, the notables in Deadwood consider the camp or its exceptionality as something that they will soon overcome; they not only expect Deadwood’s eventual inclusion in the state but also aggressively lobby to terminate the camp’s illegal and extra-legal status: “We are joining America. And it’s full of lying, thieving cocksuckers that you can’t trust at all” (“A Lie Agreed Upon”). In this way, isn’t the notables’ understanding of the Deadwood camp’s exceptionality tied more to Schmitt’s idea of the state of exception than Agamben’s? Unlike Agamben’s claim that the state of exception becomes permanent in contemporary politics, to Schmitt, the state of exception is a lacuna of law, in which the law is only temporarily suspended for its own protection and future return. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt writes,

The endeavor of the normal state consists above all in assuring total peace within the state and its territory. To create tranquility, security and order thereby to establish the normal situation is the

prerequisite for legal norms to be valid. Every norm presupposes a normal situation and no norm can be valid in an entirely abnormal situation. (46)

Though Schmitt's idea of exception is not fully satisfactory in terms of articulating the show's portrayal of the sovereign and the state of exception—for example, by the terms of Schmitt's definition of the sovereign, Milch's *Deadwood* does not project the sovereign who decides upon the state of exception, and further it is theoretically impossible to have a sovereign in the Deadwood camp because there is no law to suspend—it sheds light on the collective effort of Deadwood's notables to secure and expedite the camp's annexation.

The show's main characters are eager to make the camp stable and civilized enough to be a part of America, in order to provide the US government with its own cause to break the Treaty it made with the Indians:

MAGISTRATE CLAGGET. Essentially, if you're on it, and you improve it, you own it. But what complicates the situation is that the Hills were deeded to the Sioux by the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. This could mean that the land occupied by the camp doesn't fall under any statutory definition of unclaimed or unincorporated.

SWEARENGEN. So who needs to get paid?

MAGISTRATE CLAGGET. Signs of conciliation and willingness would weigh in the camp's favor. But just as important is the presence of an ad hoc municipal organization that would enable the legislature to say Deadwood exists. We don't have to create it. It

would be disruptive if we did. The community's already organized, not legally maybe, but certainly informally. Why not let's give this informal organization the blessing of legal standing? ("No Other Sons or Daughters")

The individual entrepreneurs aspire to transform the camp's status. They hope to have a society governed by the laws in Deadwood for the sake of their interests: "I'll [Bullock] just settle for property rights" ("Here Was a Man"). And for this purpose, they begin organizing the camp's municipal institutions, including the sheriff, mayor and other public officers, and the camp undergoes rapid changes toward its annexation, the end of the state of exception in Deadwood. In a way, however, it seems that the people in the Deadwood camp are not aware of, or able to predict the consequences that their collective effort brings to them and the camp.

Their failure to distinguish themselves from the Indians prophetically demonstrates their ignorance to the world and their future. The Native Americans in nineteenth-century America who literally experienced genocide and crimes against humanity carried out by the US government profoundly fit into Agamben's definition of bare lives: "In Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men" (*HS* 7). In "Terms of Assimilation," Priscilla Wald refers to "The legal unrepresentability of nonwhite subjects upon which *Cherokee Nation* and *Dred Scott* resolve justifies the exclusion of these subjects from the right to own property and, by implication, from personhood" (83). According to Wald, the presence of the non-white subjects

in nineteenth-century America hinders the claims of national unity in its territorial expansion. Supreme Court cases, such as *Cherokee Nation* and *Dred Scott*, “attempt to legislate the disappearance of the ‘Indians’ and the ‘descendants of Africans,’ respectively, by judging them neither citizens nor aliens and therefore not legally representable” (Wald 77). This process and logic of exclusion contributed to the creation of American identity. However, according to Wald, it also had an unexpected outcome: “the exclusion intended to foster a sense of homogeneity among White Americans ironically raises the more dramatic specter of the status of any ‘American’ self without the (already tenuous) cultural identity. White America could see its own alterity, or alienation, reflected in the fate (and of the quite literally in the face) of the racialized other” (86-7). Mainly through its representation of the Indians, *Deadwood* also embodies this racialized exclusion. Gold was found in the Indian Territory, and it gave rise to the lawless camp of Deadwood. According to the show’s rendering of the history of this settlement, it doesn’t matter whether there are Indians or not: “History has overtaken the treaty which gave them [the Indians] this land. Well, the gold we found has overtaken it” (“Deadwood”). From its beginning, the show contrasts the legal unrepresentability of the Indians with white miners’ presumed property rights on their claims, though no one could claim property rights protected by US government on the gold in Deadwood. In *Deadwood*, this exclusion of the Indians serves, as per Wald’s arguments, to foster a sense of homogeneity and security among the people of the camp, as it did in reality. The show’s rendering of this exclusion, however, also ironically raises “the more dramatic specter of the [legal] status” of any members

of the camp, which indicates that their rights to life and property rights are not protected by the state and law.

In the first episode of the show, news of a massacre arrives in the camp: “I [Ned Mason] seen [*sic*] white people dead and scalped and men, women, and children with their arms and legs hacked off” (“Deadwood”). A white family has allegedly been butchered by Indians. However, it turns out that the massacre is perpetrated by road agents, who are subordinates of Al Swearengen. This fictionalized spectacle of the Indians’ threat indicates a paradoxical function of the Indians. As bare lives, the Indians may find themselves submitted to the state of exception, and, though they have biological lives, they do not have any legal and political significance. However, the result of this massacre is the biological deaths of white people (the family and the road agents), who likewise don’t have any legal or political significance. In other words, the Indians, the people of bare life, paradoxically reveal that the people in the Deadwood camp misrecognize the camp and their status as bare lives. In this sense, in Milch’s show, the Indians rather disguise the fact that the people of Deadwood are potentially the people of bare life like the Indians. This reading of *Deadwood* enables us to redirect the Bush administration’s production of bare lives in its controversial detention facilities: what if the Bush administration produced the camps and the people of bare life, such as terrorists or suspected terrorists, to hide the fact that America is already the camp and Americans have become the people of bare life? Thus, what if what the Bush administration attempted to do through its proclamation of the state of exception was to hide that the state of exception actually becomes the

permanent paradigm that dominates our lives?

In the beginning of the series, many of Deadwood's inhabitants expect that the camp will soon overcome its zone of indistinction. In Tom Nuttall's salon, A. W. Merrick, the proprietor of the local newspaper, the *Black Hills Pioneer*, asserts: "I believe within a year, Congress will rescind the Fort Laramie Treaty, Deadwood and these hills will be annexed to the Dakota Territory, and we, who have pursued our destiny outside law or statute, will be restored to the bosom of the nation" ("Deadwood"). And as Merrick predicts, a year later, the Deadwood camp terminates its obscure legal status in the show. However, at the end of the series, when the Deadwood camp is annexed to the US, what we observe is that the majority of the camp members have been made into bare lives by a sovereign-capitalist, George Hearst. The state of exception in a legal sense was temporary in *Deadwood*, as many notables in the camp wish. However, in order to return to legal normalcy, what they need to accept is a somewhat different state of exception in which capital becomes sovereign, determining the exception through its process of original accumulation.

In order to substantiate this capitalist process, we need to account for divergent economic motivations and drives in creating and transforming the camp. Milch writes, "The only reason the town of Deadwood exists is gold" (45). Gold is the root of the camp's being and is also what drives the camp: as Hearst argues, "Before the color, no white man. No man of any hue moved to civilize or improve a place like this had reason to make the effort. The color brought commerce here, and such order as has been attained" ("Unauthorized Cinnamon"). In the early

part of *Deadwood*, we see everyone try to be a king of their own, outside the structures of social classes and legality. In Swearengen's salon, Whitney Ellsworth rants:

I'll tell you what. I may have fucked my life up flatter than hammered shit, but I stand here before you today, beholden to no human cocksucker, and working a paying fucking gold claim. And not the U.S. government saying I'm trespassing, or the savage fucking red man himself, or any of these limber dick cocksuckers passing themselves off as prospectors had better try and stop me.
("Deadwood")

Ellsworth's rather rough speech epitomizes the assertion that *Deadwood* is where individuals can sustain their lives independently through their own means of production. In this capitalist venture devoid of any legal regulations, the development of the primitive camp becomes possible, not through the individualistic competition of free-for-all or a heroic entrepreneur, but through a certain systemical consensus on the collaboration and compromise among the people in the camp who recognize the importance of order in securing their private property: "The private property of the worker in his means of production is the foundation of small-scale industry, and small-scale industry is a necessary condition for the development of social production and of the free individuality of the worker himself" (Marx 927). In "The Nature of Government," Ayn Rand, one of the most famous advocates of laissez-faire capitalism in twentieth century America, notes that "A government is the means of placing the retaliatory use of

physical force under objective control- i.e., under objectively defined laws” (381, italics in orig.). For Rand, channeling the retaliatory use of force through a government is an essential constituent to establishing a free market society where people can expect the protection of individual property rights. Regardless of what we think of Rand’s politics, her primitive definition of government provides a chance to ponder the function of Al Swearengen and other notables in the growing prosperity of Deadwood camp.

In the show, before the introduction of law and government into Deadwood, there is already a certain order or common sense of control and rule, which recaptures a historical aspect in the development of the sovereign in America: “In contrast to the European configuration whereby the sovereign was the source of authority and law, in the earlier American confederation and the later federation, the source of authority was common law, which meant the localities and the citizenry” (Sassen 121-22). The establishment of order in the camp is mainly achieved by the local notables’ intervention in the daily activity of Deadwood, in which they aim to flourish so as to reduce the collateral damage of endless revenge, which Milch also points out as the developmental process of the common law, following Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes: “You know, Oliver Wendell Holmes, in a study of the common law, said that the law develops out of society’s need to minimize the collateral consequences of the taking of revenge” (Milch and Havrilesky). In the beginning of the show, Al Swearengen of Gem Saloon, as the most powerful capitalist of the camp, well represents Rand’s primitive function of government that provides the camp with stability and safety:

“You don’t shoot nobody ’cause it’s bad for my business and it’s bad for the camp’s reputation” (“Deadwood”). In terms of appearance, Swearengen might be a saloon keeper, but in reality he dominates the camp: its order originates from his authority and power. When the camp is astir with news of Indians killing people on the Spearfish Road, Swearengen comes down from his lofty office and delivers a speech:

I know word’s circulating. Indians killed a family on the Spearfish Road. . . . I will offer a personal \$50 bounty for every decapitated head of as many of these godless heathen cocksuckers as anyone can bring in, tomorrow, with no upper limit. That’s all I say on that subject except next round’s on the house. And God rest the souls of that poor family. Amen. And pussy’s half-price next 15 minutes.
 (“Deadwood”)

Simply put, Swearengen needs to keep the lawless Deadwood camp in a certain order to make his business more rewarding. The order he creates and sustains, obviously, is not designed for any abstract or altruistic reasons, such as the success or well-being of the people in the camp. It is solely for Swearengen’s personal interest but his position in the camp is grand enough to tie his personal interests with the camp’s overall interest; the expansion and stabilization of the camp mean the same thing for his business and property.

Swearengen is not the only capitalist who shares his fortune with the camp. All other major characters are influential businessmen in the camp. And though they sometimes hate each other with a passion, they all want to transform

the camp as much as Swearingen does. When smallpox breaks out, the first unofficial town meeting is held. At this meeting are Cy Tolliver, Al Swearingen, E. B. Farnum, Sol Star, Seth Bullock, Doc Cochran, Tom Nuttal, and Reverend Smith. Without any disagreement, they raise a fund to dispatch volunteers to Cheyenne to secure a vaccine and distribute it for free, as they are fully aware that their businesses and interests in Deadwood are decisively reliant on the prosperity and development of the camp ("Plague"). All the influential businessmen in the camp aspire to Deadwood's annexation. For the introduction of the law, they don't mind, paradoxically, conducting illegal actions, such as bribery: "A small fraction of your detachment left behind ... would keep the criminal element in check. Cash compensation, unrecorded" ("Sold Under Sin"). This is not for the sake of abstractions, such as the legitimacy of the rule of law, civilization or any other ideological virtues; it is all for the economic interests they share.

Though they seek the end of the camp's obscure legal status, it should not be overlooked that they also take advantage of the camp's exceptionality. In Milch's show, Deadwood really becomes the land of fortune and chance due to its exceptional relation to the US. In a way, the capitalists' accumulation of wealth is only possible because there is no law at all in Deadwood. And so only after having procured their interests do the notables attempt to terminate the camp status or the state of exception for the safety of their economic success. As Marx observes, "The rising bourgeoisie needs the power of the state," and "[t]his is an essential aspect of so-called primitive accumulation" (899-900).

Deadwood's annexation by the US becomes complete in Season 3 of the

show. Right before the town's total inclusion within the US, George Hearst starts his campaign to prepare the maximum exploitation of the exceptional status of the camp. Hearst's immeasurable wealth and inhuman commitment to the pursuit of gold bring about radical changes in the Deadwood camp. Hearst's agents spread the rumor that the pre-established claims in the camp would not be protected by the US government after annexation, so they can purchase the claims cheap as dirt: "Not to my certain knowledge. But if you're asking, in the interim, have I been privy to a rumor, far as claims being invalidated, all titles thrown out, the answer is yes" ("New Money"). This process of persuasion or more correctly blackmail creates violent turmoil, causing many deaths in the camp: "Whatever's toward what he [Hearst] wants. Not a flying fuck if it's true or how fucking soaked in blood" ("True Colors"). Thus were the miners in Deadwood first coaxed to sell their claims or forcibly dispossessed of their claims, which were their means not only of production but also of subsistence. This is the birth of the proletariat in Deadwood: "the proletariat [is] created by the breaking-up of the bands of feudal retainers and by the forcible expropriation of the people from the soil" (Marx 896).

As a consequence of the camp's development, most of the main characters become petty, primitive capitalists who achieve their portion of original accumulation at the local level in Deadwood. However, driven by Hearst, who embodies the original accumulation of global capitalism, the silenced majority of the camp, such as the Cornish mine workers and Chinese immigrants, become literally bare lives: the miners in Hearst's claims are forced to take off all their

clothes and take showers when they are discharged from their labor, and dead Chinese prostitutes are stripped, naked and burned to ash. As Hearst's dominance proceeds, the Deadwood camp is capitalistically reorganized. And in this reorganization of the camp, "[a]s Marx sees it, the capitalists actually acted like little sovereigns in order to put through their reorganisation of the lives of the people" (Boever 265). The significant social-economic change brought by Hearst transforms the whole landscape of Deadwood for the sake of his original accumulation in Deadwood: 1) Hearst's dominance of gold mines creates an extremely exploited proletarian class in the camp where most people had been an equal, small, mining entrepreneur; 2) he connects the local market of Deadwood into the circuit of the national and potentially global market; 3) for his original accumulation in Deadwood, Hearst manipulates the local economy of Deadwood with his pseudo-national force named the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. After Deadwood's economy is internalized by Hearst, it finally becomes a part of the US. The violent capitalization of Deadwood and its integration into the national market precede the legal process of nationalization. The nationalization of Deadwood, however, does not really guarantee the end of the state of exception, as Hearst drives the camp into permanent capitalistic crisis.

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein argues that disaster capitalism always finds a chance of privatization in the wake of disasters (6). It is noteworthy that disasters like Hurricane Katrina of 2005 not only bring about a state of emergency, but simultaneously also create extremely lucrative opportunities for neoliberal capitalists. In this book, Klein writes that we face the rise of a style of

capitalism that perpetuates disasters all over the world for the endless expansion of capital. In Milch's *Deadwood*, the notables show a strong shared volition in pursuit of normalcy, which can be read as a counter-argument to Klein's argument. According to the show's description of the camp's main capitalists, though the combination of the camp and state of exception might be essential for the success of the capitalists and development of capital, it should not be made permanent in a place or zone because stabilizing the volatile reality with social, legal, and political abstractions is necessary to secure their property rights and stable growth of their wealth. In addition, the notables share a certain consensus about the extent to which they can exploit their chance, the capitalistic state of exception, in the Deadwood camp. However, Hearst prefigures the spirit of Klein's disaster capitalism or contemporary unfettered global capitalism. Though the show's descriptions of the camp are based on the historical reality of Deadwood, situated in the time before the advent of neoliberalism, its rendering of Hearst and his pursuit of gold is closely intertwined with contemporary capitalism. In *Neoliberalism as Exception*, Aihwa Ong claims that "Economic globalization is associated with staggering numbers of the globally excluded. Despite legal citizenship in some country, millions of migrant workers, refugees, and trafficked peoples who have the most minimal hold on survival have become even more imperiled and exclusive" (23). In Milch's show, the process of instituting capitalism in the camp, expedited by Hearst, represents this economic globalization, as he turns the immigrants into bare lives, while enjoying extraordinary political benefits and economic gain in the camp. Hearst is not only

ruthless in his pursuit of gold, but also ruthless in his rejection of all normal social consensus and restrictions: “The denial of these qualities [human qualities] in favor of abstract logic is what makes Hearst a monster” (Milch 53).

In one of first meetings with Hearst, Swearengen sarcastically applauds Hearst:

SWEARENGEN. The whores for your workers. Not only does burning the corpses save cargo space far as the transporting of their bones back to the homeland, which, as I gather, they hold as their big fucking chance at the afterlife. What a tremendous tactic, terrifying the unburned here.

HEARST. Do you know prospecting, Mr. Swearengen?

SWERENGEN. Fucking nothing of it.

HEARST. And the securing of the color, once found?

SWEARENGEN. Not a fucking thing.

HEARST. All I really care about. (“Boy-the-Earth-Talks-to”)

Hearst’s obsessive or psychopathic interest in “the color” truly distinguishes him from other capitalists in the Deadwood camp: “The only thing he cares about is gold. In truth, the man was not even terribly impressed with wealth. It was the color itself and getting the gold out of the ground” (Milch 50).

In terms of the dramatic capitalization of the Deadwood camp achieved by Hearst, the attitudes of the town’s rugged capitalists resonate, surprisingly, with the concerns about contemporary global capitalism expressed by those whom Žižek refers to today’s “intelligent conservative democrats”:

Intelligent conservative democrats, from Daniel Bell to Francis Fukuyama, are aware that contemporary global capitalism tends to undermine its own ideological conditions (what, long ago, Bell called the “cultural contradictions of capitalism”) : capitalism can only thrive in the conditions of basic social stability, of intact symbolic trust, of individuals not only accepting their own responsibility for their fate, but also relying on the basic “fairness” of the system—this ideological background has to be sustained through a strong educational, cultural apparatus. (Žižek, *Lost Causes* 2)

A camp provides opportunity for the notables, but it must turn into a town, a city of laws, for the sake of their long-term interests. A camp is double-sided: a volatile, lawless place like Deadwood is lucrative for aspiring capitalists in *Deadwood*; yet as much as it appealing, it is also an unstable and dangerous place that cannot even guarantee the basis of capitalism, individual property rights. Hearst’s acquisition of Alma Ellsworth’s mine, the richest claim in Deadwood, is a paradigmatic example of capitalist seizure that exploits Deadwood’s legal instability or rogue character. Representing the local economic autonomy, Mrs. Garret is also the owner of the local Deadwood bank: “a bank owned locally wishing to make available funds to organize and develop our community to build business and home, and whose deposits are guaranteed by gold not two miles distant from this building [the bank]”(“A Two-Headed Beast”). In order to complete his campaign for dominance in the camp, Hearst, who represents the

national and even trans-national flow of capital, extorts the gold mine from Mrs. Garret, as his subordinate assassinates Garret's husband, Whitney Ellsworth, who had proclaimed the spirit of individual, independent entrepreneurship in Swearingen's Gem salon. Ellsworth's death marks the end of individual entrepreneurship in the camp and the beginning of Hearst's total domination of the camp. His death can also be read as what today's conservative intellectuals are concerned about: the deterioration of capitalism's ideological and social base, epitomized in the current culture of unfettered capitalism.

If the notables represent today's conservative intellectuals of capitalism, Hearst would symbolize the brute nature and force of unfettered capitalism that abstracts everything for the sake of its own accumulation and expansion. At a glance, the nature of Hearst seems similar to that of other capitalists in Deadwood. Like many, Hearst came to the camp for gold, to achieve his single purpose. Like Swearingen and Tolliver, he does not mind terrorizing and assassinating his possible competitors and disobedient workers. Tolliver and Swearingen are also portrayed as self-centered, heartless capitalists. However, the show also reveals their humane aspects: consider these two pimps' relations with their whores, complicated with love and hatred. Tolliver has a long relationship with his madam, Joanie Stubbs, one of the few people he actually cares about. Swearingen's whores are "brought at the same orphanage where he was raised, including a cripple who was absolutely no use to him at any pragmatic level" (Milch and Havrilesky). Hearst's difference from other capitalists in the camp is not just a matter of quantity or size of business and capital. Rather, there is a qualitative

difference between them in that Hearst represents a form of pure capital, which is not restrained by anything except its own logic: “It’s one of the horrible manifestations of human possibility, and particularly of the path that we have now taken, which is irreversible—namely, the universal organization of mankind around the symbol of gold” (Milch 46). The show’s creator also considers Hearst as transcendental: “George Hearst, who is the monstrous abstraction of the symbol made flesh” (46). Indians name him “the-boy-the-earth-talks-to,” stressing his legendary, incredible success as a mining entrepreneur. And Deadwood’s residents, afraid of Hearst’s devastating power, define him as a man beyond law; they transgress laws, but Hearst is not bound by law at all: “George Hearst’s chief geologist don’t [*sic*] get convicted of any crime in any court convened by humans. They’ll buy the judge, and if they can’t, the jury or witnesses. If not, they’ll start into killing” (“E. B. Was Left Out”).

Hearst is made of his gigantic greed for gold and fearful vengeance for anything that disturbs his road to gold: “I [Hearst] take this place down like Gomorrah” (“Unauthorized Cinnamon”). He is untouchable in the Deadwood camp because of the camp’s exceptional status. As he is recognized as a man beyond law, he freely operates a notorious semi-military organization, the Pinkertons, which used to outnumber the members of the standing army of the US. The reason Hearst wields such incomparable power is only to accumulate more gold: “That is our species’ hope: that uniformly agreeing on its value, we organize to seek the color” (“Unauthorized Cinnamon”). There is no bourgeois ideology as such in Hearst’s world. There is no normal condition that the state

needs to recover through the state of exception; the camp's nationalization is just a condition Hearst needs to resume his pursuit of gold mines elsewhere. Hearst never stops after his successful acquisition of the gold mine, after his successful domination of the camp, and even after the camp's successful annexation by the US. What he does after he coercively purchases Alma Ellsworth's mine is leave for another mining camp in search for gold: "The progressive proletarianization of the noncapitalist environment is the continual reopening of the processes of primitive accumulation—and thus the *capitalization* of the noncapitalist environment itself" (Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 226, italics in orig.).

Unlike other major characters who want to remain inside after their own original accumulation, Hearst endlessly moves around to find another venture to provide him with new blood. Such contrast with other capitalists in the Deadwood camp represents the nature of capital in its imperialistic expansion. Writing about "the fundamental contradiction of capitalist expansion," Hardt and Negri argue that

The important point, however, is that once a segment of the environment has been "civilized," once it has been organically incorporated into the newly expanded boundaries of the domain of capitalist production, it can no longer be the outside necessary to realize capital's surplus value. In this sense, capitalization poses a barrier to realization and vice versa; or better, internalization contradicts the reliance on the outside. Capital's thirst must be quenched with new blood, and it must continually seek new

frontiers. (*Empire* 227)

Hearst's trajectory of searching for gold is an exact reflection of the imperialistic movement of capital. And the Deadwood camp should be incorporated with this type of abstract power and flow of capital to be a part of the US. Hearst seals his deal with Alma Ellsworth on the same day that a new sheriff arrives in Deadwood. When the economy of Deadwood is connected with the nation-state through Hearst, Deadwood also becomes a part of the US, which signifies the legal and judicial termination of the state of exception in the camp. Through Hearst, the advent of laws in Deadwood that the notables long desired is finally completed. However, the capitalist state of exception, which is perpetuated by Hearst, remains as the actual paradigm of government in the Deadwood camp, as Hearst's mines will keep producing bare lives.

At the end of Season 3, Hearst on his stagecoach smirkily salutes Mrs. Ellsworth on Main Street. Bullock approaches Hearst to say, "You've looked at your last body. You're done tipping your fucking hat. Get out of here or I'll drag you out by the ear" ("Tell Him Something Pretty"). Finished with all his business details in the camp, Hearst is on his way to the next camp. Long frustrated by his incapacity to resist Hearst, Bullock finally unleashes his indignation and resentment. In a way, his gesture is heroic because he is the only one who stands up to Hearst, surrounded by many armed Pinkerton agents. However, it is also a meaningless, empty gesture, and Bullock is fully aware of his gesture's emptiness. When his deputy, Charlie Utter, says, "You've done fucking good," Bullock replies, "I did fucking nothing."

Bullock knows that Hearst is leaving and will never come back to the camp, so, though we cannot deny Bullock's sincerity, his threat is actually empty. His confrontation with Hearst is a symbolic exchange of "empty gestures" in that they play their roles in the symbolic system. Following Levi-Strauss's idea of symbolic exchange, Žižek argues that "The magic of symbolic exchange is that, although at the end we are where we were at the beginning, there is a distinct gain for both parties in their pact of solidarity" (*HL* 13). Does this view lead us to conclude that Bullock exchanges his empty words with Hearst to increase "their pact of solidarity"? After this confrontation, nothing is changed in the camp. However, as Bullock faces Hearst eye to eye, he can signal his status as the incumbent sheriff of the camp to any member of the camp watching this confrontation, so as to affirm his symbolic position even as the new social order of the camp established by Hearst remains intact. Although Bullock seems to threaten Hearst's sovereign authority in the camp, Bullock's symbolic gesture does not really contradict Hearst's power and authority. In this confrontation, Bullock represents the dissenting voice of the majority in the Deadwood camp, while channeling its violence. Hearst recognizes and approves of Bullock's symbolic threat; in a way, thereby granting Bullock's symbolic position in the camp.

If neither Bullock nor Hearst recognized his role in this symbolic exchange, it would be catastrophic for every capitalistic venture in the camp, potentially causing Deadwood's total disintegration. Nobody wants this outcome, so, when Hearst and Bullock confront each other, what really happens is that they

confirm that they share a certain sense of consensus integral to their capitalistic interests in the camp. From this perspective, Bullock's supposed heroism actually masks this truth: the confrontation really functions as an affirmation of the symbolic order that reigns in the Deadwood camp.

On 20 September, 2001, President Bush addressed Congress as follows:

“This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom” (“Freedom”). It is not important whether President Bush was sincere when he made this speech. At stake here is rather whether his bold claims are empty or not. In other words, what if the various claims of justice, morality, religion, civilization, freedom and democracy in the US after the attacks of September 11 were just empty words that are supposed to be accepted to support the lucrative venture of the capitalists in the War on Terror? If we consider Milch's show as an allegory of the Bush administration and America after September 11, the conclusion that we can reach through the confrontation of Bullock and Hearst would be that President Bush exchanges an empty gesture with Osama Bin Laden through his bold claims. In other words, the underlying experience of watching *Deadwood* can reveal the fact that the religious, ethical political proclamations made by the Bush administration are unreal, unsubstantial, deprived of material significance in order to perpetuate the capitalistic exploitation.

Deadwood reveals the extent to which the state of exception has been integral to the consolidation of capital. In this show, what we eventually observe

is the capitalist state of exception perpetuated by Hearst in the camp and all other figures' subjection to this sovereign-like capital. The logic of the capitalist state of exception in *Deadwood* shows that it is not defined by political realms and agents but brought into existence by capitalistic calculations that produce bare lives to optimize the expansion and increase of capital in a specific situation. After September 11, Agamben argues that America adopts a state of exception that becomes the new paradigm of government. However, according to Milch's *Deadwood*, what really becomes permanent is not just the state of exception, but the capitalist state of exception. And President Bush's pompous rhetoric is an empty gesture that hides the very nature of this capitalist state of exception, the expansion of capital and its market through the War on Terror: "None of us want to realize that we live in Deadwood, but all of us do" (Milch 213).

Chapter III:

The Wasted Lives and the Politics of Equality in *The Wire*

Claimed by many to be the best thing ever seen on TV, *The Wire* portrays an American urban life that epitomizes the systemic violence of the neoliberal state and capitalism. Through its portrayal of the prevalent systemic problems of various bureaucratic institutions that govern American life, *The Wire* represents a pessimistic vision of contemporary America. The show is composed of five seasons. The first and third seasons mainly portray the Major Crime Unit in the police department of Baltimore and its target, the Barksdale organization. The second season focuses on Frank Sobotka's severely deteriorated harbor union and the Greek's smuggling organization, which brings drugs and other illegal cargo into Baltimore. The last two seasons introduce more diverse subjects: the Baltimore school system, Major Colvin's unauthorized legalization of drugs in his district, the city politics and elections, the *Baltimore Sun* paper and a new drug kingpin, Marlo Stanfield, who does not follow the code of the street.

Throughout the series, the members of the Major Crime Unit—Cedric Daniels, Detective Jimmy McNulty, Lester Freamon, Kima Greggs, Ellis Carver, Thomas Hauk, and Roland Pryzbylewski—are the most commonly recurring figures in the show; they construct most of the main narrative, while actively engaging with various street characters such as Stringer Bell, D' Angelo Barksdale, Bubbles, and Bodie Broadus. In addition, three other groups of people—Sobotka's harbor union, city politicians, and reporters and editors in the *Baltimore Sun*—constitute substantial portions of the story of Baltimore rendered

in the show.

It has been often noted that popular police shows contribute to the way in which the public thinks about crime and law enforcement. In “Acting Like Cops,” B. Keith Crew argues that “the social reality of crime created in these shows [police dramas] has an ideological content that is almost inevitably conservative and reinforces passivity in the viewer” (131). In recent studies, Loïc Wacquant also argues that the popularity of cop shows in recent decades indicates an effect of neoliberalism that promotes the neoliberal or penal state. From his perspective, the cop show is a cultural means devised to remind people that they will eventually be brought to justice if they break the law (Campbell 60). Thus, the proliferation of crime dramas on television and in the movies has evolved into a ritualized form that reminds citizens of the penalties associated with crime. In these shows, the “lesson is that if you engage in crime, you can run but you will eventually be brought to justice by the long arm of the law” (Campbell 60).

The Wire is not such a show. Rather, it subversively unveils the structural problems of the police and policing in contemporary America through its focus on the Baltimore police department. *The Wire* depicts the police department as the land of the forgotten promise because mayors politicize it for their own careers despite their original sincerity and good intentions to improve the living conditions of the population of Baltimore. In addition to this, the department’s systemic and internal failures, such as incompetent high ranking officials and “juk[ing] the stats,” contribute to its inoperativeness (“Misgivings”). Through its vivid rendering of the slums in Baltimore, *The Wire* also portrays social outcasts

who turned into vagabonds, and paupers, beggars, robbers, prostitutes, addicts, and drug dealers partly from inclination but, in most cases, under the force of neoliberal changes and circumstances. In foregrounding the police as one of the deteriorated bureaucratic institutions that foster the production of outcasts, the show unveils the inequality and injustice that is prevalent in contemporary America.

Given the well-known distrust of the police among many black inner-city residents in America, it is not surprising to see that *The Wire* reflects and denounces the history of police brutality and racial profiling in America. In an episode from the show's fifth season, a *Baltimore Sun* reporter, Mike Fletcher, wittily argues, regarding the racial injustice of urban segregation, that the kinds of criminal activities the police tolerate in black neighborhoods would never be tolerated in white neighborhoods: "Wrong Zip Code. They're dead where it doesn't count. If they were white and murdered in Timonium, you'd have had 30 inches off the front [page]" ("Not for Attribution"). However, the thing that perpetuates all the social problems described in the show's rendering of Baltimore goes beyond racial profiling, segregation or injustice, as the show insistently emphasizes the fact that everyone in the show is exposed to the same type of systemic violence and problems, which produce bare lives, degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of existence. As Chapter 2 reveals, the sovereign power of the state is not the only power producing bare lives. While cooperating with the state, capitalism contributes to the production of bare lives in contemporary society. In its portrayals of the marginalized in Baltimore, the show

elicits a strong sense of inequality and injustice in America. In examining the show's depiction of devastated Baltimore, this chapter explores how the main characters struggle against the systemic problems and violence brought by the neoliberal state and capitalism.

In *The Wire*, Baltimore's urban landscape is populated by the marginalized people whom various bureaucratic institutions in the show neglect to protect from the violence of unfettered capitalism. The police department is at the center of the show's depiction of the systemic problems brought by the state under neoliberalism. And *The Wire*'s rendering of the police department reveals that, although Foucault's idea of the police ensuring not only the safety but also the prosperity of individual lives could still be effective, we are observing a certain eclipse of the Foucauldian police in contemporary America, due to the effects of the neoliberal state and capitalism.

This chapter's exploration of *The Wire* unfolds in three steps. First, after briefly introducing Zygmunt Bauman's idea of wasted lives—the collateral casualties of capitalistic globalization—in relation to the eclipse of the Foucauldian police in the neoliberal state, it examines the show's depiction of a bleak urban landscape in terms of the police department. Second, it explores how bureaucracies in the show fail to salvage wasted lives: “the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant’, that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay” (5). This chapter's final part discusses some morally complicated characters, such as Major Colvin, and Detectives McNulty and Freamon. They are arguably the most heroic characters, who attempt

to surmount the systemic problems of the department. In examining their controversial police work—including their transgressions of laws—this chapter clarifies the political implications of these police officers in terms of Jacques Rancière’s ideas of politics and equality.

In *Wasted Lives*, Zygmunt Bauman explores the social-economic mechanism of modernity that separates the excluded from the included, while focusing on the production and disposal of “human waste” or “wasted lives.” His concept of wasted lives refers to those marginalized by capitalistic globalization, a population that includes not only Agamben’s *homo sacer*, the “legitimate targets” exempted from the protection of law,” but also “unintended and unplanned ‘collateral casualties’ of economic progress” (39). The production of wasted lives is accelerated by a shift from the welfare state to the police state occurring in recent decades. As Bauman argues, “The state washes its hands of the vulnerability and uncertainty arising from the logic (or illogicality) of the free market, now redefined as a private affair, a matter for individuals to deal with and cope with by the resources in their private possession” (51). The government in contemporary society finds its justification not in its intervention into the market or social inequality, but in the discourse of security that has flourished since the attacks of September 11. From Bauman’s perspective, the wasted lives created in contemporary society provide us with a scapegoat for our individual insecurities and offers an “easy target for unloading anxieties prompted by the widespread fears of social redundancy” (63).

In addition, as Ulrike Kistner argues, “The provisions for a state of

exception, moving from wartime measures to deal with internal disorder to political measures extending into the civil sphere, have become dominant techniques of governance.” In this sense, the War on Terror is another strategy that can be incorporated by many governments to control wasted lives. The state not only stigmatizes but also criminalizes overflowing populations, such as refugees and social outcasts: “Following the events of 11 September 2001, refugees have been branded as a sinister transnational threat to national security – even though none of the 11 September terrorists were actually refugees or asylum seekers” (Castles 16). And through its war on the overflowing population, the state establishes and re-establishes its justification and authority:

Having rescinded or severely curtailed its past programmatic interference with market-produced insecurity, having proclaimed the perpetuation and intensification of that insecurity to be, on the contrary, the prime purpose and a duty of all political power dedicated to the well-being of its subjects, the contemporary state must seek other, non-economic varieties of vulnerability and uncertainty on which to rest its legitimacy. (Bauman 52)

Contemporary global capitalism systemically produces wasted lives while devastating the previous social structures that support many ordinary modes of living: as Frank Sobotka puts it, “For 25 years we’ve been dyin’ slow down there. Dry dock’s rustin’, piers standin’ empty. My friends and their kids like we got the cancer. No life-line got thrown all that time, nothin’ from nobody, and now you wanna help us? Help me?” (“Bad Dreams”). Instead of preventing or restraining

the production of wasted lives, the contemporary police state converts them into bare lives for the sake of its justification and legitimacy.

In the contemporary police state, we can note a divergence from Foucault's idea of modern government and police. In "Governmentality," Foucault argues that "In contrast to sovereignty, government has as its purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition" (216-17). The police are the externalized power mechanism of governmentality. Thus, in "The Political Technology of Individuals," Foucault argues,

In short, life is the object of the police. The indispensable, the useful, and the superfluous: those are the three types of things that we need, or that we can use in our lives. That people survive, that people live, that people do even better than just survive or live: that is exactly what the police have to ensure" (413).

Following von Justi's idea of the police in *Elements of Police*, Foucault concludes that in modern society "The aim of the police is the permanently increasing production of something new, which is supposed to foster the citizen's life and the state's strength" ("PI" 415).

In contrast to Foucault, Agamben argues:

The point is that police—contrary to public opinion—are not merely an administrative function of law enforcement; rather, the police are perhaps the place where the proximity and the almost constitutive exchange between violence and right that characterizes

the figure of the sovereign is shown more nakedly and clearly than anywhere else. (*MWE* 104)

In short, if Foucault foregrounds the bureaucratic aspect of the police in modern nation-states, Agamben reveals the sovereign character of the police: “Whereas the sovereign is the one who, in proclaiming a state of emergency suspending the validity of the law, marks the point of indistinction between violence and law, the police operate in what amounts to a permanent ‘state of emergency’” (“SP” 62). Agamben’s idea of police is “contrary to common opinion, which sees the police as a purely administrative function for the execution of the law” (“SP” 61). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to argue whether the function of the police has drastically changed in contemporary society, or to compare Foucault’s and Agamben’s ideas of the police in detail. However, this juxtaposition of two different ideas of the police helps us understand how *The Wire* elaborates a certain eclipse of the Foucauldian police in contemporary America through the show’s portrayal of the wasted lives in Baltimore, and how the main characters struggle with this decline.

In *The Wire*, the police department is too severely dysfunctional to support and protect the citizens’ living conditions resulting from the War on Drugs, and any heroic characters’ attempts to overcome the systemic problems of the department seem destined to fail in their own struggles, for the problems they face are often beyond the control of a bureaucratic organization. *The Wire*’s realistic portrayal of various social outcasts, ranging from the drug addicts in the ghettos to the dead girls in a container make us aware of Bauman’s collateral casualties of

globalization. The second episode of Season 2, which begins with the investigation of the Jane Does, is aptly titled “Collateral Damage,” and in this episode, the dead girls are considered to be cargo, as nobody really wonders about the cause of their death: “If they were alive, they’d be illegals, and that would mean Immigration. But they’re dead, so they’re cargo” (“Collateral Damage”). They are the examples of bare lives created by global capitalism: “You gotta understand, they’re coming from places that don’t have much of anything. Romania, Moldavia, Russia, Albania, 40,000 or 50,000 undocumented women working in the US alone” (“Hot Shots”).

David Simon, the show’s creator, told *Slate* magazine that “Thematically, [*The Wire* is] about the very simple idea that, in this Postmodern world of ours, human beings—all of us—are worth less. We are worth less every day, despite the fact that some of us are achieving more and more. It’s the triumph of capitalism” (“Behind the Wire”). *The Wire* represents the systemic violence of unfettered capitalism and the complicity of various social institutions in producing wasted lives. Its portrayal of various social strata of Baltimore reveals that they are consistently afflicted by the same type of systemic problems and violence without any viable solutions. And this show’s representation of the systemic problems is paradigmatic; as Peter Dreier and John Atlas argue, “*The Wire* could have been about any other American city, facing the realities of the past decade—the loss of blue-collar union jobs, a shrinking tax base, racial segregation and the concentration of poverty, street gangs and the drug trade, and troubled school” (330).

The Baltimore Police department is at the center of the show's depiction of systemic social problems as it represents the nexus of diverse social strata in the city. In a certain sense, BPD officers seem omniscient and omnipresent as Foucault predicts, "the police apparently see to everything" ("PT" 413). However, the police department also exemplifies the decline of Foucault's idea of policing. Major Colvin instructs Sergeant Carver about the deterioration of police work:

This drug thing, this ain't police work.... Soldiering and policing ain't the same thing. And before we went and took the wrong turn and started up with these war games, the cop walked a beat, and he learned that post. And if there were things that happened up on that post whether they be a rape or robbery or shooting, he had people out there helping him, feeding him information.... You had your stats, you had your arrests, you had your seizures. But don't none of that amount to shit when you talking about protecting the neighborhood, now, do it? You know the worst thing of this so-called drug war to my mind is just it ruined this job.

("Reformation")

According to the show's depiction of Baltimore, drug-related crime is prevalent, and the city's urban landscape is becoming increasingly devastated: "The shit out there. The city is worse than when I [Major Colvin] first came on" ("All Due Respect"). This brutal urban reality becomes more profound with the fall of the show's twin towers, the Franklin Terrace Towers, in Season 3, as a part of the city's housing development project. The Franklin Terrace Towers, which

“represent some of this city’s most entrenched problems,” are the prime territory of the Barksdale crew (“Time after Time”). Though it lacks the terrorist element, the fall of the Terrace Towers resonates with September 11, in that the Towers reflect the locus of (illegal) capitalistic enterprise, and fierce aftershocks ripple through a community when they are fully destroyed.

After the fall of the petty-twin Towers, the sense of injustice becomes more dominant, epitomized in many characters’ outcries: “the game is rigged” (“Final Grades”). The post-Towers world of Marlo Stanfield features a codeless community in which the value of the lives of the people who live in the socially stigmatized areas becomes more insignificant: “Though the world is getting warmer, people is going to the other way” (“Misgiving”). When Bodie and Poot discover Little Kevin’s dead body in a vacant house, Bodie cries: “Nigger [Stanfield] killing motherfuckers just ’cause he can, not ’cause they’re snitch, not ’cause it’s business, but ’cause this shit comes just natural to him This nigger don’t feel nothing” (“Final Grades”). Before the fall of the Towers, when Barksdale was the mayor of the streets, the rules and codes of the street, like the famous Sunday Truce, were recognized and respected. The drug organizations were the street version of bureaucratic systems that hold the wasted lives in ghettos. Corner boys, like Wallace and Poot, used to take care of homeless, parentless kids in an abandoned low-rise housing complex. Even in the most devastated social area, the idea of community was preserved in its own style: as Detective Moreland says to Omar, “As rough as that neighborhood could be, we had us a community. Nobody, no victim, who didn’t matter. And now all we got is

bodies, and predatory motherfuckers like you” (“Homecoming”).

However, as Wee-Bay Brice, the most trusted soldier in the Barksdale crew, claims, the world has changed:

But shit out there now ain't like it was when we was coming up. Back in the day, a punk nigger like Marlo steps out, breaking the rules and shit, he find himself in the back of a car trunk on the way to Leakin Park. No doubt. We did that shit right. Word was your bond. Man looked out for his own, knowing he in a family.... But today it's all fucked up. (“Alliances”)

In *A New Paradigm for Understanding Today's World*, Alain Touraine argues that today's globalization creates “the separation between economy and society – a separation that contains within it the destruction of the very idea of the society” (31). After the fall of the Towers in the show, all existing social relations wither as Marlo Stanfield, who represents the brutal force of capitalistic globalization, dominates the street. In this new world, the new drug kingpin, Stanfield, slaughters whoever stands in the way of his accumulating capital and territory without any particular purposes, dreams, ideals, or causes. And the police department is too incompetent either to arrest Stanfield or to save the citizens in its own War on Drugs: as the residents of the Western District exclaim in a town hall meeting, “Man, that's bullshit! ... My cousin Willy Gant cooperated. He went downtown and testified. He deader than 2Pac today.... My kids, they can't play outside no more. Some nights, when we hear these pops, we got to sleep under our beds” (“Hamsterdam”).

Why is the police department in *The Wire* so dysfunctional? Some characters find that the systemic problems in the police department are insoluble because the War on Drugs, the very game they play, is ideologically absurd. In the first episode of the show, detective Carver wryly observes: “Girl, you can’t even call this shit a war” because “wars end” (“The Target”). “The Target” was first aired on June 2, 2002 in America. At that time, America was engaged in another “holy war,” the War on Terror, which by Carver’s logic likewise cannot be called a war: terrorism never ends. On Dec 19, 2004, the final episode of the third season, “Mission Accomplished,” was aired. In this episode the title of which echoes President Bush’s famous victory speech on the *USS Abraham Lincoln* in the previous year, Slim Charles, the Barksdale organization’s chief enforcer, encourages his boss to fight against the Stanfield crew: “Don’t matter who did what to who at this point. Fact is, we went to war, and now there ain’t no going back. I mean, shit, it’s what war is, you know? ... If it’s a lie, then we fight on that lie.” In this manner, while resonating with the contemporary atmosphere of the War on Terror, Carver’s and Charles’ arguments poignantly indicate the absurd elements in America’s two “holy wars” on general nouns.

In cross-referencing the two “holy wars” in various episodes, *The Wire* foregrounds that the two wars are absurd not only in their ideologies but also in their practices. In “The Homeland Archipelago,” Ruben and Maskovksy argue that “As a localized way of thinking about and maintaining the boundaries and rules of home, Homeland Security—and the authoritarian regime of discipline it represents—appears to resonate with and take up pre-existing cultures of

coercion, surveillance and exclusion operative in the drug war, and more broadly in a neoliberal era of disinvestment and devolution” (207). In Season 4, a session on the Western District’s patrol briefing takes an unexpected turn when an anti-terrorism expert delivers an extended monologue on the importance of keeping an eye out for potential terrorists in the police’s patrolling districts: “And for emergency procedures in the event of biochemical agents, you can refer to Appendix B” (“Boys of Summer”). The show’s rendering of the anti-terrorist expert’s session shows that the War on Terror has little, if any, direct ideological and practical purchase on inner-city communities, such as dispersed black ghettos in Baltimore: “Some Al-Qaedas were up on Baltimore street, planning on blowing up the chicken joint. But Apex’s crew jacked them up, took their camels and robes, buried their ass in Leakin Park” (“Boys of Summer”). In effect, as a national mode of governance grafted onto an urban locality, Homeland Security seems a total flop as it appears to resonate with few in the show, just like the War on Drugs. The threats of terrorism and drugs are real. However, according to *The Wire*, the Federal Government’s official approaches or strategies in dealing with the threats are often unreal.

In *The Wire*, the police department is also dysfunctional because of the city’s budget crisis. Some detectives, such as Bunk, McNulty and Freamon, are eager to do what they call real police work or career cases, but their efforts are easily frustrated by deep cuts to the department budget. In contrast to the police work seen on *CSI*, the detectives in *The Wire* need to wait week after week to receive their lab reports from the staff-deprived crime lab: the police lab

supervisor, Ron Lowenthal complains, “We had cutbacks, you know that. We lost three of four trance examiners, lost half our clerical. The freezer went bad, we lost four months of blood samples. Did you know that? Four months of evidence and they still haven’t replaced my damn icebox” (“The Dickensian Aspect”). And they often struggle to receive permission to wiretap a phone not because of the controversial nature of wiretapping, but simply due to its high costs. Thus, they struggle on the front line of America’s “holy war” without any viable signs of victory. It is not surprising to hear many detectives complain: “someday I want to find out what it feels like to work for a real police department” (“More with Less”).

The police department is also eroded by city politics. It is often politically exploited by the city’s mayors and politicians for the sake of their own careers. Deputy Commissioner Rawls reveals to Mayor-elect Tommy Carcetti his thought about the department’s problem, in a way reflecting his own interests:

CARCETTI. So what’s the problem?

RAWLS. Problem is I do what I’m told.

WILSON [Carcetti’s Deputy Chief of Staff]. Meaning?

RAWLS. Mr. Mayor, I’m no more a racist than you are. The thing about affirmative action – I’m just talking policy here, no offense intended – it’s a numbers game. And numbers games breed more numbers games. You need a 20% hike in the hiring of black officers to keep up with the city demographic.... Gotta show arrests are up 15, 20%. We’ll worry about the quality later. So

what you saw out there, it's a con game, a band-aid on cancers.

So no, I'm not with this, but I do follow orders. However, if those orders were to change, or if I had the opportunity to change them myself. ("Corner Boys")

In Season 3, the police executives manipulate crime stats to help in the re-election of the incumbent mayor Royce in an election year. This fact is divulged by Carcetti during a TV debate show. To claim to the public that crimes are down in Baltimore, the mayor needs to show numbers, so policemen drive to the corner and cuff whomever they can, instead of chasing high-level criminals like Barksdale and Stinger Bell. This is what led Carcetti to run against the previous mayor, but ironically this is also what he maintains to be elected Governor once he becomes the city's mayor. His chief of staff, Michael Steintorf, puts pressure on the new Police Commissioner, Cedric Daniels:

STEINTORF. I am not seeing this kind of decline that's going to measure out to a ten percent drop in the quarter.

.....

DANIELS. The stats are clean. They are gonna stay clean. Either we fix this police department and the crime goes down, or we don't and the crime stays up.

STEINTORF. Commissioner, we're talking about a little help in the next couple quarters. ("-30-")

What matters most in this politicized police department is numbers, not the quality of police work: as Roland Pryzbylewski explains, "Making robberies into

larcenies, making rapes disappear, you juke the stats and majors become colonels” (“Know Your Place”). As a result of entangled systemic problems, the police department fails to secure the prosperity of the urban population in Baltimore and neglects the brutal urban landscape, which helps ensure it will become a permanent living condition for the marginalized.

Richard Sennett’s arguments on neoliberalism shed light on the systemic problems represented in *The Wire*. In *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Sennett argues that “The goal for rulers today, as for radicals fifty years ago, is to take apart rigid bureaucracy” (2). Dismantling bureaucratic institutions and organizations foundational to modern states, the culture of neoliberalism claims that it promotes a free society of opportunity and competition, in which an individual can finally be free from bureaucracy’s constraints: “The apostles of the new capitalism argue that their version of these three subjects—work, talent, consumption—adds up to more freedom in modern society, a fluid freedom, a ‘liquid modernity’ in the apt phrase of the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman” (Sennett 12-3). However, the version of freedom provided by the new culture does not guarantee actual freedom to the majority of people in need: “Only a certain kind of human being can prosper in unstable, fragmentary social conditions” (Sennett 3). Moreover, many of the majority are severely marginalized in America’s culture of neoliberalism. The stevedores in the harbor union and the numerous social outcasts in *The Wire* together epitomize those marginalized, ordinary Americans who agonize over the fact that in today’s culture the value of people is much lower than in the past.

Sennett explores the culture of neoliberalism, focusing on three topics: bureaucracy, meritocracy, and craftsmanship. His principal claim is that American society has become a very unreliable and unstable community because of the destruction of bureaucracy and the demise of craftsmanship—Sennett suggests that we expand our idea of craftsmanship to a broader understanding of the enduring human capacity and desire to achieve better work for its own sake. The culture of neoliberalism brought about the collapse of public institutions, as is well demonstrated in *The Wire*'s rendering of the police department and public school system. The major reason for this collapse, from Sennett's perspective, is that bureaucracy and craftsmanship are outweighed by the corporate culture of meritocracy across diverse social realms; in *The Wire*, the quality of police work or the craftsmanship of police officers is outweighed by the corporate culture of meritocracy, as epitomized by Rawls' and Sgt. Landsman's obsession with the department's clearance rate. Sennett claims that "The values of the new economy have become a reference point for how government thinks about dependence and self-management in health care and pensions, or again about the kind of skill the education system provides" (8). In the culture of the new economy, everyone is looking for a short-term reward, profit, or result, and the long-term plan seems to become obsolete.

In *The Wire*, the police department is often required to prove its efficiency and utility through the stats for the interests of politicians. Each detective is required to show his or her usefulness through clearance rates. In "Not for Attribution," when Bunk shouts, "You're fucking our squad's clearance rate,"

McNulty fiercely replies, “Fuck the fucking numbers already. The fucking numbers destroyed this fucking department. Landsman and his clearance rate can suck a hairy asshole.” McNulty and other detectives argue that long-term investigations are necessary to prosecute and imprison high-level drug dealers, such as Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell. However, the department is always reluctant to allow their surveillance plans due to high costs and unwelcome political ramifications that the asset investigations of drug dealers’ money trail might bring in. Thus, the main characters in the show not only fight against drug dealers, but also need to struggle with or persuade the deteriorated bureaucratic system to execute their craftsmanship as police officers.

The police department’s obsession with stat games is closely linked to the abandonment of Baltimore’s urban area: as Daniels remarks, “The stat games, that lie, it’s what ruined this department. Shining up shit and calling it gold, so majors become colonels and mayors become governors. Pretending to do police work while one generation fucking trains the next how not to do the job” (“-30-”). In *Urban Outcasts*, Loïc Wacquant argues that market-oriented state policies “have aggravated, packed and trapped poor blacks at the bottom of the spatial order of the polarizing city” (4). In analyzing the ghettos of South Chicago and Paris’ banlieue, which he calls the hyperghetto, Wacquant points out a transition from the welfare state to the neoliberal penal state that enabled the creation of those spaces while social services were reduced or eliminated. Similarly, Loretta Napoleoni argues that “The successful criminal colonization of Western urban enclaves is primed by the indifference of the market-state toward these areas. Poor

economic opportunity, coupled with the electoral irrelevance of the population, most of whom do not even vote, is at the root of the market-state's lack of interest" (*RE 222*). And the people who occupy these criminalized urban areas are, in Bauman's terms, the collateral casualties of the socio-economic change brought about by the neoliberal state and neoliberalism. The most advanced form of the contemporary state is that which requires the generation of new situations of insecurity to enforce its governance through the production of socially stigmatized people. *The Wire* repeatedly reflects this development, mainly through its rendering of the indifference and failure of the police to protect urban outcasts.

While emphasizing the effects of neoliberal public polices, Wacquant insinuates the possibility of a viable solution to this bleak reality through policy changes. However, *The Wire*'s portrayal of Baltimore is more pessimistic than Wacquant's vision. In the show, everything repeats without change. A generation of corner boys disappears from the streets of Baltimore, but another generation very quickly comes up to replace it. A drug kingpin like Avon Barksdale is jailed but another big player like Marlo Stanfield immediately takes the throne. A corrupt Commissioner, Ervin Burrell, is replaced by another incompetent police executive, Stan Valchek, who is only attuned to city politics and his personal interests. It is undeniable that detectives like McNulty and Freamon solve some career cases. However, in the end, everyday life remains unchanged in *The Wire*.

The systemic problems and violence perpetuate injustice and inequality in every social realm depicted in the show: as Baltimore school teacher Grace Sampson asserts bleakly, "Wherever you go, there you are" ("Know Your Place").

And the show does not reveal anything tangible by which the problem and solution can be measured, and angry men, such as McNulty and Sobotka, do not really know how to react. Known as “an insubordinate little prick,” McNulty first brings the Barksdale case to the department as a sort of rebellion against incompetent and unintelligent police executives; he does not bring the Barksdale case for the sake of justice or great causes. This divorced detective, a college dropout, is somehow devoted to chasing drug kingpins while obsessed with sex, alcohol and anger. He is always so angry at the way he is situated in reality that he becomes an endless source of troubles. Bunk says to Jimmy, “You are no good for people. Damn everybody around you Christ” (“Lessons”); Freeman accuses McNulty of setting fire to everything he touches (“Hamsterdam”). In “Clarifications,” McNulty confesses to his partner Bede that “I don’t even know where the anger comes from. I don’t know how to make it stop.”

This pessimistic aspect of the show is criticized by Dreier and Atlas: “*The Wire* is the opposite of radical; it was hopeless and nihilistic. The city portrayed in *The Wire* is a dystopian nightmare, a web of oppression and social pathology that is impossible to escape” (“Bush-Era Fable” 330). They argue that “the show didn’t even hint at the possibility that residents, if well organized and strategic, can push powerbrokers to change policies and institutions to make the city more humane and livable” (331). From this perspective, Dreier and Atlas conclude that “*The Wire* failed to offer viewers any understanding that the problems facing cities and the urban poor are *solvable*” (332, italics in orig.).

As Dreier and Atlas claim, *The Wire* does not provide us with any viable

solution. However, the problems depicted in *The Wire* are not solvable through policy changes or civil activism, as they argue. Through Tommy Carcetti's political career, the show clarifies the point that policy changes or civil activism would not change the socio-economic conditions that have plummeted Baltimore into poverty and crime. In addition, the absence of an alternative or vision for change is not where this show fails at all. Rather, it is the very reason why *The Wire* is so successful in exposing the bleak reality of contemporary America, while resonating with capitalistic globalization. In *The Working Life*, Joanne B. Ciulla argues that in the age of globalization, "Economists aren't concerned with the ghost in the machine; they have a more frightening specter: the global economy. This new ghost is unpredictable and illogical, yet it has had a strong influence on management behavior" (60). And as a result of this capricious economic environment,

Some business leaders feel that they are less responsible for their failures because they can blame them on things beyond their control, such as the global economy or the stock market, when in fact many business failures that result in job losses are the product of human errors. (Ciulla 161)

In this business culture, "Frustrated unemployed workers don't always know who to blame or who to yell at. They can't blame managers or politicians, because nobody can control the global economy" (Ciulla 162). In Season 5, the *Baltimore Sun* executive editor James Whiting outlines the challenge: "Seeking a balance in this new world, we're now faced with hard choices....We're quite simply going to

have to find ways to do more with less” (“Not for Attribution”). And City Desk Editor Augustus Haynes wonders: “How come there’s cut in the newsroom when the company’s still profitable?” (“Not for Attribution”). In this new world, as Touraine argues, “The class struggle thus disappears not because relations between employers and wage-earners have become pacific, but because conflicts have been displaced from internal problems of production to the global strategies of transnational firms and financial networks” (24). In a *Wall Street Journal* essay, James Grant notes that “Through history, outrageous financial behavior has been met with outrage. But today Wall Street’s damaging recklessness has been met with near-silence, from a too-tolerant populace.” Individual responsibility for economic crises tends to evaporate under capitalism. The systemic violence brought by the transnational firms and financial networks is often (mis)understood by many ordinary citizens as an inevitable, neutral, and apolitical social driving force. As Perelman observes, “The capitalist has little choice but to compete aggressively or cease functioning as a capitalist. The result can be equally brutal, but the fault lies with the system, not the individual” (60). Eventually, the systemic violence brought by unfettered capitalism become transparent, although, as Barbara Ehrenreich argues, “Actual humans—often masked as financial institutions—did that [the 2007 credit crisis]” (79). Thus, on the one hand, this type of displacement of conflicts constitutes the impasse in which many main characters in *The Wire* feel entrapped and powerless. On the other hand, it also perpetuates the prevalent sense of inequality and injustice in the show.

Jacques Rancière’s idea of politics can provide insights into how *The Wire*

criticizes this standstill of inequality and injustice. In *Disagreement*, Rancière argues that “politics ... is that activity which turns on equality as its principle” (ix). In “Staging Equality,” Peter Hallward writes, “Rancière’s most fundamental assumption is that everyone thinks. Everyone shares equal powers of speech and thought, and this ‘equality is not a goal to be attained but a point of departure, a supposition to be maintained in all circumstances’” (109). Thus, Rancière’s idea of equality is an axiomatic presumption in that it is prior to any actual arrangements of inequality: “Equality, instead of being the result of a political process, must be conceived as the *presupposition* of those who act” (May, “Democracy” 5).

For Rancière, politics is essentially tied to aesthetics: “Before it is a matter of representative institutions, legal procedures or militant organizations, politics is a matter of building a stage and sustaining a spectacle or ‘show’” (Hallward 111). In contrast to his idea of politics, Rancière defines the counter-political action as “the police.” And the police for Rancière signify what is commonly, in the journalistic parlance of our times, understood by the term politics:

Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems of legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it *the police*. (*Disagreement* 28)

From Rancière’s perspective, on the one hand, the police reaffirm how there are

only existing parts of the society and how each of them has been given their due share. On the other hand, politics claims the opposite, that there is something wrong in the existing account of the society and that there is a part in the society for “those who have no part” (“Rights” 305). The order of the police consists precisely in the denial of the existence of any such part, in rendering “those who have no part” invisible and therefore non-existent.

In Rancière’s politics, the disruptive enactment of equality implies a new division of the sensible against the regime of “division and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetic-political regime” (Rockhill 1). In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière argues that “The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed” (12). Through the claim of equality, which is an event and process of political subjectivization, the marginalized who are invisible in the previous aesthetic coordinates can become visible: “all my work on workers’ emancipation showed that the most prominent of the claims put forward by the workers and the poor was precisely the claim to visibility, a will to enter the political realm of appearance, the affirmation of a capacity for appearance” (qtd. in Hallward 117).

From Rancière’s perspective, *The Wire* is a theatre of politics in which the axiomatic claims of equality make sensible the prevalent inequality and injustice through the show’s foregrounding of wasted lives in Baltimore. It takes two strategies to make the claims of equality. First, its representation of Baltimore

intersects the sensible and insensible parts of the community by showing that everyone, regardless of their awareness, is equal and connected in the face of the systemic violence of corrupted bureaucratic systems and the culture of neoliberalism. In doing so, it reveals and asserts the position of the excluded, or those Rancière names “those who have no part,” in the dominant distribution system of the sensible. Second, the show creates some controversial, angry characters who practice Rancière’s axiomatic conception of equality for the sake of “those who have no part.”

In “The Angriest Man in America,” Mark Bowden writes:

One of the clever early conceits of the show was to juxtapose the organizational problems of the city police department with those of the powerful drug gang controlling trafficking in the city’s west-side slums. The heads of both organizations, official and criminal, wrestle with similar management and personal issues, and resolve them with similarly cold self-interest. In both the department and the gang, the powerful exploit the weak, and within the ranks those who exhibit dedication, talent, and loyalty are usually punished for their efforts. (52)

Each season, a new wiretap allows the narrative to unveil the ways that the legal and illegal sides are tied to each other. And the police wiretap reveals that neither side can claim to be just or good. The police department and criminal organizations are depicted as structurally similar and highly interconnected. They are connected not just by wires, but by flows of power and money: as Detective

Freamon remarks, “The truth is, those guys [the Barksdale crew] had money going everywhere, investments, political donations, consulting fees” (“Boys of Summer”). And each demands similar compromises from the individuals caught up within their bureaucratic organizations.

The drug organizations also act as a model for unfettered capitalism. In “Stringer Bell’s Lament,” Jason Read argues:

The world of business and the drug trade are thus two different manifestations of the same chessboard, of the same structure, in which the pawns remain pawns, slaving away, and the king stays the king. They may be separated by means, legal and illegal, but are ultimately unified by ends, by the pursuit of profit. (126)

Everyone in the show is the victim of the same systemic violence of unfettered capitalism, which, seemingly, nobody can control. In this world of inequality and injustice brought about by neoliberalism, the show’s rendering of main characters emphasizes the interconnectedness of the people who seemingly belong to totally different realms in the dominant regime of the sensible. In doing so, the show asserts the equality of the excluded to the included.

The city of Baltimore is divided along lines of race, class, power, capital, and legality. Though the delimitation and segregation of the people in Baltimore seem insurmountable, the show’s rendering of the city reveals that the lines of division are actually very porous. There are many lines that cross the city, but there are also many dialogues integrating the city, such as those seen in the relation between Omar and Detective Bunk, of Prop Joe and Commissioner

Burrell, of Namond and Senator Davis, and of Bell and Major Colvin. Before being swallowed up in the darkness of the ghetto, a homeless drug addict, Bubbles, retorts to McNulty: “Thin line between heaven and here” (“Old Cases”). His remark ironically foreshadows Deputy Commissioner Burrell’s comment at a fundraiser party: “In this state, it’s a thin line between campaign posters and photo arrays” (“One Arrest”). Bubble’s dark alley and Burrell’s bright party hall: the contrast of these two spaces seems to mark an insuperable division, which segregates and delimits the black ghettos.

However, these types of divisions are reconfigured, as the show reveals that the main characters are all connected and all from the same community, though they might not realize it, through their sharing of speech lines. Known as “a predatory motherfucker” who only robs drug dealers, Omar Little helps Detective Bunk solve a couple of murder cases. It turns out that they went to the same high school; Bunk was a few years ahead of Omar. The Eastside drug mogul, Prop Joe, also went to the same high school back in the day with Commissioner Ervin Burrell: “Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, Ervin was a year before me at Dunbar. He was in the Glee Club” (“Transitions”). When Stringer Bell, the most business-attuned street figure, is killed by Omar and Brother Mouzone at the end of Season 3, his last words are “Get on with it, Motherfucker” (“Mission Accomplished”). In the same episode, Colvin is humiliated and degraded in his last Comp-Stat meeting at the Baltimore Police Department. His last remark as a police officer is also, “Get on with it, Motherfucker” (“Mission Accomplished”). Senator Clary Davis and corner boy

Namond likewise share a sentence: “I’ll take any motherfucker’s money if he gives it to me” (“Soft Eyes”). A US senator’s moral consciousness is on the same level as a corner boy’s. All the cross references of objects, dialogue, and events emphasize the inter-connection of the main characters in the show: they are all equal, and they are all from the same community. While depicting how this community is crushed and dilapidated under the influence of the culture of neoliberalism, the show also evokes an awareness of the connectivity of all the characters.

This evocation of the connectivity serves to redraw the dominant regime of the sensible. In doing so, it brings about a re-distribution of the sensible, and this enactment of re-distribution is dissent—what Jacques Rancière defines as “the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself” (May 47). The main characters from the ghettos are excluded from the community; by sharing various lines of speech, Bell, Omar, Namond, and Prop Joe, alienated and distanced from the dominant regime in reality, expose their presences in the world. Revealing their connectivity to the community is an act of reconfiguring the sensible of the community. And at the same time, it creates the voice of dissent, which accuses the sensible world of the ineluctable dissolution and vanity: as Deputy Commissioner Ervin Burrell admits, “You’re not wrong, Lieutenant [Daniels]. In this state, there’s a thin line between campaign posters and photo arrays” (“One Arrest”).

According to Rancière, being political means creating dissent, and thus unveiling the inequality concealed in the dominant system. Equality is not

bestowed but produced by the interpersonal activity in a community: “Democracy is the community of sharing, in both senses of the term: membership in a single world which can only be expressed in adversarial terms, and a coming together which can only occur in conflict” (May 71). The community in *The Wire*, while seriously divided, nevertheless disguises inequality, as it allocates and dislocates the people in the community into the socially stigmatized sectors, and then as it silences their voices as if they do not exist or belong to a totally different world. However, as the show progresses toward its end, it reveals that there is no gap to bridge between the legal side and the illegal side, no gap between races or classes. On the contrary, there is a likeness that can be acknowledged and put into play in the very production of claiming equality. In this sense, *The Wire* shows that “those who have no part” in the community claim their part in the realm of the sensible, while arousing the sense of dissent. This is the very act of blurring the boundary between those who have a part and those who have not.

The Wire represents the inter-connectedness of diverse social realms in America: from the police to unions, from public school to drug-dealing gangs. And, in developing ethically complex characters struggling with systemic inequality and injustice, “*The Wire* suggests that, since attempts to reform these institutions from within are doomed to failure, the *only* way to challenge failed systems is through independent action unsanctioned by these very institutions” (Chaddha et al. 84, italics in orig.). Thus, disappointed by the deteriorated bureaucracy and the systemic violence of neoliberalism, heroic characters such as McNulty, Freamon and Colvin become rogue cops who defy bureaucrats for their

own causes. To overcome the systemic malfunctions of the police department, they all transgress laws and, eventually, are all forced to retire from police work. How can we understand their transgression of laws? Should we advocate Major Colvin's experiment, Hamsterdam, where drugs are semi-legalized? Should we approve McNulty and Freamon's illegal use of wiretapping in cracking down on Marlo Stanfield's organization? If we approve illegal wiretaps, then do we take them as an unavoidable evil that should be allowed in times of emergency?

Simply put, from Rancière's perspective, the angry characters observe inequality and make claims of equality. As a result of their claims, what happens in *The Wire* entails a certain political subjectivization: "Those who have no name, who remain invisible and inaudible, can only penetrate the police order via a mode of subjectivization that transforms the aesthetic coordinates of the community by implementing the universal presupposition of politics: we are all equal" (Rockhill 3). The angry characters' political commitment turns them into rogue cops. Instead of following and confirming the social delimitation and legitimization as police, they subvert the police's regime of distribution and legitimization through their transgression of laws. By depicting rogue cops who subvert the regime of the police, *The Wire* transforms the realm of the police into the politics of equality.

Frustrated by the unchanging reality in his district, Major Colvin transforms the abandoned houses into *de facto* legalized areas for drug trafficking:

The new strategic plan for the district is to move all street-level trafficking to these three areas. . . . But we let these knuckleheads

know that if they move to these areas, away from the residential streets, away from commercial areas, away from schools, if they take that shit down the road, they can go about their business without any interference from us. (“Dead Soldiers”)

His secret project is eventually named Hamsterdam by the street-drug people. The Hamsterdam project makes significant progress in the Western District, salvaging the shattered community with a 14 percent reduction in crime. Colvin’s subversive experiment is born out of a frustration with the shambles and hypocrisy of the War on Drugs and his personal wish to do something, however radical, that might actually break the standstill and improve the living conditions of the people in the stigmatized areas: “But I’m just trying to save what’s left of my district any way I can, if I can” (“Back Burners”). In a certain sense, Colvin’s police work can be understood to revisit Foucault’s idea of policing, based on the microphysics of power between the population and institutions. However, as he subverts the established order of legitimization, more importantly, Colvin draws a new line of the sensible that brings “those who have no part” into visibility. The city’s wasted lives, those banished into the darkness of abandoned housing projects, finally become visible in the three zones of Hamsterdam. This is the political function of Colvin’s Hamsterdam, though he might not realize it: as the Deacon observes, “No offense, but you’re like the blind man and the elephant. It’s a lot bigger than what you got your hand on” (“Moral Midgetry”).

In Season 5, frustrated by new Mayor Carcetti’s forgotten promises about the reform of the department, McNulty and Freamon manipulate crime scenes to

create a fictional serial killer, who receives nationwide media attention and forces City Hall to provide McNulty with a sort of *carte blanche*. And they use the money from City Hall to fund a case against the Stanfield crew responsible for slayings in vacant row houses a year earlier. The pitcher goes once too often to the well but is broken at last. Because of this fraud, McNulty and Freamon are eventually forced to retire, although this fictional homeless serial killer case makes it possible to disintegrate the Stanfield crew.

Colvin, McNulty and Freamon: they all transgress the laws, which delegate sovereign violence to them. Their transgression is a revolt of petty sovereigns. Although violence is conducted in the name of the sovereign state, it is at the micro-level that sovereign subjects or petty sovereigns come to decide upon whom violence is to be inflicted. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben highlights the sovereign character of the police. Writing about the prevalent materialization of the state of exception, he argues:

In all these cases, an apparently innocuous space (for example, the Hotel Arcades in Roissy) actually delimits a space in which the normal order is *de facto* suspended and in which whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of the police who temporarily act as sovereign. (174)

According to Agamben, the local decisions and violence are committed by petty sovereigns who decide on a case-by-case basis, which people will be detained. As they decide which case is legitimate, McNulty and Freamon are petty sovereigns who decide the legal and illegal in their localities. They illegally wiretap the cell

phones of the Stanfield crew, whom they define as the legitimate target. In “The Dickensian Aspect,” Freamon solemnly narrates: “I’ve reached a point, detective Sydnor, where I no longer have the time or patience left to address myself to the needs of the system within which we work. I’m tired.” He continues:

When they took us off Marlo this last time, when they said they couldn’t pay for further investigation, I regarded that decision as illegitimate.... And so I’m responding in kind. I’m going to press a case against Marlo Stanfield without regard to the usual rules. I’m running an illegal wiretap on Marlo Stanfield’s cell phone” (“The Dickensian Aspect”).

The petty sovereigns such as McNulty and Freamon are delegated sovereign power on the condition that they follow the chain of command. However, these petty sovereigns revolt against authority: “Fuck the bosses” (“Hamsterdam”). The police department or City Hall cannot control those subversive police officers, although they could penalize them after the fact. Their acts of transgression constitute political action against the police, which is, from Rancière’s perspective, a system of a certain distribution of the sensible that precludes the emergence of politics. McNulty and Freamon use their prerogatory power to draw a new line of the sensible, to make the claim of equality for the sake of the bodies found in the row houses:

MCNULTY. Guy leaves two dozen bodies scattered all over the city, no one gives a fuck.

FREAMON. It’s because who he dropped.

MORELAND. True that. You can go a long way in this country
killing black folk. Young males especially. Misdemeanour
homicides.

.....

FREAMON. You think that if 300 white people were killed in this
city every year, they wouldn't send the 82nd Airborne?

("Unconfirmed Reports")

The bodies found in the row houses are wasted lives, those who have no part in the community. The two rogue detectives' commitment to illegal wiretapping makes invisible, wasted lives visible. Through their illegal investigation, they enact and participate in the process of re-constructing the distribution of the sensible.

Angry and frustrated characters such as Colvin, McNulty and Freamon observe inequality, they unveil inequality, and they take part in their own fight against inequality in order to claim the equality of wasted lives. And all of them, equally, fail again and again. However, the show's demonstration of the failures is also a way of claiming the equality of wasted lives. Such wasted lives have no part in the community, they are segregated and ghettoized, and they eventually become invisible. Through its rendering of this bleak reality, *The Wire* represents the fundamental claim of their equality. The show's most exceptional police officers, Detectives Jimmy McNulty and Lester Freamon, find their initiative and talent punished at almost every turn. In a way, the police department's response to them is natural in that what they attempt to achieve is to subvert the established

division of the sensible: the very regime protected by the police. Their transgressions, participation or commitment in reality are polemic reactions to inequality, to say the least, compared to the actions of those in the Baltimore police department's upper echelons, who are determined only to advance their own careers and sustain the status quo.

In a certain sense, the show portrays McNulty and Freamon as righteous because they sacrifice themselves for the sake of great ideals they believe to be just. They compromise the legality of their police work for the sake of what they believe is better police work. However, in *The Wire*, many detectives and prosecutors likewise compromise the application of the law for the sake of causes or outcomes that, they believe, will be of greater benefit; they are always ready to negotiate with middle-level drug dealers to catch the drug kingpin, though it hardly ever happens. In addition, incompetent police executives and politicians also wield the law for their version of good police work. In the context of such pervasive legal compromise, how can any particular transgression of the law be justified? Can we advocate the petty sovereigns' revolt? Are they suggesting to us a way of resistance against the systemic problems and violence brought by unfettered capitalism? As Judith Butler argues in *Prearious Life*, petty sovereigns' power is, in essence, rogue power without legitimacy:

And yet such figures are delegated with the power to render unilateral decisions, accountable to no law and without any legitimate authority. The resurrected sovereignty is thus not the sovereignty of unified power under the conditions of legitimacy,

the form of power that guarantees the representative status of political institutions. It is rather, a lawless and prerogatory power, a “rogue” power *par excellence*. (56)

Freamon’s and McNulty’s transgressions of the law seems somewhat justifiable because they pursue a selfless, righteous cause, and because the Stanfield crew epitomizes terroristic criminality. However, the show never fully endorses their transgression of the law.

The lawless, rogue power is intrinsic to the police work of Freamon and McNulty. Notable, here, is McNulty’s account of the power of the patrolling officer:

Baker, let me tell you a little secret: a patrolling officer on his beat is the one true dictatorship in America. We can lock a guy up on a humble; we can lock him up for real; or we can say, fuck it, pull under the expressway and drink ourselves to death, and our side partners will cover it. So no one – and I mean no one – tells us how to waste our shift. (“Misgivings”)

The enforcement of the law depends on the personality of the police officer on the street, as it depends on the personality of the dictator or sovereign in the state of exception. The police officer can wield the application of the law as he or she pleases on the street, as McNulty indicates in his disclosure to Baker. McNulty’s remark insinuates that the transgressions of the petty sovereigns in *The Wire* are also bound to sovereign politics—the logic and reasoning of the sovereign who decides the state of exception. In other words, the petty sovereigns’ revolt cannot

evade the vicious circle of sovereign politics. In effect, they follow the same logic and reasoning of the sovereign, and this is the fundamental reason why their effort to overcome systemic problems cannot but fail in the end, because they cannot offer a solution, alternative, or answer.

In the last episode of the show, everything seems to repeat itself. The sun rises but also sets. The camera shows the various aspects of the city without narration and music. It captures everyday life in the city, ranging from early morning traffic to a late night harbor scene. The show emphasizes a certain repetition of reality; we see Sergeant Carver succeed Daniels as Lieutenant, Sydnor become another insubordinate McNulty, talking with Judge Phelan to backstab superiors, and the various forms of drug trafficking on the streets continue unchecked. Closure of a career case does not really bring any changes into the life described in the show. All these scenes at the end of the series seem to indicate that the problematic life we witness in *The Wire* will continue, though the show will end soon. The game will never end: as Slim Charles says, “Game’s the same, just got more fierce” (“Hamsterdam”). According to *The Wire*, this is the bleak reality of contemporary America, one in which everyone is implicated, and one in which the claims of equality are more urgent than ever. Several of the main characters approach this call for equality, in their respective ways with commitment. However, such heroic individuals all eventually fail to bring about any change. They do not know the answer to their bleak reality, devastated by unfettered capitalism. However, at least they know that “whatever it is, it can’t be a lie” as Major Colvin points out in “Hamsterdam.”

Through its vivid description of the wasted lives in Baltimore, *The Wire* highlights inequality and injustice. This revelation is a political act of dissensus. In the show, however, dissensus does not really bring about any real change. As nobody knows what follows dissent, we don't know how to overcome the bleak reality perpetuated by unfettered capitalism. In a town hall meeting in his district, Major Colvin admits:

The truth is, I can't promise you it's gonna get any better. We can't lock up the thousands out there on the corners. There'd be no place to put them even if we could. We show you charts and statistics like they mean something. But you're going back to your homes tonight, we're gonna be in our patrol cars, and them boys still gonna be out there on them corners . . . deep in the game. This here is the world we got, people. And it's about time all of us had good sense to at least admit that much. ("Hamsterdam")

According to *The Wire*, the most we can know is that we don't know the answer.

Chapter IV:

The Revolt of Bare Lives and the Return to Normality

in *Heroes* Season One: Genesis

Heroes is an NBC Sci-Fi serial drama that premiered on September 25, 2006. In interweaving the atmosphere of emergency after September 11 in America with the main characters' everyday practices, this show portrays the story of several people who think they are like everyone else until they realize they have superhuman abilities. Many episodes of this show involve ordinary people who discover their (or some other people's) incredible powers and their reactions to that discovery. Although many characters remain confounded by or silent about these discoveries, some characters actively investigate the origins and extent of their special abilities by creating their own narratives of destiny and saving the world from the Company's conspiracy. Peter Petrelli, a former hospice nurse with the ability to absorb the powers of others, feels that he's meant to do something extraordinary: "I've been trying to save the world, one person at a time, but I'm meant for something bigger. Something important" ("One Giant Leap"). A Japanese office worker with the ability to teleport, Hiro Nakamura, is arguably the most likable hero from a traditional mythological perspective, in that he goes on adventures in search of his destiny for the sake of the world: "I wanna boldly go where no man has gone before" ("Genesis"). By contrast, Peter's evil alter-ego, Sylar, seeks out individuals with superpowers in order to kill them and absorb their powers for his own sake. Mohinder Suresh, a geneticist, continues his father's research into the biological source of people's superpowers to prove his

father's hypotheses regarding such abilities. And Noah Bennet represents the Company, finding people with special abilities for its conspiracy.

The Company is a biopolitical entity that controls these super-powered people. It consists of various secretive characters, including Peter's parents, mobster Mr. Linderman, and the dying Charles Deveaux, who was once Peter's patient. It is a group of people who attempt to create a state of emergency to change America, and thereby the world, through a terroristic attack that will blow up half of New York City in order to determine the next evolutionary stage. All the characters are inextricably locked into figuring out the Company's conspiracy, and cross-pollinating with one another. The main characters' struggles culminate in a climactic meeting at Kirby Plaza in New York City as they swarm from all directions, in order to stop the Company's terroristic conspiracy.

Although many expected that this show would be popular only among a relatively small number of fans, it "appeals to a broader audience and has less of a cult image, which is surprising considering that it emerged as a hybrid of comic books and science fiction television, two genres that usually inspire cultdom" (Porter et al. 16). One way of understanding this somewhat unexpected popularity of the show is that, regardless of the characters' powers, *Heroes* focuses on the ordinariness of the main characters: how ordinary people struggle with rare ability. The show's creator, Tim Kring, has remarked: "I knew that I wanted the show to be much more about how people dealt with these powers, as opposed to using them" (qtd. in Davis 60). Many episodes of *Heroes* begin with a kind of mantra: "Ordinary people across the globe discovered extraordinary abilities"

(“Genesis”). Some of the main characters claim they are special; Hiro Nakamura and Peter Petrelli are determined to save the world from the very beginning of the series. Though Peter and Hiro have a strong belief that they are destined to be greater than themselves, the show’s rendering of these two characters reveals that they do not possess the conventional characteristics of the superhero in popular American culture, in that their fragile personalities and lack of leadership and determination make them powerless as individuals in preventing the Company’s conspiracy. In addition, many characters with superpowers, such as Nathan Petrelli, Niki Sanders and Claire Bennett, do not want to be heroes at all, thinking of their abilities as curses or diseases. In this way, *Heroes* is a superhero show without superheroes.

However, it is insufficient to consider the main characters as not being heroes at all. Regardless of their various flaws, don’t they save the world from the Company’s conspiracy? Can’t heroism be a sudden, one-time act? The heroic act does not have to be ongoing. Although they do not really understand the consequence of their actions, don’t the reluctant characters nevertheless contribute to stopping the Company’s conspiracy? How can we understand this paradoxical aspect of the show? At a glance, this paradox reflects two broad, intersecting social developments after September 11: the return of cartoon superheroes and “the banality of heroism” in the age of the War on Terror: “we are all potential heroes waiting for a moment in life to perform a heroic deed” (Franco and Zimbardo). Many of the main characters in the show remind us of cartoon superheroes, such as the X-Men and the Fantastic Four. However, the show’s

rendering of the main characters emphasizes their ordinariness. Like the ordinary people on United Airlines Flight 93 on September 11, 2001, the main characters revolt and successfully protect America from a terroristic threat. As a result of mediating these two social developments, this show exemplifies a certain new mode of heroism, one marked by the ethos of network culture, as epitomized by the wisdom of crowds and smart mobs. To distinguish this new mode of heroism from a more conventional, individualistic heroism, I name it the heroic collective: a group of people who can be heroic only as a group without an authoritarian leader. The main characters form a heroic collective. Their struggles against the seemingly omnipotent Company represent a strategy of collective resistance against the sovereign power in the state of exception. In considering this new model of heroism as an allegory of Hardt and Negri's model of resistance, the multitude, this chapter explores the political implications of the main characters and their collective actions in relation to biopolitics and the state of exception.

Building on Michel Foucault's foundational work on biopower, Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt are arguably the most important figures dominating contemporary discussions of biopower and biopolitics in all its forms. Regardless of their evident differences, the theories of Agamben, and of Hardt and Negri's studies are "both marked by the *conflation* of sovereign and biopolitical modalities of power" (Prozorov 53-4, italics in orig.). In *Homo Sacer, Remnants of Auschwitz*, and other works, Agamben conceptualizes biopolitics negatively, anchoring it to the state of exception and sovereign power that separates bare life from political forms of life. For Hardt and Negri, biopolitics

takes on a distinctly positive character particularly in relation to the potentiality of the multitude, their name for the political subject in the project of democracy, a project in which the destruction of “all existing forms of sovereignty” is “a precondition for establishing democracy” (*Multitude* 353). These contrasting positions on biopolitics and life’s potentiality represent two major understandings and strategies on the possibility of resistance in the state of exception, or the global state of war, if we follow Hardt and Negri’s terminology. This chapter reads *Heroes* as a consensus narrative that involves a process of mediating these two opposing positions. In this process of mediation, what we confront is not just simple juxtaposition or transplantation of contradictory ideas. Rather, it is the translation of the radicality of those critical thinkers into an accepted code of heroism and heroic sacrifice embodied in the show by the Petrelli Brothers.

Heroes reflects notable aspects of contemporary discussions about the sovereign-biopolitical regime of modern society while portraying a sovereign biopolitical entity that produces bare lives. The members of the heroic collective are prominent examples of Agamben’s bare life, “the life of *homo sacer*, who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” (*HS* 8, italics in orig.). Echoing the attacks of September 11, the Company’s conspiracy is to blow up half of New York City with a nuclear bomb—“Hiroshima in America”—in order to provoke a state of exception that would then change the world. According to its conspiracy, the Company will turn Peter Petrelli into a suicide bomber, whether he chooses to or not. Peter will be killed, but his death will not be remembered as an act of sacrifice because nobody will observe and mourn his death. The Company

exemplifies Agamben's idea of biopolitics: a politics that "*confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation*" (MWE 41, italics in orig.). The lives of the main characters, almost seamlessly manipulated by the Company's genetic engineering, represent "a purely bare life, entirely controlled by man and his technology" (Agamben, *HS* 164).

However, the way these bare lives resist the Company's biopolitical control departs from Agamben's model inoperative resistance, epitomized by figures such as Bartleby and the Muselmann. The heroic collective's struggle has a closer affinity to Hardt and Negri's multitude, in that it represents the mode of organization indigenous to the multitude: "the model is one of more or less spontaneous and temporary alliances coordinating different agendas without a central command" (Hardt and Negri, "What is the Multitude" 377). Nonetheless, as the show's rendering of collective resistance concludes in the sacrifice of the Petrelli brothers, the significance of the heterogenic multitude in the show seems somewhat compromised, to say the least. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Rene Girard argues that "By means of rites the community manages to cajole and somewhat subdue the forces of destruction. But the true nature and real function of these forces will always elude its grasp, precisely because the source of the evil is community itself" (99). The heroic collective stops the Company's conspiracy through the Petrelli brothers' sacrifice at the end of Season One, thereby saving the society from a terroristic threat. If we read this ending through Girard's lens, we can conclude that the show veils the real problem through the sacrifice of the Petrelli brothers.

In effect, through the closing of Season One, the show reaffirms the community's redemption through the sacrifice of individual heroes, and this undermines the significance of the heroic collective as a new political subject of resistance against sovereign power. In other words, after suggesting a new mode of collective heroism, the show ends by highlighting traditional heroism of the sort that recalls the Judeo-Christian myth of the savior who returns the community to normality. As a result of this return to normality, one that endorses the established regime, the show's rendering of the heroic collective cannot but be open to the charge that it contradicts its original, critical incisiveness.

After briefly introducing contemporary hero discourses in America, ranging from the return of popular superheroes in American culture to President Bush's rhetorical call for heroes following September 11, the first part of this chapter discusses how *Heroes* represents a new mode of heroism. The second part of this chapter brings into relief the show's representation of the Company's biopower in relation to Foucault's and Agamben's theories of biopolitics. In order to explore the bare lives of the main characters and their coping strategies against the Company's terroristic conspiracy, the third part of this chapter brings together Agamben's *homo sacer* and Hardt and Negri's multitude, and discusses how the show's protagonists represent these critical concepts. The last part of this chapter considers the political implications of the heroic collective, focusing on the Petrelli brothers' sacrifice. In analyzing the end of Season One, this chapter concludes with a discussion of how this somewhat subversive TV show promotes a return to normality reminiscent of President Bush's normalizing mantra in his

various public speeches after September 11: “I ask you to live your lives, and hug your children. I know many citizens have fears tonight, and I ask you to be calm and resolute, even in the face of a continuing threat” (“Freedom”).

Heroes foregrounds a certain contradictory character in contemporary hero discourses in America. Following the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, a discourse of American heroes flooded the media. A sense of heroism was renewed in the public arena, fueled by the courageous acts of many people on that fateful day. We can identify two distinctive trends in the representation of the hero in this discourse. One emphasized superheroism. In *Superman on the Couch*, Danny Fingeroth notes that “the permanence of the superhero as an idea and as a cultural phenomenon is stronger than ever. Each week, a superhero movie or TV series debuts, and another half-dozen are announced as being in production” (170). Although the popularity of comics drastically declined over the late 1990s and early 2000s, in the past decade, diverse comic book adaptations bolster nearly every studio’s release schedule. As a result, we see the successful return of cartoon superheroes such as Batman, X-Men and Fantastic Four, along with many new superheroes in various media: the *Harry Potter* (2001-) films and TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) to name two.

The other trend, however, emphasized everyday heroism. In this period, the Bush administration and various media promoted very realistic and somewhat ordinary types of heroes, such as firefighters, policemen and soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the sake of America in the War on Terrorism. In his speech at the Medal of Valor Award Ceremony on Sep. 9, 2005, President Bush

applauded the heroism of ordinary Americans: “We recognize a group of Americans whose bravery and commitment to their fellow citizens showed us the true meaning of heroism” (“President”). He continued:

The 9/11 Heroes Medal of Valor honors the public safety officers who gave their lives on September the 11th. On that day, firefighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians, Port Authority personnel and other public safety officers performed their jobs with extraordinary distinction in the face of unspeakable terror. (“President”)

After the attacks of September 11, the media endlessly circulated heroic images of FDNY firefighters. As the president officially eulogized the sacrifice of public safety officers, the state encouraged every individual to be an American hero to help win the War on Terrorism, a war involving not only law enforcement personnel and military combatants but also civilians: “Because no one believes that every conceivable form of attack can be prevented, civilians and first responders will again find themselves on the front lines” (National Commission 46).

Some cultural critics, such as John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, maintain that the advent of ordinary American heroes can be a potential base “for the development of healthy democratic [hero] myths” (362). However, it is doubtful whether this type of heroism really promotes democratic ideals in America after September 11; is there any way we can differentiate this banality of heroism after September 11 from war-time jingoism? What is crucially missing

from the discourse of ordinary heroism is a critical reflection on the need for heroes, as Jürgen Habermas points out in an interview with Giovanna Borradori after the attacks of September 11. In this interview, Habermas observes that

The courage, discipline, and selflessness demonstrated by the New York firemen who on September 11 spontaneously put their lives on the line to save others is admirable. But why do they need to be called “heroes”? Perhaps this word has different connotations in American English than it does in German. It seems to me that whenever “heroes” are honored the question arises as to who needs them and why. Even in this looser sense of the term one can understand Bertolt Brecht’s warning: “Pity the land that needs heroes.” (43)

In a way, the return of cartoon heroes supplements the void of critical reflections in the official discourse of heroism, as superhero comics published after September 11 embody more diverse and thoughtful reflections, which often contradict the Bush administration’s wartime heroism. In “Captain America Sheds His Mighty Tears: Comics and September 11,” Henry Jenkins argues that “Slower and more reflective than CNN (or for that matter the *Daily Planet*), quicker in their turnaround than television drama or Hollywood movies, comic books offered a useful testing ground for strategies by which popular culture could respond to this tragedy” (69). Although jingoistic images of superheroes were also popular, many comics show more thoughtful reflection, featuring an “ideological diversity” which was difficult to find “anywhere else in an increasingly polarized

and partisan American media” (Jenkins 75). Particularly since the superhero genre from its inception denotes “criticism against the impotent law enforcement and institutions that can be rescued only by extralegal superheroes” (Fingeroth 164), the successful return of cartoon superheroes reveals that many American citizens doubt the need of American heroism professed by their government.

Recollecting the political and cultural context of popular heroism after September 11 in America helps to show that *Heroes* is a hybrid of these two bifurcating socio-cultural representations of heroes. Recalling the conservative heroism of ordinary citizens, the show depicts how (extra)ordinary people become heroic figures who save New York City from the Company’s terroristic plan. However, it also portrays extralegal superheroes who criticize the impotence of the state in the face of an imminent terroristic threat. As the show mediates these two types of heroic conduct, it portrays a new type of heroism, which reflects the social communications revolution that critical thinkers such as Hardt and Negri believe enables democratic movements and empowers agents of social change. As if embodying the smart mob or the wisdom of the crowd on the Net, the main characters constitute a decentered network of people: “Everything is connected. We are all connected” (“Collision”). The main characters are a group of connected people who can perform heroic activities only as an ensemble without a single authoritarian leader. Regardless of their superhuman abilities, they are not heroic as individuals: as Hiro says to Ando, “You don’t have to have special power to be a hero” (“Better Halves”). Thus, the show provides us not with new heroes but

rather with a new mode of heroism the political consequences and ramifications of which have yet to settle into an intelligible pattern.

In “The Creation of Popular Heroes,” Orrin E. Klapp argues, “Hero worship in America expresses our characteristic values” and “reveals not only the traits we [Americans] admire most but also our fields of interest” (62). If a particular type of heroism reflects the values and interests of people in a particular time and place, then what kind of popular values and interests does the heroic collective with its struggles against the Company embody? It is hardly possible to see *Heroes* without relating it to a prevalent sense of emergency in America after September 11. At the end of the first episode, “Genesis,” as Isaac Mendez is murmuring “We have to stop it,” the camera captures a wall painting of the explosion to come, and moves into a sequence showing southern Manhattan without the Twin Towers. While predicting the upcoming terroristic attack in New York City, this scene simultaneously reminds the viewer of the attacks of September 11. Consequently, the show’s rendering of the main characters often emphasizes a sense of emergency. Peter gradually becomes obsessed with his destiny: “There’s no time” (“Homecoming”). Noah Bennett is not afraid of taking drastic measures: “I will do whatever I have to do to stop it [Sylar’s killing Claire]” (“Homecoming”). This sense of emergency and the various struggles of the heroic collective are interwoven with the Company’s conspiracy. In unveiling the Company’s conspiracy, the show portrays how a biopolitical entity produces bare lives and exploits them to manipulate a state of emergency. And the struggles

of the heroic collective in the show provide us with a chance to reflect upon how a political subject against sovereign biopower can be embodied.

Approaching *Heroes*' representation of biopower through the lens of Foucault and Agamben helps us to see how this show illustrates the Company's power over the main characters. Foucault's and Agamben's conflicting ideas of biopower are brought together in the show's rendering of the Company, as if to demonstrate that these two forms of power, Foucauldian biopower and Agambenian sovereign power, although analytically distinguishable, are not mutually exclusive forms of power operating in different historical periods. In order to clarify how the show portrays these conflicting ideas of biopolitics, a summary of each is in order. In "The Birth of Social Medicine," Foucault argues that "Society's control over individuals was accomplished not only through consciousness or ideology but also in the body and with the body. For capitalist society, it was biopolitics, the biological, the corporal, that mattered more than anything else" (137). Foucault introduces the concept of biopolitics to account for a historical process in which life appears as the object of government. In doing so, he foregrounds the productive aspect of power over living bodies, which are conceived less as natural organisms than as artificial beings that are open to technological construction and re-construction. In *The History of Sexuality*, while distinguishing biopower from sovereign power, Foucault considers biopolitics as a relatively new invention: "It is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the domain of value and

utility” (144). Thus, for Foucault, biopolitics is a unique modern mechanism distinct from the old sovereign power or the juridical system of law.

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben takes up Foucault’s analysis and reestablishes it on the very terrain from which the latter had wanted to break: the field of sovereignty. In contrast to Foucault, Agamben argues that politics is always biopolitics, in that it always requires the production of bare life: “*the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power*” (HS 6, italics in orig.). The production of *homo sacer* is a constitutive but unrecognized part of politics. Agamben argues that the constitution of sovereign power necessitates the production of a certain type of biopolitical body or the exposure of bare life: “The original political relation is the ban” (HS 181). Bare life, which seems to be located at the very margin of politics, turns out to be the basis of a political body that decides not simply over the life and death of human beings, but who will be recognized as a human being at all.

In “Impossible Dialogue on Bio-power,” Mika Ojakangas argues that “Although Agamben admits that our societies are bio-political, he nevertheless sees the Foucauldian opposition between bio-power and sovereign power as superfluous” (6). However, it is debatable whether Agamben’s location of the concept of biopower at the very nucleus of sovereignty is legitimate. The extent to which we can integrate Foucault’s biopolitics into sovereign power over life and death remains controversial, regardless of Agamben’s compelling arguments in *Homo Sacer*. In “The Question of Biopower: Foucault and Agamben,” Katia Genel argues:

Despite everything, Agamben is in fact bound to a power and its logic rather than to the plurality of its mechanisms. Power, according to the model of the camp, is understood as a mechanism for creating caesuras; it is in this respect reduced to paradigmatic logic. In Agamben's conception of the term, biopower is nothing other than the deployment of the structure of sovereignty in the form of the crisis. Agamben constitutes it as a paradigm rather than locating, as Foucault has done, the discontinuities and historical transformations of the way in which power is exercised. (58)

Agamben's usage of biopolitics and sovereignty tends toward reductionism, removing historical differences. From Foucault's perspective, in arguing that politics is essentially biopolitics, Agamben trans-historicizes the modern dynamics of power. And in doing so, he reduces the various mechanisms of biopolitical power that control human beings to the sovereign matter of life and death, whereas power's operations are complex and require scrutiny rather than a mere application of the concept of *homo sacer*. In addition, Agamben's idea of biopolitics does not take into account that, in our globalized world, the site of sovereignty is in transition. His analysis is too state-centered, while disregarding the function of capital in exploiting human bodies, and it relies on a limited conception of the state which does not take into account important politico-economical transformations in contemporary society.

Heroes' rendering of the Company's biopower combines Foucault's and Agamben's ideas of biopolitics. From Foucault's perspective, power in bio-

political societies tends toward administrative power, in which the experts and interpreters of life pursue productive ways of governing. As if embodying Foucault's idea of biopolitics, the Company tracks and fixes the main characters within social institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and prisons; some characters, such as Niki Sanders and D. L Hawkins, find out that their entire lives have been manipulated by the Company in Linderman's New York office: "Her fourth grade report card. Niki's immunization records. School photos and medical files. He's tracked our entire life. This finally makes sense... Me [D. L] and Niki, everything we had, it was – it wasn't real" ("The Hard Part"). In locating and tracking people with special abilities, the Company cares for the main characters: "Please don't get excited, Matt. We're trying to test your resting rate" ("Collision"). It is the expert and interpreter of the main characters' lives:

NATHAN. Do you have any idea who I am?

NOAH. Better than even you do. ("Hiros")

In Foucault's discussion of biopolitics, the primary object of biopower is population: "Biopower involves the entry of the biological life of a given population into the calculations of the state, and of the discourses of science and territorialization informing the implementation of the strategies and tactics of power" (Tagma 410). In *Heroes*, however, the main characters, the primary objects of biopower in the show, are potential outcasts from the general population due to their special abilities. At this point, Agamben's idea of *homo sacer*, which he proposes as the political-ontological model of man in contemporary society, can also contribute to our understanding of the Company's

power over the main characters. *Homo sacer* is a life that is negatively implicated in sovereign power in the form of the exception or of the ban. It is a life expelled from the community and put at the mercy of sovereign power. The Company manages the main characters as their resources: as Noah Bennett's mysterious boss, Thompson proposes, "Imagine working with someone like Parkman by your side. Knowing what everyone around you is thinking could prove quite resourceful" ("Company Man"). However, its management is not always productive, in that the main characters' lives are also at the mercy of the Company: as Peter remarks, "If this thing that you painted, this bomb is true, we're all dead" ("Better Halves"). As the show's narrator informs us, from the Company's perspective, "Evolution is an imperfect and often violent process. Morality loses its meaning. The question of good and evil reduced to one simple choice: survive or perish" ("Better Halves"). And in this process of evolution, the Company is the only figure that defines life unworthy of life. Given these aspects, the Company also represents an Agambenian sovereign figure.

The Company's sovereign power over the main characters epitomizes a certain transition of sovereignty in contemporary society. The state is ignorant of the Company's terroristic conspiracy; such powerlessness of the state stands in stark contrast to the power of the Company, sufficient to produce a state of exception through its conspiracy. And while the state knows nothing of the heroes' powers, the Company is ubiquitous and omnipresent, can command most of the protagonists whenever and wherever it wants. As seen in *Heroes*, in a way, the main danger today may not be that the body is the target of the state; on the

contrary, we are witnessing an important transformation of the state under the sign of deregulation, privatization and liberalization: “the disintegrating world arms market, the threats to the state’s monopoly of the means of mass destruction, and the general neo-liberalization of war” (Retort, “Exchange” 6). As Thomas Lemke notes, “It is more and more the scientific consultants, economic interest groups, and civil societal mediators that define the beginning, the end, and the value of life, in consensus conferences, expert commissions, and ethical counsels” (11). Contemporary biopolitics is essentially a political economy of life, irreducible to state agencies or to the form of law. No one level of analysis will do justice to the current complex of biopolitics. The sovereign banning of bios is closely interwoven with capitalism’s exploitation of living bodies. In the show, the Company epitomizes these aspects of contemporary biopolitics. It not only manages its particular resources (the people with special abilities) but also singles them out for use in its conspiracy to blow up half of New York City so as to manage the entire population of America. Yet while the Company is a trans-national organization, its conspiracy requires collaboration with the state; in order to control the next evolutionary round, the Company plans to make Nathan Petrelli President of the USA after the terroristic attack.

The Company’s biopower and its conspiracy gradually unravel, as the major characters create connections with each other: as the show’s narrator puts it, “The simple human need to find kindred, to connect, and to know in our hearts that we are not alone” (“How to Stop an Exploding Man”). The loosely connected network of protagonists is the heroic collective in which the heterogeneous and

unpredictable become the norm of the network. In the beginning of the show, the lives of the members of this collective seem entirely controlled by the Company, with no apparent chance of escape: the narrator also remarks,

You can run far. You can take your small precautions. But have you really gotten away? Can you ever escape? Or is the truth that you do not have the strength or cunning to hide from destiny? But the world is not small, you are. And fate can find you anywhere.

(“Seven Minutes to Midnight”)

However, at the end of Season One of *Heroes*, while seeking different purposes, all the major figures, including Claire, Noah, Mohinder, Sylar, Hiro, Matt Parkman, Niki, D. L, and their son Micah, gather in Kirby Plaza, and they defeat Sylar and eventually contribute to the deterrence of the nuclear explosion, thereby saving New York City. How, then, can this loosely connected group of bare lives be powerful? How do the bare lives deal with the Company’s biopolitical control over their lives in *Heroes*? What does trigger the transformation of *homines sacri* into the heroic collective against the Company’s biopower?

Hardt and Negri’s idea of the multitude is particularly useful in understanding the heroic collective’s resistance—the revolt of bare life—in the show. In order to understand the concept of multitude in relation to that of bare life, we should first examine Hardt and Negri’s criticism of Agamben’s *homo sacer* in *Empire*:

Giorgio Agamben has used the term ‘naked life’ to refer to the negative limit of humanity and to expose behind the political

abysses that modern totalitarianism has constructed the (more or less heroic) conditions of human passivity. We would say, on the contrary, that through their monstrosities of reducing human beings to a minimal naked life, fascism and Nazism tried in vain to destroy the enormous power that naked life could become and to expunge the form in which the new powers of productive cooperation of the multitude are accumulated. (366)

The contrast between Agamben and Hardt and Negri is caused by their difference on the autonomy of life's potentiality. Unlike Agamben, Hardt and Negri approve the positivity of life's potentiality. And their resistance theory is based on the productive power of potentiality. From Hardt and Negri's perspective, biopolitics indicates a new era of capitalist production where life is no longer limited to the domain of reproduction or subordinated to the working process. Such emphasis on the productive aspect of biopower places them at odds with Agamben's notion of bare life.

To Agamben, the most important aspect of potentiality in terms of resistance is inoperativeness, but to Hardt and Negri, it is the very power of becoming and production. Thus, as Negri argues elsewhere, Agamben's bare life denies "the power of being, the capability of spreading into time through cooperation, struggle, and constitution" ("Political Monster" 209). In "Potenza Nuda? Sovereignty, Biopolitics, Capitalism," Brett Neilson argues that "Agamben finds it is difficult to think of a constitution of potentiality that is freed from the principle of sovereignty or of a constituent power that exists in separation from

constituted power” (66). In contrast to Agamben, for Hardt and Negri, bare lives embody constituent power, pure productive force and the flesh of life outside the regime of sovereign power. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri equate constituent power with the bio-power of living labour: “The common actions of labor, intelligence, passion, and affect configure a *constituent power*” (358, italics in orig.). Neilson elaborates this theoretical distancing from Agamben’s idea of *homo sacer*:

As long as constituent power remains caught in the paradox of sovereignty and the constituted order produces bare life as the limit condition of an exception that has become the rule, there can be no hope of questioning the transcendentalism of sovereign power or imagining a form of political conduct that remains free of the impositions of the modern state. Thus it is the concept of bare life that becomes the primary object of Negri’s critique of Agamben’s understanding of sovereignty. (66-7)

Thus, in proposing a political subject and power outside constituted power, Hardt and Negri refute Agamben’s understanding of sovereign politics based on the production of bare life.

Granted, it is not certain that Agamben’s *homo sacer* is an entirely negative critique of biopolitics is not as certain as it seems. In “Giorgio Agamben’s Franciscan Ontology,” Lorenzo Chiesa argues that *homo sacer* “should not be confined to the field of a negative critique of biopolitics” (105). As Chiesa notes, Agamben’s idea of *homo sacer* might not be as pessimistic as it appears at first glance: “the sovereign and *homo sacer* present two symmetrical

figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns” (HS 84, italics in orig.). In addition, Agamben further argues that “In the state of exception become the rule, the life of *homo sacer*, which was the correlate of sovereign power, turns into an existence over which power no longer seems to have any hold” (HS 153). In this respect, we may find a certain potentiality of resistance in the figures of *homo sacer*, which Agamben attempts to substantiate through his analyses of Bartleby and the Muselmann.

All the same, it remains difficult to see how *homines sacri* can achieve collective, constitutive power in a political dimension. Indeed, the various resistant subjects that Agamben provides fail to exemplify any form of collective resistance that could be considered political. Considering this, it can be argued that Agamben’s subject of resistance does not offer any viable mode of political subjectivization, and in this respect Hardt and Negri’s criticism of Agamben’s *homo sacer* has critical validity: from their perspective, Agamben’s “concept of bare life is understood as an ideological device for neutralizing the transgressive potentiality of human existence” (Neilson 68).

How to understand bare life is the critical juncture distinguishing Hardt and Negri’s ideas about life from Agamben’s. Negri himself affirms bare life as the political monster, that collective subject that, with Hardt, he christens the multitude. The opposition between Hardt and Negri and Agamben’s understanding

of life's potentiality is echoed in *Heroes* as the main characters express divergent attitudes about their powers:

NATHAN. But if people knew what we were capable of, they
would drop a collective brick.

SIMONE. You think they'll burn you at stake?

NATHAN. Yeah, pretty much. Because that's what I would do. I'd
round us all up, stick us in a lab on some island in the middle of
the ocean.

SIMONE. Where Peter saw hope, you see disaster. ("Unexpected")

In understanding the potentiality of their bodies, Nathan and Peter represent a clear difference that echoes the Negri/Hardt-Agamben opposition. Whereas Nathan fears being a *homo sacer* who would be banned from the community, Peter sees hope in the potentiality of his and other main characters' lives to save the world from the Company's conspiracy.

The bare lives in *Heroes* form the very subject of resistance that Hardt and Negri call the multitude. In the beginning of the show, the protagonists feel under the power of a monstrosly brooding temperament. As Parkman observes, "Something is happening to me, too. Ted, I was able to read your wife's dying thoughts. We're just trying to understand what it is" ("Seven Minutes to Midnight"). Their lives are passively subjected to the Company and most characters seem powerless to understand either their destinies or their super abilities. However, while communicating with others, the protagonists, without clear awareness, become more than themselves, a new subjectivity against the

Company's conspiracy: "Subjectivity, in other words, is produced through cooperation and communication and, in turn, this produced subjectivity itself produces new forms of cooperation and communication, which in turn produce new subjectivity, and so forth" (Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* 189). The main characters constitute a collective force against the Company through their communication and cooperation. The heroic collective cannot be divided into groups or factions because its very existence is a matter of "communication, collaboration, and cooperation on an ever-expanding scale" (*Multitude* xv). According to Hardt and Negri, the multitude is irreducibly diverse. The main characters are a diverse, independent, and decentered group of (extra)ordinary people that includes an Afro-American child, a blonde cheerleader, an Indian geneticist, a cop, a Japanese office worker, a hospice nurse, a New York Congressional candidate, a stripper, and a comic book artist. The main characters do not share or seek transcendental ideals for their heroic struggle together. At the end of Season One, Bennet is at Kirby Plaza to save his stepdaughter Claire, and Niki and her family members are escaping from the Company's entrapment. They immanently belong to the network of the heroic collective, and their disconnected activities finally culminate in the saving of New York City from the Company's conspiracy. Thus, they overcome the passivity and incommunicativeness in Agamben's subjects of resistance despite the bareness of their lives. Instead of being inoperative like Bartleby, they directly or indirectly struggle against the Company's conspiracy through their exceptional abilities.

The main characters' mutant singularities represent the monstrosity of the multitude that testifies "that we are all singular, and our difference cannot be reduced to any unitary social body" (*Multitude* 193-94). In "The Political Monster," Negri claims that eugenics "has become, rather, the engineering of the living predisposed to become a technique of political domination" (212). According to Negri, the monster is outside this eugenic regime, so biopower "catch[es] him, imprison[s] him and cage[s] him" ("Monster" 204). Epitomized by the Company in the show, contemporary eugenic biopower becomes more powerful than ever: "There is the possibility of creating monsters, not those that Power feared because they subverted it, but those who are useful to eugenism so that the system of Power may function and reproduce itself such as it is" ("Monster" 211). In an interview with Cesare Casarino, Negri argues that "the logic of traditional eugenics is attempting to saturate and capture the whole of human reality—even at the level of its materiality, that is, through genetic engineering" ("Powerful" 174). This is today's battleground for the multitude as well as for the heroic collective in the show:

There takes place, so to speak, a strange battle, a phantasmagoria of class struggle: *on the one side*, a biopolitics of the multitude, and, *on the other*, a bio-power that takes place in terms of eugenic bio-domination. *The object of these struggles is the technology of life* as the ultimate figure of capital's technological domination upon life ... but also *as the chance for mass intellectuality to*

decide a paradigm totally alternative to capitalism. (“Monster”
217-18, italics in orig.)

Is the multitude a true political subject that will end the state of exception? Hardt and Negri would say so: “Simplifying a great deal, we claim that rather than having to put off discussions of democracy until we get through the phase of global warfare, a project for democracy, a democracy of the multitude, is perhaps the only way finally to put an end to this state of war” (Hardt “Tarrying” 268). The multitude is a political subject without unity and command: “Just as the multitude produces in common, just as it produces the common, it can produce political decisions” (*Multitude* 339). In Hardt and Negri’s dichotomy of the biopolitics of production and the biopower of domination, resistance to biopower is cast in the mode of resisting transcendent sovereign power by affirming the self-government of the multitude. In *Multitude*, they write:

The autonomy of the multitude and its capacities for economic, political and social self-organization take away any role for sovereignty. Not only is sovereignty no longer the exclusive terrain of the political, the multitude banishes sovereignty from politics, when the multitude is finally able to rule itself, democracy becomes possible. (340)

Criticism of sovereignty is often paired with attempts to think of alternative systems of governance, ones that do away with the connection between politics and sovereignty altogether. Hardt and Negri attempt to replace sovereignty and sovereign politics with the multitude and its democracy. It is an inspiring vision—

the multitude, with its joyous excess of uncontrollable power, will end sovereign politics: “The multitude today needs to abolish sovereignty at a global level. This is what the slogan ‘Another world is possible’ means to us: that sovereignty and authority must be destroyed” (Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* 353). However, is it a viable project in reality?

The concept of the multitude has been much criticized since it first appeared in *Empire*. One concern has to do with knowledge or recognition. How do we know that any given group, network, or collective is the multitude Hardt and Negri propose as the revolutionary subject against Empire? And how do we know that any given group, network, or collective is good, positive, or righteous? In March 31, 2004, a crowd of some three hundred people in Fallujah in Iraq mutilated four private soldiers of Blackwater USA. Can we claim that this brutal execution exemplifies a victory by Hardt and Negri’s multitude over petty-sovereigns? Do we have a way of differentiating the crowd driven by the lowest passion to survive from the multitude that will bring us true democracy? Although in *Heroes* the distinction of bad and good appears obvious, the heroic collective that embodies Hardt and Negri’s multitude cannot avoid this sort of challenge.

In addition, how can such a multitude work for a common project to construct new social relations? The concept of sovereignty or sovereign politics restricts decision-making to a unity (whether it is an individual or a collective body), instead of the multiplicity of the multitude. Through the main characters’ struggles, *Heroes* exemplifies a decision-making process without unity in portraying how such disparate singularities and subjectivities can work together

against a common enemy. While Hardt and Negri propose a model that can constitute itself without unity, without sovereign power, their discussion of the multitude sidesteps important questions about how it could work on a common project without an enemy and how it would check abuses of its own power: how such a multitude would be able to legitimate itself without relying on the law. In this way, the idea of the multitude, which could be dissociated from state sovereignty, remains enigmatic, if not inconceivable, in terms of working on a common project and furthering a new world.

On the one hand, my reading of this show reveals that its rendering of the heroic collective attempts to substantiate how the multitude actually constitutes itself. On the other hand, it also reveals that at the end of the series the heroic collective also faces similar critical challenges of the kind just outlined. In the show, the heroic collective, like Hardt and Negri's multitude, becomes a counter-force without central command, saving the world from the Company's conspiracy. In this struggle, unity is not a prerequisite; in fact the protagonists' differences become their strength. How does the heroic collective constitute its counter-force? Hardt and Negri propose love as the transformative power that explains how the multitude actually constitutes, organizes and produces a counter-power against Empire. In an interview with Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman, Hardt and Negri elaborate upon their notion of love:

Love for Spinoza is based on a double recognition: recognizing the other as different and recognizing that the relationship with that other increases our power. For Spinoza, then, love is the increase

of our power accompanied by the recognition of an external cause.... And this is exactly how we conceive the cooperation, recognition of difference and of relationship. It's in that sense that we say that the project of the multitude is a project of love. ("What is the Multitude" 387)

For Hardt and Negri, "Love means precisely that our expansive encounters and continuous collaborations bring us joy" (*Multitude* 351). In *Heroes*, Peter Petrelli's struggles exemplify how this somewhat mysterious idea of love can be concretized as a transformative power of a collective.

Of the various protagonists, Peter is the most important when examining how the main characters collectively constitute this particular human network, because he embodies the transformative power of the multitude. Simone tells Peter her father's last words to Peter:

SIMONE. He [Charles] said he'd been flying all over the world. But that it was a world he didn't recognize. There was [*sic*] so many people filled with pain. Nobody looking out for each other. He worried for them. And for me. Until you told him everything would be okay.

PETER. What do you mean I told him?

SIMONE. I know. It doesn't make any sense. But he said that you were flying with him. And you told him it was all gonna be okay. That there were people who cared, who would make a difference. That you would save the world. ("Nothing to Hide")

Driven by an unconditional love toward others, Peter takes the greatest risk of his life to save the world: “For reasons I can’t begin to understand. There are people that are counting on me to do this. I don’t know if I can, but I have to try” (“Homecoming”). In this process, he communicates with the other characters, promoting a certain sense of network among them. As a result, he gradually becomes an important figure, not only because of his special ability to absorb other super-powered people’s powers, but also because of the connections he fosters.

We can elucidate Peter’s function in creating a network of heroes by way of Albert-Laszlo Barabasi’s network theory, which explains seemingly incomprehensible collective activities of various multitudes. Although we often presume an ideal, democratic network of collectives without a central command or hierarchy, networks are more rigid than we often imagine. In most networks, not all of the nodes have the same numbers of links. Rather, there are a few nodes that function as dominant hubs, sustaining the overall structure of the network: “Just as in society a few connectors know an unusually large number of people, we found that the architecture of the World Wide Web is dominated by a few very highly connected nodes, or hubs” (Barabasi 58). Peter functions as a connector who gradually creates many links with other less connected characters. In effect, he becomes an alternative hub in the human network of super-powered individuals previously dominated by the Company. If the Company is trying to be a single dominant hub that controls the whole network, Peter is the only figure who eventually acquires as many connections with the other characters as the

Company has. In other words, from Barabasi's perspective, Peter is the only competitor to the Company in this hub-dominated human network, and consequently transforms the structure of the network from a single-hub dominated network to a dual-hub dominated network.

The advent of a specific hub, according to Barabasi, is determined by two things: "preferential attachment" and each node's "fitness" in a certain network. Barabasi claims that "fitness is in the driver's seat, making or breaking the hubs" (97). In other words, Peter transforms from an isolated node to a counter-hub in the heroic collective against the Company, because of his specific fitness within the network of the collective. And Peter's fitness for restructuring this human network is the idea of love. As Charles tells him: "your heart has the ability to love unconditionally. Like I told you. In the end all that really matters is love" ("How to Stop an Exploding Man"). And this is Hardt and Negri's love, the transformative power of the multitude: "without this love, we are nothing" (*Multitude* 352).

The Company's conspiracy is the antithesis of Peter's act of love. At the height of the conspiracy, Nathan's mother, Angela Petrelli, reveals the Company's intentions:

ANGELA. Important men make impossible decisions. President Truman dropped two atomic bombs on Japan to end World War II, killed thousands to save millions.

NATHAN. That was different, Ma. We were at war. I can't accept this.

ANGELA. So how could you possibly believe this bomb could actually heal the world if you have no faith in the idea of destiny? Your destiny, Nathan, is to set the course of history after this unspeakable act has occurred. People will look back on what you do as the freshman congressman from New York, and they will thank you for your strength, for your conviction, for your faith. In my day, we called it being presidential. (“The Hard Part”)

Angela’s rhetoric justifies the sovereign exception, the exceptional usage of presidential power in a time of emergency. According to the Company’s conspiracy, Peter’s destiny became the nuclear weapon that will destroy half of New York City. And Nathan is “a man who’s being asked to make a hard choice for the greater good” (“Landslide”). He is the man of conviction, who will change the world by eventually becoming President of the USA. As Linderman tells him, “You’re going to win your election, I’ll see to that. And two years from now, through a series of fluke circumstances, you will find yourself in the White House, a heartbeat away from the presidency. A life of meaning, Nathan” (“Parasite”). If Nathan’s part in the Company’s conspiracy represents the Company’s justification for controlling the whole network of the heroic collective and so the history of the world, Peter would rather represent hope and love for the devastated world. As Charles observes, “I look in Peter’s eyes, I see compassion, empathy. But most of all, I see hope. This world won’t be saved on strength” (“How to Stop an Exploding Man”).

In effect, Peter's act of love leads him and his brother to be martyrs. In the last episode, Peter realizes the Company's conspiracy to control his life: "I can't control it. I can't do anything" ("How to Stop an Exploding Man"). In this moment, instead of being a *homo sacer*, a figure that cannot be sacrificed, Peter attempts to re-appropriate his life through a form of sacrifice, which is an extreme act of resistance to the Company's biopower: "The absolute weapons against bodies are neutralized by the voluntary and absolute negation of the body" (*Multitude* 332). In *Holy Terror*, Terry Eagleton makes a similar claim: "In this predatory environment, the only way to safeguard the self is to lose it" (137). For Peter, the only way to stop the Company's manipulative conspiracy is suicide: as he says to Claire, "If I lose it, you are the only one who can get close enough to stop me" ("The Hard Part"). Right before Claire shoots Peter, Nathan suddenly appears from the sky. He says, "You saved the cheerleader, so we could save the world" ("How to Stop an Exploding Man"), and then flies up with Peter into the sky above New York City, so the other characters can see the explosion in the sky. The world is saved by the grace of the Petrelli brothers' sacrifice.

How could we interpret this sacrifice or martyrdom in relation to the multitude? In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri write about two different forms of martyrdom:

The one form, which is exemplified by the suicide bomber, poses martyrdom as a response of destruction, including self-destruction, to an act of injustice. The other form of martyrdom, however, is completely different. In this form the martyr does not seek

destruction but is rather struck down by the violence of the powerful. Martyrdom in this form is really a kind of *testimony*—testimony not so much to the injustices of power but to the possibility of a new world, an alternative not only to that specific destructive power but to every such power. The entire republican tradition from the heroes of Plutarch to Martin Luther is based on this second form of martyrdom. This martyrdom is really an act of love; a constituent act aimed at the future against the sovereignty of the present. (346, italics in orig.)

Can the sacrifice of the Petrelli brothers be called the second form of martyrdom? Does the seemingly righteous sacrifice of the two brothers have the productive or constitutive character of what Hardt and Negri call “testimony”? In addition, if the Petrelli brothers’ sacrifice represents this testimony, does it also lead “to the possibility of a new world”?

In *Sweet Violence*, Eagleton argues that “The martyr does not want to die, but by accepting his or her death manages to socialize it, puts on a public show and converts it to a sign, places it at the emancipatory service of others and thus salvages some value from it” (105). If we follow Eagleton’s view, the Petrelli brothers’ sacrifice should be echoed in the public place in order to contribute to emancipatory power against the stark biopower of the Company. As Hardt and Negri argue, their martyrdom should be testimony for an alternative world. No matter how heroic the Petrelli brothers’ sacrifice, it is notable that nobody knows that their sacrifice is sacrifice and nobody knows about the struggles of the heroic

collective—except the Company and the other main characters. In this sense, the Petrelli brothers' martyrdom fails to convert their sacrifice into a public sign through which people can infer and imagine the opening up of a threshold to a new world. The heroic collective stops the conspiracy by the grace of the Petrelli brothers' martyrdom. However, the Company seems to remain intact. At the end of the show, the only apparent beneficial effect of the sacrifice to society is a return to normality.

In addition, as the Petrelli brothers' struggle degenerates into a more individualized heroism, while diminishing the significance of the collective struggles, it is doubtful whether their martyrdom contributes to the construction of a new world. In *The Myth of the American Superheroes*, Lawrence and Jewett claim that in American popular culture we can find a strong tradition of American monomyth, which is the secularized version of "the Judeo-Christian dramas of community redemption" (6). They define such monomyth as follows:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (6)

Heroes is no exception to this prevalent convention in the American superhero genre. In the world of *Heroes*, when normal institutions fail to contend with the threat to a community, selfless heroes (the Petrelli brothers) restore the community to its peaceful condition, only to evaporate (quite literally). In a time

of emergency, the narrative of superheroes confounds the question of democracy because it denies both the function of public institutions and the power of people in society, instead portraying the selfless superhero as the only savior from the threat society faces. In reality, America failed to protect New York City from the attacks of September 11. *Heroes* replaces this failure with the heroic martyrdom of the Petrelli Brothers.

To be a *homo sacer* is to fall outside the protective framework of national citizenship. When such people take a stand to determine their own destiny against the sovereign power that transforms them into bare life, they must act outside the law. *Heroes* reflects this imperative; the action of its heroic collective falls outside the law. The show's protagonists liberate themselves from the fear of the Company's conspiracy, while moving beyond the framework of the state's protection. And they eventually become the multitude that resists the Company's sovereign biopower.

Hardt and Negri argue that "The multitude today needs to abolish sovereignty at a global level. This is what the slogan 'Another world is possible' means to us: that sovereignty and authority must be destroyed" (*Multitude* 353). However, the return to normality and the heroic collective's reversion to the super saviors of the community diminish the heroic collective's political significance, as they compromise our ability to imagine the possibility of a new world. In the show, the heroic collective's power, marshaled against a common enemy, seems to dissipate with the return to normality at the end of the first season. This ending is

where the heroic collective succeeds. However, it is also where it fails: the return to normality.

Conclusion

If consensus is where criticism fails, awakening is where it succeeds. The purpose of this dissertation is to awaken our understanding of the state of exception after September 11, through the analyses of select TV shows. What does the state of exception after September 11 refer to? Is the US in the state of exception as I am finishing this sentence? Or should we only associate the Bush administration (2001-08) with the state of exception? In 2009, in his first week as US President, Barrack Obama signed an executive order to close down the notorious camp in Guantanamo Bay and other secret prisons within a year, which could be viewed as an unwavering pronouncement of his will to terminate the exceptional legacy of the Bush administration. However, the closing of detention facilities and removing the War on Terror from the Obama administration's lexicon would not affect the state of exception as long as the global terrorist activities against the rule of liberal democracy and global capitalism are in progress. Rather, they are grandiose empty gestures, as Naomi Klein points out:

So [Obama] will make a dramatic announcement about closing the notorious Guantanamo Bay prison – while going ahead with an expansion of the lower profile but frighteningly lawless Bagram prison in Afghanistan, and opposing accountability for Bush officials who authorized torture. (*No Logo* xxii)

The state of exception, as Agamben rightly argues, becomes the dominant paradigm of government. And from this point, as Agamben observes, “Everywhere on earth men live today in the ban of a law and a tradition that are

maintained solely as the ‘zero point’ of their own content, and that include men within them in the form of a pure relation of abandonment” (*HS* 51). From Agamben’s perspective, we are all virtually reduced to the level of bare life by the sovereign ban.

The Bush administration exposed, through its War on Terror, that we are all potential *homines sacri*. However, this is only part of the story. In this dissertation, taking a cue from Bauman’s idea of wasted lives, I have argued that we need to expand and re-define Agamben’s idea of the state of exception, in order to more properly conceptualize this reality after September 11. And following Arne de Boever and Joshua Barkan, I have suggested that the sovereign ban is also the logic of global capitalism. The Bush administration, through its pro-capitalist slogan, “the Ownership Society,” which provided multinational corporations great chances for original accumulation, while demolishing existing social supports, also revealed how global capitalism reduces us to bare life. As Michael Perelman argues,

Most blatantly, multinational corporations are taking over resources for example, water, forests, land for mining operations, and even the ownership of food by privatizing its genetic codes in a manner that would have made earlier primitive accumulationists proud. (59)

In this sense, the Bush era exposed the fact that the state of exception is the dominant paradigm of government and capitalistic exploitation in our age.

The Bush era after September 11 is a particular historical period. Its

singularity, however, represents the paradigm of government and capitalistic exploitation in contemporary society. The state of exception, the sovereign authority's transcendence of law, is no longer a hidden matrix of politics. In *Violence*, Žižek writes, "Many conservative (and not only conservative) political thinkers ... elaborated the notion of the illegitimate origins of power, of 'the founding crime' on which states are based, which is why one should offer 'noble lies' to people in the guise of heroic narratives of origin" (116). The prevailing state of exception in the age of global terrorism, triggered by the Bush administration, foregrounds the illegitimate or rogue character of sovereign power. As Satoshi Ukai argues, "When one looks closely at what it means to be called a rogue state, it is not very difficult to see that those who coined the term and impose it on others are rogue states themselves" (247). And the rampant capitalism in the Bush era reminds us that original accumulation never comes to an end but continues as a constant complement and support to the functioning of capital, in driving the marginalized of society into the condition of bare life. This is the paradigmatic singularity of the Bush era, which will also persist in our future.

To see how we imagine and understand our reality after September 11, this dissertation has explored four popular TV shows: *The West Wing*, *Deadwood*, *The Wire* and *Heroes*. All four reflect on the post-September 11 moment, an era in which the state of exception becomes paradigmatic in politics and economy. In their respective ways, these TV shows collide with the Bush era to produce their own reflections of reality after September 11. Each chapter in this dissertation is

an attempt to articulate these reflections in order to substantiate our political and economic reality.

In America, TV cottoned on to the power of the state after the events of September 11. In *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, long-time American Democratic campaign manager and political consultant Joe Trippi observes that “Americans at the turn of the twenty-first century were a culture in danger of being ruined by *Must See TV*” (3). However, TV shows are not just mere products of trans-national corporations. Rather, they are the social realm where our interests and values are contested, where our desire can be articulated. In this sense, we need to critically engage with this realm to see how society understands reality and creates a certain consensus about it. *The West Wing*, *Deadwood*, *The Wire* and *Heroes*: these TV shows are consensus narratives. They are, thus, all conservative narratives, revealing where our criticism fails. The TV shows represent the social consensus regarding the state of exception in America. Examining the consensus narratives of select TV shows sheds light on the social imagination toward the state of exception in America after September 11. This dissertation’s reading of the shows aims to portray the structure of our perception and consciousness in the process of reflecting the state of exception. Influenced by German idealism, Walter Benjamin believed that power for revolution comes from a change in “the structure of consciousness rather than the structure of society” (Jennings 37). From Benjamin’s perspective, a revolution is a corollary of the structural change of human consciousness and perception. I hope that this dissertation contributes to establishing the basis for structural change in our

consciousness and perception of the state of exception. In *Hope in the Dark*, Rebecca Solnit, a noted environmental and political activist, writes, “Inside the word *emergency* is *emerge*; from an emergency new things come forth. The old certainties are crumbling fast, but danger and possibility are sisters” (12). We do not yet know what will emerge. Criticism might never reveal what will emerge. One thing that we can hope to do through criticism is awaken the conditions for change, by exposing our consciousness and perception to the given political and economic reality.

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