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## Change the Game: Creating a Better Baltimore in Light of Lessons from The Wire

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The legendary television drama *The Wire* beautifully illustrates a subject central to progressive activism and politics—namely, the prevalence of “The Game” in Charm City. All institutions illustrated in the show—be they City Hall, educational, law enforcement, developers, drug organizations, FBI, the *Baltimore Sun*, or unions—have a set of rules that all individuals within (aka the players) must follow. In interviews, creator David Simon has discussed how *The Wire* is akin to Greek tragedies where individual’s lives are fated and controlled by the gods. In *The Wire*, the gods are the modern city institutions.

Throughout the show, Simon and his co-writers underscore how “The Game” is rigged towards perpetuating the status quo. People are severely punished whenever they attempt to break the rules of “The Game.” We know that this game is being played in the boardrooms and halls of power in Baltimore’s indifferent and ossified modern city institutions. *The Wire* reveals that “The Game” is characterized by unfair and unsustainable development, maximizing resources for the

powerful, minimizing resources for the powerless, rising mass unemployment and sinking economic opportunity, corporate media that turns a blind eye to injustice, and local communities that proliferate the maladaptive socialization and miseducation of our youth.

Although *The Wire* is utterly brilliant in exploring the parallel hierarchies of power across organizations and the connections from City Hall to the loading docks to the streets, there is one critical group missing from the show: progressive activists and advocates. Our progressive activism and advocacy for sustainability and social justice bears witness to the fact that we do not adhere to notions of preordination; nor do we subscribe to the supremacy of modern city institutions. City institutions in Baltimore continue to create negative outcomes because we have not built and sustained the social movements and organizations necessary to hold them accountable and compel them to be responsive to the needs of the people.

Simon and other writers of *The Wire* are quite fond of presenting parallels of phenomena found in the macro level with similar phenomena at a micro level. In *The Wire*, the domestic War on Drugs is analogous to the Global War on Terror where the American military-industrial complex demonizes one population at home and another abroad. At the beginning of the third season, the destruction of the two towers in West Baltimore is connected to New York City's twin towers that were destroyed on September 11, 2001. Corner boys on the streets speak words uttered in City Hall by politicians and police officers. The absence or decline of work among men in a white family (the Sabotkas) is parallel to the absence of work among men in a black family (the Barksdales), illustrating the maxim: as above, so below. Macro systems affect micro systems. The dysfunctions of systems higher in social hierarchy mirror those of systems lower in social hierarchy. The sins of the past are manifested as crimes of the future.

We know that America remains in many ways a racist society. But racism today is very murky given the number of black politicians which are complicit players in "The Game." In *The Wire*, Senator Clay Davis is an often comical embodiment of the extent to which some black politicians are willing to engage in shameful practices. He's utterly corrupt, scheming and stealing money from developers and drug dealers to satiate his greed. What we witness in *The Wire* is that an oligarchic group of white and black folks work together to maintain the status quo because, ultimately, "The Game" is about power and is characterized by power devoid of any accountability to the welfare of the larger community.

The reason why a multi-racial oligarchic group might come together to perpetuate oppression is found in the annals of American history. In the 1960s & 1970s, social justice movements pushed to change "The Game." It became untenable to keep a white face on white supremacy given the pressure being applied by activists during the civil rights and black power movements. In addition to these social movements, additional pressure was applied by people in the streets during the urban insurrections in the mid-to-late 1960s, responding to police brutality and repressive authority, especially after the assassination of Dr. King in April 1968. Thus, the people wielding power realized they needed to change "The Game" if power was to remain fundamentally undisturbed. The power players made a tactical shift and began to put a black face on white supremacy. Now the power players of city institutions can be found in black face. The shift towards a multi-racial oligarchy has kept most people from creating the appropriate strategies to confront the game that is being played now.

Perhaps it is true that there were always black folk who were helpful to "The Game" even during the time frame of American enslavement and Jim Crow. If you've seen the movie *Django Unchained*

, you might understand how this might be the case when you recount the character of Stephen, played masterfully by Samuel L. Jackson. But during those periods, there was no illusion that true power (the final word) could only be expressed in white face. Today, in our “post-racial” environment, the face of power is multi-racial. A few black people or persons of color may occupy semi-meaningful positions of power, but the main outcomes—such as education resources, segregation, serial forced displacement, incarceration rates, wealth measures, and health inequities—remain strikingly the same.

This analysis of power is drawn from an understanding of American and European foreign policy. European powers often propped up dictators in countries such as Iran, Iraq, and throughout Africa and the Middle East to continue the extraction of resources as a part of the neo-colonial arrangement. The United States has propped up dictators throughout the Western Hemisphere in countries such as Nicaragua, Panama, and Cuba. There are many more examples, but the point is that former colonial powers and current imperial powers (the US) have consistently employed local surrogates to facilitate their aims in (neo)colonized countries. A similar thing happens in America where surrogates from the black community are employed by wealthy white interests to play “The Game.” Again, the parallel is unmistakable: as above, so below. What takes place on a global stage is reproduced on the domestic front. It’s basically the same game being played.

In Baltimore, this multi-racial plutocratic cabal controls city institutions and determines how resources are allocated. Big developers make the highest campaign contributions to politicians; therefore they control the nature of development. This explains what is happening when progressive activists ask for one thing and instead receive another: When we push for more recreation centers and fire stations, we receive another casino, another hotel, or another unaffordable residential development instead. We chant for living wage and anti-poverty measures, but vulnerable people are continually disrespected and displaced. We ask for affordable housing and inclusionary zoning, but instead people with means are increasingly moving into the city (gentrification) and those without means are continually being pushed out (serial forced displacement). We ask for the end of corporate welfare to big developers (via tax breaks, bonds, and subsidies), but instead we find out that massive corporate entities such as Under Armour, EBDI, and Lexington Square Partners receive multi-million dollar TIFs and PILOTs [2] to subsidize their multi-billion dollar projects.

These are the quintessential truths of our struggle. But how do we counter “The Game” today, where power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a plutocratic cabal that locks more and more folks out of power? At the Equitable and Sustainable Development Symposium held on March 9, 2013, a gentleman from North Carolina said something quite profound: “We can’t defeat the system by playing by the rules...we have to break the rules.” That, I believe, is where our thinking must go. Not how do we join these crooks and institutions in playing “The Game,” but how do we break the rules?

Our progressive strategy has to be to change “The Game” so that we can disassociate plutocrats and their surrogates from their unbridled access to power over our city institutions. Our goal should be to create institutions and push for policies that allow social justice to flourish in all domains of human activity. What tactics will help us achieve our goals? I argue we need to do three main things.

- 1.

Form an independent progressive political party. Progressives need to become independently organized into a cohesive political organization. Democrats are not consistently progressive, especially in matters of economics. They may be progressives on certain social issues (such as gay marriage), but when it comes to working people, development of communities, countering the effects of disinvestment and displacement, our local Democrats are all but wolves in sheep clothing.

2. Limit the aggregate contributions that local politicians can receive from developers. Developers currently provide the majority of political campaigns funds for city council members and the mayor. Is it any surprise that we end up with unfair development in Baltimore? The levers of power don't belong to the people, they belong to corporations and big developers. Mitt Romney told us: "Corporations are people, my friends." And in Baltimore, corporate developers are the only "people" that really matter to our politicians.
3. Institute a council-manager government. The Baltimore mayor has too much power. The mayor controls three out of the five seats on the Board of Estimates, thereby effectively controlling how money is allocated in the city. We need a council-manager form of government instead of a strong mayor government to increase accountability in municipal decision-making and decrease the influence of big developers in Baltimore.

The magisterial R&B group, Parliament, has a song on their album, *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, called "Gamin' On Ya." In it, they sang, "People keep waitin' on a change. Ain't got enough sense to come in out of the rain." People of Baltimore, we gotta come in outta of the rain...cause the rain is "The Game" and we are the agents of change!

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