

The Midwest Faculty Seminar
Presents
The Dialectic of Enlightenment
January 15-17, 2009

EXILED TO CALIFORNIA DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, THE GERMAN SCHOLARS THEODOR ADORNO AND MAX HORKHEIMER PRODUCED FIVE "PHILOSOPHICAL FRAGMENTS" OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS REFLECTING ON THE FAILURES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT. THEIR *DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT* ANSWERS THE QUESTION "WHY MANKIND, INSTEAD OF ENTERING INTO A TRULY HUMAN CONDITION, IS SINKING INTO A NEW KIND OF BARBARISM." AFTER ITS PUBLICATION IN 1947, THE TEXT BECAME THE CENTERPIECE OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL'S CANON OF CRITICAL THEORY AND HAS SINCE INFLUENCED SCHOLARLY WORK THROUGHOUT THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES. THE SEMINAR WILL EXAMINE THIS PROVOCATIVE ACCOUNT OF HISTORY AND CULTURE FROM SEVERAL PERSPECTIVES, ASKING HOW A BOOK WRITTEN UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE HOLOCAUST CAN STILL SPEAK TO US TODAY.

THE FIVE ESSAYS IN THE BOOK INCLUDE A HISTORY OF ENLIGHTENMENT; ANALYSES OF WORKS BY HOMER, KANT, SADE, AND NIETZSCHE; AESTHETIC AND POLITICAL CRITICISM OF CINEMA AND RADIO; AND AN EFFORT TO ACCOUNT FOR THE RISE OF ANTI-SEMITISM. THROUGHOUT THESE SEGMENTS ADORNO AND HORKHEIMER HOLD THAT SOCIAL FREEDOM IS THE PURPOSE OF ENLIGHTENMENT. BUT, THEY ARGUE, AS ENLIGHTENMENT VALUES ELEVATED SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT OVER PREMODERN MAGIC, THEY SOWED THE SEEDS OF THEIR OWN FAILURE. RATIONALITY, STATISTICS, AND PRAGMATISM FAILED TO ACCOMMODATE ESSENTIAL HUMAN NEEDS LIKE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND AESTHETIC DELIGHT. IN ITS ATTEMPT TO PURIFY ITSELF OF SUBJECTIVE ERROR, THE ENLIGHTENMENT CREATED A DESIRE FOR JUST THOSE FORCES IT HAD SOUGHT TO EXTINGUISH. THUS THE "CANDY-FLOSS ENTERTAINMENT" OF MASS CULTURE AND THE ARBITRARY AUTHORITY OF THE RULING CLASS ARE EMBRACED BY THE PEOPLE, ENSURING THEIR OWN CONTINUED SUBJECTION. YET ENLIGHTENMENT STILL CONTAINS WITHIN IT UTOPIAN POSSIBILITIES: AS IT DISSEMINATES KNOWLEDGE AND SHOWS THE TRUE NATURE OF POWER, THE MASSES CAN LEARN HOW TO THROW OFF DOMINATION.

PREFACING A 1969 EDITION OF THE BOOK, ADORNO AND HORKHEIMER ADMIT THAT THEY CAN NO LONGER SUPPORT ALL OF ITS CLAIMS: "THAT WOULD BE IRRECONCILABLE WITH A THEORY WHICH HOLDS THAT THE CORE OF TRUTH IS HISTORICAL, RATHER THAN AN UNCHANGING CONSTANT TO BE SET AGAINST THE MOVEMENT OF HISTORY." AS WE LOOK AT THIS WORK 60 YEARS AFTER ITS ORIGINAL PUBLICATION, WE MUST ASK WHY ITS ARGUMENTS ABOUT CULTURE AND POLITICS ARE STILL OF SO MUCH INTEREST TO SCHOLARS OF OUR OWN HISTORICAL MOMENT. WHAT DOES *THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT* HAVE TO TEACH US IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF GLOBAL MARKETS, DECREASING DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN HIGH AND LOW ART, AND A LEVEL OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND ENTERTAINMENT THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN UNTHINKABLE TO THE AUTHORS? TO WHAT EXTENT ARE WE STILL LYING IN THE CULTURE THAT PRODUCED FASCISM, NAZISM, AND RUNAWAY CAPITALISM?

THIS SEMINAR WILL INCLUDE TALKS BY MIRIAM HANSEN (ENGLISH), MOISHE POSTONE (HISTORY), DAVID WELLBERY (GERMAN), WILLIAM MAZZARELLA (ANTHROPOLOGY), AND ANITA CHARI (POLITICAL SCIENCE). WE RECOMMEND THE 2002 STANFORD EDITION OF THE TEXT.