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The Politics and Policy of HBO's The Wire

In this class, we will watch all five seasons of HBO's award-winning *The Wire* from the perspective of social scientists interested in politics, policy, and human behavior. Set in declining Baltimore, *The Wire* provides the perfect lens with which to study a rich set of social scientific issues, concepts, and questions. We will explore a wide variety of interdisciplinary topics, including the war on drugs, urban elections, bureaucracy, rational choice theory, and union politics.

Most days on the syllabus combine episodes with readings. Because the issues explored in this course stretch across a number of the social sciences, our interdisciplinary readings come from academic journals and books in political science, sociology, and economics. The readings and the episodes will interact with one another: episodes will illustrate ideas from the literature, and the significance of show scenes becomes clearer when we use the readings' social science analyses.

Class preparation, participation, and quizzes

This is not a traditional lecture course. While we will do some lecturing to introduce social science concepts, the class will be unusually interactive for a large lecture. We will expect you all to come to class ready and eager to discuss both the episodes and the readings in large and small groups. In particular, Professors Glick and Einstein will frequently break the class down into smaller groups to facilitate seminar-style discussions normally absent from lecture classes.

It is therefore imperative that you keep up with the readings and the episodes. There is no point in being in the class if you plan on watching the show in marathons before exams: the show is integral to the class sessions. To ensure that everyone is prepared to participate, we will have **frequent tiny episode/reading quizzes at the beginning of class**. These quizzes will be very short and easy. If you watched the assigned episodes and got the basic idea of the readings, you will do well. If not, you will not. We will literally flip a coin at the beginning of class to determine if there is a quiz. We will drop your worst quiz from your semester quiz grade. Please note that if you only read HBO's plot summaries, you will not do well on some episode/reading quizzes. While these summaries can helpfully jog your memory, they are not a substitute for watching assigned episodes.

Content Disclaimer

The Wire contains a variety of content that may be offensive to some students. The dialogue contains considerable profanity and racial slurs. In addition, the show frequently depicts overt drug use, "strong sexual content" (to borrow from the ratings system), and graphic violence. While these scenes are not terribly explicit by modern movie standards, we want to ensure that you have proper expectations about the show's content.

“Books” for Purchase:

There are no books for this class. All readings will be on Blackboard.

You are responsible for acquiring all of the episodes of the Wire. You can buy the box set online at websites like Amazon.com or use an HBO Go subscription

Assignments:

There will two **exams during the term**, but no final after it. Both will be open note and designed to test both your understanding of basics and your ability to put course ideas together in interesting ways.

In addition, there will be a major research project, culminating in a 12-15+ page paper, that will constitute a large portion of your final grade. This project—which can be done in groups of up to four—will be an in-depth, case study analysis that applies the themes of the course to the city of Boston. Student groups will select a topic from the course and use social science research methods to explore that issue in the city of Boston. These methods can take a variety of forms, including observation analysis, interviews, quantitative analysis, and archival research. To ensure that students have sufficient guidance in their selection of topic and method, student groups will be assigned either Professor Einstein or Professor Glick at the start of the semester as a project adviser. You are expected to meet regularly with your adviser to discuss choosing a topic, project design, and structuring your final paper. Because these regular meetings will ensure the receipt of frequent instructor feedback, we expect papers to represent a polished, written description of a well-executed social science research design. We will also be discussing social science methodology and potential data sources during class lectures.

- **Quizzes and Participation (including TF sessions) 15%**
- Two Midterm exams 27.5% each
- Research project 30%

TF Sessions: You will NOT have weekly discussion sections. Instead, you will have three small group workshops with the TF throughout the term. These workshops will go into class materials in detailed ways and help you get towards writing an effective research proposal paper (see below). For each of the four sessions, the TF will schedule a few times for the workshop and you will be required to attend and participate. You will also meet at least once with the TF to discuss and “workshop” your research paper.

Grades for Written Work and Exams: For written work, the A range will comprise only work which features strikingly original thinking and/or argumentation, expressed in clear, cogent, error-free writing. Only students that go well beyond class materials and discussions (in thought, not extra research) will be considered for an A grade. Papers and examinations in the B range exhibit mastery of the course materials and discussions, expressed in clear, cogent, error-free writing. Papers and examinations in the C range exhibit inadequate understanding of the course materials and discussions and/or deficient, error-plagued writing. Papers and examinations in the D range exhibit

wholly inadequate understanding of the course materials combined with deficient, error-plagued writing. Hopefully the D range and worse will not be an issue. Pluses, minuses, or flat grades within any of these ranges reflect the instructors' judgment of the merits of the paper or examination relative to other papers in the same range. All late assignments will be reduced 1/3 of a grade for every day they are late. Students may appeal grades they feel they received in error but we reserve the right to increase or decrease their grade upon reconsideration.

Other Practical Matters:

Email: The most efficient way to reach us is via email. No promises, but we will try to respond quickly. If you write and don't hear back in 24 hours, please write again. Please try to CC both of us on emails unless there are reasons not to.

1. 9-3 Introduction: (Course overview, Wire overview, Thinking like a social scientist)
 - Michael Lewis, "If Only I had the Nerve," ESPN the Magazine, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espnmag/story?id=3641375>

Season One

2. 9-5
 - Rosh Hashanah – No class
 - But lots to do for next Tuesday
3. 9-10 Self Interest and Introduction to Social Science Methods
 - Episodes 1-5 (Learn the characters and be prepared to describe various characters' incentives)
 - King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Chapter 1
 - Charles Wheelan, *Naked Economics*, (2012) Chapter 2, Incentives Matter
4. 9-12 The Supreme Court and the Criminal Procedure Revolution
 - Episodes 6-8
 - Mapp v. Ohio (1961)
 - Miranda v. Arizona (1966)

- Do the “Weapons-Harmless” Implicit Association Test:
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/>
 - OPTIONAL: Amy Lerman, “The Rights of the Accused” in *Public Opinion and Constitutional Controversy*, (Persily, Egan, and Citrin Eds), 2008
5. 9-17 Challenges in Bureaucracy - Incentives and Principal Agent Problems
- Episodes 9-11
 - Dixit and Nalebuff. *Thinking Strategically* pp. 302-319
 - D. Roderick Kiewiet and Matthew McCubbins from “The Logic of Delegation” in *Readings in American Politics* (Ken Kollman ed.)
 - OPTIONAL: James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), Chapters 1 and 2
 - OPTIONAL: Donald Kettl, “Public Bureaucracies (chapter 19) in the *Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions* (Rhodes, Binder and Rockman eds)
6. 9-19 Introduction to the War on Drugs and Drug Policy
- Episodes 12-13
 - Katherine Beckett, Kris Nyrop, Lori Pfingst. 2006. “Race, Drugs, and Policing: Understanding Disparities in Drug Delivery Arrests.” *Criminology* 44(1): 105-136
 - OPTIONAL: Peter Moskos, *Cop in the Hood*, Chapter 4

Season Two

7. 9-24 Deindustrialization, White Flight, and the Context of the City
- Episodes 1-3
 - Douglas W. Rae. *City*, Chapter 8

TF Session I – research design and studying 1) Drug Policy and 2) “White Flight”

8. 9-26 Decline of Unions and Contemporary Union Politics

- Episodes 4-6
- Richard Yeselson. “Not with a Bang, but a Whimper: The Long, Slow Death Spiral of America’s Labor Movement.” June 6, 2012. *The New Republic*.
- Paul Frymer, *Black and Blue*, Chapter 2
- OPTIONAL: Ira Katzenslon, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, Chapter 3

9. 10-1 Contemporary Racial Segregation and Political Context

- Episodes 7-9
- Einstein, Katherine Levine. 2012. “Race, Political Segregation, and Metropolitan Cooperation.”
- OPTIONAL: Dreier et al., *Place Matters*, Chapter 6

10. 10-3 Federalism and Inter-agency Coordination

- Episodes 10-12
- Paul Peterson. “Who Should Do What? Divided Responsibility in the Federal System.” *The Brookings Review* 13(2): 1-6, BB.
- *McCullouch v. Maryland*

Season Three

11. 10-8 Neighborhoods, Incarceration, and the Cycle of Poverty

- Episodes 1-2
- Devah Pager. 2003. “The Mark of a Criminal Record.” *American Journal of Sociology*. 108(5): 937-75.
- OPTIONAL: Amy Lerman (2008), “*The People Prisons Make: Effects of Incarceration on Criminal Psychology*” in *Do Prisons Make Us Safer?* (Stephen Raphael and Michael Stoll editors)

12. 10-10 Local Politicians and the Allocation of Resources

- Episodes 3-4

- Paul Peterson, *City Limits*, Chapter 3

13. 10-15 Race, Urban Elections, and Majority-Minority Districts

- David Broockman and Daniel M. Butler. 2011. “Do Politicians Racially Discriminate Against Constituents? A Field Experiment on State Legislators.” *American Journal of Political Science*
- OPTIONAL: David Broockman. Forthcoming. “Black Politicians Are More Intrinsically Motivated to Advance Blacks’ Interests: A Field Experiment Manipulating Political Incentives.” *American Journal of Political Science*
- OPTIONAL: Claudine Gay. 2007. “Legislating without constraints: the effect of majority minority districting on legislators’ responsiveness to constituency preferences.” *Journal of Politics*
- OPTIONAL: David Lublin. 1999. “Racial Redistricting and African-American Representation.” *American Political Science Review*.

14. 10-17 MIDTERM #1

15. 10-22 How to Evaluate Policy #1: Case of “Hamsterdam”

Introduction of Final Papers

- Episodes 7-8
- Come prepared to discuss take-home midterm essay question.

16. 10-24 Local Political Control of the Bureaucracy

- Episodes 9-10
- David E. Lewis, “Politicization and Performance: The Case of the Federal Emergency Management Agency,” in *The Politics of Presidential Appointments: Political Control and Bureaucratic Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 141-171
- OPTIONAL: Matthew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, “Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols versus Fire Alarms,” in *Readings in American Politics* (Ken Kollman ed.)

17. 10-29 Statistics, Implementation, and Measurement: Math and Policy

- Episodes 11-12
- Charlie Wheelan (2013), *Naked Statistics*, Chapter 7 “Garbage in, Garbage Out,” WW. Norton

- OPTIONAL: Charlie Wheelan (2013), *Naked Statistics*, Chapter 3 “Program Evaluation, or Why Going to Harvard Won’t Change you Life” WW. Norton

Season 4

18. 10-31 Peer/Neighborhood Effects

- Episodes 1-3
- Bruce Sacerdote, Peer Effects With Random Assignment: Results for Dartmouth Roommates,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2001

19. 11-5 School Policy and Inequality - Local Control and Obstacles to Change

- Episodes 4-6
- San Antonio v. Rodriguez (1973)
- Stephen Billings, David J. Deming, Jonah Rockoff. 2012. “School Segregation, Educational Attainment and Crime: Evidence from the End of Busing in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.”
- OPTIONAL: Milliken v. Bradley (1974)
- OPTIONAL: Michael Paris (2010). *Framing Equal Opportunity Law and the Politics of School Finance Reform*. Chapter 4

20. 11-7 Schools and Mobility

- Episodes 7-9
- David Leonhart, In Climbing Income Ladder, Location Matters, The New York Times, 7/22/13 - <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/22/business/in-climbing-income-ladder-location-matters.html>
- Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery, the Missing “One Offs”: The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low Income Students, NBER Working Paper, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18586>
- OPTIONAL: Jencks and Phillips, *The Black-White Test Gap*, Chapter 1
- OPTIONAL Eric P. Bettinger et. al. “The Role of Simplification and Information in College Decisions: Results From the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment,” *NBER Working paper*, 2009

21. 11-12 Can We Desegregate? Public Housing and the Experimental Method in Social Science

- Episode 10
- Susan Clampet-Lundquist and Douglas S. Massey. “Neighborhood Effects on Economic Self-Sufficiency: A Reconsideration of the Moving to Opportunity Experiment.” *American Journal of Sociology* 114(1): 107-43.
- OPTIONAL: Jeffrey Kling, Jeffrey Liebman, and Lawrence Katz. 2007. “Experimental Analysis of Neighborhood Effects.” *Econometrica* 75(1): 83-119.

22. 11-14 Research Methods in Political and Policy Analysis and Status Update on Student Final Projects.

- Episodes 11-13
- Come prepared to discuss methods from at least 4 “methods” articles identified by instructors.

Season 5

23. 11-19 Universities and Urban Economic Development

- a. Episodes 1-3
- b. Hodges and Dubb, *The Road Half Traveled*, Part I, Chapter 6

24. 11-21 Media

- Episodes 4-6
- Marcus Prior, “News vs. Entertainment, How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout,” *The American Journal of Political Science*, Vol 4, No. 3, 2005
- David Simon, “Does the News Matter To Anyone Anymore?” *The Washington Post*, 20 January 2008. Access at: www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/18/AR2008011802874_pf.html.
- David Simon, “In Baltimore, No One Left to Press the Police,” *The Washington Post*, 1 March 2009. Access at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/27/AR2009022703591_pf.html
- OPTIONAL: David Simon, Testimony Before U.S. Senate Hearing on “the Future of Journalism,” Access at: http://commerce.senate.gov/public/_files/DavidSimonTestimonyFutureofJournalism.pdf

25. 11-27 Midterm #2

26. 11-29 Rationality and Incentives

- Episodes 6-9
- Come prepared to discuss take-home portion of the midterm.

Final TF Workshop – Giving and Receiving Feedback

27. 12-3 Motivated Reasoning - The Psychology of Seeing What We Want to See

- Episode 10
- James Druckman (2012), “The Politics of Motivation,” *Critical Review*
- OPTIONAL: Larry Bartels (2002), Beyond the Running Tally: Partisan Bias in Political Perceptions, Political Behavior

28. 12-5 Conclusion: The Wire, Social Science, and the American City