

The Politics of HBO's "The Wire"¹

Spring 2020

Course Description

This class uses HBO's groundbreaking series "The Wire" to investigate city's, their problems, and their politics. We will watch all five seasons of the show as social scientists and use it to learn about important social scientific concepts and theories, and apply those theories to such phenomena as the politics of crime, policing, and local elections. Each week, the assigned readings—social science articles and book excerpts, news articles, and podcasts—will highlight the social scientific concepts displayed in the show and provide context for lectures. All of the assignments work together to expose students to social science, how social science is conducted, and how political science can help us better understand the world around us.

Course Goals

At the end of this class students should be able to:

- Understand important concepts from political science and other social sciences
- Apply these concepts to understand city politics, crime, policing, and punishment
- Understand and critically assess relevant social science research
- Critique coverage of cities and crime and punishment in the news

Required Course Material

All readings for this class will be available on Canvas or elsewhere on the Internet.

All students must acquire access to all episodes of The Wire. The show is available on HBO and can be watched through one of the network's streaming services. The show can also be purchased online. Yale students have **free** access to HBO Go through Yale's [IPTV service](#). If you have concerns about accessing the show, please come see me during office hours at the **beginning** of the semester.

Course Requirements and Evaluations

All students are expected to sign up for, regularly attend, and participate in section. TFs will track participation. So, it is in your best interest to be an active participant. There will be six pop (unannounced) quizzes/in-class activities throughout the course of the semester. There will be **no** make-up quizzes/activities. However, I will drop each student's two lowest scores. There will be a closed-book midterm, which will consist of a series of short-answer questions and short essays. And there will be a closed-book essay-based final exam.

1. Participation in section (10%)
2. Six pop quizzes/activities, lowest two dropped (10%)

¹The syllabus is derived from the syllabus for Katherine Levine Einstein and David Glick's Boston University course, *The Politics and Policy of HBO's The Wire* (2019).

The syllabus is subject to change. Canvas will always have the most up-to-date version. It is your responsibility to check the Canvas site at least once a week and refer to the most recent version of the syllabus.

3. Midterm exam, Week 7 (35%)
4. Final exam, Monday, May 4th at 7PM (45%)

Grading Standard

93-100 A	90-92 A-	87-89 B+	83-86 B	80-82 B-	77-79 C+
73-76 C	70-72 C-	63-69 D	60-62 D-	< 60 F	

Grades in this class are based on mastery of the class material. This doesn't just mean attending class and reading the material, it means analyzing and articulating the material—and being able to discuss the material thoughtfully and precisely in assignments and discussion.

If you do not meet these guidelines in mastering the material, then your grade will be penalized. I encourage you to regularly check your grades on Canvas, and calculate your grade based on the grading scale in this syllabus. In order to promote fairness, there will be no unexcused make-up opportunities for the midterm or final exams. If extenuating circumstances arise, please contact your Dean of College as soon as possible. Lastly, at the end of the semester, I do not allow late work or extra credit, “round up,” barter, or additional work to improve your final grade.

Attendance and Participation

Participation is an important part of this class, in both section meetings and lecture. Participation entails several components: active listening, responding to questions posed by TFs and me, responding to classmates' comments, and arriving to class having completed the assigned reading and episodes. Even though this is a lecture class, I will sometimes have you break out into smaller groups to discuss the readings or do a group exercise. It is very important that you keep up with the readings and the viewing in order to get the most out of lectures and section. This class will be difficult to pass if you do not attend lecture.

I will not be taking attendance. I trust you to organize and prioritize your own schedules. **Do not** come to class, office hours, or section if you are sick. It is inconsiderate and irresponsible. To that end, you do not need to notify me if you will be missing a class meeting. However, if you anticipate missing many classes at once or over the course of the semester, please contact me as soon as possible.

Electronics Policy

Students may use laptops in class. However, if they become a distraction, I will ask that they be put away. Cell phone use is not permitted in the classroom.

Email Policy

I do my best to respond to all emails within two days during regular business hours. I will not respond to emails about assignments or exams less than 24 hours before they are due.

Course Content Warning

“The Wire” contains challenging material. The show's dialogue includes profanity and racial slurs, and the show frequently depicts drug use, graphic violence, and “strong sexual content”. This class requires grappling with this difficult content. Please speak with me if you have concerns about any course materials or discussions.

A Note on Respect in Class

We all may have different opinions and interpretations of the material covered in this class. That is fine, and debate is encouraged! Disrespect is not. Disrespectful and dismissive comments to classmates is prohibited. Students who violate this policy will be asked to leave class.

Yale University supports and wants to foster a civil, respectful, and open-minded climate so that all of us can live and work in an environment free of harassment, bias-motivated behaviors, unfair treatment, and fear. By committing to working with our better selves, we can work, in all our communities, towards greater mutual understanding of the questions that guide our inquiries. The university expects all members of our community to refrain from actions or behaviors that intimidate, humiliate, or demean persons or groups or that undermine their security or self-esteem based on traits related to race, ethnicity, country of origin, religion, gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, age, or physical or mental ability, including learning and/or developmental disabilities and past/present history of mental disorder or other category protected by state or federal law.

Academic Integrity

Academic honesty is a core institutional value at Yale. It means, among other things, truth in presentation, diligence and precision in citing works and ideas we have used, and acknowledging our collaborations with others. In view of our commitment to maintaining the highest standards of academic integrity, the Undergraduate Regulations (<http://catalog.yale.edu/undergraduateregulations/policies/definitions-plagiarism-cheating/>) and the Graduate School Code of Conduct specifically prohibit the following forms of behavior: cheating on examinations, problem sets and all other forms of assessment; falsification and/or fabrication of data; plagiarism, that is, the failure in a dissertation, essay or other written exercise to acknowledge ideas, research, or language taken from others; and multiple submission of the same work without obtaining explicit written permission from both instructors before the material is submitted. Students found guilty of violations of academic integrity are subject to one or more of the following penalties: written reprimand, probation, suspension (noted on a student's transcript) or dismissal (noted on a student's transcript).

Resource Office on Disabilities

Your experience in this class is important to me. If you have already established accommodations with the Resource Office on Disabilities, please communicate your approved accommodations to me at your earliest convenience so we can discuss your needs in this course. If you have not yet established services through ROD, but have a temporary health condition or permanent disability that requires accommodations (conditions include but are not limited to: mental health, attention-related, learning, vision, hearing, physical or health impacts), you are welcome to contact ROD at 203-432-2324 to make an appointment. General information for students can be found on the Student Information page of the Resource Office on Disabilities' website (<https://rod.yale.edu/student-information>). ROD offers resources and coordinates reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities and/or temporary health conditions. Reasonable accommodations are established through an interactive process between you, your instructor(s), and ROD. It is important to Yale University to create inclusive and accessible learning environments consistent with federal and state law.

Semester Schedule

All readings must be completed for the day they are assigned.

Season 1

- 1-13: Week 1, Class 1, Class Introduction
- 1-15: Week 1, Class 2- Introduction to “The Wire” and Watching as Social Scientists
 - Episodes 1-3

- 1-20: Week 2, **No Class, MLK Jr. Day**
- 1-22: Week 2, Class 1, Residential Segregation & Overview of Local Criminal Justice Institutions
 - Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton. *American Apartheid* (1993), Chapter 2. (Available online through Yale Library)
 - Episodes 4-6

- 1-27: Week 3, Class 1, War on Drugs
 - German Lopez. “[The War on Drugs, Explained](#),” *Vox* (May 8, 2016)
 - Ilyana Kuziemko and Steven D. Levitt. “An Empirical Analysis of Imprisoning Drug Offenders,” *Journal of Public Economics* (2004), pp. 2043-2066.
 - Episodes 7-8
- 1-29: Week 3, Class 2, Race and Policing
 - Gwen Prowse, Vesla Weaver, and Tracey Meares. “The State from Below: Distorted Responsiveness in Policed Communities,” *Urban Affairs Review* (2019), pp. 1-49.
 - Allison P. Harris, Elliott Ash, and Jeffrey Fagan. “Local Public Finance and Discriminatory Policing: Evidence from Traffic Stops in Missouri,” *Journal of Race Ethnicity and Politics* (2020).
 - Episodes 9-11

- 2-3: Week 4, Class 1- Principal Agent Problems and Bureaucracy
 - Charles Wheelan. *Naked Economics*, Chapter 5, “The Economics of Information” (2012).
 - Ryan Enos and Eitan Hersh. “Party Activists as Campaign Advertisers: The Ground Campaign as a Principal Agent Problem.” *American Political Science Review* (2015).
 - Episodes 12-13

Season 2

- 2-5: Week 4, Class 2- American City Politics
 - Jessica Trounstine. *Segregation by Design*, Chapter 1 (2018). (Available online through Yale Library)
 - Richard Florida. [America’s Worsening Geographic Inequality](#) (2018).
 - Episodes 1-2

- 2-10: Week 5, Class 1- Deindustrialization

- James Feigenbaum, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez and Vanessa Williamson, “[Right to Work Laws Have Devastated Unions – and Democrats](#),” *The New York Times*, (2018).
- Alexandra Guisinger, “[Americans’ Views of Trade aren’t Just about Economics. They’re Also about Race.](#)” *The Washington Post’s The Monkey Cage* (2017).
- Episodes 3 -4
- 2-12: Week 5, Class 2- Crime and Prosecution
 - Patrick Sharkey. “[The Great Crime Decline and the Comeback of American Cities](#)” CityLab (2018).
 - John Pfaff. *Locked In*, Chapter 1 (2017).
 - Sarah Koenig, et al. [Serial Podcast](#), Season 3, Episode 5, “Pleas Baby Pleas,”
 - Episodes 5-7
- 2-17: Week 6, Class 1- Cities, Housing, and Residential (de)Segregation
 - Patrick Sharkey. “[Ending Urban Poverty: The Inherited Ghetto.](#)” *The Boston Review* (2008).
 - The Impact Podcast – “[Leaving Baltimore Behind.](#)”
 - Episodes 8 -9
- 2-19: Week 6, Class 2- Local Politicians and Resource Allocation
 - Jessica Trounstine. “Segregation and Inequality in Public Goods,” *American Journal of Political Science* (2016).
 - Jon Chesto, “[Business policies giving Needham an edge over Newton](#),” *The Boston Globe* (2015).
 - Episodes 10-12

Season 3

- 2-24: Week 7, Class 1- Neighborhoods, Poverty, and Incarceration
 - Devah Pager. “The Mark of a Criminal Record,” *American Journal of Sociology* (2003).
 - Traci Burch. *Trading Democracy for Justice*, Chapter 2 (2013).
 - [Probable Causation Podcast, Episode 4](#), Megan Stevenson on Bail Reform,
 - Episodes 1 & 2
- 2-26: Week 7, Class 2- Midterm Review
 - Episodes 3 & 4
- **3-2: Week 8, Class 1- Midterm Exam**
- 3-4: Week 8, Class 2- Local Elections
 - Dan Hopkins. *The Increasingly United States*, Chapter 1 (2018).
 - The Impact Podcast, “[Is Fixing Campaign Finance as Easy As Giving Everyone \\$100](#)”
 - Episodes 5-6

Weeks 9 & 10: Spring Break Watch Episodes 7-8

Move online for remainder of semester due to COVID-19

- 3-23: Week 11, Class 1- No Lecture
 - Episodes 9 & 10
- 3-25: Week 11, Class 2- Post-Break Check In
 - Episodes 11 & 12

Season 4

- 3-30: Week 12, Class 1- Norms and Unwritten Rules (*Matt guest "lecturing"*)
 - Sudhir Venkatesh. *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*, Chapter 1 (2006).
 - Jerome H. Skolnick. "Corruption and the Blue Code of Silence," in *Policing Corruption: International Perspectives* (2005).
 - Episodes 1-3
- 4-1: Week 12, Class 2- HKS Movie, "The Rise and Fall of an American City: Race and Politics in Detroit, 1910-2013"
 - Watch the 30 minute movie
 - Episodes 4-6
- 4-6: Week 13, Class 1- Neighborhood Effects and Education
 - Bruce Sacerdote. Peer Effects with Random Assignment: Results for Dartmouth Roommates," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2001)
 - Episodes 7 & 8
- 4-8: Week 13, Class 2- School Policy and Inequality
 - San Antonio v. Rodriguez, US Supreme Court, (1973).
 - Nikole Hannah-Jones. *This American Life Podcast*, "[The Problem We All Live With](#)," Parts One and Two.
 - Episodes 9-11

Season 5

- 4-13: Week 14, Class 1- Respond to Questions from 4/8; Attend QA during Class Time if Able
 - Episodes 1-4 (Yikes! I don't know how I skipped two episodes. Also, finish Season 4! Just keep up as well as you can.)
- 4-15: Week 14, Class 2- Media in Politics (*John guest "lecturing"*)
 - Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder. *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion*, Chapter 12 (2010).
 - John Sides and Kalev Leetary. "[A Deep Dive into the News Media's Role in the Rise of Donald J. Trump](#)," *The Washington Post* (2016)
 - Danny Hayes, and Jennifer Lawless, "The Decline of Local News and Its Effects: New Evidence from Longitudinal Data," the *Journal of Politics* (2017).
 - Episodes 5-7
- 4-20: Week 15, Class 1- Motivated Reasoning
 - Brian F. Schaffner and Cameron Roche. "Misinformation and Motivated Reasoning Responses to Economic News in a Politicized Environment." *Public Opinion Quarterly* (2016)

- Ozan Kuru, Josh Pasek and Michael Traugott. "[If My Candidate Is Behind, the Poll Must Be Biased](#)" *Washington Post* (2016)
- Episodes 8-9
- 4-22: Week 15, Class 2- Wrap Up
 - Alec MacGillis. "[The Tragedy of Baltimore](#)," *New York Times Magazine* (2019).
 - "[Essays on HBO's the Wire](#)," *Critical Inquiry*, Chaddha and Wilson ("Way Down in the Hole: Systematic Urban Inequality and *The Wire*") and Warren ("Sociology and *The Wire*")
 - Episode 10