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Class Meetings: SOCY3306.01/UNCP5539.01: Wednesdays, 4:30 – 6:50 p.m.,  
Gasson 208  
Office Hours: Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, 3:00 – 4:00 p.m. and by appointment

### **Introduction:**

The central theme of this class is to consider the dialogue between individual choice and social setting as we struggle to construct a life of effectiveness and balance; looking inward toward family and career and outward toward community and spirituality.

The historian Dick Flacks has distinguished people who make a living from people who make history. The assumption of this class is that BC should have prepared you, and you should have prepared yourself, to be people who do both: to make a living and to make a difference.

I will argue that, in order to find satisfying answers to life's challenges, you need to know how to ask good questions. For a sociologist, good questions are those that allow you to see the intersection of biography and history, to understand how personal choices are both shaped by and shape societal forces.

Good questions, in turn are connected to good answers: ones that allow you to act productively while steering a middle course between hearsay, prejudice and formula on the one hand and exhaustive scholarly research on the other. A good answer allows you to make decisions while respecting the fact that most knowledge is incomplete, ambiguous and, often, contested.

Moreover, good answers, while individually constructed, are also shaped by the societal context in which they arise. The sociologist C. Wright Mills calls this interplay between text and context "the intersection of biography and history." In his essay, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Karl Marx wrote that "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please...but under circumstances directly encountered."

We begin this class with attention to "good questions." You will be asked to reflect on the best question you were asked and to wrestle with the three questions offered to us by Fr. Michael Himes as he seeks to help us with the issues of vocational discernment.

Next, we will practice "thinking in context" by using the work of C. Wright Mills and

Peggy McIntosh as they apply to your BC experience. This is an exercise in discerning what small and do-able changes you can make that might generate larger changes in the community around you.

We will then turn to three case studies that provide very different contexts for their inhabitants to construct effective and balanced lives. Materials for these case studies will be drawn from my lectures, from social science, fiction, and film sources. We are using works of film and fiction because, after graduation, very few people read textbooks, but we do read novels and see films that enlarge our understanding of ourselves and our communities.

The first case study will focus on Palestine as a context for building an individual life. Every aspect of existence for Palestinians is defined by the fact that Palestinians are a stateless people living under the longest continuing occupation of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Individual Palestinians have vastly different responses to their oppressive circumstances: some resist non-violently, some violently; some retreat into a purely private horizon, trying to block out the difficulties of life; some help their neighbors and still others exploit their neighbors. But, whatever their individual responses, those responses are deeply marked by the context in which they are constructed. We will ask what we can learn about a society that is organized around a single issue or question. How would we, experiencing such a place, structure out lives? What do we learn from the characters in the film and novel struggling to do so?

The second case study will focus on South Africa as a context for building an individual life. South Africa is a society that was once marked by a single question/issue (the struggle against Apartheid) and, having resolved that question, is now looking for an equally unifying issue to guide the future. It is a society in transition. Again, individual responses to the quest for mission vary tremendously, but all lives are marked by the question “Where do we go from here?” We will ask what we can learn about a society that is asking: “What’s next?”

The third case study will focus on the United States as a context for building an individual life. While deep inequalities persist in the United States and curtail the options available to some of our fellow citizens and neighbors, America is nevertheless characterized by a vast array of choice for most people. We might think of ourselves as a society in which nearly anything is possible but nothing is essential. How do we build a good life in the face of an often-bewildering array of choices?

**When history calls, will we be ready to answer the call???**

## **Course Requirements**

***NO Capstone course may be taken on a pass-fail basis.***

A schedule of assignment dates is attached below. Students will be REQUIRED to attend all classes, to participate in class discussions EVERY WEEK, to write 6 essays and to lead discussions about novels and films. ABSOLUTELY NO LATE WORK WILL BE ACCEPTED FOR CREDIT UNLESS AN EXTENSION HAS BEEN GRANTED BY ME **BEFORE** THE DUE DATE OF THE ASSIGNMENT. Your final grade will be computed as follows:

6 essays @ 12% each = 72%  
class participation = 28%

(grading on class participation to be constructed with input from students)

### **Academic Integrity**

Guidelines for academic integrity in written work are posted on the Boston College website at

[bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/enmgt/stserv/acd/univ.html#integrity](http://bc.edu/bc_org/avp/enmgt/stserv/acd/univ.html#integrity)

If you have any questions pertaining to academic integrity, please do not hesitate to ask me. If you are caught violating Boston College's policies on academic integrity, you will receive a failing grade for the assignment and the appropriate Dean will be notified in accordance to the rules set forth by Boston College. Deans may prescribe a failing grade for the class or even expulsion, depending on the circumstances.

### **Disability Rights**

If you are a student with a documented disability seeking reasonable accommodations in this course, please contact Kathy Duggan, (617) 552-8093, at the Connors Family Learning Center regarding learning disabilities, or Paulette Durrett, (617) 552-3470, in the Disability Services Office regarding all other types of disabilities.

### **Course Schedule**

#### *Week 1 (January 17, 2018): Recognizing Good Questions*

Readings:

Fr. Michael Himes, "Fostering Vocational Discernment among Undergraduates" on-line reserves

Class exercise:

What was the best question you were ever asked and what made it so good? How would you identify the qualities of good questions?

#### **Essay (Due January 24, 2018):**

At this moment, in your senior year, how would you answer Fr. Himes' three questions: what is your joy? What are your talents? What does the world need from you? How, specifically, did your experiences at BC help you to identify joy, talent and, **especially**,

societal need? Please be sure to focus on specific moments when you learned the most about what the world needs. How would you answer the “shadow” questions: what do you fear, what are you not good at, what does the world not need from you? Please be sure to focus on specific moments when these questions were relevant. How did BC experiences relate to your answers to the shadow questions.

*Weeks 2 (January 24): Asking Questions in Sociological Perspective: Thinking in Context*

Readings:

C. Wright Mills, “The Promise,” (chapter 1 of *The Sociological Imagination*)

Peggy McIntosh “White Privilege, Male Privilege” on-line reserves.

“Clueless Things White People Say,” at: [http://www.dailydot.com/opinion/clueless-things-white-people-say-racism/?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=socialflow](http://www.dailydot.com/opinion/clueless-things-white-people-say-racism/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=socialflow)

9 Clueless things white people say when confronted with racism at:

[http://www.dailydot.com/opinion/clueless-things-white-people-say-racism/?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=socialflow](http://www.dailydot.com/opinion/clueless-things-white-people-say-racism/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=socialflow)

What Privilege Really Means (and Doesn’t Mean) at:

<http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/07/what-privilege-really-means/>

Class Exercise #1:

What are the most significant features of your environment at BC? In the United States? How do they shape your ability to answer Fr. Himes’ questions?

Class Exercise #2:

In small groups, discuss the ways in which wealth, whiteness, heterosexuality are normalized at BC. For each example, what behaviors would help to “de-normalize” unearned privilege?

**Group Essay (January 31):**

How have certain race, class, and sexuality categories been normalized in your life at BC? ***Please be very specific.*** If you were to challenge this normalization, what changes would you make in your own behavior? What would you expect of other students, the administration, the faculty, alumni? **How would you achieve the changes you, yourself, can make?**

*Weeks 3-6 January 31 – (February 22): Palestine- building a life in the shadow of occupation*

Week Three (January 31): Palestine – historical background  
Lecture: Eve Spangler, + film “Christmas Break in Palestine,”

Reading:

Natasha Gill, “The Original ‘No’: Why the Arabs Rejected Zionism, and Why it Matters,” in *Middle East Policy Council Commentary* June 19, 2013 at:

<http://www.mepc.org/articles-commentary/commentary/original-no-why-arabs-rejected-zionism-and-why-it-matters>

Ari Shavit “Lydda, 1948: A City, A Massacre and the Middles East Today,” *New Yorker*, October 21, 2013, at:

[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/10/21/131021fa\\_fact\\_shavit](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/10/21/131021fa_fact_shavit)

Week 4 (February 7): Palestine – ordinary people respond to difficult circumstances

Film: *Paradise Now*

(extra credit possibility: compare to *The Crucible* – is there any belief or project you would be prepared to die for?)

Discussion – to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Assignment: everyone must contribute 2 “good” questions, one based on your major and one on your curiosity.

Week 5 (February 14): Palestine – ordinary people respond to difficult circumstances

Reading: Amy Wilentz, *Martyr’s Crossing* New York: Ballantine Books

(extra credit possibility – compare to Saed Kashua’s *Second Person Singular* – how is family the window into the integration of a life?)

Discussion – to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Assignment: everyone must contribute 2 “good” questions, one rooted in their major and one in their curiosity.

Week 6 (February 21) Open discussion: can you build an ordinary life and build resistance simultaneously. How will you address the (often more subtle) injustices in American society

### **Essay due February 28**

Imagine your own life playing out in the shadow of one great issue, perhaps personal (e.g. depression, addiction, bereavement, illness,) or communal (e.g. plant closings and mass layoffs in your town, chemical spills, weather catastrophes). What have you learned from the characters and situations in the novel and film about good and bad ways of maintaining a balanced life? For example, when is it good to ignore difficulties and when should you engage them? How much advice should you take from others? How would you balance self-interest and social need? Where, specifically, have BC experiences helped you to explore these questions.

You may want to ask friends from marginalized groups at BC what it is like to make choices in an environment where they cannot assume they are safe. Remember

McIntosh.

**Weeks 7-10 (February 28 – April 4): South Africa – Building a life in the midst of transformation**

Week 7 (February 28): South African History

Lecture: Eve Spangler

Readings: TBA

Week 8 (March 14): South Africa – ordinary people responding to massive social change

Film: *City Lovers*

(Possible extra credit: *Stand and Deliver* – how do educational aspirations differ in the US and So. Africa?)

Discussion: to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Everyone must bring 2 good questions, one based on your major and one based on your curiosity.

Week 9

9 (March 21): South Africa – ordinary people responding to massive social change

Film: *Tsotsie*

(Possible Extra Credit Assignment: *Moonlight*: How do young people build a life in the face of extreme poverty and the appeal of criminal activities as a source of income)

Discussion to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Everyone must bring 2 good questions, one based on your major and one based on your curiosity.

Week 10 (April 4):

Reading: Zoe Wicomb *You Can't Get Lost in Capetown*

(possible extra credit assignment: Nadine Gordimer *None to Watch Over Me* – how does the transition from Apartheid to non-racial and partially successful democracy differ for whites and blacks in South Africa?)

Discussion: to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Everyone must bring 2 good questions, one based on your major and one based on your curiosity.

**Essay, due April 11**

Using the example from your Palestine paper, what would you do if the overarching issue in your life suddenly got resolved and you had to move on - e.g. the divorce or bankruptcy or detox is over, the town has rebuilt after the earthquake, etc – and now you need to move into a new chapter. Instead of looking back, you need to move forward.

What next? What have you learned from the characters and situations in the novel and film about good and bad ways of maintaining a balanced life? For example, when is it good to ignore difficulties and when should you engage them? How much advice should you take from others? How would you balance self-interest and social need? What experiences at BC have helped you to answer these questions?

You might want to consider: Is graduation such a transition? How will you establish balance after graduation?

**Weeks 11-14 April 11 – May 2): The US – building a life where “anything goes”**

Week 11 (April 11):

Lecture – Eve Spangler: Inequality in America – seen through budget exercise

Budget Exercise

Class exercise in constructing a family budget for yourself at age 30 (or: putting your money where your mouth is).

**Essay Due: April 18:**

Your family budget at age 30 and what you learned from it: what aspects of the budget surprised you? How does this budget (i.e. you put your money where your mouth is) reveal about your ability to balance making a living and making a difference?

Week 12 (April 18):

Film: *The Return of the Secaucus 7*

Discussion: to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Everyone should bring 2 good questions, one based on your major, and one based on your curiosity

Week 13: (April 26):

Reading: Barbara Kingsolver *Flight Behavior*,

Discussion: to be lead by 2 students – framing good questions

Everyone should bring 2 good questions for class discussion, one based on your major and one based on your curiosity. Keep in mind that the characters in *Flight Behavior* may represent, in part, the Trump voter and the Clinton voter.

Week 14 (May 2):

Meeting at Eve’s house.

**Essay, due May 2**

You live in a society that combines an ethos of “anything goes” with a social structure that limits opportunity for many. How does this context shape your plans for work,

intimacy, community and spirituality? Can you do as well as or better than the protagonists of *Secaucus 7*? The conflicts and contradictions in your environment may be less intense than those between Dellarobia's religious community and Ovid's scientific one, but there will be contradictory imperatives in your environments. What are they? How do your choices, going forward, represent an attempt to balance between public and private concerns? Where/how has BC helped you to think about the future.