The Wire: Race, Class Gender and the “Urban Crisis” (Spring 2012)

Location: Sills 117

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Office hours (no appointment needed): Tuesday, Thursday: 3-4; Wednesday, Friday: 4-4:40

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“The Wire is … about the America that got left behind.”
David Simon, creator and executive producer of The Wire, on Bill Movers Journal (April 17, 2009)

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Course Overview

During the latter half of the twentieth century politicians, journalists and scholars argued that US cities entered a state of crisis. Crime, poverty, depopulation, violence, racial and ethnic tension, and fiscal insolvency threatened to make American cities unlivable. What are the origins of this post-WWII “urban crisis?” Did an urban “underclass” cause the “urban crisis,” or is an “underclass” a result of “structural” factors that caused and exacerbated the American “urban crisis?” How did the urban crisis impact people’s everyday lives? How did it shape the politics and economies of postwar American cities? What were its “structural” causes and effects? What discourses about race, class, and gender did various intellectuals, politicians, and journalists use to explain social life in postwar American cities? These are some of the questions this course will address?

Ideological camps have shaped much of the policy and academic debate over these historical and sociological questions. No matter the side of the spectrum, analysis of the American “urban crisis” inevitably drew upon notions of race, class, and gender to make arguments about what was wrong with post-WWII cities and the best ways to fix these problems. Black people, especially African Americans; poor people, especially the seemingly permanently unemployed; and urban families, especially men and women’s seemingly “pathological” roles in family structures, were at the center of decades of discussions about life in America’s economically depressed and politically marginal urban communities (commonly called “ghettos,” or “inner-cities”).

Using the epic crime drama, The Wire: journalism; and scholarship drawn from history and sociology, this course examines the racial, gendered and class dynamics of the American “urban crisis.” The course uncovers ways of understanding the human drama of the urban crisis; and the interconnectedness of those, with power to people whose everyday lives are defined by social and economic struggle. One of the analytical points The Wire presents is that those who possess power and those who are marginalized within social relationships and institutional structures (work, politics, families, etc…) is not always clear. We will pay particular attention to the ways people’s ability to exercise agency over their lives, and within the institutions that structure their lives, is often compromised and limited. Through our readings and lectures we will examine the dialectical relationship between individuals’ agency and the structural constraints that shape political, economic, and social possibilities and power dynamics within post-war cities. Last, the course sustains a conversation about what The Wire teaches us about cities, racism, gender ideology, and class relations in modern American. Is The Wire a form of “dissent,” as its creator David Simon contends; or merely a reiteration of ideas that Black poor people in American cities represent an unassimilated “underclass,” culturally pathological, and inherently nihilistic and self-destructive?
Students are strongly encouraged to brainstorm and investigate possible policy solutions that address issues raised in the class.

**Level**

1. Intermediate lecture course in Africana Studies, Sociology, and Gender and Women’s Studies
2. 50-70 pages of reading per class; 3 episodes (roughly 3 hours) of *The Wire* per class.
3. This is not a research class. Aside from the census profile assignment, students do not need to conduct outside research to complete the assignments; but you are encouraged to consult outside material if it will help you complete your final analytical paper.
4. Fulfills *Exploring Social Difference* distribution requirement. In our examination of the U.S. “urban crisis” we will study the ways racial, class, and gender differences shaped people’s experiences of structural transformations that characterized American cities from the 1960s-1990s. We will also pay close attention to how social categories and groups define people’s relationships to their larger social worlds; when and how “power” and “agency” operates within those social categories; and conflicts between, as well as within, groups.

**Goals**

1. To explore the history of American cities from World War II through the first decade of the 21st century
2. To use all five seasons of *The Wire*, as well as works of history, sociology, and journalism as tools to explore economics, labor, everyday life, education, and media in post-WWII American cities
3. To place “race” (particularly as that concept is historicized through the African American experience), class (particularly social relations defined by poverty and joblessness), and gender ideology (particularly social experiences of femininity, masculinity, and family units) at the center of the ways we understand economics, politics, and social life in contemporary American cities

**Objectives**

Students who complete the assignments in this course and make thorough use of the class time will be able to do the following:

1. Identify liberal and conservative camps’ interpretations of the American “urban crisis,” its causes and solutions; and articulate how American cities developed socially since the 1940s
2. Critically interpret how *The Wire* portrays the American city in “crisis;” its people, politics, economics and everyday life
3. Use characters, themes, and arguments from *The Wire* to analyze the ways race, class, and gender, shape how individuals relate to social structures in post-WWII American cities; and how social structures shape individuals’ lives; develop a sociological profile of one of the “main characters” from *The Wire*
4. Assess the merits of scholarly and journalistic arguments regarding the characteristics of social life in post-WWII American cities
5. Compile data on postwar American cities from census databases, and analyze that data to create comparative sociological profiles.

**Attendance and Student Responsibilities**

I take attendance each day because I want to learn your names and faces. Attendance and participation, however, does not factor into your final grade. (*Caveat: I do not see how it is possible to pass without regular attendance.*) Ultimately, you are responsible to come to class having done the reading in advance. Lectures will reference readings, highlight some key points in detail, give cursory treatment to other points, and mostly provide an overview of analytical, conceptual, and historical frameworks through which to understand the readings and television series. You are responsible for attaining clarification on anything unclear in the readings, lectures, or episodes. We may have impromptu discussions, but discussion participation is factored into your final grade.

**Assignment due dates and quiz dates are set below. There are no make-up quizzes for anything except excused absences; unforeseen and documented illness; or last-minute family emergency that you report to your Dean. It is your job to present me with information regarding already scheduled obligations that require absence(s).**

While this syllabus is not likely to change too much, I may make adjustments as the semester proceeds. I will announce changes in class on a week-to-week basis, well in advance of any deadlines. However, if you are not in class, it is your responsibility to find out about any changes.
Requirements

In-class Quizzes: Total points = 20
*Journal: Total Points = 20
*Census Profile: Total Points = 10
*Sociological Profile/Character Analysis (12-15 pages): Total Points = 20
Cumulative Final Exam: Total Points = 25
* See separate explanation sheets

I will convert numerical grades to letter grades according to the following rubric. However, I do not grade on a curve and I reserve the right to raise your final course grade by as much as 1/3 (from a B to a B+, for example) for exceptional performance or improvement. If an unexcused absence causes you to miss a quiz, you receive a 0. Do not ask to reschedule. Unless arrangements were made beforehand, late papers will be marked down 1/3 of a grade per day (e.g., B+ to B), including weekends. I rarely grant extensions beyond two circumstances: personal illness or family emergency.

A (4.0) = 100-95 points  A- (3.7) = 95-90 points  B+ (3.3) = 89-86 points
B (3.0) = 85-81 points  B- (2.7) = 80-76 points  C+ (2.4) = 75-71 points
C (2.0) = 70-66 points  C- (1.7) = 65-61 points  D (1.0) = 60-56 points
F (0) = < 56 points

Citation of Sources

Description of the written assignments will follow, but know that in your written work, when referring to sources on which you have drawn, you should provide a complete citation including author, title, publisher, place and date of publication and page numbers. I ask that you use footnotes or endnotes for citations from assigned texts in our course or from articles in the reader. (Do not use parenthetical references!) Good reference works for citation include The Chicago Manual of Style or Kate Turabian’s A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations. There is also information posted on the Bowdoin College Library Gateway about citation.

Plagiarism and Adherence to the Academic Honor Code and Social Code

All students are responsible for reading and heeding the statement on plagiarism, as well as reviewing and following the Academic Honor Code and Social Code, as written in the Student Handbook, 2010-11. If I suspect plagiarism, I will ask you to see me and, if unresolved at that point, I will refer you to the Judicial Board. If you are unsure what constitutes plagiarism, you may re-read the Handbook or another printed source, contact a reference librarian, or ask me in person or by email.

Assigned Texts


The Wire Seasons 1-5 [NOTE: There are three copies of the complete series available for you to use outside of class. Two copies of the complete series are on reserve at the H-L library. One is on reserve at the office of Glynis Wears-Siegel (Adams Hall 3rd floor), Africana Studies Program Coordinator. The course requires you to watch episodes on your own. Find a way to do this without impeding your peers. Do not abuse the lending privileges of these materials. If possible, work together to view the material so fewer people have to compete for limited resources.]
Introduction

1/25: First Class

1/27 Lecture – The “Sociological Imagination” and The Wire
For class: Read:
- “The Promise,” C. Wright Millis, The Sociological Imagination, chapter 1
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/Wire/index.html>,” [only page 1]

SEASON 1: THE “SHADY” ECONOMY

Week 1 “Why can’t you sell the shit, and walk the fuck away.” (Jimmy McNulty, 1:2)

2/1 Lecture – Origin of the Urban Crisis (*Class Location – Sills Hall: Smith Auditorium)
For class: Read:
- J. McWhorter, Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America, 73-113
- L. Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the ‘Race Question’ in the US,” New Left Review, 13 (Jan/Feb 2002), 41-60

2/3 Lecture/Discussion – Characteristics of the Underground Economy
For class: Watch:
The Wire, Season 1, Episode 1, “The Target;” (cited hereafter as, Season #: Episode #), 1: 2, “The Detail;” 1:3, “The Buys”
Read:
- S. Venkatesh, Off the Books, Prologue and chapter 1
- “Why Do Drug Dealers Still Live with Their Moms,” in S. Levitt and S. Dubner, Freakonomics, 89-114

Week 2 “A man must have a code.” (Bunk Moreland, 1:8)

2/8 Lecture – “Social Organization” and “the Hustler”
For class: Watch:
Read:
- D. Simon and E. Burns, The Corner, 57-74
- S. Venkatesh, Off the Books, chapter 4

2/10 Lecture/Discussion – Urban Sociology in the U.S.: From the “Chicago School” to The Wire
For class: Watch:
Read:
- W.J. Wilson, When Work Disappears, Introduction, chapter 1, 2
**Week 3** “This is me, yo, right here.” (Wallace, 1:12)

2/15  Lecture/Discussion – “Snitches Get Stitches,” or worse; but why?  
**For class:**  
**Watch:**  
**Read:**  

2/17  Discussion – “Nicely Done” (“Yuh Happy Now?”)  
**For class:**  
**Watch:**  
The Wire, 1:13, “Sentencing”  
**In Class:**  
Quiz 1  
Journals Due

**SEASON 2: WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS**

**Week 4** “They used to make steel there, no?” (Spiros Vondas, 2:5)

2/22  Lecture – “Post-Fordism” and the “Global” City  
**For class:**  
**Watch:**  
**Read:**  
-J. Freeman, Working-Class New York, 291-337

2/24  Lecture – Structure and Agency: Opportunities for Work  
**For class:**  
**Watch:**  
**Read:**  
-W.J. Wilson, When Work Disappears, chapter 3, 5  
-S. Venkatesh, Off the Books, chapter 3

**Week 5** “OK, get dressed. I pressed you some clothes and laid them out up stairs.” (Mother in West Baltimore. 2:9)

2/29  Lecture/Discussion – What killed Aiyana Stanley-Jones?  
**For class:**  
**Watch:**  
**Read:**  
-D. Simon and E. Burns, The Corner, 158-69  

3/2  Discussion – Who feels alright?  
**For class:**  
**Watch:**  
The Wire, 2:10 “Storm Warnings;” 2:11, “Bad Dreams;” 2:12 “Port in a Storm”  
**In Class:**  
Quiz 2  
Journals Due
SEASON 3: THE “GHETTO” COMMUNITY

Week 6 “I’m talking about people. Memories, and shit.” (Malik Carr, aka “Poot”, 3:1)

3/7 Lecture – American Cities: From Working Class to “Underclass”
Read: -D. Simon and E. Burns, The Corner, 86-99
-R. Williams, “Creating ‘A Little Heaven for Poor People:’” Descent Housing and Respectable Communities,” in The Politics of Public Housing, 21-53
-S. Venkatesh, Off the Books, chapter 2

3/9 Lecture/Discussion: Men, Women, and the “Ghetto” Community
Read: - J. Miller, Getting Played, 32-66
-C. Kubrin, et. al., “Neighborhoods, Race, and Recidivism”

3/10 – 3/26 – Spring Vacation

Week 7 “Conscience do cost.” (Butchie, 3:7)

3/28 Lecture/Discussion: “The Undeserving Poor”
Read: -P. Bourgois, “Just Another Night in a Shooting Gallery,” Theory, Culture and Society, 15:2, 37-66
-S. Venkatesh, Off the Books, chapters 5,6,7
-W.J. Wilson, When Work Disappears, chapter 6

3/30 Lecture/Discussion: “On a fast train going nowhere?”
In Class: Quiz 3
Journals Due

SEASON 4: “THEY SCHOOLS”

Week 8 “No one wins. One side just loses more slowly.” (Prez, 4:4)

Read: -W.J. Wilson, When Work Disappears, chapter 4
-D. Simon and E. Burns, The Corner, 230-236
4/6 Lecture/Discussion: How to Talk about Young People, Education and the Urban Crisis

*For class:*

**Watch:**

**Read:**
-Pedro A. Noguera, *The Trouble with Black Boys... And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education*, 17-42
-Jeanne Theoharis, “I Hate it When People Treat Me Like a FXXX Up,” in *Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education*. Edited by Gaston Alonso, 69-112
-D. Simon and E. Burns, *The Corner*, 276-285

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**Week 9** “We got our thing, but it's just part of the big thing.” (Zenobia, 4:8)

4/11 Lecture/Discussion: Violence in Schools

*For class:*

**Watch:**

**Read:**
-J. Miller, *Getting Played*, 67-113
-Pedro A. Noguera, *The Trouble with Black Boys... And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education*, 83-110
-Laura Vanderkam, “LAPD High,” *City Journal* (Spring 2009)

4/13 Lecture/Discussion: The Ballad of Randy Wagstaff

*For class:*

**Watch:**
The Wire, 4:11 “A New Day;” 4:12, “That’s Got His Own;” 4:13 “Final Grades;”

**In Class:**
Quiz 4
Journals Due

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**SEASON 5: THE FREE PRESS**

**Week 10** “They're dead where it doesn't count.” (Fletcher, 5:3)

4/18 Lecture/Discussion: The Social Construction of Crime in the Media

*For class:*

**Watch:**
The Wire, 5:1 “More With Less;” 5:2, “Unconfirmed Reports;” 5:3 “Not For Attribution”

**Read:**
-J. Pollak, “Crime in the News: How Crimes, Offenders and Victims are Portrayed in the Media”
<https://webfiles.uci.edu/ckubrin/Crime%20in%20the%20Media.pdf?uniq=fn1t5x>

4/20 Lecture/Discussion: Beyond the “Dickensian Aspect:” The NYPD Tapes – How a Cop, A Reporter, a Digital Recorder, and a Newspaper Policed the NYPD

*For class:*

**Watch:**

**Read:**
-G. Rayman, “The NYPD Tapes”

**Listen:**
This American Life, “Right To Remain Silent,” Act 2 (40 minutes)
<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/414/right-to-remain-silent>
**Week 11** “A lie ain’t a side of a story. It’s just a lie.” (Terry Hanning, 5:8)


*For class:*  
**Watch:**  
The Wire, 5:7 “Took;” 5:8 “Clarification;” 5:9 “Late Editions”

**Read:**  
-“Correcting the Record; Times Reporter Who Resigned Left a Long Trail of Deception”  
-“The Jayson Blair Affair,” AJR  
http://ajr.org/article.asp?id=3019
-“All About the Retrospect,” AJR  
http://ajr.org/article.asp?id=3020
-“Jayson Blair: Offering His Views on Making Up News,” NPR  

4/27  Discussion: The Wire – Dissent? A Mirror to America?

*For class:*  
**Watch:**  
The Wire, 5:10, “–30–”

*In Class:*  
Quiz 5
Journals Due

**Week 12**

5/2:  Work on Final Paper/Census Profile; meet with Professor if needed

5/4:  Work on Final Paper/Census Profile; meet with Professor if needed

5/9:  Last Day of Class

*In Class:*  
Final Paper Due
Census Profile Due

5/18:  Final Exam – 9AM – In class cumulative final exam