

**PHIL255 – Philosophy and the City: Plato's *Republic* and HBO's *The Wire***  
**Dr. Coleen Zoller**  
**Spring 2011**

**Contact Information:**

E-mail: zoller@susqu.edu

Office: Bogar 024

Office Telephone: 570.372.4163

Office hours: MWF 9:40-10 AM, 11:10-11:30 AM, and by appt.

*"The dialogue is a kosmos and the kosmos a dialogue." – Anonymous Commentator on Plato*

*"What the fuck is wrong with this city?" – Jimmy McNulty in The Wire*

*"It seems like every time I open my mouth in this town I'm telling people something they don't want to know." --Bunny Colvin in The Wire*

*"Deserve got nuthin to do with it." – Snoop in The Wire*

*"Don't matter who did what to who at this point, fact is we went to war and now there ain't no going back. I mean, shit, it's what war is you know, once you're in it, you're in it. If it's a lie, then we fight on that lie, but we got to fight." – Slim Charles in The Wire*

**Course Description:**

David Simon has compared his five-season HBO series, *The Wire*, to the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. This course will examine *The Wire* in comparison with Plato's *Republic*. Both of these texts raise philosophical questions, such as: What is justice? Who should rule? How should citizens be educated? What does it mean to be a good guardian/soldier? and How should desire be managed in society? Our task is, first, to work to understand the philosophizing being done in both these texts, and second, to philosophize on our own about the topics raised by both these texts.

N.B. *The Wire* is a television series, and watching television is meant to be entertaining and enjoyable. However, to navigate the course successfully, you need to watch carefully and analytically, while taking notes.

**Course Objectives:**

The general aim of a philosophy course is, as Kant wrote, to "have the courage to use your *own* mind!" More specifically, as a course that satisfies the Central Curriculum Ethics Intensive learning goals as well as the Diversity learning goals, students in this course should:

More specifically, students in this course should:

- Understand and critically analyze course texts
- Articulate the experiences of suffering depicted in course texts
- Connect the structures of society to the suffering depicted in course texts

- Identify the fundamental vocabulary, questions, theories, and problems in course texts
- Identify and question one's own beliefs about justice, poverty, race, gender, moral responsibility, political leadership, education, media, the war on drugs, self, and society
- Recognize the relevance of course texts to real-life decision-making
- Debate effectively (in speaking as well as in writing), including: expositing positions, organizing thoughts logically, analyzing and evaluating arguments, and accounting for a variety of viewpoints

**Required Course Texts:**

Plato, *Republic* (Hackett)

*The Wire*, created by David Simon (HBO, 23 DVDs)

Tiffany Potter & C.W. Marshall, eds., excerpts from *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* (Continuum) (excerpts available on **Blackboard**)

**Optional Further Reading:**

Lorrie Moore, "In the Life of 'The Wire'" (from *The New York Review*, Oct. 14, 2010)

Rafael Alvarez, with introduction by David Simon, *The Wire: Truth Be Told* (Grove)

Sudhir Venkatesh, "What Do Real Thugs Think of The Wire?" (a nine-part blog on the NY Times Freakonomics Opinion site)

Sudhir Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day* (Penguin)

**Grading:**

Participation (including reflection portfolio and contribution to character study team) = 50%

Term Paper Preliminary work (thesis, intro, first draft) = 15%

Term Paper (final version) = 35%

**Office hours:** Please take advantage of my office hours to discuss any problems you have with the reading assignments, discussions in class, meaning of life, etc. Do not feel that you must have a carefully formulated set of questions before you come to see me. The articulation of the problem is often the main stumbling block; so if something is an issue for you, don't hesitate to talk with me about it.

**Course Requirements:**

**A. Essay:** Each student is required to write a formal essay in at least two drafts. In this assignment you will need to demonstrate both your understanding and evaluation of course texts. Details about this essay will be announced.

**B. Attendance:** All students are expected to participate in all classes, arriving punctually.

**C. Class Participation:**

1. *Class format:* Our format will be seminar-style class discussion. For each class meeting students should have prepared themselves to discuss their responses to the course texts and the issues they raise.

2. *My Assumptions:*

- a. The classroom is an environment that must be conducive to learning. To help foster that environment cell phones should be entirely silent and stowed in your bag for the duration of all class meetings. Anyone using a phone will have to leave class. Laptops may only be used with official permission from the Office of Academic Accommodations.
- b. No one knows everything, but every one of us knows something and is able to contribute something to our class discussions.
- c. Everyone *should* contribute to our class discussions. You are citizens, not consumers, at a university. Those who attend class and never participate are “moochers” – consuming the understanding being generated by class discussions without contributing to that process.
- d. Coming to class unprepared is disrespectful to those who are prepared.
- e. Questions are just as important as comments.
- f. Some of you are shy about speaking publicly.

3. *Why participate?* There are two main reasons to participate in your classes. First, pedagogical research has demonstrated that students learn more when they actively participate in class discussions. Second, all students have a civic responsibility to offer their questions and thoughts so that the entire class can collaboratively learn the course material. Furthermore, participating in class will help you practice having thoughtful conversations outside of class.

4. *Assistance:* As soon as possible anyone who feels ill at ease should discuss with the instructor ways of easing oneself into participation.

5. *Reflection Portfolio:* On Blackboard (under assignments) you will find the details concerning a reflection portfolio you are building throughout the semester. Each weekend you must submit your reflections on the readings and/or viewings for the previous week. These entries will be considered in your participation grade.

6. *Rubric:* A participation grade will be assigned to each student based on which of the following regularly applied to her/him:

F = not physically present, or *severely detracting from* classroom discussion (e.g., behaving in a manner that is disrespectful like **checking text messages**); never interacts with peers; never prepared; demonstrates a noticeable and on-going lack of interest in course material (e.g., **sleeping**)

D = present physically but not mentally and/or not being prepared, or *detracting from* classroom discussion (e.g., **regular mid-class bathroom trips, not having text and classroom supplies with you**, having side conversations, daydreaming, etc.); never participates or making totally irrelevant comments

C = **present, alert, and prepared for class** (e.g., having read required texts in at least a cursory way, bringing text and classroom supplies with you to class, reflecting in advance on the day’s texts, etc.), and adding to the discussion **but in only minimal ways**

B = present, alert, prepared for class (e.g., having read required texts with significant attention, bringing text and classroom supplies with you to class, reflecting in advance on the day's texts, etc.), and **contributing positively to class discussion (e.g., communicating some understanding of the text, asking related questions, sharing ideas, maintaining an appropriate balance of talking & listening, etc.)**

A = present, alert, prepared (e.g., having read required texts thoroughly, bringing notes, text--**with significant passages marked**--and classroom supplies with you to class, reflecting in advance on the day's texts, having written a reflection paper as well as some additional questions to ask to advance the conversation, etc.), and **making thoughtful contributions to classroom discussion based on engagement with the texts** (e.g., communicating one's understanding of the text and the overall course, posing related questions to both the instructor and fellow students, sharing ideas and responding to the ideas of others, maintaining an appropriate balance of talking and listening, **applying course material to personal experience; actively engaging in one's own learning, etc.**)

#### **Policy on Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty:**

All forms of plagiarism, cheating, and academic dishonesty are prohibited. This includes submitting without citation your own work originally written for other assignments. Students found cheating on assignments will receive an F for the course and will be reported to the Dean of Student Life. I reserve the right to have all student written assignments submitted in an electronic format for the expressed purpose of checking assignments for plagiarism against internet sources (including pay-sites for papers) using turnitin.com. If you are in doubt about what constitutes cheating or plagiarism, please discuss this with me BEFORE turning in an assignment.

#### **Students with Disabilities:**

If you are seeking an academic accommodation, it is essential that you have appropriate documentation on file with the University and present that documentation to me as early as possible in the semester. If you believe that you have a disability but have no documentation on file at Susquehanna and wish to discuss what steps can be taken to determine whether an accommodation is warranted, please contact the Counseling Center for further information and assistance. Some additional information is available at <http://www.susqu.edu/counseling/disabilities/>.