

[Professor Rich Keiser](#) Fall 1999

AMERICAN STUDIES 396

POLITICAL SCIENCE 367

American Studies 396 will explore the people, the environment, and the values associated with American suburbs, particularly in the post-WWII era. We will pose questions about the social, political, economic, psychological, gender, and racial implications of suburbia. We will consider why, given the ubiquitous criticisms of suburbia, so many Americans continue to strive to live there. Over the course of the term, we will analyze the evolving patterns of suburban life from a variety of perspectives: history, political science, literature, film, journalism, sociology, architecture, and material culture.

This course also has an explicit agenda of building formal research skills and is intended to be a preparatory course for the comprehensive exercise process in American Studies.

A seminar is a collaborative enterprise. In a seminar, students take important responsibility for producing stimulating discussions and presenting the results of their research and thinking. For most of the term, we will discuss a common set of readings and viewings in order to build our understanding of suburbia and its historical and contemporary relationships to American politics and culture. As well, nearly everyone has some familiarity with suburbia or suburban culture; your background and experiences are a treasure of resources from which we can all learn. But you must follow the rule of framing your experiences through the class materials rather than merely emoting about your past and your experiences.

The success of the course (and whether it is a fun learning experience) will depend both on your willingness to complete the reading and viewing assignments on time and your eagerness to participate. Read actively, consider keeping a journal of your impressions, record ideas you aren't prepared to evaluate yet but want to think about further. To insure that you come to class having connected with the authors and ready to contribute your thoughts on the issues raised, one third of the class will be required to prepare a one page, double spaced set of talking points for most classes. This will be two or three paragraphs (not an outline) that develop two or three ideas from the readings and viewings that you think are interesting, irritating, worthy of further research, or represent a connection to previous topics. Bring one copy to class for yourself and send me one copy by e-mail by **nine am** of the class day.

Grading: The comps prospectus will receive a final grade worth 20%; Film analyses 1-2 and the Literature analysis will constitute 40% of the grade and lowest of the three will be dropped; Material Culture analysis or the Final Exam will be 20%; and class discussion (including talking points and attendance) will be 20%. Late assignments will be penalized two letter grades per day or any part. Page limits will be strictly enforced in the name of fairness. Read ahead on the syllabus and plan accordingly for athletic events, holidays, and conflicts with other classes.

Office Hours will be announced during the first week of classes. My office is 417 Willis and my phone is 4122. I am glad to take calls at home but please do not call after 9 pm.

9/14: Defining Suburbs; Analytic approaches to the study of suburbanization; the prospectus for the comprehensive exercise.

Film 1: The City

9/16: 1. Fishman & Sharpe and Wallock, Talking Points 1 (always 9 am deadline)

2. Eldersveld & Schneider, Talking Points 2

3. Putnam & Stark, Talking Points 3

9/21: Jackson, chs. 1-6; Clark, ch. 3. TP 1

Film 2: Mr. Blandings ...

9/23: Jackson, chs. 7-10; Clark, ch. 6. TP 2

9/28: Jackson, chs. 11-13; Kelly, ch. 3; Riesman, *Time*. TP 3

Film 3: Avalon

9/30: Jackson, chs. 14-16, TP 1

Danielson, chs. 2-3, TP 2

10/4: Note Monday @ 10 am due date for draft 1 of prospectus.

10/5: Roth, "Eli, the Fanatic" TP 3

Film 4: TBA

10/7: Readings on Film or Material Culture TBA

Discuss comps prospectus

10/11: Note Monday, Film Paper #1 due @ 10 am

10/12: Begin readings for Thursday; we will discuss film papers.

10/14: Friedan, chs. 1, 2, 10, 12; TP 1 and 2 (all five chaps.)

Faludi, ch. 6

10/19: Draft 2 of prospectus due in class. Bring 4 copies to class.

{Last third, music or Orfield}

Film 5: Serial Mom

10/21: Garreau, chs. 1-6; TP 3

10/26: Garreau, chs. 7-10; TP 1

Film 6: Heathers

10/28: McKenzie, ch. 1; Stevens & suburban dystopia packet; TP 2

11/2: Draft 3 of prospectus due in class (1 copy)

{Review; music}

Film 7: The ... Alleged Texas Cheerleader Murdering Mom

11/4: TBA

Read Kaplan, *Two Guys From Verona*

11/9: Paper due at 10 am on *Two Guys From Verona*

Film 8: TBA

11/11: Logan and Schneider; TP 3

Feagin and Sikes; TP 1

Tate; and Gordon; TP 2

11/15: Note Monday due date, 10 am, film paper #2.

11/16: Final Class Readings TBA

Themes for Fall 1999

"If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes."

-- Federal Housing Administration, 1938

"One thing is certain; racial housing covenants don't just happen. They are carefully and often expensively promoted. Two groups have taken the lead in that activity -- the property owners' and neighborhood improvement associations, and the developers of subdivisions. Both groups have been ably aided and supported by the FHA and financial institutions."

-- Robert C. Weaver, *The Negro Ghetto*, 1948

"We can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem. But we cannot combine the two."

-- William Levitt

In 1960, not a single one of the Long Island Levittown's 82,000 residents was black.

"Buyers liked the idea of being accepted into an 'exclusive' neighborhood. To be discriminating, they were told, you had to be discriminatory. The dream of the warm fireside, of the security and pride of ownership would be enlarged to include a whole community of neighbors, friendly, similar, socially acceptable, interesting, and white."

-- Charles Abrams, *Forbidden Neighbors*, p. 171.

"What is public and what is private? And how do we draw the line between them? At first blush this seems very clear, but on closer examination it is not so evident."

-- Charles Merriam, *Public and Private Government*

"Those who accept this existence [suburban life] might as well be encased in a rocket hurtling through space, so narrow are their choices, so limited and deficient their permitted responses. Here indeed we find "The Lonely Crowd." ...Suburbia offers poor facilities for meeting, conversation, collective debate, and common action -- it favors silent conformity, not rebellion or counter-attack. Suburbia has become the favored home of a new kind of absolutism: invisible but all powerful."

-- Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, pp. 512-513.

"I am trying to envision what happens when 10 or 20 per cent of the population has enough income to bypass the social institutions it doesn't like in ways that only the top fraction of 1 per cent used to be able to do."

-- Charles Murray

"The continuing debate over whether the wealthy are paying their fair share of taxes obscures a larger issue, with more profound implications in America: the fortunate fifth is quietly seceding from the rest of the nation."

-- Robert Reich

"The suburb is the last word in privatization, perhaps even its lethal consummation, and it spells the end of authentic civic life."

-- Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk

"But isn't it 'in the national interest' to bail out the cities? The suburbs have given their answer: walled communities."

-- William Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *The Atlantic*, July 1992.

Our parents were anxious to do what was expected of them, even when the expectation was not altogether clear.

-- Waldie, *Holy Land*, p. 173