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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 one midterm exam and a final exam. Both will be closed-book/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 15%**
- Midterm Exam: 25%
- Final Exam: 30%
- Research project 30%

TF Meeting(s): You will NOT have weekly discussion sections. You will, however, 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.

Schedule of classes and assignments. As always, subject to change. Both addition and subtraction.

1. 9-3 Introduction: (Course overview, Wire overview, Thinking like a social scientist).
 - a. Watch Episode 1 (Season 1)
 - b. Brendan Nyhan, "Donald Trump, the Green Lantern Candidate," *The Upshot*, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/upshot/donald-trump-the-green-lantern-candidate.html?_r=0

Season One

2. 9-8 Race in American Cities
 - a. Do the "Weapons-Harmless" Implicit Association Test: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/>
 - b. Jennifer L. Doleac and Luke C.D. Stein. "The Visible Hand: Race and Online Market Outcomes," *The Economic Journal*, 2013
 - c. Episodes 2-3
3. 9-10 Race and Policing
 - a. This American Life (audio) – "The Police See It Differently." Parts I and II. <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/547/cops-see-it-differently-part-one>
<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/548/cops-see-it-differently-part-two>

- b. Leon Neyfakh, “How Police Learn When to Shoot,” *Slate*, 2015
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2015/05/police_shootings_the_grim_videos_cops_watch_of_their_colleagues_being_killed.html
 - c. “That’s Our Standard Policing...Fear,” *Slate*, 2015
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2015/08/baltimore_ex_cop_discusses_police_violence_toward_young_black_men.html
 - d. Episodes 4-6
4. 9-15 Self-interest and Incentives: Thinking Like a Social Scientist
 - a. Charles Wheelan, *Naked Economics*, Chapter 2, “Incentives Matter,” 2012
 - b. Michael Lewis, “If Only I had the Nerve,” *ESPN the Magazine*,
<http://sports.espn.go.com/espnmag/story?id=3641375>
 - c. Michael Adams. “The Dead Grandmother/Exam Syndrome and the Potential Downfall of American Society.”
<http://www.easternct.edu/~adams/Resources/Grannies.pdf>
 - d. Episodes 7-8
 5. 9-17 Incentives, Market Failures, and Principal Agent Problems: What Bureaucracies, Avon Barksdale, House Flipping, and the Health Care Individual Mandate Have in Common, Part I.
 - a. Episodes 9-11
 - b. Charles Wheelan, *Naked Economics*, Chapter 5, “The Economics of Information,” 2012
 - c. Martin Austerhuhle, “A Dream House Becomes a Nightmare,” WAMU, Parts 1-3, <http://wamu.org/projects/house-flipping/#/part1?scrollTo=part1#part1>
 6. 9-22 Incentives, Market Failures, and Principal Agent Problems: What Bureaucracies, Avon Barksdale, House Flipping, and the Health Care Individual Mandate Have in Common, Part II.
 - a. Ryan Enos and Eitan Hersh. “Party Activists as Campaign Advertisers: The Ground Campaign as a Principal Agent Problem.” *American Political Science Review*, 2015
 - b. Episodes 12-13

Season Two

7. 9-24 Deindustrialization, White Flight, and the Decline of Unions
 - a. Episodes 1-3 of Season 2
 - b. Douglas W. Rae. *City*, Chapter 8, 2003
 - c. Jonathan Cohn, “Happy Labor Day. Are Unions Dead? An interview with Rich Yeselson, labor strategist and expert,” *The New Republic*,
<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119272/labor-day-are-unions-dead-interview-rich-yeselson>
8. 9-29 The Structure of Modern American Cities
 - a. Dennis Judd and Todd Swanstrom. *City Politics*, Chapter 4. “The Reform Crusades,” 2014

- b. Sandro Galea, "Health Inequalities in Boston by Train Stops." http://www.bu.edu/research/articles/health-inequalities-in-boston-by-t-stops/?utm_source=social&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=prbumain, BU Research, 2015
 - c. Simon Rios, "The First to Leave East Boston are Us?" *WBUR*, 2015 – read and listen <http://www.wbur.org/2015/07/06/east-boston-rents-residents>
 - d. Episodes 4-6
9. 10-1 Can We Desegregate? The Political and Social Effects of Housing Decisions
- a. Patrick Sharkey. "Ending Urban Poverty: The Inherited Ghetto," *The Boston Review*, 2008 <http://www.bostonreview.net/patrick-sharkey-inherited-ghetto-racial-inequality>
 - b. The Fire and the Fuel, *The Economist*, 2015 <http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21650533-what-dead-white-man-can-teach-america-about-inner-city-decay-fire-and-fuel>
 - c. Richard Florida, "America's Biggest Problem Is Concentrated Poverty, Not Inequality." City Lab, 2015 http://www.citylab.com/housing/2015/08/americas-biggest-problem-is-concentrated-poverty-not-inequality/400892/?utm_source=SFTwitter
 - d. Episodes 7-9
10. 10-6 Federalism and Inter-agency Coordination
- a. Paul Peterson. "Who Should Do What? Divided Responsibility in the Federal System." *The Brookings Review* 13(2): 1-6, 1995
 - b. Reid Wilson, "Oklahoma Bans Local Wage Hikes," *The Washington Post*, 2014 http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/04/16/oklahoma-bans-local-wage-hikes/?Post+generic=%3Ftid%3Dsm_twitter_washingtonpost
 - c. Episodes 10-12

Season 3

11. 10-8 Neighborhoods, Incarceration, and the Cycle of Poverty
- a. Devah Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," *American Journal of Sociology*. 108(5): 937-75, 2003
 - b. Graeme Wood, "How Gangs Took Over Prisons," *The Atlantic*, 2014 <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/10/how-gangs-took-over-prisons/379330/>
 - c. Episodes 1-2
- 12. 10-13 No class BU Monday**
13. 10-15 Local Elections
- a. R. Douglas Arnold and Nicholas Carnes, "Holding Mayors Accountable: New York's Executives from Koch to Bloomberg." *American Journal of Political Science*, 2012
 - b. Episodes 3-4

14. 10- 20 Local Politicians and the Allocation of Resources
 - a. Paul Peterson, *City Limits*, Chapter 3
 - b. Jon Chesto, “Business policies giving Needham an edge over Newton,” *The Boston Globe*, 2015
http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2015/07/03/needham-outshines-newton-efforts-attract-big-employers/hsaS1N9CdVhbInd1bcoCvJ/story.html?s_campaign=bostonglobe%3Asocialflow%3Atwitter
 - c. Episodes 5-6
- 15. 10-22 Midterm #1**
16. 10-27 Race and Political Representation
 - a. David Broockman and Daniel M. Butler, “Do Politicians Racially Discriminate Against Constituents? A Field Experiment on State Legislators.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 2011
 - b. Episodes 7-8
17. 10-29 Norms and Unwritten Rules
 - a. Robert Ellickson, *Order Without Law*, 1991 (excerpts)
 - b. Lisa Bernstein, “Opting out of the Legal System: Extralegal Contractual Relations in the Diamond Industry,” *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 1992 – Read to Page 135 then skim from 135 to the end
 - c. Episodes 9-10
18. 11-3 Statistics, Implementation, and Measurement: Math and Policy.
 - a. Charlie Wheelan, *Naked Statistics*, Chapter 7 “Garbage in, Garbage Out,” 2013
 - b. Ben Poston and Joel Rubin, “LAPD Misclassified Nearly 1,200 Violent Crimes as Minor Offenses,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 2014
<http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-crimestats-lapd-20140810-story.html#page=1>
 - c. Doug Saffir, “Boston Drivers Ranked Among Riskiest in the Country Even Though It’s Probably Not Our Fault,” *The Boston Globe*, 2014.
<http://www.boston.com/cars/news-and-reviews/2014/08/26/boston-drivers-ranked-among-riskiest-the-country-even-though-probably-not-our-fault/bSIQYDGk95r6We5ZlgyVwN/story.html?hootPostID=b850d0c3f352741fc01a24497bc156f3>
 - d. Episodes 11-12

Season 4

19. 11-5 Peer/Neighborhood Effects
 - a. Episodes 1-3
 - b. Bruce Sacerdote, “Peer Effects With Random Assignment: Results for Dartmouth Roommates,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2001
20. 11-10 School Policy and Inequality – Local Control and Obstacles to Change
 - a. *San Antonio v. Rodriguez* - US Supreme Court Case (1973)

- b. Dale Russakoff, “Schooled: Cory Booker, Chris Christie, and Mark Zuckerberg Had a Plan to Reform Newark’s Schools. They Got an Education.” *The New Yorker*, 2014
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/05/19/schooled>
 - c. Episodes 4-6
- 21. 11-12 **Student Paper Workshop. Come Prepared with an Outline.**
 - a. Episodes 7-8
- 22. 11-17 Evaluating Schools and Teachers
 - a. Steven Glazerman et. al. “Evaluating Teachers: The Important Role of Value Added,” Brookings, 2010,
<http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2010/11/17-evaluating-teachers>
 - b. Rachel Aviv, “Wrong Answer,” *The New Yorker*, 2014
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/07/21/wrong-answer>
 - c. Philip Stark and Richard Freishtat, An Evaluation of Course Evaluations,
<http://www.stat.berkeley.edu/~stark/Preprints/evaluations14.pdf>
 - d. Episodes 9-11
- 23. 11-19 Schools and Mobility
 - a. David Leonhart, “In Climbing Income Ladder, Location Matters,” *The New York Times*, 2013,
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/22/business/in-climbing-income-ladder-location-matters.html>
 - b. 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>
 - c. College Completion graphics - <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/business/who-finishes-college/>
 - d. Episodes 12-13

Season 5

- 24. 11-24 No class. Season 5, Episodes 1-3. Office hours for paper will be held in usual lecture location.
- 25. 11-28. Thanksgiving holiday.
- 26. 12-1 Universities and Urban Policy: The Case of BU.

RESEACH PAPERS DUE AT START OF CLASS

- a. *Boston Globe* series on student housing:
<http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/specials/shadow-campus>
 - b. Episode 4
- 27. 12-3 Media
 - a. Episodes 5-7

- b. Brendan Nyhan, Americans Don't Live in Media Bubbles, *The Upshot*, 2015
<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/25/upshot/americans-dont-live-in-information-cocoons.html?smid=tw-share&abt=0002&abg=1>
28. 12-8 Motivated Reasoning and Wrap-Up
- a. Alec MacGillis, "Martin O'Malley's Incredible Shrinking Legacy," *Slate*, 2015,
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/03/martin_o_malley_could_have_challenged_hillary_clinton_the_maryland_governor.html?wpsrc=fol_tw
 - b. Episode 8-10