

## THE POLITICS OF “THE WIRE”: AMERICA AT WAR WITH ITSELF

Political Science (POLS) 392

Spring 2012, 1 Unit

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W, 12:00p–12:50p

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<https://mylmuconnect.lmu.edu/>

### COURSE INFORMATION

**DESCRIPTION:** In the original pitch made to HBO, David Simon explains that “The Wire” was intended to be “a vehicle for making statements about the American city and even the American experiment.” Simon goes on to note that, at its core, “The Wire” is a tragedy. “At the end of thirteen episodes,” he writes, “the reward for the viewer—who has been lured all this way by a well-constructed police show—is not the simple gratification of hearing handcuffs click. Instead, the conclusion is something that Euripides or [Eugene] O’Neill might recognize: an America, at every level at war with itself.”

The central “war” that shapes the narrative of the “The Wire” is the now 40 year old “war on drugs,” and one of the key “statements” it makes about the “American experiment” is that this war has been a policy failure. We will critically evaluate this argument through a close reading of the first season of the show, which will serve as our central “text” for the semester. Moreover, we will ask what role the idea of “war” itself plays in shaping (and possibly distorting) other figures, ideals, and motifs in political thought and practice. To this end, the course will pair the first thirteen episodes of the program with short readings in political and social theory, U.S. history, criminology, and political science. This is not a course on the “The Wire,” but rather a course which will use “The Wire” to explore broader themes including: racial, economic, and sexual dimensions of (in)equality, personal freedom and capitalism, the state’s monopoly on the use of violence, the effects of systemic poverty and residential segregation on political agency, and the relationship between punishment and surveillance.

### **STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

- 1) Students will be introduced to the history and effects of the war on drugs in the United States.
- 2) Students will learn to read visual media as a text to aid in the analysis and understanding of social and political questions.
- 3) Students will learn to connect abstract theories of political and social life to concrete contemporary social and political problems.
- 4) Students will learn to evaluate persuasive and narrative accounts through empirical social science data and analysis.
- 5) Students will enhance their skills in evaluating social and criminal justice policy.
- 6) Students will improve their critical, argumentative, and interpretive writing skills.
- 7) Most importantly, students will develop their critical thinking skills and apply them to their political and social lives, allowing them to grow as persons and as reflective citizens.

**PREREQUISITES/RECOMMENDED BACKGROUND:** Students are expected to have an interest in U.S. politics, crime and punishment, public policy, and popular cultural representations of social problems. Students are strongly recommended to be familiar “The Wire,” but prior knowledge of the program is not strictly required. Should the course be over-enrolled, priority will be given to majors and minors in political science.

### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

This course is a 1-unit course, and while this means that the course will take up considerably less time than most of your other classes, this does NOT mean that you can expect to breeze through this course. Each week you will be responsible for viewing and reflecting upon an episode of “The Wire,” reading the assigned articles and essays, responding critically online, and coming to class prepared to actively participate in our discussions. Specifically, the course has the following requirements:

- You will **write a short term paper**. This paper must be formatted and submitted properly to receive full credit, as documented in the course paper requirements on the course website. Details about the paper will be provided later in the semester.
- You will **post a discussion question** each week online in the discussion board corresponding to each episode. You must post your question by *Tuesday each week by Noon*. Discussion questions posted late will receive only partial credit.
- You must **attend class** and be an **active participant** in discussion.

#### **GRADE BREAKDOWN:**

Term paper:	60%
Discussion Questions	20%
Attendance:	10%
Participation:	10%

#### **GRADING SCALE:**

A	93-100
A-	90-92
B+	88-89
B	83-87
B-	80-82
C+	78-79
C	73-77
C-	70-72
D	60-69
F	0-59

*Any student who receives a failing grade for attendance and participation will receive a failing grade for the class.*

### COURSE POLICIES

**DISCLOSURE:** “The Wire” is a work in “realist” fictional representation, originally produced for a subscription-based television service. As such, it graphically depicts poverty, sexuality, drug-use, and brutal violence. The use of profanity and vulgar language is replete throughout the show, and arguably central to parts of its narrative. As such, students who may be offended or uncomfortable with such language and themes should avoid taking this course. Students for whom such depictions of drug use and violence might serve as “triggers” should exercise caution in taking this course.

For students who enroll in the course, it is imperative that they be able and willing to engage with their colleagues in a mature, respectful, and ethical manner consistent with the letter and spirit of the University's anti-harassment policies. We will inevitably need to talk and think about the language used in the show, and also about our own usage and deployment of frank and sometimes painful language. We will collectively set a series of "ground rules" for our class discussions at the beginning of the semester, and we will also self-consciously revisit these "rules" throughout the term to be sure that our classroom is an inclusive, safe, and productive space for everyone involved.

**ATTENDANCE:** Timely, prepared, and engaged attendance is required. Absences will only be excused in the case of illness or emergency. If there is a conflict between course participation and religious observance, please contact me in advance. It is not necessary to obtain prior approval from the instructor when missing a meeting is unavoidable, but note that students bear the *entire responsibility* for the decision to miss class and for whatever effect that may have on their course grade and their learning experience. Repeated absences and lateness will directly affect the discussion and attendance portion of a student's grade, as detailed in the course requirements section.

**LATE PENALTIES:** Assignments must be turned in at the designated time and place. Failure to turn in an assignment on time is unacceptable except with the prior agreement of the instructor (which will be given only in exceptional circumstances). Except in documented cases of illness or emergency, a penalty of up to a full letter grade may be assessed for each day the assignment is late.

**PLAGIARISM & ACADEMIC HONESTY:** Academic dishonesty will be treated as an extremely serious matter. Proven plagiarism of any kind may result in automatic failure of the course, and will be referred to the University for further disciplinary action. I reserve the right to submit your electronic document to plagiarism detection websites if necessary. It is **never** permissible to turn in any work that has been copied from another student or copied from a source (including Internet) without properly acknowledging the source. It is your responsibility to make sure that your work meets the standard of academic honesty set forth in the "LMU Honor Code and Process" which appears in the LMU Bulletin 2011-2012. You should also refer to my own writing requirements posted on the course website.

**GENDER NEUTRAL & GENDER SPECIFIC LANGUAGE, NAMES & ACCENTS:** Academics no longer use the pronoun "he" to apply universally to all persons, nor do we use the term "man," when we are referring to humanity or people in general. In our writing, when we are making generalizations we should use gender neutral pronouns, that is, *she* and *he*, *s/he*, *him* or *her*, *they/their*, etc. When referring to a specific person or group of people, we should use the language and pronouns *that they prefer* if we know them. Further, we should be attentive to the spelling and accents of author's names. Finally, all authors must be referred to by their entire names, or only their last names, *not by their first names*, orally and in writing.

**EMAIL COMMUNICATION:** At times I will communicate with the entire class using campus email systems, so it is essential that you regularly check your [lion.lmu.edu](mailto:lion.lmu.edu) email address or forward your lion account email to your preferred email address. I encourage you to contact me via email with questions about the course, the material we cover in class, and assignments.

You are expected to be professional in all communication with the instructor. All email communication should be in complete sentences with a proper salutation and conclusion. Treat the email more as a letter and less like a text message. Include a comprehensible subject heading (e.g.

“POLS 220 paper question”), address and sign the email, making sure to identify what class you are in (usually instructors are teaching more than one class) and explain clearly what it is that you are inquiring about. Failure to do these will guarantee that you will not get a response. Also, unless I’ve explicitly stated otherwise, I will generally check my faculty email only during normal business hours (more or less until 6pm).

Finally, here is a short list of things that I **will not respond to** emails that contain the following:

- Questions that can be answered by checking the course syllabus or looking online.
- A request to know **if** you missed anything. (The answer is yes.)
- A request to know **what** you missed. (Instead of asking this through email, take the appropriate next steps to catch up: ask a classmate for notes, meet with me in my office hours, etc.)

**TECHNOLOGY USE DURING CLASS:** You are welcome to bring a computer to class provided that it enables you to engage more in the class discussion. You may also use a computer to help you take notes. Email, Twitter, Facebook, or anything at all that is not directly related to the *conversation* we are having will not be tolerated. Using a computer in this way during a seminar is quite simply RUDE and deeply disrespectful to your classmates. If you need to use a computer in class, you will be expected to post copies of your class notes on the class website immediately following the class session to share with others. If you are not willing to do this, do not bring a computer with you.

There is simply no reason whatsoever for you to be using your phone/PDA/Kindle/iPad/whatever during class time. E-Reserve texts should be \*printed\* and brought to class.

Your phone should be turned off and put away. If your phone rings during class, I will answer it for you, and it will be your responsibility to arrange for coffee service for every member of the class during our next meeting.

**OFFICE HOURS:** I look forward to meeting with you all during regularly scheduled office hours, or by appointment when meeting during office hours is not possible. Students who would like to discuss issues raised in the course further than class discussions will permit, or students who encounter difficulties with the course or the assigned material, are especially encouraged to attend office hours.

**ACCOMMODATION:** Students with special needs as addressed by the Americans with Disabilities Act who need reasonable modifications, special assistance, or accommodations in this course should promptly direct their request to the Disability Support Services Office. Any student who currently has a documented disability (physical, learning, or psychological) needing academic accommodations should contact the Disability Services Office (Daum Hall Room 224, 310-338-4535) as early in the semester as possible. All discussions will remain confidential. Please visit <http://www.lmu.edu/dss> for additional information.

**TENTATIVE NATURE OF THE SYLLABUS:** If necessary, this syllabus and its contents are subject to revision; students are responsible for any changes or modifications distributed in class or posted on MYLMU Connect. The precise schedule of readings will be updated throughout the semester, so it is your responsibility to stay on top of announced readings and assignments.

## REQUIRED TEXTS

None; all readings will be distributed via electronic reserve.

It is strongly recommended, however, that you obtain a copy of the first season of *The Wire* in some format so that you can be sure to view (and review) the episodes for each week. The DVD is available for purchase online, and the entire first season can be purchased easily via iTunes or via Amazon video.

## TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE

### **Week 1, W Jan 11: Course Introduction**

#### **Week 2, W Jan 18: “... when its not your turn.”**

- Episode 1: The Target
- Margaret Talbot, “Stealing Life: The crusader behind ‘The Wire’” in *The New Yorker*.
- David Simon, “The Wire” Bible, Series Overview
- David Simon, “Letter to HBO”
- Ed Burns, David Simon, and George Pelecanos, “The Wire's War on the Drug War” in *Time Magazine*.

#### **Week 3, W Jan 25: The “War” on Drugs**

- Episode 2: The Detail
- “Timeline: America’s War on Drugs”, from NPR.
- Michael Tonry, “Race and the War on Drugs,” in *Malign Neglect*.
- Michael Moriarty, “Pilots in the War on Drugs,” in *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*.

#### **Week 4, W Feb 1: The Street**

- Episode 3: The Buys
- Elijah Anderson, “Code of the Streets,” in *After the War on Crime*.
- David Simon and Ed Burns, “Chapter Two,” in *The Corner*.

#### **Week 5, W Feb 8: Murder**

- Episode 4: Old Cases
- Jonathan Simon, “Drugs Are Not the (Only) Problem: Structural Racism, Mass Imprisonment, and the Overpunishment of Violent Crime”
- Loic Wacquant, “West Side Story: A High Insecurity Ward in Chicago” in *Urban Outcasts*.

#### **Week 6, W Feb. 15: Collateral Consequences**

- Episode 5: The Pager
- Vesla Weaver and Amy Lerman, “Political Consequences of the Carceral State.”
- Bruce Western, “Invisible Inequality” in *Punishment and Inequality in the United States*.
- Loic Wacqaunt, “Race as Civic Felony.”

#### **Week 7, W Feb. 22: Surveillance**

- Episode 6: The Wire
- Emma Short and Jason Ditton, “Seen and Now Heard: Talking to the targets of open street CCTV.”
- Michel Foucault, Selection from *Discipline and Punish*, Part 1

**Week 8, W Feb. 29:** NO CLASS, Spring Break

**Week 9, W Mar. 7: Surveillance**

- Episode 7: One Arrest
- Michel Foucault, Selection from *Discipline and Punish*, Part 2.

**Week 10, W Mar. 14: Teaching Kids**

- Episode 8: Lessons
- Ann Ferguson, “The Real World” in *Bad Boys: Public Schools and the Making of Black Masculinity*

**Week 11, W Mar. 21: Policing Kids**

- Episode 9: Game Day
- Victor Rios, “‘Dummy Smart’: Misrecognition, Acting Out, and ‘Going Dumb’” in *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*.

**Weeks 12, W Mar. 28: Labor, Work, and Reentry.**

- Episode 10: The Cost
- Devah Pager, “The Labor Market Consequences of Incarceration” in *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration*.
- David Weiman, “Barriers to Prisoners’ Reentry into the Labor Market and the Social Costs of Recidivism”

**Week 13, W April 4:** NO CLASS, Easter Break

**Week 14, W April 11: Alternatives to Prohibition?**

- Episode 11: The Hunt
- Michael Specter, “Getting a Fix” in *The New Yorker*.

**Week 15, W April 18: Drug Courts and their Hidden Dangers**

- Episode 12: Cleaning Up
- *This American Life*, “Very Tough Love”: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/430/very-tough-love>
- Justice Policy Institute, “Addicted to Courts.”

**Week 16, W April 25: Prison**

- Episode 13: Sentencing
- Jon Marc Taylor, “Pell Grants for Prisoners” in *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*.
- Michael Wayne Hunter, “Sam” in *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*.
- Kathy Boudin, “Our Skirt” in *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*.