

American Studies 471  
American Cultural Politics Since WWII  
The Political Economy of the Inner City With an Analysis of *The Wire*  
M—F 9-10:15am  
CUE 407  
Instructor: Frank King  
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Office: Wilson 107A  
Hours: By Appointment.

*We used to make things in this country*

**Frank Sobotka**

*There are more African Americans under correctional control today- -in prison or jail, or probation or parole – than there were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.*

**Michelle Alexander**

### **Overview**

Political Economy is the study of the “relationships of the economic system and its institutions to the rest of society and social development. It is sensitive to the influence of non-economic factors such as political and social institutions, morality, and ideology in determining economic events (Riddle, Shackelford, and Stamos, 1998).”

In layman’s terms, political economy looks at how social, economic, and political structures intersect. This class will look how political economy impacts the societies in the American inner city. We will look at how the inner city was created in America, resulting from systemic racism and class struggles. The political economy of the inner city is complex, and reflects many of the problems within America, such as deindustrialization and the attack on the middle class, the war on drugs, the failures of the American education and criminal justice systems, and the negligent news media.

We will read several articles that address these topics and we will also watch HBO’s critically acclaimed television show *The Wire*. *The Wire* has been determined by numerous critics as the “Best show on television,” and used as a pedagogical tool by institutions across the country (including myself). While the show is incredibly well written and impeccably acted, the social commentary makes *The Wire* crucial to understand the political economy of the inner city.

### **Required Materials**

*The Wire* seasons 1-5 are essential for this class. There will be two copies of the entire series available for sign out, as well as one copy of the series reserved at the Holland Terrell Library. Other places to acquire *The Wire* are the Pullman Library downtown,

Hastings in Moscow, Netflix, Blockbuster, and various online sources. **I urge you to watch with fellow classmates to avoid access shortages.**

The reading materials will be provided in class or via email. I will use your preferred email address. Please have the reading materials available for class every day (Printed or laptop)

## **Course Requirements**

### **Attendance**

Attendance will not be taken for this class, but it is necessary for you to attend. You will be responsible to make up assignments, notes, readings, etc.

### **Participation**

It is imperative that you are prepared to participate in the class discussions. This requires more than simply doing the reading, but arriving to class ready to talk about the issues each day. Participating in class not only consists of talking, but also includes listening so please do not talk while others are speaking. Be respectful of your peers and instructor.

If there is a lack of participation I will “volunteer” individuals to discuss the materials that day.

### **ALSO PLEASE NO CELL PHONES**

### **Persons with Disabilities**

The Program in American Studies supports members of our community who request disability accommodations. Please notify me during the first two (2) weeks of class for any requirements needed for the course. Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and may need accommodations to fully participate in this class, please visit the Disability Resource Center (DRC). All accommodations **MUST** be approved through the DRC (Washington Building, Room 217). Please stop by or call 509-335-3417 to make an appointment with a disability specialist. Late notification may result in the request being unavailable.

### **Academic Integrity**

Academic dishonesty, such as cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, and fraud, is prohibited. The proper use of primary or secondary research sources and without proper citation or acknowledgment, or copying and claiming someone else's work as your own, is illegal and is not acceptable in this or any other class at WSU. Whether intentional or unintentional, academic dishonesty will result in a grade of F for the assignment in question, or a grade of “F” for the entire course. Should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty, we will discuss the situation with you before penalties are enforced.

### **EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION SYSTEM**

WSU has made an emergency notification system available for faculty, students and staff.

Please register at **myWSU** with emergency contact information (cell, email, text, etc). You may have been prompted to complete emergency contact information when registering for classes on **RONet**.

Please refer to the University emergency management website: <http://oem.wsu.edu/emergencies> as well WSU ALERT <http://alert.wsu.edu> for information on WSU's communication resources WSU will use to provide warning and notification for emergencies. The entire WSU safety plan can be found at <http://safetyplan.wsu.edu>.

## **Assignments**

### **Wire Journal**

Each week you will be required to watch and critique a season of HBO's television show *The Wire*. After you watch each episode write a 1-2 paragraph critique/analysis of the episode. Please do not summarize the episodes; your opinions are needed for this assignment.

This show has a very different dialog than other shows you've watched before. It is imperative that you pay full attention to what the characters are doing and saying. This is important to understand the overall theme of each season and the entire series.

The schedule for watching the show will be combined with the reading schedule.

**100 pts.**

### **Write-Ups**

Each week you will be required to write a 2-4 page analysis of the weeks readings and connect it to that week's season of *The Wire*. You will have full autonomy on the topics you choose to write, but you must discuss the readings, the show, and your take on the theme for that week.

**20 pts each**

### **Group Presentations/Facilitation**

A lottery will be taken to determine who will present what season.

You will be required to present the season and writings for that week and facilitate the discussion on the week's topics. You must provide a presentation with visuals (PowerPoint, handouts, video, etc) along with questions and comments to encourage class discussion. You have full autonomy to discuss whatever you desire, but you must discuss the readings and the season for that week. The presentations/discussions will be group efforts but you will be graded on your individual performance. Please ensure that you work together and divide the work evenly.

**IF YOU PRESENT THAT WEEK YOU WILL NOT HAVE TO DO A WRITE UP**  
**75 pts**

## Class Schedule

### Week 1

Reading: “On the Reproduction of the Conditions of Production” by Louis Althusser.

Due by Thursday.

Lectures: Political Economy, Socialism, and Capitalism.

### Week 2

Reading: “The Black Poor: Highest Stage of Underdevelopment” by Manning Marable and “White Privileges and Black Burdens: Still Systemic Racism.” By Joe Feagin

Due by Wednesday.

*The Wire* Season 1 Journals due Thursday.

Group 1 presentation—Thursday.

Lectures: The Growth of the Inner City and Systemic Racism in America.

### Week 3

Reading: “Below the Line” by Mark Robert Rank and “The Great Divergence” by Paul Krugman. Due by Wed.

*The Wire* Season 2 Journals due Thursday

Group 2 presentation—Thursday

Monday—No School (July 4<sup>th</sup>)

Lectures: Class Warfare, Attacks on Unions, and Deindustrialization.

### Week 4

Reading: “The Lockdown” and “The Color of Justice” by Michelle Alexander. Due by Wed

*The Wire* Season 3 Journals due Thursday

Group 3 presentation—Thursday

Lectures: The War on Drugs, Prison Industrial Complex, and the Criminal Justice System

### Week 5

Reading: “Reviving the Goal of an Integrated Society: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenge” by Gary Orfield and “NCLB: Measure and Punish” by Diane Ravitch. Due by Wed

*The Wire* Season 3 Journals due Thursday

Group 4 presentation—Thursday

Lectures: The Failures of Schools

### Week 6

Reading: “Weapons of Mass Distraction” by Paul Krugman and “*Media Control*” by Noam Chomsky. Due by Mon.

*The Wire* Season 5 Journals due Thursday

Group 5 presentation—Thursday

Lectures: The Failure of the Media, Conservative Ideologies, and The Role of Media in Your Life.