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**Baltimore: behind the Potemkin village, the Ghetto.**  
**An interview with Marc Levine, in Nanterre (France), 27 October 2012**  
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The interview was made at the University Paris Ouest Nanterre, on October the 27th, 2012, on the occasion of an international conference around *The Wire*<sup>1</sup>  
(*The transcript of this interview has been edited and completed by Marc Levine*)

JSSJ: Marc Levine, you hold a position as professor of history, economic development and urban studies at the University of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It is a pleasure and an honor for us to interview you today.

M.L: The pleasure is mine!

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JSSJ: Thank you! You've come to Nanterre for the current colloquium, held on the subject of *The Wire*. If I am not mistaken you were the first academic to use *The Wire* in a social science course. What does *The Wire* tell us of the ghetto, the crisis in US central cities, and the condition of the African-American population today? Beyond that, how does *The Wire* resonate with your work and enhance your teaching and thinking?

M.L: That's an excellent question. In my view, *The Wire* is a unique, incomparable TV series. It is a series that portrays, with extraordinary realism, the situation in US inner city ghettos, with nuance and sophistication. In my view, it's the best portrayal we have of conditions in American ghettos, even including textbooks or social science studies. For me, as professor of urban studies, *The Wire* gives the opportunity to present to our students, in a clear and nuanced way, the various interconnected aspects of the situation in the ghetto. In addition, as a researcher - and I'll discuss the situation in Baltimore later- I have written several articles on the economic situation, city redevelopment policies, and I have been a long-time critic of the redevelopment policies of the city. In my view, these were policies of *Trickle Down Economics*, which didn't give much to ghetto neighborhoods and didn't really change conditions there. In fact, these were policies that essentially benefited city developers. In my view, redevelopment in Baltimore is more a story of *Branding and Marketing* than a history of a genuine urban renaissance. *The Wire* has changed the view of Baltimore in a profound way in the past ten years. I believe the first episodes were shown in 2002. Since then, the consensus perspective on Baltimore has changed a great deal. Everybody now is aware that Baltimore faces extremely serious problems, and it feels like all I wrote as a researcher on the situation in Baltimore in the 1980's and 1990's has been validated by what David Simon has portrayed in *The Wire*. In my view, *The Wire* is important as a portrayal of the reality of the situation in US ghettos, and for me personally it's a kind of [professional] vindication.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.u-paris10.fr/recherche/colloque-international-de-cloture-du-seminaire-the-wire-visages-du-ghetto-entre-fiction-et-sciences-sociales--420351.kjsp>

JSSJ: Perhaps what you mean is something like revenge or protest?

M.L: It is the validation of my own scholarship in past years as well as the work of researchers such as William Julius Wilson, who have illuminated the situation in inner city ghettos. There are a number of university researchers, such as Wilson, Wacquant and others who have studied in-depth the American ghetto. It isn't as though the ghetto has been forgotten, but I must say that in our popular culture more and more there is a sort of celebration of the « cities' rebirth », which in the United States has to do with city centers, that is to say, the "Downtown," the redevelopment of Downtown, the idea that at « cities are back »...

JSSJ: ... The city comeback, or the cities' comeback

M.L: ...Big cities. For me, above all, the contribution of *The Wire* has been to change our perspective and show that, in fact, there has been no great comeback. In cities today, we find an incredible concentration of poverty, of ongoing drug trafficking, of dilapidated neighborhoods, of abandoned housing. And the situation has been getting worse and worse over the years.

JSSJ: During the colloquium you mentioned the remarkable figure of one billion dollars in comparison to another billion dollars...

M.L: Yes, it's extraordinary! The figure is an approximation, of course, as there are obviously no official census figures on drug trafficking in the city. However, some journalists have estimated that the drug trafficking business brings in that amount in Baltimore. What I was suggesting was that those figures are more or less equivalent to the money the tourist industry in Baltimore brings in. One of Baltimore's big success stories has been turning the city into a tourist attraction. Before the 1980's that wasn't the case at all. Baltimore was once seen as a city located between Washington DC and New York City that no one ever visited. Then after the 1980's and after the redevelopment of the *Inner Harbor*, and the opening of a variety of restaurants, entertainment attractions, and baseball and football stadiums, Baltimore was transformed into a "tourist city." The net receipts for the tourist industry in Baltimore today are approximately one billion dollars annually, which is basically equivalent to that of the drug industry. For me, this indicates that, yes, there has been a successful redevelopment of Baltimore as a tourist city, but that Baltimore is a "drug industry city" as well – and that's a central theme of *The Wire* as well.

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JSSJ: To come back to *The Wire*, which you use as part of your curriculum, why is it so useful and how does it work as an aid?

M.L: It really does work well. The course is one of the most popular at our university. It's certainly the course I've enjoyed teaching the most during my career as a professor. It is extraordinary how fully involved the students have become in the topics. When I initially planned the course, I decided to use *The Wire* because I found its depiction of the situation in inner cities so compelling. *The Wire* gives students a perfect "entry point" to the subject -- they view things in *The Wire* and say to themselves: "Hmmm, it might be interesting to read some social science studies on these subjects." Now, perhaps some of these studies are a bit dull, or hard to read, but once the students have been shown *The Wire*, they become stimulated and given an incentive to read these studies in depth. In all these ways, I've found the course to be a great success and completely worthwhile.

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JSSJ: Quite recently, that is in 2012, you wrote a report entitled *Race and Male Employment in the Wake of the Great Recession*<sup>2</sup>, which highlights the devastating social impact of the current crisis.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.blackeconomicdevelopment.com/Content/RaceandMaleEmployment\\_Recession.pdf](http://www.blackeconomicdevelopment.com/Content/RaceandMaleEmployment_Recession.pdf)

The group most deeply affected by de-industrialization and the crisis appears to have been African American males. What main analyses on the subject have you developed? What dynamics do we find today? Would it be possible for you to mention some of the concrete proposals for reform you developed at the end of the report?

M.L: It's not a boring study - it's become a *bestseller!*... (Laughs)

No, I'm joking. Obviously, it's an academic and scientific study. But it provoked quite a bit of reaction in political circles in Milwaukee and nationwide, because it showed how much the situation had deteriorated, above all for black males in US cities. (I didn't study just Milwaukee, but also examined the 40 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S.). As you mentioned, our figures show how the situation has considerably worsened since the Great Recession of 2008/2009. In some of the metropolitan areas, half of black males are unemployed or not even in the labor market; that is to say, they are not working and no longer looking for jobs. Many of these men are in prison, or hidden in certain sectors linked to welfare policy, and therefore are not included in the official unemployment statistics. If we try to develop a concrete indicator of people "without jobs" instead of using the concept "unemployed" - which is the technical term - unemployed people are those who are without work, but who are looking for a job. "Without jobs" covers the people who are of working age and, whether looking for a job or not, are without work. Thus, if we were to analyze "non-employment" in cities such as Milwaukee, Buffalo, Detroit, Chicago and two or three other cities, we find that half of the black males are not employed. For a city like Baltimore, the figures range from 40% to 45%, and in most US cities the figures are above 35%, which is a very high rate of non-employment.

If we take the example of Milwaukee, where I've studied the phenomenon in depth, during the 1970's the situation for black males was totally different. It was a situation with manufacturing industries in which black males were able to find jobs, and it was a period of almost -I underscore *almost*-- full employment for black men.

In the U.S., the collapse and the decline started in the early 1980's, after the major recession of 1982. It was a deep crisis, one characterized by urban deindustrialization and the displacement of jobs, first to the suburbs, and then to Mexico and China. Consequently, the rate of unemployment for black males in Milwaukee rose consistently through the 1980s and 1990's, and on into the 21st century. Today in Milwaukee, the situation is such that, there are more black males in prison -- among the working age population-- than are working in Milwaukee factories. For me, this is an incredibly striking indicator of the extent to which the deindustrialization of Milwaukee has damaged the culture of work in the city. At the same time, as a result of the "war on drugs," an enormous number of black males (representing about half the population of young men between 20 and 35 years of age) have been imprisoned. They are currently either in prison, on probation, or on parole --under the control of the criminal justice system. Milwaukee, once an industrial city, has now become a prison-industry complex. The situation is similar in many other cities, including Baltimore. In my opinion, this is the most important part of the employment crisis in the US. We still have a general problem with economic growth and a national unemployment rate that is still too high, even after the recession, -- but the situation is much worse for the black community in big cities. I don't want to ignore the situation for the white male majority, but their situation is completely different. For white men between 25 and 54 years old --the "men in prime working-age", in English--the employment rate for this category is approximately 95%. This means basically that almost all the men in this category are finding work. But for black males in Milwaukee the percentage is only 52%. We see a big difference here, indicating the very real problem of racial inequality on the job market.

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JSSJ: Yes, but concerning inequality, what is most astounding in your analysis is that it shows the gap has grown enormously. The harsh picture of the ghetto situation, from our perspective here in France, is from images of the 1960's and 1970's! According to your description, today the situation is far worse than at that time!

M.L: Absolutely! William Julius Wilson described the situation very well in his book *When Work Disappears*<sup>3</sup> and he wasn't exaggerating. In many US central city neighborhoods, over 60% of males in the prime working age range, don't work or no longer work. So yes, the gap has grown over the years. There's an expression of one of the characters in *The Wire*, Bunny Colvin, helping us understand why nothing changes - it's a little "off-color" in English<sup>4</sup>. But the situation is getting worse and it is because there have been no effective policies to try to change things. Various levels of government in the US - at the state or federal level- have not paid attention or set up targeted initiatives on these types of problems. We have seen some macro-economic policies, meant to promote general growth, but no major initiatives have targeted non-employment in the black community. Even the Obama administration is not taking the situation very seriously. There are no coherent urban policies from the Obama administration, and for me that's a real problem.

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JSSJ: In that respect, you ended your report with a number of proposals. Would you mind presenting them to us briefly?

M.L: Not at all. I think we need to undertake new initiatives. Our report shows that the job market in the private sector is no longer functioning effectively in many big cities – it's not creating enough new jobs. There is a gap - we call it the *Job Gap* – between the number of people looking for jobs, and the creation of new jobs. For example, looking at the population as a whole in Milwaukee, there are five unemployed workers for each available job. That is why we need mechanisms that will help create many jobs. One of my main recommendations is for a "new" New Deal, like the one of the 1930's in the US. The government could play a very active role in job creation through public investment, above all in the field of infrastructure. The US today has a \$3 trillion dollar infrastructure deficit for its rapidly deteriorating infrastructure: the sewer systems, roads, and mass transportation networks. In rising industries, such as green and solar industries, there is much public investment that can be made that will lead to long-term economic growth. It would be a good thing for the economy on the whole, and enhance job creation in the short and medium term, for laid-off workers and the companies that are currently not hiring. I think we need these kinds of investments. We cannot count on private investors, because their incentives are not to invest in central cities, where most of the unemployed live, but rather invest in Mexico and China, where there is low-wage labor, in order to enhance their companies' profitability. Thus we thus need a [public] investment policy for the creation of new jobs.

Second, I recommend rethinking the "war on drugs." I'm not a specialist at all on drug markets or drug politics – my research is on the political economy of cities. But thanks to my experience with *The Wire*, as well as my relationship with Kurt Schmoke (the former mayor of Baltimore and one of the inspirations for the series with his recommendations for the decriminalization of drugs in the US)... and I am persuaded by my conversations with Schmoke - who is a real expert on the subject – that the war against drugs is definitely not working. In fact, it's a total failure. The policy has led to a number of problems in central cities, such as mass incarceration: an entire generation of black males in prison instead of being integrated into the labor market.

<sup>3</sup> William Julius Wilson (1996). *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, Knopf.

<sup>4</sup> "Why this shit don't ever change?" Bunny Colvin, *The Wire*. cité dans "The Wire goes to College", Sarah Lageson, Kyle Green and Sinan Erensu, *Contexts* 2011, 10:12.

We must, therefore, rethink the war on drugs. I'm not sure whether we need to decriminalize or to consider another type of reform, but we certainly must stop putting half of [black] males - age 20 to 35 - into jail. Most of them are not even arrested because they are violent criminals. They are generally arrested for being in possession of marijuana. Public health initiatives and other policies could lower the rate of incarceration that is so costly to states governments in the United States. Maryland and Wisconsin, where the big cities of Baltimore and Milwaukee are located, are both good examples. A lot of money is being spent for the construction and upkeep of prisons, whereas all of these states are facing a major economic and fiscal crisis and spend more these days on prisons than they do on higher education. We spend, for example, more on prisons in Wisconsin than for the University of Wisconsin. Therefore, if we were fiscally sensible enough to lower our incarceration rates, and our prison-construction budgets, I think we'd have the added benefit of contributing to job creation for black males as well. Thus, public investment, rethinking the war on drugs, and investing in education and training are what we need. (Training though is only one aspect of the problem. Some people consider it to be the key, but I don't think so. For me, the most important thing is to create jobs). So, there you have it: our main recommendations.

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JSSJ: You are the founder of *The Center for Economic Development*<sup>5</sup> at the University of Milwaukee and for a long time you were also its director. The center's objective was to boost the economy in poor neighborhoods, in the black ghetto of Milwaukee, and to help local organizations get involved effectively in their economic development. Could you tell us a bit more about this commitment, and involvement of yours? This work has been ongoing in the poor neighborhoods of the ghetto for a long time. As a university faculty member, what is your role in these neighborhoods, in relation to its inhabitants and local organizations in poor neighborhoods?

M.L: Well, yes, at university level I do serious research on serious topics, publish articles in papers and [academic] journals and write books. But I personally consider it important to have our scholarship made accessible, to improve the fortunes of people living in our community. Before beginning my career as a professor, I was an adviser to a rather well-known member of the U.S. senate, Senator Edward M. Kennedy, working on issues of economic and urban policy. In the mid 1980's, when I accepted my position at the University of Wisconsin, it was with the idea of continuing my research and teaching, but also to launch initiatives linking our research at the university to the improvement of conditions in the city, and to advocate policies to improve things. So, in the early 1990's, we launched the *Center for Economic Development*, in order to make university research accessible to the community, and so that the community would be better informed - as I already mentioned - on the real nature of the issues. We also aimed to work with government institutions and community groups to develop strategies for economic growth, for the development of disadvantaged neighborhoods, and for economic development in general. We have worked with around 100 or so organizations over the years.

We've identified several important issues. To give you a concrete example, we identified in our research the horrific unemployment rate for black males in Milwaukee. After a period of controversy - as politicians do not particularly like to acknowledge the reality of such information, and actually deny this type of reality (they are "in denial", as we say) - they have now acknowledged the reality because, after all, the numbers are the numbers. Two or three years ago, the Milwaukee city council set up a commission on the issue of African American male unemployment in Milwaukee. This is one example, of the impact of Center research on city policies. It has not changed the situation fundamentally, the commission - like all commissions - is still in the process of discussion, there are

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www4.uwm.edu/ced/>

many competing interests involved, etc. I don't think we've come up with the most efficacious policies yet, but all the same, for me, this is an example of how university research is able to set things into motion in the city. I could give you a number of other examples, but I definitely believe that it is important to have such institutions as the *Center for Economic Development* at the university, as a bridge between the university and the community, to involve professors who are interested in these types of issues, and engage students wishing to work both in a very serious, high-level university research context while also doing something for the community. And I think, in all modesty, that we have succeeded in this goal.

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JSSJ: Do you mean to say that those who deal with urban politics have not been involved in the Afro-American ghettos since the time of the "war against poverty"? Could you tell us about the struggle for more justice in poor US neighborhoods today?

M.L: Yes, it's true that the situation in American inner city ghettos persists: a negative situation, significant poverty. I've used the expression "Potemkin village" to describe the situation in Baltimore with its sparkling city center, characterized by its brand new buildings, its entertainment and tourist facilities surrounding the *Inner Harbor*; and its condominiums and housing for the very affluent... And the *other* Baltimore, which is still there and growing. It's the Baltimore of the black ghetto as shown in *The Wire*, described by David Harvey in *Spaces of Hope*<sup>6</sup>, and the Baltimore on which I've researched and written several articles. The problem is, as I mentioned previously, that the decision-makers in these cities – that is to say the local politicians and business leaders - such as the *Greater Baltimore Committee*<sup>7</sup> - the very influential business leaders in these cities are not pushing for the revitalization of the inner city. It's not a priority for business leaders. This theme is quite striking in *The Wire*. David Simon clearly shows that the ghetto communities portrayed in *The Wire* have been left by the wayside by politicians: these are the people called [by Simon] the "surplus" population. Existing policies aren't aimed at improving the situation there: neither electoral politics nor powerful organizations are putting pressure on the local politicians and policies to do so. Thus, there is what we call in English "*a disconnect*", in other words a gap, between city policies and the actual problems existing in the city. The issue in Baltimore is not to build up tourist attractions. The problem is not to engage in urban boosterism or offer incentives for private investment in areas that are already quite affluent. Instead, we need to target investment to disadvantaged neighborhoods and in the final analysis to launch "a war on poverty": a series of policies aimed at significantly reducing the poverty rate in our cities. We use the expression "two Baltimores" and "two Milwaukees". David Harvey has, and so have I. In fact there are three Baltimores and three Milwaukees. First the communities of the city centers, the revitalized districts of US *Downtowns*. There is a second city, the ghetto city, which continues to be an extremely impoverished area. And in the US the third area is suburbia, with conditions that obviously differ from those found in France. On the whole, suburbs in the USA are rather affluent, although some are declining today. Suburbia in the United States is much more prosperous than in France, and there is a periphery of US regions -exurbia, we call it- a third Baltimore and third Milwaukee, which is becoming more and more separate from the rest of the city. The people living in *exurbia* work less and less in the city center and visit it less and less. This has created a sort of "secession of the affluent" to suburbia and consequently a lack of resources in the central areas, which could help improve the conditions there. Thus, I think that there are persistent spatial inequalities in regions such as Baltimore and Milwaukee, as well as a lack of concern or attention for conditions in the urban ghettos, and in the final analysis, we have few policies in place to truly ameliorate the situation.

<sup>6</sup> David Harvey (2000), *Spaces of Hope*, University of California Press.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.gbc.org/>

JSSJ: To come back to the notion of “war on poverty” and to conclude on that subject, could we consider that the 1960’s war on poverty failed?

M.L: It failed in a certain sense, as poverty has persisted. However, the failure is not because fighting poverty is impossible, or that the 1960’s policies failed. I think the war on poverty ran aground because after the 1980’s, with the Reagan Administration’s move to the right and the elimination of many programs and investments targeted against poverty, the poverty rate began rising again.. During the 1960’s and 1970’s the poverty rate fell considerably, so one can’t say that the war on poverty failed. In fact, after the “War on Poverty” the poverty rate fell, but after America’s conservative turn the poverty rate -except for a time in the 1990’s, under the Clinton administration- increased without interruption, and in a particularly significant way since the beginning of the 2000s, especially since the Great Recession in 2008/2009. The evidence is that poverty increased by three percentage points after the beginning of the Great Recession, after having risen steadily during the decade before that. So the failure was not caused by the policies of the 1960’s. In my view, it was the result of the policies that began in the 1980’s.

JSSJ: Thank you so much for accepting this interview!

**To quote this paper: Marc Levine, Frédéric Dufaux**, « Baltimore : derrière le village Potemkine, le ghetto. Un entretien avec Marc LEVINE » (“Baltimore: behind the Potemkin village, the Ghetto. An interview with Marc Levine”, translation : Ann Dufaux, Frédéric Dufaux), **justice spatiale | spatial justice**, n° 5, déc. 2012-déc. 2013 | dec. 2012-dec. 2013, [www.jssj.org](http://www.jssj.org)