

HARTWICK COLLEGE
Department of Sociology, Criminology, and Human Services
SOCI 250-2—The Sociology of *The Wire*

Instructor: Dr. Zachary McKenney
Office: Golisano Hall 334
Office Hours: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday 11:30-12:30pm
Class Meeting Time: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday 12:30-3:00pm
Class Location: Golisano Hall 201

Course Description

The Wire is arguably the greatest television program ever made. Written by David Simon, a former Baltimore Sun journalist, and Ed Burns, a former Baltimore homicide detective turned public-school teacher, *The Wire* is a literary television series which unflatteringly eulogizes the city of Baltimore, Maryland and its sprawling web of bureaucracy that mystifies, demonizes, and ultimately ensnares its most vulnerable and disadvantaged citizens. An extremely diverse group of sociologists and philosophers including the likes of William Julius Wilson, Sudhir Venkatesh, Frederic Jameson, and Slavoj Zizek, have treated *The Wire* to a range of academic interpretations. Former President Barack Obama's favorite TV show is *The Wire*; his favorite character is the magnanimous robber-of-drug-dealers Omar Little. The Sociology of *The Wire* will focus on four key sociological themes that are prominently represented in the show including deindustrialization and the decline of the labor movement, urbanization and the postindustrial city, the failed policies of the War on Drugs and their impact on policing and low income and minority communities, and racial and economic disparities in the educational system. We will analyze these themes in the relevant sociological literature while simultaneously examining how they are unflinchingly captured in *The Wire*. Alongside the academic literature on these topics, we will also read excerpts from *Homicide* and *The Corner*, two books written by David Simon and Ed Burns that inspired the show.

Course Objectives

- To analyze key themes of sociological importance in *The Wire* including, but certainly not limited to, deindustrialization and the decline of the labor movement, urbanization and the postindustrial city, the failed policies of the War on Drugs and their impact on policing and low income and minority communities, and racial and economic disparities in the educational system.
- To analyze television from a sociological perspective and provide operative criticism, original insights, effective use of sources, and connections to existing research.
- To improve your critical thinking, reading comprehension, expository writing, and communication skills.

Required Text

There is no required text for this course. **However, it is imperative that you have access to the first four seasons of *The Wire*.** You can purchase all seasons of *The Wire* on DVD or Blu-Ray for \$30-60 on Amazon. A more convenient and less expensive option is to purchase a monthly subscription to one of the streaming services that hosts *The Wire*. You can watch *The Wire* on HBO Max (\$9.99/month), Hulu (\$14.99/month), or Amazon Prime Video (14.99/month). All other materials are available on our course Desire to Learn (D2L) page.

Grading Scale

A: 93-100	C+: 77-79
A-: 90-92	C: 73-76
B+: 87-89	C-: 70-72
B: 83-86	D+ 67-69
B-: 80-82	D: 63-66
C+: 77-79	D-: 60-62
C: 73-76	F: 59 and below
C-: 70-72	

Assessment

Attendance and Participation—20%

Episode Guides—40%

Exams—40%

Attendance and Participation

Students will be exposed to the required course material by attending the regularly scheduled class. Students are responsible for the topics covered not only in the course readings but also during course lectures and class discussions. Organized and accurate note taking of lectures and discussions is essential to comprehending the course material and for your success in this course. Students are expected to participate in class discussions and may be called upon to address specific questions or interpret passages from the texts. **In order to adhere to these expectations, attendance in this course is mandatory.**

Only three unexcused absences will be permitted. Students with more than three unexcused absences during the term will lose their attendance and participation points and may incur a full letter grade deduction from their final grade for each subsequent absence. The only exception to this rule will be for students who are missing class for college sanctioned events or documented emergencies such as serious illness, athletic matches, field trips, religious holidays, or academic conferences. A student who finds it necessary to miss class assumes responsibility for what may have been missed.

Per Hartwick College's Missed Class Policy, students who must miss class will provide each instructor with an agreement letter prior to the end of the first week of the semester notifying them that they may occasionally have to miss class for an event or competition and will work with the faculty member to complete any missed assignments. In the event that an activity is not known prior to the drop/add period the student will notify the instructor as soon as they are aware of the conflict. In all cases and for all activities, students will present the faculty member with a hard copy of a letter detailing the activity, dates of the activity, and acknowledgement of the class assignments that will be missed and date for submission of any course work. Students are expected to notify their instructors in whose courses they will be missing academic work -- preferably two weeks before each absence from class -- due to extra-curricular or co-curricular participation. When applicable, the letter also will be signed by appropriate college personnel coordinating the event and will be accompanied by a schedule of conflicting times and will include anticipated departure times. Finally, be prompt and on time for the start of each course. Tardiness is disruptive for your classmates and for me. **Students may be considered tardy if they arrive more than ten minutes late for class, and tardy students may be counted absent for the day.**

Although attendance in this course is mandatory, I do understand that life happens and emergencies occur. In the event that you find yourself in an emergency situation (i.e. severe medical illness, death in the family), you should contact me as soon as possible and submit documentation of your emergency. If you find yourself in an emergency situation, you may also find it helpful to contact the staff at the Office of Student Experience (<https://www.hartwick.edu/campus-life/student-affairs/>) and/or the Perella Health Center (<https://www.hartwick.edu/campus-life/health-wellness/health-center/>).

Episode Guides

One of the principal requirements of the course is to produce brief episode guides for each episode of the first four seasons of *The Wire*. On the first day of class I will provide you with a composition notebook where you will compose all of your episode guides. There are a variety of ways in which you can receive full credit for your episode guides, but, in brief, your episode guides should do three things: 1) briefly describe the key plot lines from the assigned episodes of *The Wire*; 2) briefly reflect on one scene that you found especially meaningful or powerful; and (3) propose one discussion question about or related to the episode. At the beginning of each course session, I will quickly check your episode guide notebook and assign you a grade of credit/partial credit/no credit depending on the thoroughness of your entries. More information regarding the episode guides can be found on our course D2L page and will be distributed and discussed in class on Tuesday, January 3. We will write the first episode guide together in class.

Exams

Three times during the term you will take an exam that is designed to measure your understanding of the key material and concepts from our course readings and from seasons two, three, and four of *The Wire*. The exams will consist of a combination of multiple choice, true/false, matching, and short answer questions. As a further incentive to write thorough episode guides, you will be allowed to use your episode guide notebook on the exams. Additionally, on the day before each exam I will dedicate a significant amount of class time to exam preparation and review.

Course Expectations

This course will be taught primarily as a discussion class. I will usually begin class with a mini lecture on the assigned readings but there will always be ample opportunities for you to participate, discuss, and debate the material being presented. I may ask questions to facilitate discussion and I may call upon specific students to answer questions, interpret passages and scenes from *The Wire*, and give their opinions on the assigned readings and episodes.

Course Rules and Policies

Some of topics that we will cover in this course are controversial. As a result, class discussions are likely to be heated at times. I absolutely encourage you to freely offer your opinions and to be critical of the episodes of *The Wire* will we watch and the course readings and other course material. However, comments that are disrespectful towards other students will not be tolerated. **Students who are disrespectful towards their classmates may be asked to leave and may be counted absent for the day.**

College COVID-19 Policy

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, circumstances may necessitate adjustments to instruction, such as shifts in mode of instruction (to remote or hybrid), classroom capacity limits, or indoor mask requirements. Updates will be provided on the College website (<https://www.hartwick.edu/about-us/covid-19-updates/>). I will communicate with you about any specific adjustments that are being made to this course, such as modality of instruction, expectations for participation, and any changes to assigned work; students should check their Hartwick email accounts frequently for information from their instructors.

Academic Dishonesty

I take academic integrity very seriously and fully expect each of you to do the same. **If you plagiarize or cheat, you may receive a grade of F in this course and suffer other penalties and sanctions imposed by Hartwick College.**

In particular, you must uphold the academic integrity policy found in the Student Handbook (<https://www.hartwick.edu/campus-life/student-affairs/code-of-conduct/student-handbook/>) which means you must refrain from all forms of dishonest academic behavior (e.g., cheating, unauthorized collaboration, plagiarism, double-submissions). Lapses of academic integrity will be dealt with according to the policies set forth in the student handbook. If you are not sure what constitutes dishonest academic activities, please make sure to discuss any questions you may have with me. For more information on academic integrity, see <https://www.hartwick.edu/academics/student-services/academic-affairs/academic-policies/>

Title IX

Hartwick College is committed to equal opportunity and providing a safe community free from all forms of sexual misconduct including sexual/gender-based harassment, discrimination, dating or domestic violence, stalking, sexual exploitation, and sexual assault. If you wish to make an official report to the College or have questions about the College's policy and procedures regarding sexual misconduct, please contact the Title IX Coordinator, Michael Arno, at arnom@hartwick.edu or (607) 431-4293. Online reporting and policy information is available at <https://www.hartwick.edu/about-us/employment/human-resources/title-ix/>.

If you wish to speak confidentially about an incident of sexual misconduct, please contact one of the following resources: Perrella Wellness Center, Health (607) 431-4120, or Counseling (607) 431-4120, or

Opportunities for Otsego's Violence Intervention Program (607) 432-4855. All other employees, including faculty, are responsible employees at Hartwick College and are required to report any incident of sexual misconduct that is personally reported to them to the Title IX Coordinator so that support and resources can be provided for all parties.

Students with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires, among other things, that all students with disabilities be afforded a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. Hartwick College is committed to upholding and maintaining all aspects of the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. If a student with a disability wishes to request academic adjustments, they should contact Lara Sanford, Director of AccessAbility Services, at sanfordl@hartwick.edu, or AccessAbilityServices@hartwick.edu. AccessAbility Services is located on the 5th floor of Yager Library in the Center for Student Success. Any information regarding a student's disability will remain confidential. **However, students must present me with an updated Academic Plan Letter for the semester in order to be eligible for academic adjustments.** Requests for academic adjustments should be made as early as possible. Additionally, any student with a documented disability is encouraged to contact me privately to discuss your specific needs. I promise to do everything I can to accommodate your disability.

Religious Holidays

I accommodate students who are adherents of a religious tradition and wish to fulfill obligations of that religious tradition. Students are expected to notify their instructors of their intent to fulfill the obligations of their religious tradition as soon as possible. For the sake of this policy, religious holidays are defined as periods of time in which either: activities required by normal class participation are prohibited by a religious tradition, or a special worship obligation is required by a religious tradition. I promise to do everything I can to accommodate your religious obligations.

Name and Pronoun Accommodations

If you use a name and/or pronoun other than what is listed in the course roll, please email me with the name and/or pronoun that you would like me to use.

Disclaimer

As instructor, I reserve the right to edit, revise and repost any aspect of the syllabus as needed. In the event that this syllabus is modified, I will alert you via email, D2L, and class announcement.

Course Schedule

Session 1

Introduction to the Course

Watch In Class—Season 1 Episode 1 “The Target”

Session 2

Before Class Read—Mittell, Jason. 2012. “*The Wire* in the Context of American Television.” Pp. 15-32 in *The Wire: Race, Class, and Genre* edited by Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Before Class Watch—Season 1 Episode 2 “The Detail”

Season 1 Episode 3 “The Buys”

Season 1 Episode 4 “Old Cases”

Season 1 Episode 5 “The Pager”

Season 1 Episode 6 “The Wire”

Season 1 Episode 7 “One Arrest”

Watch In Class— Season 1 Episode 8 “Lessons”

Session 3

Before Class Watch—Season 1 Episode 9 “Game Day”
Season 1 Episode 10 “The Cost”
Season 1 Episode 11 “The Hunt”
Season 1 Episode 12 “Cleaning Up”

Watch In Class—Season 1 Episode 13 “Sentencing”

Session 4

Before Class Read—Bluestone, Barry, and Bennett Harrison. 1982. *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry*. New York: Basic Books.

Before Class Watch—Season 2 Episode 1 “Ebb Tide”
Season 2 Episode 2 “Collateral Damage”
Season 2 Episode 3 “Hot Shots”

Watch In Class—Season 2 Episode 4 “Hard Cases”

Session 5

Before Class Read—Barrickman, Nick. 2015. “The Deindustrialization of Baltimore.” *World Socialist Website*.

Before Class Watch—Season 2 Episode 5 “Undertow”
Season 2 Episode 6 “All Prologue”
Season 2 Episode 7 “Backwash”

Watch In Class—Season 2 Episode 8 “Duck and Cover”

Session 6

Before Class Read—Florida, Richard. 2015. “There are Plenty More Baltimores.” *Bloomberg News*.

Before Class Watch—Season 2 Episode 9 “Stray Rounds”
Season 2 Episode 10 “Storm Warnings”
Season 2 Episode 11 “Bad Dreams”

Watch In Class—Season 2 Episode 12 “Port in a Storm”

Session 7 Exam One

Session 8

Before Class Read—Alexander, Michelle. 2012. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.

Before Class Watch—Season 3 Episode 1 “Time After Time”
Season 3 Episode 2 “All Due Respect”
Season 3 Episode 3 “Dead Soldiers”

Watch In Class—Season 3 Episode 4 “Amsterdam”

Session 9

Before Class Read—Cooley, Will. “The Drug War in Baltimore: The Failure of the ‘Kingpin’ Strategy in Charm City.” *Metropole*.

Before Class Watch—Season 3 Episode 5 “Straight and True”
Season 3 Episode 6 “Homecoming”
Season 3 Episode 7 “Back Burners”

Watch In Class—Season 3 Episode 8 “Moral Midgetry”

Session 10

Before Class Read—Graziosi, Graig. 2021. “Baltimore ends war on drugs with plot line straight from *The Wire*.”

Before Class Watch—Season 3 Episode 9 “Slapstick”
Season 3 Episode 10 “Reformation”
Season 3 Episode 11 “Middle Ground”

Watch In Class—Season 3 Episode 12 “Mission Accomplished”

Session 11—Exam Two

Session 12

Before Class Read—Kozol, Jonathan. 2005. *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. New York: Random House.

Before Class Watch—Season 4 Episode 1 “Boys of Summer”
Season 4 Episode 2 “Soft Eyes”
Season 4 Episode 3 “Home Rooms”

Watch In Class—Season 4 Episode 4 “Refugees”

Session 13

Before Class Read—Ayscue, Jennifer. 2013. “Settle for Segregation or Strive for Diversity? A Defining Moment for Maryland’s Public Schools.” *The Civil Rights Project*.

Before Class Watch—Season 4 Episode 5 “Alliances”
Season 4 Episode 6 “Margin of Error”
Season 4 Episode 7 “Unto Others”

Watch In Class—Season 4 Episode 8 “Corner Boys”

Session 14

Before Class Read—Alvarez, Rafael. 2009. *The Wire: Truth Be Told*. New York: Grove Press.

Before Class Watch—Season 4 Episode 9 “Know Your Place”
Season 4 Episode 10 “Misgivings”
Season 4 Episode 11 “A New Day”
Season 4 Episode 12 “That’s Got His Own”

Watch In Class—Season 4 Episode 13 “Final Grades”

Session 15—Exam Three