English 167H: The Ethical Gangster: Especially Juicy Moral Dilemmas and the Moral Psychology that Underlies Them
Monday and Wednesday, 9:30-11:20 and Section (Section Times to be Announced)

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“Capitalism is the legitimate racket of the ruling class”---Al Capone

Since the 17th century, stories about gangsters—hardened, often violent criminals who build networks of criminal activity and operate outside the norms of ordinary society—have magnetized poets, fiction writers, and filmmakers. I want to probe this fascination.

It is a striking and perhaps unappreciated fact of modern literature that much very direct moral talk—talk about moral dilemmas, talk about how to behave in ethically challenging situations, talk about serious ethical compromises and lapses—gets presented to us through gangster fiction—not just crime fiction, but fiction about organized crime. Why should this genre, in particular, be so fruitful for the dramatic staging of ethical challenges? In this course we will address the question of why gangster fiction has been so popular and what its popularity can tell us about characteristically modern ethical dilemmas and core issues in moral psychology.

The class will consider such topics as when and under what conditions we root for evil; the so-called puzzle of imaginative resistance (dating to Hume, who claimed that we resist fictional scenarios that challenge our moral intuitions much more readily than we resist scenarios that just seem implausible); how moral
dilemmas—especially those involving the greatest good for the greatest number—are framed with reference to competing interest groups; and why tribes (and their breakdown in the modern world) are an especially fruitful background for the sorts of fictional scenarios that prime our ethical intuitions. These core issues include the nature of justice and injustice, what it means to live an ethical life, whether moral psychology is fixed or changes in relation to circumstances, the relative nature of good and evil, and the difference between gangsters and successful legitimate politicians who use similar methods.

**Watch**

Chase, David. “The Sopranos” (Selections)
Cooper, Scott. “Black Mass”
Glazer, Jonathan. “Sexy Beast”
Kazan, Elia. “On the Waterfront”
LeRoy, Mervyn. “Little Caesar”
Howard Hawks, “Scarface”
Newell, Mike. “Donnie Brasco”
Scorsese, Martin. “The Departed”
Scorsese, Martin. “Goodfellas”
Tarantino, Quentin. “Pulp Fiction”

**Read**


Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Week 1  Omerta/Uomo

January 4  Introduction to Class
            Watch “Little Caesar” in class

January 6  Read Freakonomics, Chapter 3 “Why Do Drug Dealers Still Live with Their Moms?”
            Watch “Scarface” (1932) in class

Week 2  Omerta/Uomo continued

January 11 Read Baumeister, chapters 1-3
            Watch “On the Waterfront”

January 13 Baumeister chapters 5-8
            “Waterfront” discussion continued

Week 3  Good and Evil

January 18  MLK Jr. Day no class.

January 20  Read Baumeister, chapters 9 and 11 (10 is optional)
Watch “The Departed”

Week 4 The Godfather

January 25 Read Bloom (chapters 1-3)
Watch “Sexy Beast”

January 27 Watch “The Godfather”; Read Bloom (chapter 4)

Week 5 The Godfather’s Legacy

February 1 Watch “The Godfather Part 2” (Bloom Chapter 5)

February 3 Watch “Goodfellas” (Bloom Chapter 6)

Week 6 The Godfather and His Legacy continued

February 8 Watch “Donnie Brasco” (Bloom Chapter 7)

February 10 Read Haidt, Righteous Mind selections

Week 7 Tribes and Tribal Ethics

February 15 President’s Day No Class

February 17 Read Greene (first quarter);
Watch “The Sopranos” (selections)

Week 8

February 22 Read Greene (second quarter)
Sopranos continued

February 24  Greene (third quarter); Sopranos (selections)

Week 9  Tribes and Tribal Ethics continued

February 29  Read Greene (finish)
Sopranos continued

March 2  Watch “Black Mass”

Week 10  Wrap up: Tarantino, comic genius

March 7  Watch “Pulp Fiction”

Course requirements:

All students must read, attend lecture and section, and participate in class. Beyond that, your work load will be determined by the number of units you are taking.

We will have a reading and or watching quiz at every lecture, so please be prepared to answer a short focused question about the reading and/or film.

You may take this class for 3, 4, or 5 units.

Work load for each unit count:

If you are taking the class for 3 units:
3 units means 9 hours of work per week (including lecture and section)

(Lecture and Section = 5 hours)

Daily quizzes, one 1000-word paper, one take-home final exam, due at the end of the regularly scheduled examination time for this class

4 units means 12 hours of work per week (including lecture and section)

Daily quizzes, two 1250-word papers, one take-home final exam, due at the end of the regularly scheduled examination time for this class

5 units means 15 hours of work per week (including lecture and section)

Daily quizzes, three 1500-word papers, one take-home final exam, due at the end of the regularly scheduled examination time for this class

English majors must take the class for 5 units

Required Texts (Available in the Bookstore, although all of these are also available as electronic books).

Copies of the films will be placed on reserve in Green Library.
I will supply one copy to the class every week so you can take it and watch it together on your own.
Please also subscribe to Netflix or to some other video rental site (iTunes, Amazon, Google Play etc.)

Canvas: Other required readings will be announced along the way and available via the “Materials” section of our Canvas site. Please also check the Canvas site for announcements regarding readings and assignments, and for supporting materials and links.

Policies and Expectations

I have a strict no gadget policy including laptops. Please switch off phones and other electronics. I will consider exceptions to this rule in cases of compelling need.

Students with Documented Disabilities
Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oaer).

Honor Code
The Honor Code is the University’s statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work:
The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

1. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading.
2. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.
3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.
4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.