FROM MICHEL FOUCAULT TO MARIO PUZO: USING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO UNDERSTAND UBRAN IMMIGRATION THEN AND NOW

by

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Abstract: This article reports on the efforts of a political science professor teaching a multidisciplinary course focused on New York City to develop an interdisciplinary class project designed to lead students to an appreciation of the immigrant experience in the United States "From Ellis Island to JFK" (Foner, 2000). The particular interdisciplinary project that the article describes employs work from philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and political science in an effort to help students grasp more fully the often contentious and always complex process of immigrant acculturation from traditional cultures to life in a modern capitalist society. The project culminates with students considering how the narrative in Mario Puzo's novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim,* which chronicles the fortunes of an early 20th century Italian immigrant family in New York, reflects the academic work covered previously in class and whether the story line applies more generally to the experiences of recent immigrants to the United States. It is notable that the venue within which this class occurs, St. John's University, has had as part of its larger mission for nearly 150 years the education of first-generation college students. This mission is a particularly telling one in a classroom peopled with first-generation Muslim immigrants as well as fifth or sixth generation descendants of the southern and eastern European immigrants of the turn of the last century.

Introduction

This article reports on the efforts of a political science professor teaching a multidisciplinary course focused on New York City to develop an interdisciplinary class project designed to lead students to an appreciation of the immigrant experience in the United States "From Ellis Island to JFK" (Foner, 2000). The particular interdisciplinary project the article describes employs work from philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and political science in an effort to help students grasp more fully the often contentious and always complex process of immigrant acculturation from traditional cultures to life in a modern capitalist society. The project culminates with students considering the narrative in Mario Puzo's novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim,* which chronicles the fortunes of an early 20th century Italian immigrant family in New York. The students are asked to consider how the novel's narrative reflects the academic work covered previously in class and whether the story line applies more generally to the experiences of recent immigrants to the United States.

The article is divided into four parts, each reporting on one exercise in the larger class project. Part one sees the students confront the peace-and-quiet-disturbing work of the noted philosopher and historian of ideas Michel Foucault, specifically his arguments that the accepted truths underlying the conventional notions of common sense in any society are actually grounded in historically contingent cultural norms. In part two, reading the work of sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists, students explore the basic tensions between belief systems, i.e., accepted truths, in modern and traditional cultures. Part three employs sociological and political science research as the class turns to the various modes of immigrant adaptation to their new surroundings, emphasizing how the intergenerational process of acculturation *with* rather than assimilation *to* the new culture has defined the process of blending traditional belief systems with modernity in the American city. And lastly, by focusing on Puzo's novel, part four asks students to synthesize the philosophical, sociological, anthropological, and political science insights defining the first three class exercises by unpacking the experiences of an Italian immigrant family living in New York City in the first third of the 20th Century.

The issue of how immigrants adapt to life in their new homelands is certainly a topic that is too broad and complex to be dealt with adequately by one discipline. By definition, immigrant acculturation is a matter of concern to a variety of academic disciplines. For some students, the issue has immediate personal import as they themselves are 1st or 2nd generation

Americans; for other students, the issue is a more distant one involving long-term family history. The class project reported on here was developed in light of Veronica Boix Mansilla's (2005) notion of "interdisciplinary understanding" and Allen Repko's ideas about the values and skills promoted by effective interdisciplinary classes (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014).

Boix Mansilla (2005) defines interdisciplinary understanding as "the capacity to integrate knowledge and modes of thinking drawn from two or more disciplines to produce a cognitive advancement…in ways that would have been unlikely through single disciplinary means" (p. 16). She suggests four criteria for making the concept of interdisciplinary understanding operational: the disciplinary information considered can be used for further study and enhanced understanding of the topic; the information from each of the disciplines tapped must be "deeply informed"; the information from the variety of disciplines employed must be integrated around the topic; and the entire integrative exercise must be a means to the end of advanced understanding by the participants, in this case, the students (pp. 16-17).

The class project presented in this article is designed to meet these criteria. First, each exercise in the project helps students move on to the next step, and each helps them clarify issues raised in prior discussions. Second, an effort is made to encourage students to integrate the disciplinary components of each exercise in a non-linear fashion, i.e., using each class exercise both as a basis for the next topic and as reflection back to material already covered. Third, in each exercise, students are presented with work by scholars in the various relevant fields and, although the level of analysis cannot be exhaustive in a core course, the integrative class discussions of issues are focused on promoting "deeply informed" and highly integrated learning. And fourth, if the enterprise is successful, there are several "take aways" for the students: one, they come to recognize that although the notion of common sense may not be totally contingent, it is heavily influenced by the social discourses emerging from the power relationships in any society; two, they see that the process of immigrant acculturation has not been and is not now one of identity shedding in melting pots (or one that can be defined by any other such ethnocentric metaphors) but is rather a mutual adjustment of traditional and modern cultural norms and values with modernity having primary but not exclusive influence in the enterprise; and three, students come to realize that if the United States is indeed exceptional, and there are reasons to believe that it is, one of the clearest indications of this is the comparative success the nation has had in integrating people of various ethnicities, religions, and cultures into its larger social order.

In his work, Repko argues that effective interdisciplinary teaching encourages student empathy, appreciation of diversity, and tolerance for ambiguity while helping students hone their critical and abstract thinking skills as well as the capacity to engage in the kind of self-examination inherent in metacognitive reflection (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, pp. 53-57). Much like constructivist qualitative research in the social sciences, interdisciplinary teaching does not focus on some *object of study*—something out there, separate from the student, to be discovered; it emphasizes rather a *subject of discourse* where the discourse itself as well as the student's earlier perspectives toward the discourse is subject to interdisciplinary critical analysis and metacognitive thinking.

The class project was created to focus on contingent social truths and the dialectical process of accommodating cultural value differences. As such, it is designed to encourage the kind of metacognitive self-awareness and tolerance for ambiguity stressed by Repko in his analysis of interdisciplinary process as students are pushed to confront their own belief systems in light of Foucault's unrelenting challenge to the notion of transcendent truth. The project seeks to encourage student self-awareness of what may well be their previously unexplored belief systems in light of Laura Border's view that "students learn in depth when they are stretched beyond their comfort zones" (2002). Moreover, integrating Foucault's worldview with an exploration of how immigrants from traditional cultures, with norms and values quite distinct from those of modernity, try to adapt to life in New York City is a project designed to encourage among students an appreciation for cultural diversity and at least the potential for empathy. In terms of the specific skills emphasized by Repko, the class exercise is designed to hone critical and abstract thinking capabilities. The project encourages, indeed it forces, students to confront and critically evaluate a highly complex and decidedly abstract process, specifically how personal notions of truth in the context of diverse cultural norms and values impact on immigrant acculturation patterns.

To conclude this introduction I might also note that one of the purposes of the class project described in this article is highlighting the point that cultural tensions experienced by Muslim immigrants to the United States in the 21st century are not all that different from those that defined the experiences of Catholic immigrants one-hundred years ago. It is notable that the venue within which this class occurs, St. John's University, has had as part of its

larger mission for nearly 150 years the education of first-generation college students. This mission is a particularly telling one in a classroom peopled with first-generation Muslim immigrants as well as fifth or sixth generation descendants of the southern and eastern European immigrants of the turn of the last century.

The Course Setting

Before proceeding with the analysis of the project, I should provide some background on the multidisciplinary course, *Discover New York*, within which this class project unfolds. The *Discover New York* (DNY) class is a first-year transition course offered at St. John's University in New York. The course is designed to provide students with an understanding of selected aspects of New York City history, instill an appreciation for how diversity has influenced New York City's development, and encourage an active understanding of the concept of social justice in the city. Faculty members develop versions of the course around the application of their own academic disciplines to some aspect of city life, employing these disciplines as conceptual lenses to address the general framework defining DNY's educational goals. As a result, students have the opportunity to "see" New York through a particular academic perspective including those focused on the arts, business, social and political relationships, literature, and media in the city.

With a continual emphasis on critical thinking, information literacy, and writing skills as the primary course competencies, the city becomes the laboratory for the course. As an integral part of their studies, students participate in field-based learning excursions to venues around the city that relate to the academic focus of their class. Students also have the opportunity to attend on-campus presentations where experts speak on matters of history, culture, and social justice in New York and to participate in transition events, which assist them in their adjustments to University life and in planning for their subsequent studies and careers. Finally, the class requirement for six to ten hours of actual community service, facilitated by the University's Academic Service Learning Office, encourages students to experience the city as a place populated with real people, many of whom live in difficult situations and need the kind of assistance that lies at the heart of St. John's Mission with its commitment to the ideal of social justice.

DNY classes meet every week on Wednesdays in three-hour time slots although for most of the scheduled meetings actual class time is two hours, with the third hour reserved for transition activities. Each professor has a Peer Leader (an upperclassman assigned to his/her class) to help with the

organization of the Field-Based Learning (FBL) excursions and with the Academic Service Learning component of the class. Each professor also has a budget of roughly $60.00 per student (the class is capped at 25 students) to pay for the three mandated FBL excursions. Recently, we have begun experimenting with multi- and interdisciplinary strategies in developing DNY class offerings. In some cases, professors from different academic backgrounds visit each other's classes bringing with them their various disciplinary perspectives on some topic related to life in the New York Metropolitan area; in other cases, like mine, specific topics are addressed by individual professors who wish to move beyond mere multidisciplinarity to an interdisciplinary approach by "drawing on different perspectives and integrating their insights to construct a more comprehensive perspective" (Klein & Newell, 1998, p.3).[1]

Project Exercise # 1: Foucault as Intellectual Grounding

The project exercise described in this section begins with the students exploring the notion of social consensus. We discuss how living in a world governed by common sense makes life explainable, predictable, and understandable. Indeed, in such a world, basic truths, moral codes, and causal relationships are readily understood by most members of society and these precepts are passed on to new generations through the various processes of socialization. We then discuss the modes of social enforcement employed against those who resist particular aspects of social belief systems. In some cultures, if individuals resist accepting and acting under the basic common sense precepts of their society, they may be subject to harsh punishment; in other cultures, bemused observers may merely consider them somewhat eccentric. Whatever the particular form of social enforcement, it is important for students to understand that resistance to the norms of common sense is considered socially dysfunctional in all societies and it results in social ostracism and even legal sanctions in large part because the norms being violated are considered transcendent social truths that define the human condition.

Having established that enforcing the social norms of common sense is—well—common sense, the class begins to discuss Michel Foucault's take

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[1] An example of the latter work was presented at the 2014 annual meeting of the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies where Dr. Heidi Upton and I conducted a workshop on an interdisciplinary aesthetic education-political science project developed for one of her DNY classes. The project was constructed around Anna Deveare Smith's docudrama *Twilight LA*.

on such matters, a take notably interdisciplinary in that it integrates the worlds of history, philosophy, linguistics, and politics. The readings for this first project exercise emphasize Foucault's views concerning the social and political consequences of the historical evolution of philosophical ideas (see Appendix A). I ask students to consider Foucault's rejection of the idea of transcendent truth, literally a rejection of the enduring value of the notions underlying common sense in any society, and his calling into question the bases for the social paradigm underlying human experience at any historical moment, including their own.

Students confront Foucault's position in his response to the renowned linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky, who argued for a transcendent notion of human nature grounded in the universal capability to formulate increasingly complex causal chains of analysis. Foucault makes his own position crystal clear:

> [W]hen we discussed the problem of human nature and political problems, then differences arose between us. And contrary to what you think you can't prevent me from believing that these notions of human nature, of justice, of the realization of the essence of human beings, are all notions and concepts which have been formed within our civilization, within our type of knowledge and our form of philosophy, and that as a result form part of our class system; and that one can't, however regrettable it may be, put forward these notions to describe or justify a fight which should—and shall in principle—overthrow the very fundaments of our society. This is an extrapolation for which I can't find the historical justification. (Foucault quoted in Wilkin, 1999, p. 177)

Students then tackle Foucault's notion of "truth." They come to see that while modern thinkers concede the contingent nature of older social orders, often seeing these constructs as historical reflections of flawed assumptions and false gods, Foucault demands that modernity and its social order, most particularly the liberal social order of the West, itself be analyzed as a historical construct that disguises its own contingent nature behind its purportedly *transcendent* language of individualism within a *transcendent* notion of human nature. According to Foucault, "the development of Western thought can no longer be characterized as a shift from superstition to objective, scientific knowledge, but is seen rather as a series of abrupt and arbitrary paradigm shifts or epistemic breaks" (McNay, 1994, p. 12). Grounded in his archaeological method of inquiry, Foucault argues that history is best characterized as a succession of "epistemes" or "regimes of truth" that "are governed by rules, beyond those of grammar and logic, that

operate beneath the consciousness of individual subjects and define a system of conceptual possibilities that determines the boundaries of thought in a given domain and period" (Gutting, 2014, p. 8).

The students are then asked to consider the implications of Foucault's idea that in any society, human social relationships, as manifest through the various techniques of social discourse, reflect the power relationships inherent in a particular era's "episteme," which defines its culture and more importantly its notion of common sense. "The fundamental codes of a culture—those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices—establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical order with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home" (Foucault, 1970, p. xx). The entire exercise is grounded in the following line of inquiry: "The question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks and perceive differently than one sees is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all" (Strathern, 2012, p. 39).

Writing in the context of her own evolution as a scholar, the educational philosopher Maxine Greene (1995) reflects succinctly the profound challenge faced by the students in dealing with Foucault's radical ideas:

> It came as a shock to realize that what I had believed was universal, transcending gender and class and race, was a set of points of view. I had considered it a kind of beneficence for someone like me to be initiated into a traditional dimension of the culture's conversation, even if only to a rivulet of those unnamed voices that had been made faintly available to those who did not quite belong. Now, in the midst of remembered delights and still-beckoning desires in my field, I found myself directly challenged to think about my own thinking and speaking and the discourses in which I had been submerged. (p. 112)

Given the time constraints of the DNY class model, it is obvious that an in-depth consideration of Foucault's work is simply not possible. But the core of his challenge to social order in general and Western modernity in particular, the argument that truth is historically contingent, can be employed to encourage students new to higher education to confront their own perspectives and worldviews early on in the class project. Such encouragement is needed since students, like most other people, do not consciously recognize the bases of their worldviews or often even grasp the fact that they have worldviews. They operate intellectually in a reflexive manner assuming that the various opinions they hold and decisions they make reflect pragmatic assessments grounded in common sense and

disconnected from any larger worldview. Indeed, modern Western modes of socialization are quite effective precisely because they appear to reject ideology in favor of a pragmatic approach subsumed under transcendent truths—truths which are "self-evident" and therefore unexplored. And herein rests Foucault's underlying contribution to the class. Because it forces students to engage in the kind of metacognitive personal reflection valued by Repko and helps shake them loose from their own cultural comfort zones, Foucault's perspective is a very useful resource with which to begin this interdisciplinary class project. Using lecture and discussion formats coupled with brief exegeses of Foucault's work on multiple "epistemes" and the historical contingency of thought (see Appendix A), students can be led to the intriguingly uncomfortable place where their own notions of common sense are, intellectually at least, up for grabs.

Foucault's work also serves as more than a vehicle to initiate the exploration of cultural value differences and immigrant acculturation processes, topics addressed in exercises 2 and 3. Before moving on to these exercises, the students are asked to explore several of the implications of Foucault's views related to academic work in general. After all, the ideas being addressed in this class are drawn from Foucault's conclusions about the impact of historical contingency on modern disciplinary approaches to the study of human behavior. In this context, students confront questions about the validity of social science research in general, which is under attack for its philosophical dualism from a number of feminist and constructivist scholars (Cooper, 1994; Wendt, 1998). "By insisting that there is a separation between what goes on inside of subjective human consciousness and the objective phenomena enveloping it, Western epistemology severed consciousness from reality" (Welch, 2011, p. 11). In light of these concerns, we consider whether the instrumental interdisciplinary thinking of the kind encouraged in the class project represents a major advance in knowledge or, as critical interdisciplinary scholars suggest, simply the merging of fundamentally flawed academic worldviews (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, pp. 36-38).

Having the class confront, even if only briefly, ideas critical of the foundations of disciplinary thought continues the effort to move students away from their educational comfort zones where they have been passive recipients of information and toward a less comfortable place where they must actively consider the nature of the information that they themselves will uncover during their undergraduate years. Moreover, exposure to fundamental epistemological challenges to the academic status quo forces students to consider the consequences of Foucault-like perspectives, most notably the tendency toward relativity. Both in terms of the particular class

project under discussion and in relation to the undergraduate careers on which they are embarking it is important that the students be discouraged from adopting prematurely firm positions on these issues in an effort to achieve the intellectual serenity that comes from certainty, including the certainty that all is fairly uncertain. The hope is that they will be encouraged to pursue the epistemological arguments around disciplinary and interdisciplinary issues, despite all the intellectual turmoil such a pursuit necessarily entails, throughout their student careers. I see the educator's role in this process as akin to that of the journalist, "comforting" students afflicted with epistemological doubt and "afflicting" those comfortable with their epistemological certainty.

Project Exercise # 2: Modern and Traditional Cultures

Having become acquainted with Foucault's argument that what we perceive to be transcendent truth may well be more of a historically contingent value consensus, students now confront the tensions between the values of traditional and modern cultures. Given that the class is both literally and figuratively grounded in New York City and that interpretations of modernity do manifest national cultural differences, this exercise employs work in political science to emphasize that American political culture incorporates a unique take on modernity from which emerges an American take on common sense (Almond & Verba, 1989).

Students are asked the following question: What does the American version of modernity say about the American take on common sense? In the context of their class readings, which include the work of historians, sociologists, economists, and political scientists, the students are asked to analyze the philosophical basis (contingent if they accept Foucault, transcendent if they do not) underlying the American notion of human nature.[2] (See Appendix B.) Students are led to understand that common sense in the American liberal worldview is grounded in a Judeo-Christian view of human nature that sees the species as acting within the confines of a generally positive but nonetheless flawed character. I also want them to grasp the core common sense conclusion

[2] There may be students who have come to firm conclusions on the contingency-transcendence matter although at this point in the class and in their education in general I would strongly discourage that. It is helpful to remind them that they are only first-year students and that multiple worldviews await them in future classes; they may well find that some or many of these worldviews will contain particular ideas that resonate with them; and in the best of the academic tradition, they can play off one set of ideas against the others in an interactive search for intellectual grounding.

emerging from this worldview: The American liberal perspective encourages a drive toward individual autonomy and material acquisition that claims to reflect who we are, what we want, and how we would choose to live if left unfettered by more intrusive worldviews (Hartz, 1955).

The class then moves to an analysis of the cultural implications of this drive toward individual autonomy and material acquisition both in terms of what it offers and, by employing alternative perspectives from more traditional cultures, what it costs. Students are first presented with the notion of freedom as the political bulwark of individual autonomy. Political theorists contend that in the American context this means "negative freedom," i.e., freedom as protection from state interference (Berlin, 1969). In no small part, the American experiment is designed to fashion a government that will leave individuals alone—to worship or not, speak or not, assemble with others or not, etc.—as they see fit. In other words, the political system is designed to encourage individual autonomy vis-à-vis the state and requires the kind of limited governance envisioned by its framers. James Madison (1961) explicitly draws the connection between governance and human nature when he writes: "*But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature. If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary*" (p. 322, emphasis added).

We then explore the fact that autonomous individuals must accept personal responsibility for their situations in life as the larger culture makes no "positive freedom pledges," i.e., asserts no right to secure the material needs of life through the commonweal. Such responsibility is coupled with the modern notion of the control individuals exercise over their own destinies—a micro-level reflection of the larger notion of human control of nature in modern societies. We then address the common sense parameters of individual control, which are captured best in sociological work examining the precepts of the Protestant Work Ethic (Weber, 2009). At this point, students come to see the sociological norm of the Protestant Work Ethic morph into the economic mandates of neo-liberal, capitalist values.[3] To be successful, defined as achieving material wealth, individuals must aspire

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[3] The direction of the disciplinary morphing here has been the topic of intense intellectual struggle. Those who follow the sociologist Max Weber contend that the development of ideas, e.g., the Protestant Work Ethic, precedes the material organization of capitalism. Marx argues just the opposite asserting that the economics of material organization gives rise to cultural ideas or rationales intended to defend material privilege. In short, one of history's most notable political battles can be considered an interdisciplinary question of exactly how to integrate views from two distinct disciplines.

to be better off than they are; must be willing to sacrifice and risk failure; and most importantly must be ambitious and willing to work hard. If they are successful, the rewards are largely though not exclusively material in nature (social status is after all a sociological concept) and these rewards are protected by one of the world's most individualized contractual conceptions of private property (Arnold, 2002). On the other hand, if individuals fail, it is considered to be their fault and they must take the full responsibility for the consequences.

The class then turns to the market model of social exchange, which complements quite naturally the emphasis on individual autonomy and property rights on the one hand and the liberal notion of human nature on the other. Students are presented with the neo-liberal economist's conception of the market economy as the optimal locale for individuals to pursue mutually beneficial exchanges in a continual effort to enhance their own rational self-interests and tend to the acquisition of their material needs (Porter, 2000). Moreover, they come to see that the prevailing liberal social discourse envisions social order emerging as an indirect and largely unintended consequence of the pursuit of private wealth. "The uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition, the principle from which [public] and national, as well as private opulence is originally derived, is frequently powerful enough to maintain the natural progress of things toward improvement" (Smith, 2000, p. 373). Indeed, in the liberal worldview, the market arises and operates according to natural law—a reaffirmation of its common sense basis.

If this part of the class exercise has achieved its goals, students now recognize that—contingent or not—this individualistic and materialist social order was the cultural milieu that "welcomed" millions of southern and eastern European immigrants during the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries and that continues "welcoming" immigrants to the United States in the 21st century. It is important that students understand the sociological point that during both these periods, the great majority of entrants into the United States had one overriding similarity: The societies from which they came were grounded in cultures that reflected more traditional social values than those espoused by the forces of American modernity. Moreover, many of the first wave of immigrants held, and many of the second hold, religious beliefs antithetical to modernity or at least to those of the majority religious affiliations in American society.

The class discussion of traditional cultural values revisits the balance between the individual and the community. In several of the sociology readings in Appendix B, students are presented with the notion that in direct

contrast to the individualistic and impersonal focus of modern society, traditional cultures tend to be more communally and personally oriented (Knick, 2011; Inglehart, 1977); in Foucault's terms, they operate under a different "regime of truth" than the one defining modernity. Sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies' (1887) classic dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft*, with its focus on the primary relationships and mutual bonds that are indicative of social life in a "community," and *Gesselschaft,* with its emphasis on the instrumental secondary relationships evident in the larger society, is the oft-cited reference in this area. With their emphasis on the emotional attachment of personal bonds, traditional cultures envision individuals more as situated selves than as modernity's autonomous creatures. From the traditional perspective, people are located within a broad range of communal interactions including informal relationships in extended kinship ties as well as more formal associations such as those found in guilds (Novak, 2000, p. 65). Moreover, the notion of a situated self incorporates a less potent vision of individual control over one's destiny, and students come to see that from a traditional worldview, the modern notion of control, whether human control of nature or individual control of destiny, can be considered hubris.

To students immersed in modern American culture, often 3rd generation or later descendants of immigrants, the consideration of such counter-intuitive cultural perspectives can be destabilizing and may generate initially hostile reactions. And in responding to these sometimes hostile reactions, 1st or 2nd generation students may be inclined to react defensively and even angrily over criticisms of their family's more traditional worldviews. It is helpful to remind all of the students at this point that "taking on other perspectives often involves temporarily setting aside your own beliefs, opinions, and attitudes" and that "interdisciplinary studies arrives not at a more comprehensive perspective, but a more comprehensive understanding" of multiple perspectives (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, p. 95). In other words, the interactions involved in this part of the exercise are not intended merely to provide students with information about multiple worldviews while they remain adamantly ensconced in the confines of their own perspectives. Rather the intent is to encourage the kind of self-critical perspective taking or empathetic thinking that can emerge from what are at times contentious discussions and can lead to a deeper appreciation of the core values underlying another person's worldviews. It should be noted that the task of encouraging perspective-taking among students is helped immensely by the culturally diverse nature of classes at St. John's University.

Reading the work of theologians and historians of religion (again, see Appendix B), students are also asked to reflect on the import of religion for

this cultural dichotomy. Theologian Chester Gillis notes that in the United States, religious tensions were and are particularly pronounced during waves of immigration (1999, pp. 24-26). In all likelihood, students will readily grasp this point with regard to Muslim immigrants today but may well be less aware of the Catholic-Protestant cultural divide that formed the context of the first wave of immigration. The class therefore is exposed to historical scholarship that suggests that Catholic immigrants "understood freedom differently [than Protestants]. If nineteenth-century liberals idealized human autonomy, Catholics habitually referred to communities" (McGreevy, 2003, p.36). Moreover, students see that in many quarters Catholic immigrants were viewed as alien even dangerous to the majority culture of the time. "Underwriting the belief that Catholicism threatened national identity was a more profound, less fully articulated concern: that Catholicism stood opposed to modernity wholesale (McGreevy, 2003, p. 102).

The class then addresses how the religious tensions of a century ago are replicated today as increasing numbers of Muslims settle in New York. Students come to see that, despite differences based in racial issues and a highly volatile international environment, the two periods of immigration manifest striking similarities. Students are reminded that Muslim immigrants, like their Catholic predecessors, often face questions about their loyalties and desire to adapt to modern culture. And, in class discussions referencing the works of sociologists and cultural anthropologists, students come to understand that like their predecessors, some Muslim immigrants are more successful in acculturating with the majority culture than are others (Abdullah, 2002; Abu-Bader, Tirmazi, & Ross-Sheriff, 2011).

Lastly, students confront the feelings of nostalgia that are sometimes attached to the communal nature of traditional cultures, i.e., the tendency to romanticize the past while overlooking its many shortcomings. Employing the sociological readings for this section of the project exercise, we discuss the fact that many of these old world perspectives manifested historically and many manifest today a variety of social dysfunctions, at least to the modern mindset. The traditional notion of a "place for everybody and everybody in his/her place," which is one version of being a situated individual, can be employed by traditional religious and political elites to justify the worst forms of oppression, particularly with respect to gender. The idea of less individual control over one's destiny can reinforce religious and political oppression while also leading to its own form of "a life of quiet desperation." In short, the readings and discussions in this part of the class are intended to help students see that traditional cultures, with their deep communal roots, may well have something to offer participants in modern

society's individualized "rat race," but that these traditional cultures are also at constant risk of social stagnation and of legitimating the worst forms of patriarchal elitism. In any event, in exploring this cultural divide, students once again directly deal with Foucault's notions of social discourse as a function of power relationships in particular "epistemes."

Project Exercise # 3: Immigrant Intergenerational Acculturation

It is important in this section of the class, especially for those students who are fourth, fifth, or later generation Americans, that the stark personal realities of the immigrant experience be as fully appreciated as possible. "Approaching individuals, groups and cultures with empathy is part of what it means to become interdisciplinary" (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, p. 53). Therefore, this exercise begins with the class considering the following: Immigrants leave behind all they know and all that is familiar to settle in an unknown and unfamiliar place; the support systems upon which they have come to rely are either no longer available or are only available through the disembodied connections of cyberspace; and the simple and predictable things of daily life become complex and disjointed. But more than all of this, it is crucial that the students grasp that people leaving traditional societies and immigrating to more modern cultures confront direct and often quite disturbing challenges to fundamental aspects of their belief systems—basic challenges to who they are and what they have come to believe to be true. Indeed, as covered in the two previous class exercises, immigrants' very notion of what is and what is not common sense, that underlying set of understandings and norms that lie unquestioned in people's psyches after a lifetime of cultural socialization, becomes simply one more tenuous feature of their new lives.

It is in this light that the question of what we know about how immigrants adapt to life in a modern American city is raised. Employing the writings of historians, sociologists, and political scientists whose work on the process of immigrant adaptation to modern life are listed in Appendix C, we begin class discussions of how immigrants from traditional cultures, whose worldviews or "epistemes" are quite different from those of modern urban societies, have adjusted historically and are adjusting today to the pressures of modernity. First, we parse some important words. The phrase "immigrant assimilation" is presented as problematic and we discuss why the phrase "immigrant acculturation" is preferable. "Assimilation" implies a melting of identity into some larger whole with a consequent loss of self-identity; it has been defined as a "process of absorption" into the norms and values of the

host culture (Eisenstadt, 1954, p. 15). The term "acculturation," on the other hand, which emphasizes a mutual adjustment process where immigrants are influenced by and in turn influence the larger culture, is preferable, especially in the American context where immigrants have not only adapted but have also contributed to the national culture.

It is also important that students confront the point that immigrant acculturation is an intergenerational process of time adjusting to space—a "dissonant acculturation" (Kasinitz et al., 2008, p. 346). "Those who make the trip from the old country invariably live between two worlds, and if they arrive as adults, may never fully assimilate. Far more important in the long run is how their children fare" (Jacoby, 2004, p. 21). As a strategy for assessing "how they fare," the class considers the personal pressures felt by members of the second generation. If the original immigrants *live* between two worlds," the second generation is better described as *"torn* between two worlds" (Irwin Child quoted in Kasinitz et al., 2008, p. 354). Noting that this group faces a different and perhaps more difficult challenge than their immigrant parents, sociologist Min Zhou (2004) writes that "the second generation, born in America and raised to be Americans, expects to be judged by the same standards as other Americans" (p. 144). Referencing the second class exercise, where we discussed the difference between traditional and modern cultural norms, offers a reminder to the students that the "same standards as other Americans" are in all likelihood quite different from the standards held by the second generation's immigrant parents.

In light of the dissonance described above, the class considers sociological research that indicates that educational systems in the early 20th century were explicitly focused on inculcating the same cultural norms as those held by other Americans into the children of immigrants. "The schools were rigid in their approach, [and] had no place for the culture, history or language of the immigrants" (Foner, 2000, p. 206). The resulting tensions experienced by the second generation are described in the work of sociologists and political scientists and summarized quite well in Kasinitz et al. (2008):

> For many situations, second generation members cannot blindly repeat the received wisdom of their parents, which is better suited to a different society….Nor can they unreflectively take up an American culture that they are only beginning to understand. Instead, they must choose among the ways of their parents, of broader American society, and of their native minority peers or, perhaps create something altogether new and different. (p. 356)

We end this section of the class project by discussing the implications of immigrant acculturation for the relationships between 1st and 2nd generation

Americans. Based on the readings (see Appendix C), the class discussions to date, and the personal experiences of some of the students in the class, we discuss the inevitable tensions defining these relationships and raise the question of how these tensions might have manifested themselves historically and today.

Project Exercise # 4: Puzo's Narrative in the Context of the First Three Exercises

The project concludes with an analysis of Mario Puzo's novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. The culminating exercise is an effort to address Myra Strober's rationale for interdisciplinary instruction in general: "On the teaching side, the call for interdisciplinarity results from a dissatisfaction with the idea that undergraduate students, whose coursework exposes them to multiple disciplinary perspectives, are left to integrate them on their own" (2011, p. 40). Although earlier project exercises involved different disciplinary perspectives, I thought it was essential to end the project by bringing together in one place the insights of the multiple disciplines previously discussed.

Why select a fictional story for the project's ending? One answer lies in the evidence that reading fiction has the potential to affect attitudes and increase empathetic responses to others (Hayakawa, 1990). Research indicates that people reading fiction can engage in "experience taking" and "lose themselves" in the narrative's characters and story line (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). "Experience taking can be a powerful way to change our behavior and thoughts" (Libby quoted in Ohio State University, 2012). Reading Puzo's novel, then, can encourage a form of perspective taking within students, assisting them to consider immigrant acculturation "from alternative viewpoints, including interdisciplinary ones in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of it" (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, p. 50).

There are other reasons to use a novel to end the project. In Foucault's terms, novels reflect the truth regimes of their times. As such, they transcribe the received wisdom of the eras in which they appear and this may well include popularized versions of academic research. Novels, therefore, can serve as transdisciplinary landing sites integrating "one or more academic disciplines with extra-academic perspectives" (Holbrook, 2013, p. 1867). Moreover, in a project that begins and continually returns to Foucault's ideas, the use of a novel as a culminating exercise is somehow both fitting and ironic. To

Foucault, all writing, whether disciplinary research or fictional narrative, is grounded in the social discourse of a particular historical episteme. At the very least, this notion narrows the distance between fact and fiction and taken to the type of ultimate conclusion that Foucault so enjoys may very well make both the researcher and the novelist ultimately irrelevant to the works they produce. Obviously, such ideas serve to inform an intriguing and integrative introductory class discussion to exercise 4.

The Fortunate Pilgrim relates the story of an Italian immigrant family living in what is now the Chelsea neighborhood of New York in the 1920s. One of the book's major themes is the ongoing struggle between Lucia Santa Angeluzzi-Corbo, the widowed and remarried family matriarch from a small village in Italy, and her American-born daughter, Octavia, who is roughly the same age as most of the first-year students in the class. The two women reflect their very different cultural origins. In Foucault's terms and in relation to the cultural divide explored in exercises 2 and 3, each character manifests the internalized mores and mandates of her own episteme, one grounded in traditional rural values, the other in the more modern worldview of the American urban experience. As the narrative unfolds, the tensions between the two women and their distinct worldviews are starkly drawn. In this exercise, the class reviews multiple passages from the novel's narrative that serve to highlight the conclusions about the immigrant experience found in the research of the historians, theologians, and social scientists discussed in previous class exercises.

Immigrant Living Experiences

One of Puzo's passages describing tenement life can serve as the basis for a class discussion of how ethnic living patterns in the early 20th century reflected efforts to reestablish traditional spatial and cultural interactions in a modern setting. And even more to the point, the passage encourages students to consider one of the ways that immigrants coped with the potentially alienating impacts of life in modern cities, a process that involved importing aspects of their cultural past and their own "truth regimes" into the realities of their very different current situation.

> Each tenement was a village square; each had its group of women, all in black, sitting on stools and boxes and doing more than gossip. They recalled ancient history, argued morals and social law, always taking their precedents from the mountain village in southern Italy they had escaped, fled from many years ago. (p. 12)

Tensions between Traditional and Modern Cultures

In the following set of passages, Puzo explicitly addresses the tensions between traditional and modern cultures from the perspective of immigrant women steeped in tradition. These passages have served as the basis for a variety of class discussions on topics including why modern American society neither values nor respects age as well as the chasm between modern cultural values and traditional family life. As we read the passages out loud, the students are asked to decipher the social discourses evident in these expressions of traditional values in the face of the challenges of modernity.

1. The women talked of their children as they would of strangers. It was a favorite topic, the corruption of the innocent by the new land…. Ahhh, the disrespect. *figlio disgraziato.* Never could this pass in Italy. Ah, Italia… how the world changed and for the worse. What madness was it that made them leave such a land? Where fathers commanded and mothers were treated with respect by their children. (pp. 12-13)

2. Each in turn told a story of insolence and defiance…And at the end of each story each woman recited her requiem. *Mannaggia America!*–Damn America. (p. 13)

A final passage in this section of the exercise focuses on the reactions of Lucia's husband, Frank Corbo, to watching his American-born son play tag with his friends. Students clearly see from the text that the world around him is incomprehensible to him and that his feelings of inadequacy in the face of this modern world threaten his traditional standing as head of the family. The nature of his response—his fear of losing the respect of and control over his children that are so integral to traditional patriarchal cultures—raises intriguing questions for the class about cultural clashes in general and gender-specific reactions to acculturation tensions in particular.

Frank Corbo watched his son Gino run crazily in some sort of tagging game incomprehensible to the father….The world was a great mystery. Vast dangers that others could guard their children against would bring him and his loved ones into the dust. They would teach his children to hate him. (p. 21)

Intergenerational Conflict

Intergenerational acculturation conflict is clearly drawn and intensely personalized in the passages describing several of the strained interactions

between Lucia, a first generation immigrant, and her American-born daughter, Octavia. In the selection below, Octavia thinks about her own modern persona in contrast with the traditional personae of her mother and the other tenement women. This passage has served as the basis not only for consideration of the immigrant experience but also for class discussions of the often galactic distances between parental and student conceptions of gender roles. These discussions also serve to highlight for students the similarities and differences between early 20th century Italian Catholic immigrant attitudes toward gender and sex roles and those of the more recently-arrived Muslim families as each group has had to confront a more individualistic and egalitarian social order than that of their families' traditional culture.

> As if her mother could understand that Octavia wanted to be everything these women were not! With the foolish and transparent cleverness of the young, she wore a powder blue suit that hid her bust and squared the roundness of her hips. She wore white gloves, as her high school teacher had done. Her eyebrows were heavy and black, honestly unplucked. Hopelessly she compressed the full red lips to an imaginary sternness, her eyes quietly grave—and all to hide the drowning sensuality that had been the undoing of the women around her. For Octavia reasoned that satisfying the terrible dark need stilled all other needs and she felt a frightened pity for these women enchanted into dreamless slavery by children and the unknown pleasures of a marriage bed. (p. 17)

In the next set of passages, students confront the disagreement between Lucia and Octavia over Octavia's ambition to become a teacher. The contrast between cultures analyzed in previous exercises, one encouraging the possibility of individual growth and in this case literally the "pursuit of happiness," the other recalling the dangers inherent in an uncertain world governed by fates beyond our control could not be clearer. This mother-daughter exchange has served as the basis for student comments and class discussions of family expectations of career paths and the meaning of personal happiness in a society that guarantees only its pursuit.

> 1. Octavia wanted to go to night school, study to become a teacher. Lucia Santa refused permission…."Why? Why?" the mother asked. "You, such a beautiful dressmaker, you earn good money." The mother objected out of superstition. This course was known. Life was unlucky, you followed a

new path at your peril. You put yourself at the mercy of fate. Her daughter was too young to understand. (pp. 17-18)

2. Unexpectedly, shamefacedly, Octavia had said, "I want to be happy"…. The mother had mimicked Octavia in the perfect English of a shallow girl, "*You want to be happy."* And then in Italian, with deadly seriousness, "Thank God you are alive." (p.18)

A final reference to the brief passage below is designed to remind students that Octavia's desire to shape and control her own destiny, reflective of her acceptance of a modern culture that encourages such individual desires, may well be threatened by natural forces that can supersede even the rational pursuit of self-interest. It is a stark reminder that the individual freedom and control promised by modernity have sometimes surprising limits and that some of the limits can be best characterized as representing a traditional culture's notion of fate.

Out of the corner of her eye Octavia saw Guido, the dark son of the *Panettiere,* wavering through the warm summer night toward the light of her white blouse. (p. 18)

Conclusions and Discussion

Integrating insights from diverse perspectives is the defining quality of interdisciplinary as opposed to multidisciplinary work; indeed, multidisciplinarity has been defined as "the placing side by side of insights from two or more disciplines *without attempting to integrate them*" (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, p. 31, emphasis added). This distinction means that interdisciplinary teaching employs non-linear strategies to link perspectives and conclusions from a variety of disciplines in order to assist students in understanding some complex social phenomena. "Once described as a *foundation* or *linear structure*, knowledge today is depicted as a *network* or a *web* with multiple nodes of connection, and a *dynamic system"* (Klein, 2004, p. 3) Consequently, class discussions need to be structured so that students employ one set of disciplinary perspectives as guides into other such perspectives—a dynamic process that continually refocuses each set in light of the others. Such an effort does not simply add a new disciplinary perspective to those already covered in class. Instead, it seeks to encourage understanding that is cumulative by moving back and forth among various perspectives during classroom discussion as

a strategy to ensure that "disciplines are not simply juxtaposed but deeply intertwined" (Miller & Boix Mansilla, 2004, p.5).

The class project presented in this article, focused as it is on contingent social truths and the dialectical process of accommodating cultural value differences, serves to encourage the type of understanding that is only possible with interdisciplinary teaching. Using Foucault's work as an introduction and then as a constant presence in the project serves the purpose of shaking students loose from their own versions of received wisdom. If Foucault's worldview is seen as even partially valid, his ideas are quite destabilizing for students who have internalized Western notions of common sense. Indeed, Western modernity's exclusive emphasis on social processes as opposed to any particular social outcomes can be viewed as either the final stage of Foucault's pattern of epistemic revolutions, i.e., the "end of history," or as the most deeply insidious episteme ever created. In either case, the implications of Foucault's notion of contingency are stark and their effects on subsequent class discussions of cultural distinctions and immigrant acculturation patterns can be both profound and entertaining.

As we examine the cultural "epistemes" or "truth regimes" that define social discourse in traditional and modern cultures, students are reminded that although there may well be objective truths in the universe, such truths are only partially, at best, represented in any one cultural approach to social order. Indeed as Welch (2011) reminds us (and I remind them), questioning the transcendent nature of epistemological truth is an inherent part of the interdisciplinary project. "[T]he ideal of absolute truth—some eternal, immutable epistemological standard—runs counter to the very idea of interdisciplinarity, which instead embraces the relativity of epistemological negotiation among the diversity of contending truth claims" (p. 3). As we examine intergenerational dialectical tensions between the values of traditional and modern cultures, students are prompted to consider how much the social order, its notion of truth, and its accompanying discourse are changed by whatever cultural synthesis, i.e., cultural "negotiation among the diversity of contending truth claims," emerges as immigrant acculturation unfolds. Moreover, students confront the reality that immigrant acculturation is a multifaceted social phenomenon as they consider the similarities and differences between Puzo's early 20th century Italian family, itself a classic example of intergenerational cultural

adaptation, and the experiences of other immigrant groups both at that time and in the 21st century.

In summary, if the project proceeds as it is intended to, students approach the immigration issue with Foucault's ideas concerning the historical contingency of truth and the notion of epistemic change as philosophical background. In light of these ideas, they explore the work of historians and social scientists concerning the differences between traditional and modern cultural worldviews. Students then evaluate sociological and political science research concerning intergenerational cultural adaptation among immigrant groups, focusing on how cultures reflecting two different "epistemes" accommodate each other in a global city. And lastly, in order that they may integrate the material from previous project exercises, they reflect on the insights gained from their exposure to Foucault as well as to the various disciplinary approaches to cultural values and the process of acculturation through the lens of Puzo's novel about one early 20th century immigrant family. It is my hope that, having completed this interdisciplinary class project, students will have developed a deeper understanding of and a new appreciation for not only the complexity of the immigration experience but also the diversity of worldviews that define the human condition.

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Appendix A: Michel Foucault and the Notion of Contingent Truth

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