Dear Colleague,

Thank you very much for your interest in the NEH Summer Seminar, “German Exile Culture in California,” which will take place at Stanford University June 25 though August 3, 2007. I am looking forward to inviting a group of scholars with varying perspectives and from a wide range of disciplines. We will participate in a collaborative exploration of the lively intellectual world of the writers, philosophers, musicians and film directors who escaped Nazi Germany and gathered in California, especially Los Angeles, where their European traditions directly encountered the modernity of American mass culture. I am very excited about the prospect of the seminar. We’ll have a lot to talk about and a chance to learn from each other’s expertise. In this letter, I begin with a discussion of the intellectual scope of the seminar and its approach, before proceeding to other important information about the organization, logistics, and the application procedure. Separate documents include specific information about the application process and the syllabus of readings. **All readings and seminar discussion will be in English.**

Some of the intellectuals who fled Hitler left Germany because of their religion, others because of their political affiliations, and some out of a general revulsion at the nature of the new regime. Germans fled to locations as distant as China, South Africa, and Argentina, but the United States was a preferred destination. While most (although not all) refugees arrived in the port cities of the East Coast, many eventually made their way to California, especially to the Los Angeles region. The film industry in Hollywood exercised a magnetic pull on new arrivals, as of course it did for many Americans. An extraordinary concentration of creative talent ensued. To be sure, not all German refugees came to California, nor were all involved in the arts, broadly defined: one need think only of Albert Einstein, for example, at Princeton and his role in the Manhattan Project. However the German exile in community in Los Angeles is especially interesting because of its importance to the core humanities fields of literature, cultural theory, music and film.

In addition, this particular exile experience was defined by the confrontation between “old-world” understandings of culture and the very different presuppositions underlying American cultural habits. (These refugees often viewed California as the epitome of American culture, a common European bias). These differences involved alternative estimations of the categories of “high” and “low” culture, problems of commercialization, and the prospects for a specifically democratic culture. Studying this exile community involves both an examination of a particularly rich chapter in the cultural history of the twentieth century and an exploration of broad issues still relevant today: the relationship between culture and democracy, and between traditional European understandings of (high) culture and the modernity of American democracy.

The readings for the seminar will consist of works by a core group of exiles: the novelist Thomas Mann, the playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht, the philosopher and essayist Theodor Adorno, the film director Fritz Lang, and the composers Arnold Schoenberg and
Hanns Eisler. This range of figures will allow the seminar to span several areas of the humanities: literature, theater, philosophy (cultural theory), cinema, and music. Each figure is quite interesting on his own, but I am also very eager to think about the dynamics of the group and the rich network of relationships—collaborations, as well as competition, even enmity. The patrician Mann, as the unofficial representative of the German exile community and with ties to President Roosevelt, was the object of bitter hostility from Brecht, with his plebian posturing and communist sympathies. Adorno was quite close to Mann (who quoted liberally from Adorno’s music theory in his writing) and to Lang, for whom Brecht wrote the screenplay for the anti-Nazi film, *Hangmen Also Die*. Eisler contributed the musical score to that film, and he collaborated with Adorno on their book *Composing for the Films*. His erstwhile mentor, Schoenberg, meanwhile is the source of Mann’s treatment of twelve-tone composition in *Doctor Faustus*.

Of course, there were many other Germans in the creative professions in Hollywood (such as the movie stars Marlene Dietrich and Peter Lorre) or elsewhere in the United States (such as Brecht’s erstwhile collaborator, Kurt Weill, who pursued a career as a composer for Broadway). I would be delighted to include participants in the seminar interested in exploring them, although we will focus on the six central figures. The seminar will approach them in light of three overriding themes-- the place of politics in art, democratic culture in the American experience, and the tension between modernism and popular mass culture. While these topics were part of the historical moment of the exile culture, they remain pertinent to concerns in the humanities today. Let me say a few words about each.

**Art and Politics:** The insistence that works of art have a political mission or that artists (a term referring not only to visual artists but also to writers and musicians) have an obligation to respond to political challenges followed from the very fact of exile: these émigrés had fled Germany because of the National Socialist accession to power, and they were committed to contributing to the defeat of that regime. After the American entry into the war, the exiles’ engaged anti-fascism became congruent with American foreign policy and the mass sentiment of the American public. Yet despite the alignment of the exiles with contemporary American political orientations in the fight against Hitler, their approach to the politics of art derived from a German philosophical tradition suddenly transplanted into the center of the new mass culture. The exiles also inherited the world-war-one era spirit of expressionism and the avant-garde: the belief that a new art could usher in a new social order. For Mann and Adorno, the political province of the work of art was located primarily in its formal integrity; for Brecht and Eisler, more emphatically engaged and activist expression was at stake. Schoenberg and Lang, in different ways, could straddle the fence, sometimes addressing politics but holding back from agitation. These concerns with political aesthetics are symptomatic of the historical circumstances, but they also shed light on humanistic questions about the public significance of literature and the arts today.

**Culture and American Democracy:** The German arrivals in California typically saw themselves as “European,” a term which, much more than a sign of geographical provenance, suggested an elite cultural legacy and a set of traditions presumed, frequently, to be at odds with a democratic America, which was viewed with a mix of
relief and apprehension. Of course, the refugees from a violent dictatorship were relieved to find safety, as they welcomed the freedom and rights, which America provided them. Yet, they also brought with them an apprehension about democracy that had long circulated in Europe: the anxiety that democracy could level culture, mowing down elite achievements and replacing them with mediocrity. While these fears about an American cultural deficit were common throughout Europe—and they have resurfaced in the recent discussions about the cultural roots of European anti-Americanism—the matter was particularly salient for Germans. During the First World War, German nationalists insisted on their cultural superiority, which in turn elicited a harsh response, especially in the United States, where leading intellectuals denounced the authoritarianism allegedly inherent in German—or “Prussian”—Kultur. This debate over the difference between elite European culture and American democracy was amplified during the Weimar Republic by fears of “Americanism,” i.e., the spread of a new mass culture, perceived as emanating from America and inimical to German traditions. With the refugees’ arrival not merely in the United States but at the very epicenter of commercial mass culture—Hollywood—all these debates reemerged.

Modernist Culture: As traditionalist as some of the refugees’ underlying assumptions may have been, they were also heirs to European modernism, the effervescent innovation that played itself out across the arts at the end of the nineteenth century and during the first decades of the twentieth. Schoenberg’s compositional innovations, for example, are widely recognized as a definitive rejection of nineteenth-century romantic practices. Similarly—albeit with very different aspirations and intents—Brecht’s elaboration of his program for an “epic theater” represented a deep break with established theatrical conventions. The seminar will therefore engage the question of modernism, with however an emphasis on one particular aspect: the reconsideration of the relationship between “high” modernist culture and the new forms of mass culture, especially cinema. German exile culture, especially in the shadow of Hollywood, had to grapple with the question of new mass-cultural forms, particularly in the wake of the successful utilization of film for propaganda purposes in Nazi Germany, such as Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*. Lang himself could have returned to Germany to oversee the Nazi film industry; he chose to stay in Hollywood. Adorno, collaborating with Max Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, posited his theory of the “culture industry,” deeply suspicious of the conformism elicited by the mass culture. Meanwhile Brecht, Eisler, and Lang worked together on the anti-Nazi film, *Hangmen Also Die*. The seminar will dissect this combination of suspicion and enthusiasm about film in the exile community of the early 1940s, but it will also consider how our new media landscape today, sixty years later—the spread of new electronic technologies, from DVDs to the internet—can give us an important historical distance and perspective on these questions. While the émigrés were concerned with modernism and mass culture, our contemporary framework has been colored by post-modernism and the fragmenting of mass culture into identity communities and privatized forms of cultural reception (contrast the public space of the giant movie palaces of the 1940s with on-demand film viewing at home).

The seminar will explore these three areas—the relationship between politics and art, the conflict between European cultural conservatism and American democracy, and the positioning of modernism toward mass culture—through the examination of a set of texts
that emerged in the German exile culture in Los Angeles of the 1930s and 1940s. Considering works by Mann, Brecht, Adorno, Lang, Schoenberg and Eisler (and with side glances to other figures, such as Weill) will allow the seminar participants to gain a deeper and interdisciplinary understanding of the intellectual underpinnings of this rich configuration of humanistic creativity. We will however also be able to bring to bear our early twenty-first century perspectives on this material, which retains important significance today for our understanding of aesthetic works. Questions of aesthetic politics, democratic culture, and new technological media continue to concern the humanities; studying the German exiles in California in the 1940s provides a distant mirror that helps us better understand problems in the arts and aesthetic theory today.

I look forward to working with the participants collaboratively and collegially. On the basis of my having previously directed two NEH Summer Seminars (on other topics), I am certain that I will benefit from the varied specializations represented in the group and from our shared efforts. A few words about my own background and approach are in order. I am a member of the faculty of the Department of German Studies at Stanford, where I also chair the Department of Comparative Literature. My scholarship includes several discussions of Thomas Mann (whose work I have taught on many occasions), and I have written frequently on the tradition of “Critical Theory” in which Adorno is the defining figure. I have also edited two volumes of essays on Schoenberg and retain a theater-goer’s fascination with Brecht and Brechtian aesthetics. (Last year I saw Three Penny Opera in New York, and Happy End in San Francisco). Yet I am not only interested in these figures individually: I see this configuration of material as an opportunity to deepen my own interests in problems of cultural modernity, the status of traditions and the possibilities of art in mass culture.

Applications are welcome from scholars in German Studies, since our central figures obviously developed within the German cultural tradition. I am equally eager to open the seminar to scholars from American Studies: this is very much about US culture in the 1940s and the interaction with an intellectual immigrant group. Applicants are welcome from scholars in the fields of history, literature, musicology, art history, film studies, philosophy, Jewish Studies, drama and theater studies. The list is not meant to be exclusionary: if you believe you can bring some other pertinent expertise to the table, feel free to apply (or to contact me directly). All required readings will be in English.

I expect that all seminar participants will be pursuing careers involved in the teaching of undergraduates in American higher education or to be in a position to contribute directly to such education (such as certain museum or library professionals). Independent scholars may also apply. I am especially eager to find colleagues who plan to continue to work in this area and who would come to the seminar with a specific project in mind: be it a planned article or a book project or a curriculum design or some other clear goal. The point of the summer seminar is to provide a framework for scholars working in this area to share their approaches and their current work.

The seminar will meet three times a week for two-hour sessions; Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. The first session will take place on Monday, June 25; our last meeting
will be on Thursday, August 2. Normally, the Monday and Wednesday sessions will be devoted to the discussion of particular texts. Given the seminar format, one or two participants will initiate the discussion with brief presentations (no more than twenty minutes) on the material, highlighting areas of particular importance and/or pointing the group toward questions and criticisms. These presentations will be assigned at the first session. Presenters should provide hand-outs with their key points, any bibliographic references, and—where appropriate—other short material from their areas of expertise that could help illuminate the assigned readings. For example, a participant with expertise in theater might display images of famous performances and discuss issues of staging.

The Thursday meetings will normally be used for supplementary activities, especially the presentation by participants of their own projects in order to share them with the group and to benefit from the group’s comments. While I expect that these project presentations will take place mainly in the second half of the six-week period, I welcome presentations earlier from colleagues who are eager to ‘front-load” collegial in-put.

I will hold individual office hours regularly during the seminar, and participants are urged to take advantage of these times for consultation on their topics or on the seminar discussion. In any case, all participants will be expected to meet with me at least twice: once during the first week (these appointments will be scheduled at the first session), and once later in the summer. I am conducting the seminar in the hope of providing substantial assistance to the participants on their projects and want to underscore my availability for consultation.

Stanford University maintains an extraordinarily rich collection of libraries and archives. Of particular interest to seminar participants are the Cecil H. Green Library (the main research library at Stanford) with nearly three million volumes, as well as 6,500 current periodicals and 350 current newspapers; and the Library and Archive of the Hoover Institution. The Hoover collection focuses on twentieth-century political movements and is a quite exceptional resource for the seminar: 1.6 million volumes and some sixty million documents in the archive.

Green Library summer hours are Monday-Thursday 8 AM- 9PM; Friday 8 AM-6 PM; Saturday 9 AM- 5PM; and Sunday 1 PM- 9 PM. The Hoover library summer hours are Monday – Friday 8 AM – 5 PM. Further information about the Stanford University Libraries is available at http://www-sul.stanford.edu/. The resources of the Hoover Institution are described at http://www-hoover.stanford.edu/hila/.

On-line access to Stanford library catalogues is largely available, especially for scholars with Stanford email accounts. This will be provided to seminar participants for the duration of the seminar.

The seminar, will take place in the Department of German Studies, which is part of the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages, the umbrella grouping of the modern languages at Stanford. The advantage of this location, in the midst of the foreign language departments, is the relatively easy access to colleagues with various national literature specializations. Seminar participants will be able to contact colleagues in their areas of
research (summer travel plans permitting). A reception will be held very early during the seminar to which interested faculty from all relevant departments will be invited in order to establish contacts for the seminar participants. I am eager to help establish contacts between seminar participants and other Stanford faculty with appropriate interests.

For the six-week seminar, participants receive a stipend of $4,200, in two payments: the first to be paid soon after their arrival at Stanford, and the second about half-way through the seminar. Participants are responsible for paying for their housing and meals.

Studio units will be available for rent on campus, in a graduate student housing area. The cost will be about $49/night. These units are a twenty-minute walk to the library and the seminar location; there is however also a campus bus system, and bicycles are popular. Participants may also choose to live elsewhere and make their own arrangements.

Seminar participants will be given “Visiting Scholar” status. (The status is dependant on having completed a Ph.D., which is typically the case in NEH seminars; different arrangements would have to be made for an “ABD” participant). Visiting Scholars are entitled to make use of many university facilities; the status does not, however, provide for telephone privileges or individual photocopying needs. Access to the Stanford computing network will be provided; you are strongly urged to bring your own computer, however, as well as your own printer.

Stanford University is located next to Palo Alto, California, with easy train connections to San Francisco and San Jose, and their enormous diversity of museums, recreation, and restaurants. A drive to the ocean can take 40 minutes to spectacular scenery (but the water is too cold for swimming). In addition, cultural events take place on campus, where participants will also find the Cantor Center for the Visual Arts. The summer weather is pleasantly warm, and the campus provides numerous athletic opportunities.

Application information is included with this letter. Your completed application should be postmarked no later than March 1, 2007, and should be addressed as follows

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650-723-1069

Do not send your application to the NEH.

Perhaps the most important part of the application is the essay that must be submitted as part of the complete application. This essay should include any personal and academic information that is relevant; reasons for applying to the particular project; your interest,
both intellectual and personal, in the topic; qualifications to do the work of the project
and make a contribution to the seminar; what you hope to accomplish by participation,
including any individual research and writing projects.

I hope I have covered all issues important for now. Should you be interested, I would be
delighted to receive your application..

Sincerely,

Russell A. Berman