

The Meaning of Life — A Panel Discussion

Jurgen Brauer, Joe Cotter, Duncan Robertson, and Ralph Watkins
(arranged by Jurgen Brauer)

"What is the meaning of life?" Seeking to contextualize this ultimate, infinite question, most of us turn to culture and community. The "meaning" of any one person's life, we find, is defined by one's concept of one's own identity, indissociable as it turns out from one's sense of social allegiance. Many intellectuals however live in at least two cultures: this observation applies, I believe, to all the members of the Bell South seminar (1998-99), and to most faculty at Augusta State University.

Our panel-discussion brings together four different descriptions of division (resolved or not) between the experience of living in the United States, common to all of us, and the consciousness of an Other place/time: Germany (Jurgen Brauer), Latin America (Joe Cotter), France (Duncan Robertson) and African-America (Ralph Watkins). It may be observed that each of us has paid a certain price for double affiliation: not always is it easy to communicate with fellow-Americans who accept their cultural identities as single and unproblematic. On the other hand, it is equally clear that the experience of division enriches our lives, and provides not simple answers perhaps, but an ongoing process of questioning of their meaning.

— Duncan Robertson

The papers are in the following order:

- Jurgen Brauer (economics) Page 1
- Duncan Robertson (language and literature) Page 9
- Joseph Cotter (history) Page 15
- Ralph Watkins (sociology and theology) Page 19

THE MEANING OF LIFE — A FRAMEWORK AND PERSONAL STATEMENT

by Jurgen Brauer

Framework

One useful way to address the question — how is meaning-in-life *generated* in different cultures — is by providing a structure of thought within which and with which to discuss the question's constituent components. I think of meaning-in-life as a *mental construct* composed of

- political
- economic
- cultural and
- natural processes

that mutually influence each other in the determination of what makes life worth living to individuals that grow up and live in different environments.

I proceed in three steps: first, I provide some simple examples of what I mean by political, economic, cultural, and natural processes; second, I provide a few straightforward examples of how these processes mutually constitute each other; and third, I provide some personal examples (section III).

Processes

Natural processes involve “the movements of matter and energy commonly understood as chemical, biological, physical, and so forth.” These speak to the transformation of the physical properties of matter, such as breathing or the transformation of raw materials into man-made materials. They include reference to geographic location since many natural processes operate differently at different locations. **Economic** processes refer to “the production and distribution of the means of production and consumption for communities of human beings.” These speak to issues such as saving, consuming, lending and borrowing, investing, importing and exporting, and so on. **Political** processes are about “the design and regulation of power and authority in such communities.” These speak to issues of control, as in legislative processes, judicial processes, and processes of administration and supervision. Finally, **cultural** processes refer to “the diverse ways in which human beings produce meanings for their existences.” These speak to language, to the arts and sciences, and to popular culture, religion, and the like. (All quotes from Resnick and Wolff, 1987, p. 20).

In a word, natural, economic, political, and cultural processes are broad classifications or aspects of life. They are classified in this way for convenience. Nestled within each of these broad categories are further processes (the process of working, the process of adjudication, the process of radioactive decay, the process of popular culture, and so on). There is nothing particularly scientific about dividing life up into natural, economic, political, and cultural aspects. But the advantage of doing so is that we won't overlook any aspects when explaining any one other aspect, such as “what makes

life worth living.” Indeed, the very point of this procedure is that it allows us to avoid *determinism*, that it avoids homing in on some putative ultimate cause. The claim is that these processes do not just *influence* each other but *mutually constitute* each other. Thus, what makes life worth living is not merely an ethereal, speculative question in response to which one assembles a set of more or less interesting opinions as to what makes life worth living for *me* in contrast to what makes life worth living for *you*. Instead, what makes life worth living for you and for me can be subjected to analysis by focusing on how the different playing out of different natural, economic, political, and cultural processes constitute the meaning of life differently for you than for me.

Examples

For example, the economic process of saving money is shaped by and shapes our notions of frugality, a cultural process. Saving money is also shaped by and shapes the political processes of lawmaking that protects private property (who would save if not for the expected assurance that one’s savings are safe?), and it shapes and is shaped by natural processes such as a particular person’s health or lack of health which, in turn, is shaped and helps shape our cultural attitudes toward saving money in the first place.

A second example: the climate of North America does not just influence crop yields, it makes crops possible in the first instance. But cropping patterns, in turn, help constitute climate patterns. Cropping patterns are influenced by the availability of subsidies as well (an economic process), subsidies that, in turn, may have been created in response to the political process of lobbying and campaign contributions.

A third example: the “political processes of lawmaking not only influence economies; their effects help bring into being the specific economic processes (buying, selling, importing, lending, producing, etc.) that will exist” (Wolff and Resnick, 1987, p. 137). But lawmaking itself is acted upon by economic and cultural precepts. For instance, importing quantities of foreign-made goods regularly causes certain commentators (e.g., Pat Buchanan) to bemoan the loss of American identity, loss of American sovereignty, and loss of American power in world affairs, comments which, when listened to and multiplied through constituencies of voters and lobbyists influence lawmaking.

Yes, everything helps determine everything else, but that does not necessarily lead to chaos, to running around in circles, to abandonment of analysis. To the contrary, the framework just outlined imposes a structure of thought with which to guide one’s thinking. In the 1980s Professors Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff (of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst) developed this framework of natural, economic, political, and cultural processes to analyze a process of particular concern to them: the *class process*. This is so because they are Marxists, and hence they take a particular interest in the concept of class. We don’t want to be Marxians at our colloquium today (or, not necessarily so): all that we want to do today is to use this framework of thought to elucidate another process: the process of generating meaning in life. What makes life worth living shapes and is shaped by natural, economic, political, and cultural processes. For example, we all know that people living in the mountains are differently influenced than people living by the sea (natural processes), that mountain people living off the mountain plains are differently influenced than people living off the sea (economic processes), that the different constitution and structure of power, authority, and dispute adjudication differently influences peoples’ perceptions of what and how life becomes meaningful (political processes), and that the effects of language, customs, habits, and religious and non-religious

influences (cultural processes) jointly constitute what makes life worth living for each one of us. But not only for each one of us: generating meaning in life is a process differently constituted in different societies. But how? And how does the process of constituting meaning differ from that in (and within) US America?

A Personal Statement

As the foregoing sections might suggest, I do not believe that culture — and especially culture with respect to so fundamental a question as to “what makes life worth living — is “just there,” coming into existence *ex nihilo* as it were. Instead, I believe that this amalgam “culture” — our beliefs, customs, habits, traditions, attitudes, prejudices, values, character, personality, our “spirit” — is created in each person’s mind, regardless of the degree to which we are conscious of that creation (children usually aren’t), and irrespective of the degree to which we deliberately participate in and modify that creation. “Meaning” is created by our degrees of response to, or interaction with, the panoply of life’s facets and events that we encounter as we grow, mature, reproduce, and die off.

Economics

The great German poet, Johann Wolfgang v. Goethe insightfully entitled his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Fiction and Truth), suggesting that any autobiographical sketch contains elements of truth but also elements of fiction as memory not only fails to recall events accurately (if at all) but also shades the recall in one fashion or another. With this in mind, and asking for your indulgence, let me tell you just a bit about myself. I grew up poor, and I grew up sickly. My parents did provide food, clothing, and shelter, but the food I ate led to malnourishment, the clothing I wore was geeky not of the ‘cool,’ but of the ‘to-be-avoided’ type, and the shelter I had was cold (no running hot water, no central heat) and usually dark (Berlin is pretty far up north, and I had north window in my room). In terms of simple possessions, there was no TV until age 17, but on occasion I did watch TV on weekends at my grandmother’s place. There was no car in the household until age 12, I believe, when my parents proudly paraded a newly acquired VW Bug. I didn’t own a bicycle until age 16. There was no such thing as pocket money. I was born with an inherited disease, responsible for a series of medical maladies that the state insurance agency balked at correcting and paying for, and my parents gave me to understand that this was one cause of our relative poverty. It was certainly the cause for my remaining an only child — and I was happy at that!

My father was merely 17 when I was made, my mother 22. My father was unable to handle the stresses life had wrought on him. He, as well as my mother, were victims of World War II, both child refugees. In both cases, their families split. In my father’s case, the family reunited, for the most part, after the war in what then had become West-Berlin, although my grandparents did divorce on account of the distress generated by war separation and imprisonment in East-Berlin for trying to flee to the West. In my mother’s case, a refugee from what then was German, but now — again — is Polish territory, her family was believed entirely lost until one day, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the apartment door bell rang and the person standing there claimed to be my mother’s sister (having located my mother’s address through the Red Cross). My parents’ education, in both cases, was curtailed by the war. My mother’s education ended at grade 8; my father’s at grade 11, in spite of his obvious talent for and aspiration toward being educated. None of the Brauer’s, I believe to this day, ever finished high school (that is, the German *Gymnasium*). My parents moved into a subsidized

apartment about a year after I was born, literally one apartment block away from what was at the time considered the second-worst slum area in Berlin. As regards playmates and schoolmates I grew up in the slum myself. Wife-beatings, child abuse (mostly, but not only, in the form of child neglect), alcoholism, nicotine addiction, job changes and joblessness, poor education, a dissatisfied outlook on and poor prospects for life were common fare. All of these also occurred in my own family. In addition, we rarely spoke at home.

This was Berlin, for me, throughout the 1960s. I was born into a divided family, a divided city, occupied by foreign troops (and I was acutely aware of this), and a divided country. How does one grow up and consider, in these circumstances, the meaning of one's life? What, in these circumstances, makes life worth living?

Foremost on my mind were the economic conditions under which I grew up. I experienced poverty up-front, and I also saw immense wealth elsewhere that was not available to me. It was also clear that I could not aspire to wealth. At best, I might become a minor civil servant within the German *Obrigkeitsstaat*,¹ that would guarantee a dreadfully secure job, income, and pension. At the same time, from my earliest memories, I appear to have been incredulous to learn that there are people who appeared to be even worse off than I was, especially people in so-called developing countries. In December 1972, a massive earthquake leveled Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua. I wrote a song, performed it, collected money (some DM300 if I recall correctly), and sent it to help alleviate the suffering of unknown Nicaraguans. I did this in February 1973 in lieu of a birthday for myself. The opening line of this song speaks to me about myself even today: *Mir geht's gut, denn ich habe zu essen* (I am well off because at least I have something to eat). It expresses an odd confluence of philosophical twinges and musings of a 16-year old and the economic circumstances he faced himself and noticed elsewhere. Why are some people rich and some people poor? I came to answer Shakespeare's famous question decisively: to be — or not to eat? in favor of to-eat! I came to study economics over philosophy proper — in part because of a particular set of limitations and opportunities I faced but mostly because I figured that people who don't eat don't need philosophers either.

That is to say, the economics of my situation strongly directed my perceptions of “what makes life worth living”.

Politics

Also from early on, I have had a particular attraction to what one might call “radical” literature. I came to feel the attraction of Karl Marx' writings, but was repelled by what posed itself as Marxism in my divided Berlin, namely Marxism-Leninism and its suppression of freedom. Indeed, Marx is not difficult to understand at all. All one has to do is to read any Charles Dickens novel in a non-romantic vein (i.e., not at Christmas time) to grasp with stunning immediacy what labor and working conditions were like in Dickens' — and Marx' — England of the time. To me, it was not difficult at all to intrinsically understand the revolutionary leanings and movements that swept Europe and, even more

¹ This translates as “authoritarian state;” democratic in appearance, but of an intensely hierarchical structure with well-developed and preserved career “tracks” depending on one's educational achievements which, in turn, were understood to be largely the predetermined outcome of one's social origin.

so, the Latin American continent in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. All one had to do — literally — was to take a look at the abysmal living conditions and political arrangements then in place.

But, as indicated, I also objected early on to totalitarian suppression that was so obvious and self-evident — despite the white-washing — just a few kilometers away across the Berlin Wall as well as from the recent history of Nazi Germany. I remember having stood in line with my parents to buy a one-day visa to visit a disconnected family member who remained stuck in East Berlin. I remember Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, the attempt at rapprochement and détente, with eastern Europe in general and East Germany in particular. It was very clear that the Berlin Wall served not to keep people out of the socialist paradise, but to keep people in! Still, revolutionary flames spread throughout the world. The 1968 student rebellions in Paris, in Berlin, and elsewhere mark the onset of indigenous terrorism in Western European countries with the aim of violently overthrowing capitalist, exploitative society. I could empathize with the students, it was after all a movement directed against the rich, the powerful, the oppressors, the capitalists, against those whom I vaguely held responsible for my economic condition and that of other poor people, and responsible also for withholding opportunities for advancement and self-betterment, especially in the context of a supposedly democratic society that nonetheless managed to keep masses of people in economic bondage. But I could not emphasize with the violent methods — already I had seen and known too much violence in my life. I was much attracted to peace in families, peace in societies, and peace in and among states.

In 1973, 16 years old, just out of school (I have a 10th grade education), and in my first job — I was an apprentice to become, indeed, a minor civil servant — I read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag*. By that time, and round that time, I had also read or was reading 18th century German literature, Russian 19th century literature, and French 20th century literature. I was especially stuck by Camus' 1942 *L'Étranger* (*The Stranger*), “a study of 20th-century alienation with a portrait of an ‘outsider’ condemned to death less for shooting an Arab than for the fact that he never says more than he genuinely feels and refuses to conform to society's demands” for remorse and apology (quoted from *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, www.eb.com; “Camus”). Albert Camus' writings about the

“... isolation of man in an alien universe, the estrangement of the individual from himself, the problem of evil, and the pressing finality of death, accurately reflected the alienation and disillusionment of the postwar intellectual. Though he understood the nihilism of many of his contemporaries, Camus also argued the necessity of defending such values as truth, moderation, and justice. In his last works he sketched the outlines of a liberal humanism that rejected the dogmatic aspects of both Christianity and Marxism” (*Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, www.eb.com; “Camus”).

The time I read Camus was also the time of socialist humanism in Czechoslovakia and the Prague Spring of 1968, crushed by the friendly, brotherly assistance of the Soviet Union. It was the time of an emergent socialist Christianity in western Europe — in distinct contrast to a growing capitalist-conservative fundamentalist Christianity arising in the US — and of Marxian-tinged liberation theology in Latin America, and black theology in South and southern Africa. It was a time of rejecting dogma without stooping to the rejection of all values. It was a time of struggle to define human value — meaning in life — without doctrine. It was a time to go beyond *nihilism*, the constant skepticism

and negation of the existing economic and political order, the achievement of individual freedom without falling into the abyss of political totalitarianism or religious dogmatism, as evidenced by the plainly false promises of autocratic Marxism-Leninism in eastern Europe or Maoism in China or the theocratic Islamism that arose later on in Iran.

That is to say, not only did the economics of my situation strongly direct my perceptions of “what makes life worth living,” but so did the particular political environment in which I grew up as a young Berliner at the time: socially, an ostracized outsider; economically, a member of a hopelessly disadvantaged family; and politically, an empathetic rebel but reluctant revolutionary.

Culture

I remember refusing to join my family (my parents and grandmother) in a Christmas or New Year’s celebration because I was more comfortable being snuggled up in bed with a copy of one of Antoine-Marie-Roger de St. Exupéry’s books (the author of the famous *Le Petit Prince*, *The Little Prince*).

“Saint-Exupéry found in aviation both a source for heroic action and a new literary theme. His works exalt perilous adventures at the cost of life as the highest realization of man's vocation ... The growing sadness and pessimism in Saint-Exupéry's view of man appears in *Citadelle* (1948; *The Wisdom of the Sands*, 1952), a posthumous volume of reflections that show Saint-Exupéry's persistent belief that man's only lasting reason for living is as repository of the values of civilization” (Encyclopedia Britannica Online; www.eb.com; article on St. Exupéry).

I was fifteen or sixteen at the time. “Perilous adventures” appealed to the adolescent youth in me; “at the cost of life” — martyrdom, voluntary crucifixion, giving life for cause — appealed to my political sensibilities and rebellious, even revolutionary urges. I look at my own 15-year old son today: political sensibilities? None, none, none whatsoever! What will make life worth living for him cannot be what makes life worth living for me because the streams of influences that mutually determine our perceptions of what makes life worth living are so utterly disparate.

But, how come that I was such an avid reader? There are a number of facets that explain that. We were poor; there was no TV and only one transistor radio. But there were books; my father, as I mentioned, apparently had been a talented student whose own education was curtailed at 11th grade by the aftershocks of the war and his personal difficulties of handling these events (including the difficulties that arose when he fathered me at age 17 and I turned out to be ill and in need of expensive medical care). He fondly recalled stories of his schooling, and he aspired to *Bildung* — inadequately translated as learning — and he read frequently. There was also the social malaise in our dysfunctional family I mentioned: other than perfunctory comments, we did not speak with one another. And so my mother turned to reading, albeit reading for entertainment rather than explicit educational purposes. And there was my own social isolation inside and outside the home; and so I turned to reading.

Reading and reflection — *critical* reading and reflection — was what gave my life some semblance of meaning although it did not rise then — I don’t think — to the level of constituting “what makes life worth living.” And then there was the radio, listening to which was the only time when the family appeared consistently content and happy and united. This was very nearly the only time we congregated. We congregated around the small living room table, listening to short stories,

music, news events, entertainment programs, and the like whenever something special was on. This was not background noise, this was deliberate *listening*. To this day, reading and listening and a congregated family are central pillars of what makes life worth living for me. They also make me vulnerable. Whatever is cherished is valuable; whatever is valuable makes you vulnerable to its loss.

Religion, in its narrowest and broadest sense — encompassing all manner of philosophical systems of thought — played an important, if highly contentious and ambiguous role, in my life. Only recently did I close the chapter of religion — I am a deliberate non-theist and opposed to all forms of theism — but I will not speak of how I came to adopt that position. Rather, I mean to illustrate how religion and philosophy influenced the creation of meaning in my youth. I was poor, isolated in family and society. There was not much hope, nor prospect for hope. Yet there *were* rays of hope. I did have a very loving grandmother and I looked forward to seeing her on weekends (not only to see TV, but to see her). And, by pure chance, there happened to exist, within five minutes walking distance from my apartment, an American, fundamentalist Christian, missionary peace-church. It was an outlet of, and financed by, a subgroup of Amish-Mennonite churches in the US. I had never, and have never since, met a *people* who are as loving and selflessly giving as these Amish-Mennonite (within the Amish and Mennonite communities, they are referred to as the *Beachy Amish*, but I won't go into that history).

Permit me a “sidebar” on the Amish and Mennonites. Jacob Amman is considered the founder of the Amish Christians. This occurred at around the time of the Lutheran revolution in church history. Against the oppressive domination of the Roman Catholic Church, Luther and other rebelled. The Amish distinguished themselves doctrinally in two main ways (there are plenty of behavioral and interpretative differences as well but I focus on the key two doctrinal differences): they believed that following Christ must be a conscious, deliberate decision, one that can be taken only by an adult person. Therefore, only an adult person can be baptized and thus be “saved” from the sinful ways of the world. The Amish therefore practiced the renewed baptism of those who, under the Catholic Church, already had been baptized as infants. But what to the Amish was a logical necessity, *anabaptism* or rebaptism, to the Catholic Church constituted the invalidation of the earlier, infant, baptism. It was a direct affront to the authority of the Catholic Church as it declared the earlier baptism as null and void, and that was an abomination before the Lord, a heresy — for which it burned the Amish at the stake. The Amish did not conceal their beliefs. “Let your ‘yeah’ be a ‘yeah,’ and your ‘nay’ be a ‘nay’” exhorts a passage in the biblical scriptures — and the Amish were (and are) a gentle, kind, loving and literalist people of believers.

We see in this an element important to my own development: rebellion out of genuine veracity. Not rebellion *and* genuine truthfulness. But opposition to established order as a consequence of genuine reflection upon what you wish to hold dear and true. It recalls Camus’ *L’Etranger* who was sentenced to death not so much for killing an Arab but for expressing only what he genuinely believed and for refusing to satisfy society’s demand by expressing remorse and apology. Had he done so, Camus implies, he would have gone free-- for, after all, what’s the life of an Arab against submission to the established order!

The second doctrinal aspect that made the Amish distinct — distinct from Camus’ Stranger as well — is their refusal to participate in any violent action of any sort whatsoever, even at the expense of their own lives. A people that belongs to the Kingdom of God cannot fight for kingdoms of mere men. Many refused to pay taxes that finance the destructive machinery of the state (even today!). Of course a people that refuses to fight is, when the time comes, a pretty useless sort of people. But they

are a people of peace. Jesus said to turn the other cheek — and that’s what they did. For that, also, they were tortured and burned at the stake.

We see in this another important element to my own development: as a youngster, living in an abusive family and neighborhood, there was nothing I craved more — not even economic well-being — than a sense of peace and security (*Geborgenheit*). That, of course, is what religion in its narrow and in its broad sense means to offer. I was susceptible. I was vulnerable, then, because of what I did not have and wished to gain, just as I am vulnerable today because of what I do have and do not wish to lose.

Conclusion

And so it was that I came to cherish a few things about my life today, things that, one might say, make my life worth living, although — once more — I don’t want to publicly claim that these arise to the level of constituting my “meaning in life”: I cherish the degree of personal freedom I now possess but that I was missing when I grew up; I cherish the expanse and location and peace of the land I now inhabit; I cherish the degree of economic well-being I now enjoy; I cherish the degree of relative security and independence of thought and means that are now at my disposal; and I cherish being a desperately and stridently devoted father and husband.

There are other things I cherish; and still others I have come utterly to reject. But I choose not to go into these other things today. The purpose of this little paper, after all, is neither autobiographic nor confessional but merely to illustrate that and how one life’s meaning is not “just there,” but constructed out of life’s vicissitudes, and that the fortunate among us, by means of self-conscious reflection and action, can nudge the construction of themselves to some degree, and to remind us that we always must be merciful, if just.

I hope to have illustrated that a *specific* set of natural, economic, political, and cultural processes produced a specific person. Some of these conditions were specific only to myself, but others transcended me and were specific to all Berliners; still others transcended the Berliners and were available to all Germans, still others to all Europeans. The processes that apply only to myself are responsible for whatever meaning in life I construct. But beyond that, there exists some degree of *commonality of processes* that result in shared experiences which help create what one might call a Berlin mentality or culture or German mentality or culture or European mentality or culture — a mentality, a culture an outlook on life, a “meaning in life” — perhaps — that is unavailable to those who are not Europeans, not Germans, not Berliners, not me.

References

1. Resnick and Wolff. *Knowledge and Class*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987.
2. Wolff and Resnick. *Economics: Marxian versus Neoclassical*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
3. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. [Http://www.eb.com](http://www.eb.com).

EUROPE VS. AMERICA: REFLECTIONS ON POLITICAL CULTURE

by Duncan Robertson

Some time ago—it must have been well before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989—someone compared Europe to the United States in these terms: in Europe, nothing is permitted and everything is meaningful; in America everything is permitted, and it's all totally meaningless. Now that Europe is in fact pulling itself together as a unity (potentially) equal and opposite to the United States, it might be a good moment to take a fresh look at this contrast. My own view of Europe is admittedly a bit abstract; and it also channeled mainly through France. With that apology, I will try to sketch out the familiar opposition between the two cultures, and explore briefly what I take to be the European point of view.

European intellectuals in the twentieth century have often defined the meaning of their lives in opposition to totalitarian regimes. We can only dimly imagine, here today, what that has been like: the strategies needed to survive in police states, the pressure to accommodate, the self-policing, the culture of betrayals, and the investment of one's integrity in convictions maintained in secret, uncompromised, somewhere in the intimacy of thought and feeling. We have seen the same psychology imposed in Latin America: in Cuba, in Pinochet's Chile, and in Argentina of the *guerra sucia*.

Even in France and Britain, life over the last two or three decades has meant a struggle against oppression, which has been economic in the west rather than political. We have glimpsed this reality here in movies such as *The Full Monty*, *Trainspotting*, or *La Haine*. Double digit unemployment, as in France now, means that many educated, young people will fail to find jobs, and many hardworking people cannot make ends meet. The pervasive *morosité* favors neo-fascist movements such as the French *Front National*. If you are touch with university colleagues in your own fields, you will have heard the note of bitter frustration with the politics of penury — I mean, the manipulation of scarcity by politicians and administrators — that governs the systems in place. Everyone I know over there is dreaming and scheming to escape.

Having found their way west, Europeans typically pass through a honeymoon period—Magali [Magali Duignan; linguist at Augusta State University] commented on that—followed by depression and the sense of a loss of meaning. Suddenly without systematic opposition, with few or no enemies to fear, they find that the class or group loyalties that once defined their ideologies simply dissolve. Writers of recent generations have dramatized this disorientation. Vladimir Nabokov turned his encounter with America of the 1950's into dark comedy in *Pnin* and especially *Lolita*. In the 1980's the Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz got a tenured professorship (as poets often do) at the University of California in Berkeley, and there began commenting on the “trivialization” of American life. Milan Kundera, best known for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and several other, passionately anti-Soviet novels, escaped finally to Paris; he is alive and well in Montparnasse, last I heard, and now publishes mediocre post-modernist writings in French. It's a pity.

My mother made this same, westward journey. She was born in Kiev in the Ukraine, the youngest child of a prosperous middle-class Jewish family. Having lost everything in the Russian Revolution, they moved to Canada, and started over. My mother was the rebel in the family. She embraced the

cause of International Communism, until the reality of Stalinism became known; she remained always an intensely political person, who experienced the distant events of the War, the Nazi Holocaust, and the Soviet Gulags, as intimate, personal tragedies. She married my father, moved to the United States, made a complicated accommodation with American culture ... and spent the rest of her life in negotiations between two or three cultural worlds; which is what I find myself also doing here in Augusta, on any given day.

Here one can be simply free of politics, “free at last.” But then one finds oneself at sea in the great American *anomie*: capitalism, consumerism, the mirage of affluence, the suburban moms and children running around in station wagons (I mean mini-vans ...), the mindless teenagers and the education industry which lives off them, the compulsive joinerism in all age groups — and all of it repeated on television, our national art imitating our national life imitating art imitating life, like facing barber’s mirrors, in an infinitely self-reflective *mise en abyme*. The cheery mediocrity of it all, the very liberties and comforts and conveniences one longed for in the old country, here become another sort of totalitarian regime. What one positively longs for here is an intelligent, adult conversation over a glass of wine; real bread; cheese; a chicken that would taste like chicken, or a tomato that would taste like anything at all; a newspaper that could offer a coherent point of view; a little discipline, dignity and wit.

In the midst of what feels like cultural chaos, you are pretty much on your own. You have to create meaning positively, for yourself, without reference to an Other or opposed term. “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all,” we remind ourselves, not acknowledging that contrastive binary constructs are an essential part of the thought process. Post-modernists claim that all meaning is created by the play of differences, and they may be right. But in the United States, the meaning of life is conceived to be a personal matter. That may be the heart of our problem: ... can meaning ever be merely individual or personal? In any case, if one fails to find meaning, one has no one to blame but oneself. The enemy becomes internalized, and one struggles very much alone.

To be free from politics is not enough. We Americans lack, and we do need, political consciousness. We have gone somewhat beyond the traditional ideologies of left and right, but we have not yet developed a post-ideological discourse, in which to conceive the realities of our community. You will remember E. M. Forster’s epigraph to *Howard’s End*: “Only connect!” That is what we Americans don’t do; we have a short historical memory and a short attention span. We do not place things in context. We think and act as if things just happened in a vacuum or at random. We do not sufficiently *interpret* their meaning, historically or in the present, in relation to each other and/or to ourselves.

The French, a couple of years ago, went through an exercise in interpretation in reference to the trial of one Maurice Papon. Papon, who turned 87 years of age in 1997, was a middle-level bureaucrat in Bordeaux from 1942 to 1944, during the Occupation; he was responsible for the deportation of around 1,600 Jewish people, who were rounded up, sent in various trains to a transfer station at Drancy, near Paris, and thereafter to Auschwitz. Papon was a sort of native French Eichmann, another case of the Banality of Evil, but on a lower level: the careful, competent *fonctionnaire* who carries out policy, not the one who initiates it. He kept the files on Jewish people up to date, he managed paperwork involved in the expropriation of their property. He claimed not to know the ultimate destination of the trains. And by 1943, he had in fact begun making contact with the local *résistance*. He began working, we might say, on an alternative *curriculum vitae*. And when the Liberation came, in 1944, at the moment of the purges when the collaborators were summarily

tried and executed, Papon escaped and landed a new and higher-level government-service position. The truth is that with the local *résistance* divided into factions, with the economy and the administrative infra-structure in ruins, De Gaulle's provisional government had an urgent need of professionals like Papon, who could be trusted to carry out orders and get things on the rails again, so to speak. So in the post-war period, Papon continued to rise; he was in North Africa for a while; in 1961 we find him back in France, Prefect of the Police in Paris, no less. He survived several more administrations, in ever higher positions, and ended up in the 1970s as Minister of the Budget in the government of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.

In the 1980s, Papon came to the attention of advocacy groups involved in the pursuit of ex war criminals. After sixteen years of legal maneuvering, a group of Jewish plaintiffs, including the well-known Nazi-hunters, Serge and Arno Klarsfeld, finally brought Papon to trial. It lasted seven months, one of the very longest in French history, covered exhaustively day to day by the media, debated from all sides. Public opinion was sharply divided, not concerning Papon himself, but on the real purpose of the trial at this late date. The final verdict was not an execution of any sort, not even life imprisonment, but just ten years for "complicity in crimes against humanity."

Anti-climax? Yes, but a lot else besides. The French have been accused of inability to come to terms with their own past, with the moral trauma of the Occupation. There were polarizing mythologies in place: the myth of the Vichy-Collaboration-government as the "buffer" or "shield" against the Nazis; the myth of the Résistance—*Résistentialisme*, it has been called—featuring heroes of the underground like Jean Moulin, who died under torture at the hands of Klaus Barbie. (An American historian, Robert Paxton has made a valuable contribution to better understanding of these matters). The truth is that most people who survived the Occupation were caught in between the extreme positions, in the zone of moral ambiguity. Subjected to pressures we can hardly imagine today, people got by, but they did things or were party to things that they would deeply regret later. Coming to terms with this past has involved acceptance of *degrees* or implication. And this is where one young Jewish lawyer, Arno Klarsfeld, repeatedly broke ranks with his colleagues on the plaintiffs' team. Throughout the trial he argued for a mitigated sentence: because Papon was not the same as Klaus Barbie, and the condemnation of Papon as a Nazi monster would be unsupported by the documented record of his acts; because the demonization of such a character would continue the maintenance of the mythologies, and effectively confuse other cases of similarly intermediate responsibility. Klarsfeld argued for a realistic *historical pedagogy*, a non-simplistic understanding of the past, one which could take the real complexity of the lived experience into account. Something more challenging, we might say, than a Steven Spielberg movie.

It has been half a century since the war. The process of reflection is still ongoing in France. High government figures like Mitterand were involved in ambiguities, as was every man and every woman on the street. The French have had to reconcile a duty to remember with a duty to forget. It is important to do justice to the events of the 1940s, to get the record straight, but the time has come to allow the old wounds to close and heal; more important than rehashing past history is the need to apply the historical pedagogy to present situations.

There have been other Holocausts in recent years. Cambodia, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia. There are other monsters now abroad in the world: what to do with Pinochet? While I fervently hope that he gets served some of his own *chocolate*, I am puzzled by the Spanish initiative in this case. They made the shift from dictatorship to democracy when Franco died in 1975, but they have not, as far as I know, brought many of their own police criminals to trial.

I find another sort of lesson to learn from Maurice Papon, closer to home. I have met Papon and he is us. We all work in bureaucracies. We compromise and accommodate, we deal with the nonsense that gets handed down from the administration, we turn out paperwork as required. It's bad form to protest. We compete with our colleagues and placate our superiors, we rewrite our *curricula vitarum*, we hope mainly for job security. Well and good. But what if the relatively trivial pressures of our situation were multiplied a hundredfold by the circumstance of war, or by the presence of a police state? I think I see in my own behavior and in that of the guy down the hall some pretty plausible indications of how we would do then. Here at this college things are gentle and humane. But I have seen a lot of tenured cowardice over the years in the American University system, and it can get very scary.

Turning now from tragedy to farce, what meaning should we find in the Clinton impeachment trial? This would seem to have been the paradigm of American trivialization: a truly meaningless event. The opinion polls showed unwavering popular support for Clinton throughout; people got "sick of hearing about it," so they said; they did not care about sex-and-lies-and videotape, as long as the economy remained prosperous. Was this mere cynicism, disaffection with politics and politicians, as having Nothing to do with you and me?

The American people were at least less childish than Europeans suppose, in that apparently they were not taken in by the speechifying and moralizing. Most of us realized that the sex-scandal was the catalyst or pretext. What was really going on was a struggle for political power, no more and no less. That is what the partisan trench war in the House and the Senate clearly showed. And that is not meaningless, that has to be taken seriously. Several times it came close to a constitutional breakdown. I do place ultimate blame for all of it on Clinton. He of all mortals should have understood where he was, and what was at stake. There were and there are dark forces lurking on the scene, which have long threatened our democracy. Clinton's arrogant, reckless behavior threw open the door and invited them in.

The French press focused on Kenneth Starr, whom they compared to the Grand Inquisitor, Torquemada, and to Joe McCarthy. They derided Starr as personifying a naïve or hypocritical American Puritanism, the culture of the small town in the South (in Texas, actually) from which he came. They saw him attempting to impose a regime of repressive prurience in this country. Rather complacently, they referred to François Mitterand and his two wives and two families and many other women besides, who were left in peace, out of public scrutiny, as it was right they should be. What they clearly saw here was the witch hunt: the proceeding from Watergate to Travelgate to Linda Tripp to Paula Jones to Monica, the intimidation of witnesses, the manipulation of the media, the calculated pornography of the published Starr report. What was and is obvious to the Europeans is that the so-called "independent counsel" works in the service Clinton's Republican enemies, whose whole, sole purpose is to destroy and remove this President of the United States, by any and all means possible. How is it that our own press did not denounce this monstrosity early on, especially not the *New York Times*? How is it that this has gone on unchecked for so long?

I think that this is the consequence of a failure of interpretation, of a refusal or inability to *name* things. The classic European political language has names and terms which might help us in times like these. For example, Daniel Moynihan, no friend of Clinton, referred recently to a Republican "coup d'état" narrowly averted. A while ago Hilary Clinton alleged a "vast right-wing conspiracy" to subvert a democratic election. People scoff at that language, but I remember that George McGovern said something similar during the 1972 election, nobody believed him either, and the next year the

Watergate scandal broke. “Only connect...” Hilary was connecting Kenneth Starr and friends to Richard Scaife, the millionaire who has bankrolled various right-wing foundations, and contributed a million or so to Pepperdine University, which offered Starr a professorship, as you recall. Just recently Starr has been connected to one Jerome Marcus and to the team of right-wing lawyers (the Landmark Legal Foundation) who pushed forward the Paula Jones case. And what does it mean, when we find Trent Lott and Bob Barr connected to the “Council of Conservative Citizens,” as they now call themselves, formerly the “White Citizens’ Council” I believe? Dennis Wheeler, head of our own, Georgia chapter of this group, recently opened a meeting with quotes from the book of Revelation about the Blasphemy of the Beast, and went on to discuss “Yankee radicalism”: “It is exactly this philosophy that our Confederate forefathers fought against in the War Between the States. The current mark of the beast is the equalitarian religion, which names as sins racism, sexism, antisemitism and homophobia, among others, rather than the Ten Commandments” (Associated Press report.) How many Republican congressmen and Senators were compelled to follow the impeachment party line, long after the cause was obviously lost, for fear of losing campaign funding from such sources?

Now I recognize that there are many other ways to make connections. Moynihan and others find a real “character” issue concerning Clinton, not concerning his personal messes, but in the lack of a coherent foreign policy. There is a sense of pervasive corruption in his administration, and new scandals may yet emerge.

Even so: there *was* indeed a right-wing conspiracy. But Clinton—having opened the door in the first place — closed it in the end. He refused to resign and we should be grateful for that. The presidency survived, the Constitution survived; we should be especially grateful to the mobilized Democratic politicians who put aside their own feelings toward Clinton, and held off the crisis.

What now? Polarization? Vengeance? Reconciliation? Intelligent Republicans are coming to their senses, these days, and trying now to make up for the lost time. Hopefully they will have something other than dirty tricks and manufactured scandals to contribute. The political suicide of a loyal opposition would not be good news to anyone. But what Bob Barr and Tom Delay and Lindsey Graham are counting on is the famously short memory of the American people, who they hope will just forget about this colossal *porquería* by the election year 2000. We’ll see about that. This event has politicized many people like me, and you can be sure that we will be out there in the year 2000, hoping to vote the clowns out of Congress. And for the long run, what I hope to hear is “Plus jamais ça!” Never again!

My point here is not to pledge allegiance to the Democratic party, but rather to plead and grope for a discourse of meaningful interpretation of such events. We still have a lot to learn from Europe in this respect; or rather, we need to adapt certain European intellectual habits to our own, distinctive, and not at all simple situation.

First of all, one has to take a point of view: “objectivity” as in the *New York Times* editorial page, is an abdication of all thought process. Anthony Lewis’s columns were on the case, but that does not discharge the “newspaper of record” from the responsibility to state the truth under the masthead, in the name of the whole community.

Things have to be called by their names ... “right wing conspiracy” etc ... and so taken seriously. Although maybe I am wrong, maybe the sheer indifference of the American people, their assumption of meaninglessness, their cheery refusal to take anything seriously, is what saves us. Maybe also, by calling for the use of names, I am legitimating the crude sludge that appears on *The Augusta*

Chronicle editorial page. Name-calling, unsupported by facts, obviously does not advance understanding,. The moralizing, pseudo-religious demagogy of our southern politicians has been discredited time and time again ... *Quousque tandem, Catiline?* How long are people going to continue to swallow it? Who is it that pays *The Augusta Chronicle* to print what everybody knows is nonsense?

Things have to be contextualized. The concept of a Republican “conspiracy” at least makes connections, in the present context. We have to also connect the present to the past to make any sense: we have to not forget Watergate, Joe McCarthy, the House Unamerican Activities Committee hearings, the struggle between General MacArthur and Truman; we have to see the pattern of repeated attempts to subvert our democratic institutions and way of life. This is also a way for an individual to place himself or herself in context, as Cheryl Mills did: as a black, woman lawyer arguing for Clinton before the Senate, she made the connection between her own career and Clinton’s defense of civil rights in Arkansas and in Washington.

Only by interpreting, by naming, by contextualizing, and by remembering, can we hope to understand anything or create positive meaning. I look for a non-simplistic historical pedagogy to emerge. I hope that the next time a threat such as this one arises, we will be able more quickly to *recognize* the danger under whatever new disguise it takes, and respond.

HISPANIC CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

by Joseph Cotter

A number of cultural characteristics and historical legacies have a strong influence on the ways Hispanic people define themselves and interact with each other. In this paper I examine several of these factors, discuss how they have influenced Latin American history, and consider their role in the present. I want to shed light on a few (but no means all) of the ways in which Hispanic people find “meaning in life.” I also examine how they relate to the recent (1980s-1990s) “redemocratization” of Latin America, a very popular topic among Latin American specialists from many academic disciplines.

“*La familia*” (your extended family) and “*la patria chica*,” literally translated, the little country, play a crucial role in the creation of “*confianza*” (literally “trust”) among Hispanic people, an element considered essential in interpersonal relations. Modern Spain was forged when Catholic Spaniards reclaimed the Iberian Peninsula from the Moors and the smaller principalities (Aragon, Castille, Navarre, etc.) were united under one Royal household. Reflecting regional variations in culture, the ebb and flow of military events, and the need for local cohesiveness in the face of turmoil coming from outside the community, the Spanish developed a strong sense of loyalty to small social units. An individual's primary loyalty went to “*la familia*.” Secondly individuals would identify with their village or town of origin, “*la patria chica*.” Thirdly, people found commonality with other individuals from their home province, another example of “*la patria chica*.” Only lastly did they think of themselves as “Spaniards.”

Self-identification and social organization based on *la familia* and *la patria chica* have had an immense impact on the evolution of society in Latin America. When Spaniards settled in the New World they moved to places where their relatives were already established, thus exporting the extended family to the Americas. Nephews frequently followed uncles and took over their businesses when they retired or passed away. Individuals from one Spanish town tended to settle in areas already inhabited by people from that town; and regions of the Americas were settled by people from one province in Spain. Regional rivalries had a profound impact on Latin America's independence movements. For example, Chile's first experience with independence ended with reconquest by the Spanish when its leaders began to fight among themselves to advance provincial interests. Similarly, regional rivalries shaped 19th century politics, as provinces constantly rebelled against the central government. Some Latin America countries owe their existence to regional rivalry. For example, the five Central American nations were born in 1840 when the so-called “United Provinces of Central America” were torn asunder by provincial rebellions.

Regional loyalties continued to affect politics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Brazilian system of Presidential power sharing between the two strongest states of Sao Paulo and Minas Gerais, known as *café com leite*, was constructed to mollify patronage networks based in each. Today Latin Americans often identify themselves by pointing to the province or town they come from. For example, residents of Mexico City call themselves “*Chilangos*” and people who come from the Mexican state of Guerrero call themselves “*Guerrereneses*.” Usually couched in the language of “*machismo*” (literally manliness), in Southern California Mexican immigrants sometimes fight to prove that their town or region is superior to another. Similarly, in Colombia regional and patron-

client loyalties contributed to the long period of civil strife known as “*La Violencia*.” Although great strides have been made during the 20th Century, the process of replacing “*la patria chica*” with nationalism has challenged Latin America’s political leaders.

In Hispanic societies people have also assigned meaning to life by forming Patron-Client relationships. In Spain, then in the Spanish Colonies, and then in the independent nations of Latin America, humble individuals seeking protection and people who desire upward social mobility have sought out more powerful individuals to be their “*patrón*” (literally translated: patron). *Patrones* provided many forms of assistance to their “*clientes*” (literally translated: client), including providing loans in time of personal or family crisis, help in finding employment, and securing the support of local political authorities. In return the *Patrón* expects loyalty from the *cliente*, including the right to specific services or favors on request. Patron-client relationships provided a way for individuals from different social classes and ethnic groups to form interpersonal relationships.

Reflecting the importance of “*la familia*,” if the *patrón* was not a member of an individual’s extended family, they often used the system of *compadrazgo* (literally Godparents) to form fictive kinship bonds with him/her. The patron-client system and fictive kinship also illustrate the importance that Hispanic people place on *personalismo* (literally personalism): basing loyalty and trust on interpersonal bonds rather than identification with some social group or organization. In Latin American society its not the job or the institution, but rather individuals and your relationship to them that is most important. In a multiracial society like Latin America, patron-client bonds provided a means for members of different ethnic groups and social classes to establish personal relationships. In modern Mexican and Chicano Spanish, the expression “*compa*” is used when males greet their close friends.

Patron-client bonds, *compadrazgo*, and *personalismo* have had an immense impact in Latin America. Since the Colonial period they were used to organize life on the *hacienda*, or large rural estate. *Hacendados* became the *patrón* of their employees, and used *compadrazgo* to bring their children and their grandchildren into their extended family. In return for a plot of land, food in times of scarcity, a lifetime job, and financial help in times of crisis, the *hacendado* expected loyal service from their *clientes*. Far beyond the daily chores of farm labor, this might include performing personal services, taking crops to market, or military service against hostile Native Americans or local outlaws. Indeed, some *hacendados* like Juan Manuel de Rosas, the notorious dictator of Buenos Aires province during the early 19th Century, formed personal armies by arming their *clientes* on their estates and enlisting the support of other *hacendados* allied with him through kinship, *compadrazgo*, or intermarriage. *Caudillos* (literally charismatic leaders) used this system to dominate Latin American politics during the 19th Century.

Patron-client networks organize urban society as well. Mexico’s “one party-democracy” of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), which has governed since 1929, is based on competition between different patron-client networks (*camarillas*) within the party. When the *patrón* of one *camarilla* advances to a higher government post, all of their *clientes* also move up the latter. *Clientes* have strong expectations about the duties of their *patrón*, as the Rockefeller Foundation discovered when it granted scholarships for U.S. study to young Mexican agricultural scientists, thereby becoming their *patrón*, but then failed to help them get the best jobs in Mexico’s Ministry of Agriculture. The officers of the Foundation could not understand why their grantees complained after they returned to Mexico. In Latin America *personalismo* has worked against the strength of political parties because followers are loyal to the leader, not to their organization. It will be interesting to see

what happens to Cuban socialism after its *caudillo* Fidel Castro leaves power.

The Spanish Conquest of Latin America forged a society from the fusion of European, Native American, and African peoples. During the colonial era the Spanish Crown developed the *sistema de castas* (literally caste system) in which the different “pure” and mixed racial groups in society were ranked in a hierarchical system. Europeans (who made the system) were on top, *mestizos*, people of European and Native American ancestry, occupied the next rung, *mulatos*, people of European and African ancestry the next, Africans, stigmatized by slavery, the next, and Native Americans, defined as not fully adult (“*sin razón*,” literally “without reason”) were on the bottom. Each group was subject to different laws, subordinate groups were banned from some occupations (*mestizos* could become master armourers, but *mulatos* could not), and paid different taxes (Native Americans and free blacks paid tribute, a tax based on race). Hispanic *machismo* also defined women as inferior to men. During the colonial period elite women were confined to the home and subject to much control by male family members.

The combination of the patron-client system and the *sistema de castas* produced a society that was profoundly hierarchical. All men were not created equal, and women were not equal to men. To Juan Manuel de Rosas, members of an ideal society recognized the principle of *subordinación*, the notion that everyone should know their place in the hierarchy and act accordingly. Although the Latin American nations abolished legal distinctions between the races at or sometime after independence, race continued to correlate strongly with social class status (darker being poorer), and the region’s elites frequently viewed the masses of color with disdain and/or racism. During the 1930s Latin American “fascists” strove to avert social “disorder” and chaos caused by the politicization of the working class and peasantry. Mexican agronomists believed that the “backwardness,” “superstition,” and “laziness” of Native Americans caused the nation’s low farm productivity.

I have witnessed the hierarchical nature of Latin American society first-hand. I stood behind two Native Americans waiting for an elevator in a Mexico City high-rise. Suddenly two “whites” in business suits walked past me and the Native Americans, cutting between them and the elevator door. They took a half step backward and did not protest, reflecting their internalization of social norms of interaction between the “races” of Mexico. The prevalence of “white”-looking performers in the Hispanic media, the attitude of Guatemalan elites regarding “subversive” Native Americans in their country, and the Bolivian notion that “our Indians need coca” all reflect the persistence of a hierarchical world view ranked by class, race and culture.

During the colonial era the heads of elite families typically arranged marriages to form ties of “*la familia*” among themselves and to maintain the racial “*limpieza de sangre*” (literally purity of blood) of their lineage. This served to link powerful *patrones* to one another, and the “*criollo*” elite bonded by blood, creating the “*confianza*” needed for collaborative action. Colonial elites staffed the ranks of the colonial clergy and dominated local politics through institutions like the *cabildo* (town council), which gave out mining permits and land grants. Thus political power was translated into economic power. Further, Spain paid most of its colonial bureaucrats low salaries, and sold some powerful positions to the highest bidder. It was perfectly acceptable for office holders to use their political power for personal gain. Even the most powerful and well-paid colonial officials like the Viceroy's did this on some occasions.

When *Peninsulare* (Spanish immigrant) Viceroy's and other high colonial officials served in the New World, colonial elites coopted them by intermarriage and *compadrazgo*. They often came to see issues in a new light. When the King issued an unpopular law for the colonies, the Viceroy's often

replied “*obedezco pero no cumpro.*” (I obey but do not comply), and accompanied this response with a long list of complaints from the citizens of the colony. Further, the colonies chafed under monopolistic Spanish trade policies and welcomed most any opportunity to deal with foreign smugglers and circumvent the law. Thus the “law” did not always “rule” in colonial Latin America.

Since independence the problem of “corruption” has affected the Latin American nations. For example, Guatemalan dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920) happily accepted payoffs from the United Fruit Company. In 1975 Honduran “President” General Oswaldo Lopez Orellano was deposed by his army after the “bananagate” scandal involving similar bribes was revealed. Corruption flourished in Mexico during the age of Porfirio Diaz (1876-1910), who had a railroad line built to the hacienda of his mistress. The recent legal problems of ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and his brother Raul demonstrate that ten years of Revolution (1910-1920) and 68 more of one party rule did not put an end to it. The involvement of Mexican border town police in auto theft rings illustrates that corruption is rife at the local level. Most citizens and visitors “in the know” will avoid the police if they can. In 1990 a Mexico City policeman pulled my friend Enrique Ochoa, a part-Nicaraguan from Los Angeles, California, for driving his car (which had California plates) on the “*dia sin auto*” (residents cannot drive their car on certain days based on the last digit in their license plate, a measure adopted to reduce air pollution, which is among the world’s worst). Despite Enrique’s protestation that he did not know the law applied to cars with foreign plates, the officer informed him that his car would be impounded (and hence probably dismembered) and that he would be fined 150 U.S. dollars. Enrique offered the officer a “*mordida*” (bribe) of 20 U.S. dollars, and then received a police escort to his front door. Other U.S. citizens who have visited Latin America report similar experiences.

The weakness of the rule of law has also affected Latin America since independence. Even leaders who wrote Constitutions resorted to force when the elections they mandated turned them out of office, as happened in Mexico in 1828. During the 19th century barracks revolutions and coup d’ etats swept the region, and in the 20th Latin American military forces have overthrown a number of elected governments, such as Brazil’s Joao Goulart (1964). Despite a general trend toward political openings, detente with revolutionary groups, and the return of constitutional rule, the recent actions of Peru’s President Alberto Fujimori demonstrate that old patterns persist in the region. The long-term success of “redemocratization” depends to some extent on reversing these long historical legacies.

I have examined several aspects of Hispanic culture that may present problems as the nations of Latin America enter the 21st Century. Hence, it is by no means a full overview of what “gives meaning to life” for Hispanic people. Indeed, “*la familia*” has been a source of strength and cultural continuity for Hispanic people confronted with the rapid changes induced by modernity. Mexican teenagers dance to music their grandparents knew at village festivals, and family members continue to help their kin with the process of migration, including to “*el norte.*” Patron-client bonds provide a social safety net when many region’s nations are too poor to do so. Racism affects Latin America today, but the Hispanic system of race relations and racial identification ameliorates it to some extent. Corruption still plagues many political systems and arms of the state like police agencies, but some of the guilty are punished and awareness of the problem continues to grow. Hispanic culture has an innate vitality that has been a source of strength in the face of the many obstacles that Latin American people have faced and continue to confront.

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

by Ralph Watkins

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world - a world which yields him no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. ... One ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

W. E. B. Du Bois
“*Strivings of the Negro People*,” 1897

Belonging yet not belonging presents peculiar challenges. ... I have developed the term *outsider-within* to describe social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power. Individuals gain or lose identities as “outsiders within” by their placement in these social locations.

Patricia Hill Collins
“*Fighting Words: Black Women & The Search for Justice*,” 1998

Introduction

Identity and meaning for life is arrived at in a social world. One cannot begin to discuss this topic without accessing the central frame for the development of identity. Moreover the designator of meaning is inextricably linked to identity. As one defines oneself in the context of the social world this in turn provides the platform from which meaning and self-worth are eventually arrived at. Therefore for African-Americans the social constructs of the larger societal structure in which they live must be considered in this discussion. There are some who deny the reality of race as a biological construct, and still others who choose to ignore the social construct of race, but in the final analysis the social construct of race continues to play a dominant role in the lives of African-Americans and Americans in general. So we start with race in this discussion as we reflect upon meaning, worth and life for African-Americans. Let me quote Patricia Hill Collins again, “I see a great difference in trying to speak *to* someone, *with* someone, or *for* someone. Each suggest a different power relationship between the speaker-author and the intended or accidental audience and /or constituency.”² To claim

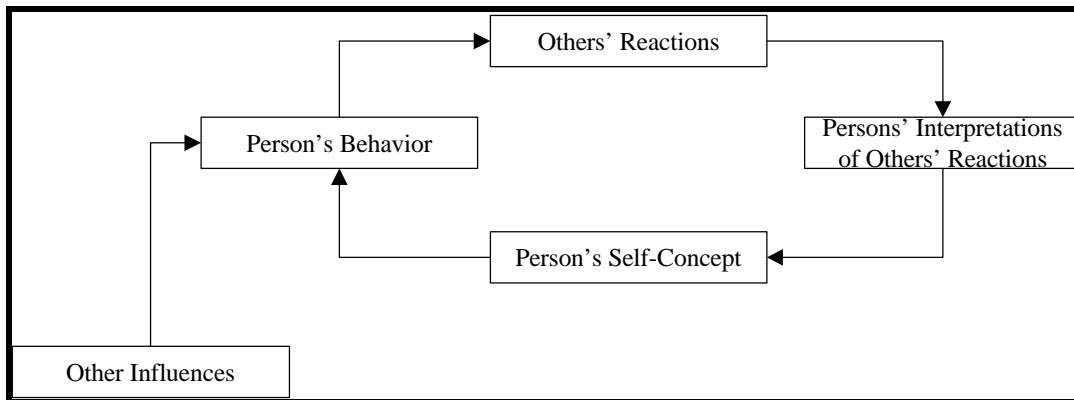
² Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women & the Search for Justice*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), xxi.

to speak for African-Americans is too broad a claim for this reflective statement. To claim to speak with African-Americans is also an inappropriate label for the audience this is written for is primarily non-African-American. Therefore I would prefer to label this reflective statement, “personal musings” on the topic assigned.

The Power of the Social-Construction of Identity: The Looking-Glass Self

Charles H. Cooley coined the term the looking-glass self to describe the process whereby human development is created through interaction with others. The process (which is lifelong) contains three steps (see figure):

1. We imagine how we look to others;
2. We interpret others’ reactions (how they evaluate us); and
3. We develop a self-concept, even if it is erroneous, of the social-self.



The Looking-Glass Self

The looking glass-self is not meant to imply a deterministic model of self-interpretations but rather in reveals or suggest a process by which the development of the self comes about in the context of the social world. If we take this paradigm or model as designed by Cooley and apply as an analytical frame in our effort to discuss identity formation, meaning and self-worth for African-Americans we can't excuse the race factor. The primary reaction of the other to African-Americans tends to be based in the race frame. Even those who claim not to see color or tout color blindness as the ideal must admit they see color. For someone to deny my ethnic and racial identity, or I those, is in essence to disregard a part of the revealed social identifier by which we come to recognize each other. It is my revealed or presented self that elicits a response and interaction in the context of the social world. To negate a part of someone revealed self, race, marital status, sex, etc. is essentially to ignore portions of one's identity. The problem for many who want to deny the “race issue” is heavily linked to the socially negative connotations that have ben ascribe to race. On the other hand to recognize that part of me which you see and for me to respond in the process of the looking-glass-self, this process has the promise of producing a genuine social exchange.

For African-Americans the primary and most obvious component of the revealed social self is

race. It is something we walk in the door with. Moreover it has become a social construct that has dominated the American cultural landscape. Therefore the primary construct of identity formation is rooted in the frame of race for many African-Americans. It is both a process and social product of the larger social structure that is nurtured through the evolving experience of the looking-glass-self. For African-Americans race has become the identity prison of a world obsessed with the social construct of race. W. E. B. Du Bois, the Harvard trained, African-American sociologist, described the prison like effect the concept of race has for many African-Americans. In his essay entitled, *The Concept of Race*, Du Bois helps us make sense of the power of the socio-political construct of race:

Practically, this group imprisonment, within a group has various effects upon the prisoner. He (African-Americans) becomes provincial and centered upon the problems of his particular group. He tends to neglect the wider aspects on national life and human existence. On the one hand he is unselfish so far as his inner group is concerned. He thinks of himself not as an individual but as a group man, a “race” man. His loyalty to this group idea tends to be almost unending and balks at almost no sacrifice. On the other hand, his attitude toward the environing race congeals into a matter of unreasoning resentment and even hatred, deep disbelief in them and refusal to conceive honesty and rational thought on their part. This attitude adds to the difficulties of conversation, intercourse, understanding between groups.³

The construct of race is so strong that it captures primary attention in the identity formation of African-Americans. He or she is never allowed to forget his or her race. They are constantly reminded by social cues of their racial identity. In the process of social interaction the race factor serves to place limits on the potential for interaction with the other. Interactions become set in a type of race frame, at some point in time, regardless to how much the social actors want to negate the power of the social construct of race. Therefore for African-Americans the race becomes one of the central factors in identity development and in the search for meaning in life.

Finding Meaning in Life: A Life Worth Living

Many African-Americans operate out of the race frame as he or she begins to act within the social world. Their surroundings, political, economic, cultural and natural, are perceived through the lens of race. Whenever they attempt to ignore this very vivid social reality someone has a way of waking them and reminding them they are indeed Black! Even Supreme Court Justice, Clarence Thomas, proclaimed at the end of his confirmation hearings, “I am Black”. America gave Justice Thomas a wake up call. The focus of these personal musings raise the question, “how do African-Americans effectively deal with life, find worth and meaning in within in the confines of a racist society?” The answer in short colloquial language is, “they deal with it!” African-Americans are constantly struggling to define themselves and defend themselves in a society that has attempted to reduce them to the category of the “other”. They have to simultaneously take both an offensive and defensive posture. The group consciousness of African-Americans also has a backlash of supporting the larger

³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, (NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1988 [1940]), 132.

societies lumping all African-Americans together. It is out this social frame that a life philosophy is developed on an individual basis. Each African-American, like anyone else, first constructs some type of life philosophy. The uniqueness, and common element for African-Americans, is the process and power of the race frame.

As one constructs a life philosophy, it is out of that philosophy, that meaning and life worth emerge. It is out of the frame of the operating life philosophy that one discovers meaning, purpose, worth and “calling.” In the lives of many Africa-Americans the key component of their life philosophy is linked to the idea of struggle. There is a constant struggle to negotiate the minefield of racial politics in a land that has constantly devalued the Black self. African-Americans are constantly having to redefine themselves in a social world that bombards them with negative messages about Blacks. Therefore the power in the development of a life philosophy is set in the frame of *resistive redefinition*. Resistive redefinition is the constant flipping or decoding African-Americans engage in as they reinterpret the larger social worlds negative interpretation of them by transforming those definitions into positive, powerful philosophical constructs. Once one enters into the resistive redefinition process a life philosophy begins to emerge.

A life philosophy births meaning and as one searches to define oneself in the larger social world they make a decision about the worth or the possibility of making a life worth living. We find among some African-American teenagers that they have decided that life isn't worth living. The oppressive conditions in some of the urban ghettos is so overwhelming, and the prospects of long life so dim, that many have given up hope. They appear not to have been given the time, place, or space to develop a life philosophy of resistive redefinition. They have been consumed by the power of hopelessness and falling prey to the prescriptive roles as outlined for them by the mass media and the other social forces that negates their self-worth. When one is absent any sense of self-worth life becomes meaningless and one questions if life is worth living. For many inner city African-American youth the question, is life worth living, is posed in socio-structural world that has denied them any real opportunity of escaping the world of poverty. Recent social research by William J. Wilson and others suggest that we have a permanent, immobilized, underclass that have little if any hope of escaping the grips of poverty. The pain and despair associated with living in poverty, in the land of the free and home of the brave, has a paralyzing affect on the minds hopes and dreams of young African-Americans who find themselves in the throes of the ghetto.

On the other hand there are some who brave the struggle. They creatively enter into the resistive redefinition process and they fight to make a life worth living. They come to some meaningful definition of the self, in the context of their social group, and they survive. These are those who have been able to construct philosophical foundations from which they can search for meaning. They have been able to withstand the mixed messages of what it means to “Black” in America. The foundation in this struggle, for all African-American youth, is the progressive power of the race frame. This frame is and will continue to be the obsession of America. African-Americans will, as they always have, struggle to arrive at meaning, self-worth and discover a life worth living in the context of the overarching frame of what it means to be an African-American.