Waging War on the Working Class in *Breaking Bad*

Creating Architectures of Indifference to Victims of Neoliberalism*

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Introduction

This paper is an exploration of a set of images and ideas presented by a popular and much discussed serialized television drama. My objective here is not one of understanding the series in terms of the images it promotes of contemporary American masculinity and femininity nor of various historical, sociological and psychological issues it raises. These have been handled by a host of media researchers (see, for example, Gerke 2013; Kovvali 2013; San Juan 2013). Nor is my goal to subject *Breaking Bad* to the kinds of minute examinations and discussions like those carried out in the fall of 2013 by an intellectual troika hosted by *The Atlantic Online*. Instead, my main aim is one in keeping with the relationship between the material and the ideational dimensions of society first sketched out in the mid-1840s by Marx and Engels in the *The Ruling Ideology*.

Their framing, I contend, provides a way of seeing that the themes, values and attitudes promoted by this series from 2008 to 2103 are not simply entertainment but are instead ideological ammunition serving the interests of the capitalist class long dominating the material forces and processes of production in the United States. By focusing especially on the treatment by *Breaking Bad* of issues related to methamphetamine, I will attempt to show that it produced certain images, values and attitudes legitimizing the unilateral and draconian class war of attrition being waged by the capitalist class against American workers in recent decades. As Michael Parenti made clear some years ago in analyzing the US entertainment media from a class perspective, their films and television programs do more than merely entertain viewing audiences. As he put it

\[\ldots\text{the media help legitimate the hegemonic ideological system with images and themes that propagate private enterprise, personal affluence, individual acquisitiveness, consumerism, super patriotism,}\]
imperialism, racial stereotyping and sexism. . . Media also do their part in bolstering negative views about working-class people and labor unions (1992:209)

Breaking Bad, I contend, is just the latest and cruelest example of the spreading of ruling ideas by the entertainment media. This television drama, I will attempt to show, represents a key ideational component in class warfare paralleling what has newly been characterized in conventional American warfare as the “architecture of indifference”. This concept was formulated by John Tirman, Executive Director of MIT’s Center for International Studies, who in 2006 commissioned the Lancet study which documented over 600,000 deaths in Iraq in the wake of the US imposed sanctions and invasion. In searching for the reasons for the widespread indifference among the American public to the results of this and other hostile actions by the US, Tirman began by analyzing American history from the genocidal campaigns of colonial times up though recent wars. In examining the American collective conscious, he found a system of ideas defining the millions of victims of US wars as populations unworthy of any degree of concern and sympathy. In his view, this shared ideology of indifference to the fate of others depended in great part on their invisibility as well as beliefs in their inferiority and depravity.

This way of legitimizing the fates of victims of conventional warfare is not only a feature of the ruling ideology of American imperialism. According to Issam Nassar, the ideational construct of unseen and depraved “others” deserving the violence wreaked upon them has a key psychological role to play in justifying wars among soldiers and their civilian counterparts. As he argues

. . . fighting an obscure, invisible enemy demonized by pundits and politicians alike, entails less guilt and ill feeling on the part of the attacking soldiers regarding the pain they inflict in modern warfare (2006: 222).

Similar idea-producing processes were recently identified by two Finnish researchers in their respective deconstructions of the dominant discourse employed to legitimate the massive devastation unleashed by the United States and its servile allies on Afghan society. In analyzing the ways the
Afghan war was portrayed and justified in media accounts and educational materials, these two investigators found two ideational processes prominent in these discursive formations. First and foremost, the violence done to the civilian women, men and children of the world’s most impoverished society by the world’s richest and most powerful military power was made almost invisible. If, however, victims of this massive violence did make their appearance in the media and schoolbooks, their lives were defined by various methods as more inferior, less valuable and hence less grievable than Western lives lost in this war (Kotilainen 2011; Mikander 2012).

Before turning to the ideas promoted by *Breaking Bad* for legitimizing the war waged on employed, underemployed and employed members of the American working class, it may be fruitful to sum up key features of what research has shown us to be key ideational processes employed to justify conventional wars as well the violence inflicted on their victims. In the first place, victims and their fates are to be made invisible. If, however, some victims make their presence known, they are to be demonized as inferior or immoral beings whose lives are not worthy of concern or sympathy. As Tirman and others have shown, these processes produce an ideational architecture of indifference setting American minds at rest and relieving them of any responsibility for the enormous devastation their weapons of mass destruction have left in their wake.

**The Visible Protagonist, Methamphetamine and Its Invisible Victims**

Turning now from conventional warfare to the unilateral war victimizing working class Americans since the 1980s, we find many of the same elements of this ideological apparatus influencing the television audience of *Breaking Bad* – even its viewers in the White House. Last Christmas, readers of the *New York Times* were informed that Breaking Bad was President Obama’s favorite television show. Commenting on this in the *Daily Beast*, columnist Kevin Fallon suggested that it was unlikely that Obama has much time to watch TV so he most probably “. . .asks one of
his rich, fancy friends, ´What should I watch?´ Rich fancy friend says, ´Breaking Bad´ because that ´s the kind of thing rich, fancy people watch.”¹ In a very real sense, Fallon´s commentary touches upon the central theme of this paper: namely, that a class perspective must be brought to bear on this televised fictional saga of a high school teacher who amasses a vast fortune through his brilliance and ingenuity in producing, distributing and profiting from the sales of a highly refined form of methamphetamine.

Even though the twists and turns of the processes involved in the accumulation of all this money runs like a green thread throughout the five year run of the Breaking Bad, viewers are almost never exposed to the many persons whose purchases of crystal meth provide the profits stacking up in cubic feet and then cubic yards of dollars in the storerooms of the protagonist. Throughout the many episodes of the series, viewing audiences are only provided with occasional glimpses of meth-addicted women, men and youngsters. There are only two main exceptions to this. One is Wendy, a gaunt and highly-strung street prostitute who has sex with Jesse, the protagonist’s lab assistant and also provides him with an alibi for the murders of rival drug dealers. The other meth addict, Spooge, is a thief and a thoroughly loathsome father of a seriously neglected and starving child. In contrast to Wendy who is included in several episodes of the series, Spooge appears in only a single episode before dying when his skull is crushed while trying to open a stolen ATM machine. So after subtracting one prostitute with the ghastly complexion, scabby skin and bad teeth of the long-term meth addict and one disgusting, half-crazed and stupid thief, the human beings whose lives have been made miserable by methamphetamine addiction remain largely unseen throughout the five-year run of the series. They serve as a kind of distant and anonymous backdrop for the main dramatic action of the series taking place in the foreground. While their purchases of meth serve as the source of the growing stores of wealth always on display in the series, the masses of those using and addicted to the drug are for all intents and purposes “non-persons” to use the term first coined by Erving Goffman to describe people treated as things by prisons, mental hospitals and other total institutions (1961).
One way of judging the degree to which the meth addict is demonized by *Breaking Bad* is to compare its treatment of Spooge with that accorded Bubbles, the heroin addict, introduced to viewers of the *The Wire*. Both are the featured drug male addicts in *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire* and represent polar opposites. While Spooge’s gross neglect of his child makes him little worthy of viewer sympathy, the reverse is true of Bubbles. He is no less of an addict, but the solidarity and humanity he displays to Johnny, his HIV infected addict friend, as well as to other addicts makes him an extremely sympathetic and likeable person. There can be little doubt that the compassion viewers feel for Bubbles is intensified as the series follows his torturous quest to free himself from heroin. The sympathetic feelings viewers may gain for Bubbles, Johnny other heroin addicts depicted during the 60 episodes of *The Wire* is not surprising given the views of David Simon, the creator of the series. As a long-time journalistic recorder of what drugs have done to his home city of Baltimore, Simon’s public statements have made clear how he views the class nature of American society, its criminal justice system and the vast scale of the human wreckage left in the aftermath of a once vibrant economy ravaged by forces unleashed by neoliberal capitalism. In an interview a few years back, Simon stated that *The Wire*’s main aim was to be

...a meditation on the death of work and the betrayal of the American working class ... it is a deliberate argument that unencumbered capitalism is not a substitute for social policy; that on its own, without a social compact, raw capitalism is destined to serve the few at the expense of the many (Vine 2005).

In contrast to the hyper-visibility of the legions of very human addicts shown purchasing and using drugs during the 60 episodes of *The Wire*, the invisibility of methamphetamine users in *Breaking Bad* is striking. It is also significant for a number of other reasons. In the first place, their absence from the series mirrors what was long the fate of this drug and related substances in the research literature. In one of the earliest major compilations of international studies of amphetamine misuse, its editor described policy makers and the media in the UK as unaware that this drug and the problems it created existed. Meth addiction, she noted, was in different ways “hidden” or “neglected” or “ignored” or “not taken seriously” (Klee
In a summary description of the long-term invisibility of this drug in official circles and the media of the United Kingdom, she emphasized that “Amphetamine, to modify a common phrase, has not been noticeable by its absence. Its absence, until very recently, has not been noticed at all (ibid:19).

As the journalist/ethnographer Nick Reding showed in Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town, his in-depth study of the devastation wrought by methamphetamine in a small community in Iowa, a similar disregard of as well as outright ignorance about this drug and the multiple problems it generated long existed among state and national bureaucracies as well as the American media (2009). For nearly two decades beginning in the 1980s, mainstream journalists as well as state and federal policy makers largely ignored the explosive spread of meth – especially in the American countryside. It was, however, something that increasingly impacted on the lives and work of law enforcement officials, social workers and medical personnel. They steadily documented the casualties of this drug in their arrest sheets, court records, hospital admission forms, child welfare cases and environmental damage reports. Their figures, however, failed to register with policy makers and researchers higher up the food chain and consequently, many were largely unprepared when abruptly confronted in the opening years of the new millennium by what long had been taking place in the heartlands of their own country.

As Reding documents in great detail, methamphetamines were unknown to prison officials in North Dakota in 1995. But 10 years later, over 60 per cent of male prison inmates used meth and a prison for female meth users was being constructed. In 2009, the number of people sentenced to prison in Minnesota for meth-related offenses had quadrupled since 2001. By 2004, more than 40% of law enforcement officials in the US reported that meth was their number one drug problem. One year later, one third of these agencies reported that meth was the drug contributing most to violent crimes and crimes against property in their areas. Today, meth is reported to be responsible for 4,154 incarcerations in US prisons of inmates charged with murder and manslaughter (Engle 2013:33).
In 2005, a survey of 13 largely rural states revealed that nearly 70% of reporting counties in Minnesota and more than 50% of counties in North Dakota had experienced major increases in children removed from their homes owing to meth-related neglect and abuse. In Missouri at that time, meth accounted for more than 30% of all children who had been placed in foster care. In 2011, it was estimated that meth labs had affected approximately 21,000 children in the United States during a 9-year period beginning in 2002 (Engle 2013: 33). As one official of the Children’s Home Society of West Virginia put it in explaining the great numbers of children placed in foster care because of meth-related problems in their homes:

*In most cases of violence or abuse, a child may be removed from one parent. With meth, children often go into foster care because they lose both of their parents to the drug (PEW Report n.d.:10).*

In addition to its devastating effects on users and their immediate families, this drug also infects those unlucky enough to find themselves in the environments where it is made. Since contamination effects were little known during the early years of the meth epidemic again owing to insufficient research, protective gear was seldom used by those charged with finding and dismantling labs and consequently cancer rates among them have been rising dramatically. As Redding also notes, every pound of methamphetamine produced creates five to seven pounds of toxic waste contaminating home interiors, buildings, streams, septic tanks and surface water. Today, many states demand that homes offered for sale must first be certified as free from traces of meth. In addition to creating thousands upon thousands of chemical Chernobyls in houses, sheds, barns, motels, cars, trucks and other production sites, meth labs all too often erupt in flames or explode and cause horrendous injuries and deaths (2009).

Given the massive human costs and sheer magnitude of these and related problems, such as environmental cleanups of meth labs and medical treatment of those injured in meth lab fires and explosions, how can we explain why this methamphetamine tsunami was so long invisible to researchers and policy makers? As the cultural anthropologist Philipe Bourgeois maintained in his long-term participant observational studies of crack cocaine dealers and users in East Harlem,
every illicit drug and its users needs to be understood in terms of economic, historical, demographic, geographical and historical factors and especially how these impact on the lives and motives of addicts (2003). With this as a point of departure, we can begin to explore the question about invisibility of the methamphetamine’s many victims not only on a popular television series but also among US policymakers and research czars who ignored the immensity of problems created by this drug for large segments of American society.

The answer to this key question is, I contend, a simple one involving the dynamics and inequalities of the class system of contemporary American society. Quite simply, it is members of the American working class whose lives and communities are still being destroyed by a methamphetamine epidemic that began three decades ago. Today, it has been estimated that anywhere from 10 to 12 million people in the US have tried methamphetamines at least once (Lyshorn 2006: 7; National Survey on Drug Use and Health 2012). It has been estimated that a proportion of these users have been middle class gays who have used meth and amyl nitrate “poppers” in sexual encounters (Purcell at al. 2005). But most of the women, men and youngsters addicted to this easy-to-make drug comprised of over-the-counter cold medicine and other legal substances are members of a working class already defined as having little value by the victors in the class war which has been growing in ferocity since the 1980s. A great number of these together with their non-addicted working class sisters and brothers have been slotted by neoliberal capitalism into what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman and the educator Henry Giroux have jointly described as the “Zero Generation” comprised of those millions today who have zero jobs, zero possibilities, and zero hope (Bauman 2011; Giroux 2011).

**Neoliberalism, the New Horatio Alger and the Invisible Working Class**

The invisibility of the human costs of meth both in *Breaking Bad* as well and policy making and research organs in the US is but a tiny reflection of what has been happening to the American working class since the advent in the 1980s of neoliberal ideology and practices. There exist today a number of thoughtful and well-written analyses of neoliberal capitalism’s devastating impacts on both American as well as
international workers (see, for example, Cockburn & St. Clair 2004; Fryer & McCormick 2012; Harvey 2007; Rutherford & Davidson 2012). Yet, despite the wealth of findings produced by these authors, there is still much to learn about the sets of attitudes and values aimed at creating widespread acceptance and indeed support in society at large for the massive damage inflicted by the forces of capital on workers and their families. As David Harvey puts it, there is an urgent need to explore how a “climate of consent” has been created and spread in society by neoliberal ideologues. He argues further that it is imperative for the employed, underemployed and unemployed members of the working class to defend themselves by studying the processes providing the capitalist class with legitimacy and moral justification for very real war they have been waging and winning over the past 30 years (2007:83-85).

As the late Stuart Hall pointed out, a number of ideologies mirroring the interests of ruling classes are not particularly difficult to decode – especially those presented in the tabloid press and related news organizations, such as those of Rupert Murdoch’s media empire (1973). However, in films and television programs produced by the entertainment media, it is often much more difficult to untangle and decipher hegemonic values, attitudes and themes owing to their often extremely clever packaging and more subtle message forms. This is particularly true of the shrewdly wrapped constellations of ruling ideas presented by Breaking Bad. When we begin to explore what lies beneath its surface of ingenious plots, superb acting and highly innovative camera angles, we find the contours of an ideology generating antipathy to and even disgust about the working class among audiences of this series - especially educated middle class viewers. By creating a protagonist and storyline with which middle class professionals can identify, the series helps blind them to their own objective positioning as waged/salaried workers closely resembling that of the class they fear of “falling into” as suggested by a number of researchers (e.g. Ehrenreich 1970; Newman 1999).

And so rather than identifying themselves with the class most like their own, one suspects that many educated professional fans of Breaking Bad having such elite illusions find in it ideological rationales - like their law school professor colleague
now residing in the White House – for cozying up to the fancy rich folks of the capitalist class. They can like novelist James Meek extol the brilliance of the series in intellectual journals like the *London Review of Books* (2013). They can dress themselves and their children in the bestselling Breaking Bad Halloween meth lab protective gear – complete with blue colored crystalline candy to go out as a trick or treating family in their nice suburban neighborhoods (White 2013). Or they can even edit books about profound philosophical themes embedded in the series (Koepsell & Arp 2012).

For these and other salaried and freelance idea producers involved in various ways in the reproduction of capitalist culture and social relations in schools and other institutions, the rags to riches storyline of this series is an appealing one. For members of what Barbara and John Ehrenreich first described in the 1970s as the “professional middle class,” (1977) and recently elaborated on in their *Death of a Yuppie Dream: The Rise and Fall of the Professional-Managerial Class* (2013), it is not difficult to identify themselves with a poorly paid but highly intelligent high school teacher and part-time car washer initially facing death and financial ruin who transforms himself into an enormously wealthy head of a vast drug empire. It could be reasonably argued this has considerable weight among middle class professionals living in an American society where middle class educators – particularly at the grade and high school level - long have been taunted with the question: “If you’re so smart, why aren’t your rich?” Perhaps even more significant in terms of professionals identifying with the protagonist is that of the timing of the first season of the series. This coincides with the year of the financial meltdown devastating and trapping many professionals in the ruins of collapsed housing, labor and investment markets. It is in 2008 that Walter White, the protagonist, is first told of the cancer threatening not only his own life but also the future of his family comprised of a handicapped teenage son and an unemployed and pregnant wife.

Given all the praise conferred on *Breaking Bad* for its plots and characters by many of the well-educated and highly literate fans drawn from the Ehrenreichs’ professional managerial class, it is remarkable that so few have noted two very important aspects of the series. In the first place, it is difficult to find in the many
analyses of the series produced by a range of scholars the fact that in many ways, the protagonist is not merely the *homo economicus* first discussed by John Stewart Mill and elaborated upon by later scholars. He epitomizes in many ways what could be thought of as the *neoliberal homo economicus* envisioned by Margaret Thatcher. Throughout all but the final of the 62 episodes of the series, Walter White is forever justifying his acts with references to his sole motive of providing for the welfare of his family. Time and again, he declares this all the while his drug empire expands and his wealth accumulates in the wake of a series of murders he commits and engineers. In so doing, he may be understood as rephrasing one of the key elements of the Anglo-American neoliberal project ushered in by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. With his incessant declarations about ensuring the well being of his family as his sole motive, White neatly epitomizes Margaret Thatcher’s infamous declaration that: “...There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families”(1987).

As David Harvey (2005) as well as Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin (2013) have described and discussed in great detail, this statement together with Thatcher’s equally infamous assertion that “There is no alternative” to the neoliberal economic system can be thought of as representing the core proposition of late capitalism’s restructuring of society. This involves the forcible replacement of social solidarity by a draconian new order involving individuals competing and otherwise engaging with others in the context of the marketplace. According to Massey and Rustin, the ideological nucleus of the neoliberal project is one revolving “... around the supposed naturalness of ‘the market,’ the primacy of the competitive individual, the superiority of the private over the public.”(2013:9). As Harvey also points out, this project is to take place free from meddlesome governmental laws and regulations in an “institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”(2005:2). This is illustrated through the series in White’s never-ending battle with the DEA and other law enforcement agencies and his highly inventive ways of outmaneuvering their interference with his empire building project. His private property rights are also underscored dramatically in episode 10 of the second season of the series when he...
confronts two potential competitors in the act of purchasing meth-making ingredients and equipment. As the episode ends, he threatens and orders them to stay out of “his” territory.

Another more significant class-wise ideological aspect of the series is how few of its intellectual fans have noted that its 21st century narrative is in many respects little more than an updating of the 19th century writings of Horatio Ager. In book after book, Alger ceaselessly promoted the myth that wealth and success in American society comes to those rugged individuals who conquer all adversities through hard work, determination, creativity and sacrifice. This falsehood, described by Michael Moore as a seductive drug (2004), has also been characterized as an extremely destructive belief leading people to individualize their failures and to blame themselves mistakenly for failure. In accepting the myth that individual effort determines success in the socio-economic system of the United States, this prevents persons from seeing that inherited wealth, class, race and gender have the decisive roles in determining success and failure (Miller and Lapham 2012; Weiss 1999).

While Alger used over one hundred books to present his rags to riches narrative, the producers of *Breaking Bad* needed little more than sixty episodes to promote a slightly different version of the same storyline. Despite their many similarities, perhaps the single most contrast between these two sets of ideological products is that while both extol rugged individualism and the drive for financial success, Alger’s characterizations of the newsboys, bootblacks and farm boys populating nearly all of his books reveal little antagonism to their shared working class backgrounds. On the contrary, these youngsters may be tough, street-wise but they are also kind and generous to one another. They may play tricks and swear at one another, but there is always a rough kind of solidarity among them. For example, when Dick, the shoeshine boy hero of one of Alger’s best known books, is rewarded with a new suit by a rich merchant who has hired him as a clerk, the boy gives his old suit to another poorly-clad bootblack who throughout most of the book has been teasing and bullying him (Bercovitch 2005:663).
While Alger’s many books are heavily populated with newspaper boys, bootblacks and young farm workers, one of the most noticeable features of *Breaking Bad* is the relative absence and some could say invisibility of workers from its many episodes. In the main, workers throughout the series are usually dim figures in the background where they wash cars, take fast food orders, wait tables, salvage auto parts, crew trains, wash commercial loads at the laundry, staff hospitals and nursing homes, do janitorial work and carry out an array of other tasks. This kind of underrepresentation of the working class on American television screens is by no means extraordinary. In reports from the 1980s and 1990s, it was found that while service workers and blue collar laborers comprised nearly 70% of the American workforce, only 10% of the characters on television shows came from that kind of background (IAM 1980; Johnson 1981; Parenti 1992). And like most workers in *Breaking Bad*, when they did make their presence slightly known it was as waitresses and waters, bartenders and other workers performing various unskilled or semi-skilled service tasks (Parenti 1992:70).

There are only two workers receiving much attention in *Breaking Bad* and they represent polar opposites. Hugo Archuleta, the Chicano janitor at White’s high school, represents the one sympathetic working class character. When Walter White is having his vomiting attacks trigged by chemotherapy, Hugo cleans up after him, provides him with chewing gum and reminds him of the great importance of “teaching kids”. But Hugo loses his job after being mistakenly arrested for stealing the lab equipment actually stolen by White for his meth production. When the police find a small quantity of marijuana in Hugo’s home, Hugo is arrested and imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. But in contrast to Hugo’s care, generosity and humanity, viewers are presented with Todd Alquist, who works for an exterminating company. After becoming Walter’s lab assistant, Todd cold-bloodedly murders a young boy who accidentally comes upon their meth operation. He then goes on to murder and torture others while engineering a takeover of White’s meth operation together with his uncle, Jack - the leader of a Neo-Nazi gang. Unlike the caring and unfairly prosecuted Hugo, Todd is a coldblooded, depraved exterminator of children,
women and pests. There is little about him to evoke sympathy on the part of *Breaking Bad*’s viewers.

There are several other reasons why the absence of the working class from this series needs to be emphasized. This represents a much greater problem than simple underrepresentation. In the first place, the research literature makes clear that meth is a drug impacting almost exclusively on the working class. The literature of drug abuse in the US also indicates that when Obama’s rich fancy friends and other dominant class fractions wish to use hard drugs, they rarely choose meth. For those fractions of the American class system possessing considerable economic, cultural and social capital, chances are high that cocaine – in powdered form – would be their recreational hard drug of choice (See, for example, Hobfoll 1998:111; NIDA 1985:15, 136; Platt 1997:9-10).

Owing to the power of the pharmaceutical industry which makes more than 600 million dollars annual selling pseudoephedrine cold remedies which are easily mixed with other lawful household and industrial products to make meth, only two states – Oregon and Mississippi – have been able to enact legislation limiting the sale of pseudoephedrine products (Engle 2013:32). Attempts to enact similar legislation in other states have been defeated by Big Pharma’s legions of lobbyists and millions of dollars spent on advertising and other political campaigns. Most recently, this took place in Kentucky in 2010 when a bill proposed to require a prescription for pseudoephedrine was tabled after a blitz by industry lobbyists in the state capital and several million dollars spent on telephone campaigns and radio ads by an associations representing the makers of over-the-counter medicines. In none of these ads was the word methamphetamine ever mentioned even though Kentucky, as we shall see, is one of the four states consistently topping the list of meth labs discovered by law enforcement (Engle 2013:33-34)

**The All American Drug**

Report after report have made clear that it is precisely those members of the working class most lacking economic, cultural and social capital in American society who are using methamphetamine and methamphetamine related drugs. According
to one of the most finely detailed studies of meth use in the western United States, the main users of what is often called “poor man’s cocaine” were marginalized working-class members of economically declining rural and suburban communities, marginalized working class Anglos in urban areas, welfare mothers and members of outlaw biker gangs (Morgan & Beck 1997:135-162). Statistics from National Institute on Drug Abuse and National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuses (CASA) have shown that methamphetamine’s main user populations draw mainly from white working-class communities in rural areas as well as some urban areas in the Midwest, Southwest and Northwest of the United States.

Not surprisingly, given the widespread use of meth among the most powerless segments of American society, it has shown a skyrocketing surge among Native Americans living on reservations in the past decade. In 2012, it was reported that meth abuse was found among 30 percent of the population of some reservations, and in some reservations 65 percent of all documented cases of child neglect and out of home placement of children were due to the use of meth by parents. Two years ago, California Indian Legal Services estimated that in nearly every case of a child being removed from their home, one or both of the parents were using meth. Often, babies removed from the home were born suffering from prenatal exposure to the drug (Two Rivers Tribune 2012). One study of a 12-month period in 2007 found that 4 times as many Native Americans reported using methamphetamines when compared to non-Native Americans (Spear et. al. 2007). A few years earlier, law enforcement agencies responsible for policing reservations reported that from 50 to 60 per cent of violent crimes investigated involved meth (ICUP 2005).

Outside the boundaries of the reservations, a nationwide survey of rural and small town America found the rate of meth abuse among unemployed in these places was seven times that of abuse among urban dwellers (Van Gundy 2006). In 2006, a survey conducted by Slate found that law enforcement agencies and journalists had proclaimed over 70 places, nearly all in rural counties, to be meth capitals of the United States. It has long been clear that meth is very much a feature of life in contemporary rural America – particularly in those areas
devastated by agribusiness, factory closures, union busting campaigns, whole industries moved with the help of NAFTA to maquiladoras south of the border as well as the destruction of main street businesses owing to the invasion of the countryside by Wal-Mart, Home Depot and other giant retail conglomerates (see, for example, Anderson 2012; Engle 2013; Reding 2009; Solotaroff 2003).

One geographic picture of where meth addicts are to be found is provided by the yearly statistics compiled by the DEA about so-called lab incidents – i.e., methamphetamine laboratories seized by law enforcement agencies. In a one-year period beginning in 2004, rural counties in Missouri, West Virginia, Washington, California and Michigan featured the greatest number of laboratories seized. At the state level, Missouri, Indiana and Tennessee accounted for the most labs seized during this period – nearly 5 thousand. During the past decade, these three states plus Kentucky have led the nation each year in numbers of seized meth labs.

But again, in contrast to those at the higher end of the American social ladder using recreational drugs, there is much evidence showing that for many working class users in these and other states having a heavy presence of meth laboratories, this substance – and its precursors of Benzedrine and Dexedrine – are more vocational drugs rather than recreational ones. Reding found in the Iowa town he studied that methamphetamine initially appeared among workers whose hourly wages had been cut by two-thirds following the takeover of the community’s main meatpacking plant by an outside conglomerate which succeeded in destroying the meat packer’s union. As a result, plant workers previously making 24 dollars an hour were then trying to make do on 8 dollars an hour. This led to many to take on double shifts and work long hours of overtime. In the beginning, they purchased methamphetamines to give them the energy to handle these long hours of extremely demanding work. But as time went by, many began synthesizing their own meth by mixing cold medicines with other chemicals in what became known as the shake and bake method – often with disastrous results caused by fires and explosions (2009).
Reding’s findings are supported by a host of studies of the reasons given for meth use by workers. In one investigation carried out by the Indiana University and the Universities of Kentucky and Colorado, rural and urban informants – nearly all white, working class adults – reported using the drug to gain energy to work multiple jobs (Rural Center for AIDS/STD Prevention 2006: 4). A study of 41 active and former meth users in rural Colorado found that meth use was widespread in construction, oil production, trucking and other occupations demanding endurance to work long hours at often tedious tasks (Dreisbach et al. 2004). Endurance and gaining energy for “getting things done” were also reported as reasons for using meth by 40 male and female heavy methamphetamine users interviewed in Atlanta, Georgia by a team of researchers (Lende et al. 2007). These and other research findings show that meth has become part of the work cultures of many industries: not only does it give its users boundless energy but it is cheap – particularly for those who use internet recipes to mix cold medicines with household products.

These findings are supported by my own experiences while a driver and warehouseman as a member of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in the 1960s. Back then and prior to mandatory drug testing at workplace, Benzedrine, Dexedrine, Dexamyl and other amphetamines were easily available on loading docks and at truck stops. Among my workmates at that time - many of whom were moonlighting at other jobs and working 16 of more hours a day – amphetamines were easier than “M & Ms” to obtain as one driver observed. An interesting feature of those times that I witnessed first-hand was that while a driver or warehouseman who showed up at a loading dock smelling of alcohol would be sent home or dismissed on the spot by a foreman, the same foreman paid little or no attention to workers whose eyes, facial expressions and constant fidgeting showed they were speeding away. As long as workers were working hard, taking few breaks and easily doing double shifts and overtime, employers seemed to be little concerned whether drugs were activating them or not.

Seen from the point of view of those expropriating the labor of workers back then, amphetamines and methamphetamines were tolerated as long as they led to increased productivity and higher profits. In the Americas, these drugs represented
recent additions to a history of such substances beginning in the 16th century. As described by Eduardo Galeano in his history of the brutal exploitation of Latin America by foreign and domestic oppressors, the Spanish conquerors of the Andean peoples at that time found that the coca leaves traditionally reserved for religious ceremonies could be used to increase the payloads of silver mined for them by enslaved natives. Miners provided with coca leaves to chew could work days at a time without rest or food. In a very real sense, the immense riches of the Potosi silver mines were the result of thousands of miners whose lives were cut short by exhaustion, starvation and cocaine addiction (1971:47-49).

It is extremely important to emphasize how the *vocational* rather than *recreational* use of methamphetamines and amphetamines and related drug by workers in the workplace can easily develop into drug addiction. As ethnographic researchers, such as Brown (2010), Lende et al. (2007) and Pach and Gorman (2002) as well as Redding (2013) have suggested, the high levels of energy and concentration triggered in workers by tiny amounts of meth and their resulting compulsion “to get things done” without resting or eating contribute to making this drug fit perfectly into the American work ethos. In this way, meth becomes the all-American drug, but the price workers pay for this as already noted is extremely high with many tragic consequences.

**Providing Illusions of Power for Powerless People**

For the employed, underemployed and unemployed members of the American working class struggling to survive in a social landscape laid waste by the forces of neoliberal capitalism, the initial meeting with methamphetamines most often gives them a new, unfamiliar and mind-blowing feeling of power and invincibility. As one addict trying to recover from meth addiction told me - “The first time I smoked meth, I hunted for a plane to steal and to fly – even though I know nothing about flying a plane”. The feeling of soaring and possessing colossal power often reported by meth addicts contrasts markedly with what recovering addicts reported about what they gained from heroin. Often, I was told while living and working with addicts in a therapeutic community that heroin had little to do with
power and invincibility. Its main benefit, I was told time and again, was in erasing psychological pain. As one recovering addict put it to the approving nods of other addict: “If you’ve got a lot of pain, heroin in the beginning seems to be the quickest way of making it all go away” (Seltzer & Gabor 2009).

Meth, too, in the beginning of the addict’s career, seems to be life changing, but this is only an illusion fostered by the dopamine the meth rush produces to saturate the nervous system. But once the initial extreme high becomes a closed chapter, the life of the user becomes one of desperately trying but always failing to regain that initial rush and feeling of immense power, colossal strength and indestructability. In the book Tweak: Growing Up On Methamphetamines, one addict recalls

*I guess I’ve pretty much spent the last four years chasing that first high. I wanted desperately to feel that wholeness again. It was like, I don’t know, like everything else faded out. All my dreams, my hopes, ambitions – they all fell away as I took more and more crystal up my nose...*(Sheff 2008:5).

In what can be understood as one of the most poignant descriptions of the effects of methamphetamines written by a woman who has seen what this drug has done to those closest to her, she writes:

*I imagine you are 17 years old and locked up, again. You aren’t a murderer or rapist, you are an addict, and it’s all you have ever known. You are shaking uncontrollably, sweating profusely, seeing and hearing things that aren’t really there, vomiting, and screaming in agony. You are coming down off of one of the most addictive and destructive drugs in the world today, Meth. On the street it’s called ice, glass, crank, chalk, or crystal, to you it’s the substance that has destroyed every relationship you’ve ever had, its destroyed your family, kept you from getting your high school diploma and from having any kind of social group of friends other than the other meth heads you know who seek what you seek; the ultimate high. It’s the only thing that is consistent in your life and offers you the best and worst feeling in the entire world*(Lyshorn 2006: 4).

Meth addicts constantly but futilely try to regain their first meth high. What they do gain, however, are a host of troubles. First and foremost, they lose their ability to produce dopamine while acquiring over time patchworks of lesions from picking at imagined bugs under their skin, decayed and missing teeth resulting from “meth mouth” and constant teeth grinding, and restless hands
continually fidgeting with small tasks and things in their immediate environment. They lose much weight and acquire rapid and/or stymied speech, high blood pressure, and elevated pulse rates. In addition, they experience paranoid delusions, hallucinations, severe and often suicidal depressions, and long periods of sleeplessness.

In comparison to recovery rates of persons addicted to heroin and cocaine, the figures showing rates of recovery from meth addiction make for depressing reading. According to the Coalition Against Drug Abuse, crystal meth has one of the highest relapse rates of any drug. One figure often quoted comes from the University of Nebraska as well as a survey of drug counselors carried out by Statistics Canada. Both these studies give the relapse rate following treatment for meth addiction as 92 per cent (Bartos 2005; DPNOC 2014). In one recently published study of the recovery rate of a group of meth addicts in Australia, it was found that three years after treatment, the relapse rate was greater than 95 per cent (McKetin 2012). In the course of fieldwork in a therapeutic community of recovering drug addicts, one of my roommates—a meth addict—told of envying the community’s heroin addicts whose often horrific withdrawal symptoms we often were witnessing. Their pain and misery he felt seemed minor in comparison with what abstinence from meth was doing to his body and brain. In the end, his withdrawal symptoms became so painful that he tearfully wished the community farewell after being its member for less than two weeks. Life without methamphetamine he told us then was no life at all. Like many addicts in the US and especially those described in *Methland*, he began using meth as a vocational drug to help him hold down a second night job as a doorman at a discotheque after the neoliberal restructuring of his factory left him and his fellow workers with wage packets too small to cover the costs of everyday life.

Though a member of the Hungarian working class, his initial use of methamphetamine as a *vocational* rather than *recreational* drug has its origins in many of the same processes as those acting upon the Iowa workers described in
Methland (see, also Seltzer and Gabor 2006). Rather than assuming the morally comfortable position of blaming the victims of this drug for their own addiction, which is implicit in much of the storyline of Breaking Bad and explicit in many mainstream journalistic accounts, Reding emphasized instead that

The rise of the meth epidemic was built largely on economic policies, political decisions, and the recent development of American cultural history. Meth’s basic components lie equally in the action of government lobbyists, long-term trends in the agricultural and pharmaceutical industries, and the effects of globalization and free trade. Along the way, meth charts the fears that people have and the vulnerabilities they feel, both as individuals and as communities (2009:16).

Concluding Remarks

The writings of Reding and other earlier cited investigative journalists such as Anderson, Engle, and Solotaroff represent one challenge to the dominance of the architecture of indifference functioning both to make invisible as well as to demonize those working class women, men and youngsters most victimized by the war which has been directed against them during past decades in the United States. The writings, speeches and video productions of David Simon, too, represent still another form of image and value producing work challenging from within the entertainment media its many hegemonic and malign contributions to the architectures of indifference to the victims of class warfare in the United States. There is perhaps no better way to demonstrate the class-based contempt central to this ideological apparatus than to reflect on the following remarks made in 1999 by Frank Keating, then governor of Oklahoma – a state consistently ranked among the leaders for annual meth lab incidents. Speaking at a press conference focused on methamphetamine, Keating declared

*It’s a white trash drug - methamphetamines largely are consumed by the lower socio-economic element of white people. And I think we need to shame it. . . . Just like crack cocaine was a black-trash drug and is a black trash drug* (Senate Communications Division 1999).

It speaks volumes to the power of the architecture of indifference and the powerlessness of the working class victims of methamphetamine addiction that following much public outcry, Keating was forced to apologize for the racist content
– rather than the class hatred – expressed in his comments. One last thing to underscore even more the key relationship of the class system to methamphetamine is to imagine a scenario where the youngsters growing up in the families of Obama’s rich and fancy friends from the capitalist class were able to purchase all the ingredients to make their own cocaine or heroin at counters of their nearest Walgreens, Wal-Mart or Home Depot. One would their parents to make use of the stories of economic, social and cultural capital to force federal and state governments to enact legislation prohibiting the sale of products harmful to their offspring as well as to launch massive crackdowns on the companies producing these substances. But as long as this is the situation today faced by both young and adult members of most powerless class in American society on the other side of the class divide, there is little likelihood for these developments to take place. The social annihilation of a large segment of the American working class by methamphetamines is like to continue at an even greater pace in the years to come – especially as feelings of powerlessness and helplessness become even more dominant in the lives of those defined as useless by capital. And most probably, the architecture of indifference to their fates – especially among many members of the professional managerial sectors of society - will most likely be reinforced by even more artistically sophisticated and creative productions of the American entertainment media. In this way, such a hegemonic project will strengthen a preexisting collective conscious – formed by many imperial wars – to provide a traditional template for accepting that members of the largely unseen and losing side in the class war lead inferior lives not worthy of much concern and even less compassion.

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iv During 2003 and 2004, I live and worked as a non-addict member and anthropologist in a therapeutic community for recovery addicts in Hungary. The references here are drawn from my field notes.
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