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Class Meetings: SOCY3306.01/UNCP5540.01: Wednesdays, 3:00 – 5:20 pm.

### **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: make a living and make history.

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 18, 2017): 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 25, 2017):**

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.

Alternative assignment:

How would you answer the “shadow questions” that Fr. Himes might have asked: what are you bad at? What do you fear? What does the world not need from you? What experiences at BC helped you figure this out?

Weeks 2 (January 25): 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 (February 1):**

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 3-5 February 1 – (February 15): Palestine- building a life in the shadow of occupation

Week Three (February 1): 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.mepec.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 8): 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 3 “good” questions.

Week 5 (February 15): 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 3 “good” questions.

Week 6 (February 22) – South Africa

Lecture: Eve Spangler

Readings:

### **Essay due February 22**

The film and readings show us how a number of Palestinians and Israelis, caught up in the Occupation, make individual life choices: to resist injustice or to look the other way, to stand in solidarity with others, or to profit from the situation. Many of those who are committing injustices as defined by one side, are, from their own point of view, acting appropriately (see for example, the debate between Gill and Shavit). In your opinion, which of the characters represents a positive response to the conflict – **and by what criteria do you make this case?** Which characters represent particularly bad responses to the conflict – again, **by what criteria?** Who represents the “average” person caught up in the conflict? Who strikes a healthy balance between private and public concerns?

Now imagine your own life playing out in the shadow of one great issue. How would you attend to both questions of effectiveness and balance when you are struggling

with a single issue (e.g. depression, addiction, bereavement, illness of your own or a loved one, plant closing and mass layoffs in your town, chemical spill, etc. etc.)

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 6- 9 (February 22 – March 22): South Africa – Building a life in the midst of transformation*

Week 6 (February 22): South African History

Lecture: Eve Spangler Readings: Peter Abrahams *A Wreath for Udomo*

Week 7 (March 1): 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 3 good questions.

Week 8 (March 15): South Africa – ordinary people responding to massive social change

Film: *Tsotsie*

(Possible Extra Credit Assignment: *Stand and Deliver*: how do educational aspirations differ in the US and South Africa)

Discussion to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Everyone must bring 3 good questions.

Week 9 (March 22):

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 3 good questions.

**Essay, due March 29**

The film and readings show us how a number of South Africans construct their lives, first in the context of Apartheid and now in a post-Apartheid but still unjust world. Some resist injustice, others look the other way. Some stand up for the weak and others prey on them. In your opinion, which of the characters represents a positive response to the situation – ***and by what***

***criteria do you make this case?*** Which characters represent particularly bad responses to life in South Africa – again, ***by what criteria?*** Who represents the “average” person in post-Apartheid South Africa? Who strikes a healthy balance between private and public concerns?

Now imagine your own life playing out in a situation of transition. How would you attend to both questions of effectiveness and balance while in transition? 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 and now, instead of looking back, you need to move forward. What next?

*Weeks 10-13 (March 29 – April 26): The US – building a life where “anything goes”*

Week 10 (March 29):

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).

Week 11 (April 5):

Film: *The Return of the Secaucus 7*

Discussion: to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions  
Everyone should bring 3 good questions

Week 12: (April 12):

Reading: Barbara Kingsolver *Flight Behavior*, part I

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

Week 13 (April 19):

Reading: Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*, part II

Discussion to be lead by 2 students framing good questions

Everyone should bring 3 good questions for class discussion.

**Essay, due April 26**

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?

*Week 14 (May 3): Summing up – are you ready for the next steps in your life?*

Dinner at Eve's house

**Essay, due May 3**

The budget assignment

Please prepare a family budget as you imagine it for yourself at age 30. Be sure to document your source for every price you name. When you see where you are putting your money, how does this change the positions you took in the paper responding to Fr. Himes and in the three papers focused on our case studies?