

CFP: The California Ideology Conference

Submission Deadline: January 26th, 2024, by midnight PST.

Speakers: Massimiliano Tomba, Banu Bargu; additional speakers TBA.

The California Ideology Project (UCHRI) welcomes submissions for an upcoming interdisciplinary conference on the theme of “the California Ideology” at UC Santa Cruz on April 6-7, 2024.

California, the place and the idea, may seem sunny and exceptional: in its economy, its politics, its culture. It promises a unique form of dynamism and levity, a fantasy that has always seemed both singular and fundamentally American. Yet, in the midst of unfolding global catastrophes – climate collapse, new wars cold and hot, the rise of the far right, etc. – California’s uniqueness appears increasingly phantasmagorical. While moving images of California palms continue their work of seduction, the doom scroll of our lives is produced as much by Hollywood and Silicon Valley as by anywhere else on Earth.

Our research group, The California Ideology Project, grew out of a related suspicion: that California, rather than being a refuge against the rise of American fascism, may rather present something like its vanguard. We recognized, for instance, a relation between California’s long history of white supremacist eugenics, including the forced sterilization of thousands of disabled, incarcerated, and impoverished Californians, and the preoccupation with biological perfection, as in contemporary phenomena like Los Angeles’ booming plastic surgery and wellness industries, and Silicon Valley’s obsession with bio-hacking and physical optimization. In fact, many apparently “Californian” proclivities of today—like the affinity for occultism and the conflation of “wellness” and pseudoscience—were well-documented in the mid-20th-century, particularly by members of the Frankfurt School Institute for Social Research, a group of German intellectuals who were exiled to California during and after WWII. These thinkers acknowledged resonances between the effects of industrial culture in California and the Nazi Germany they had just escaped. Using resources from sociology, cultural criticism, art, philosophy, and political science, the Frankfurt School researchers provided insight into the ways that the reality of California’s politics and culture converged and diverged from both mainstream politics and culture, in the US and in Weimar-era Europe, as well as from California’s own sunkissed auto-fictions.

Inspired by such historical and empirical studies in and about California—as an image, an idea, and a place—we are hosting an interdisciplinary conference dedicated to exploring the various dimensions of the enduring paradoxical character of the Golden State. Taking a critical approach to the California Ideology as described by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron in the 1990s, this conference is animated by three entwined questions:

- How do we understand those processes that blur or obfuscate the relationship between California's self-image and its history, political economy, and culture?
- To what social need does the image or actuality of California promise fulfillment?
- And what seemingly benign, or even potentially liberatory, phenomena that appear emblematic of California might, counterintuitively, serve as signals of the growing threat of the far right?

We welcome abstracts (300-500 words) for papers that should be suitable for a 20-minute presentation (3,000 words), followed by a short Q+A. We welcome papers from any discipline addressing the issues discussed above, or the following topics:

- Image production and consumption
- The image in Hollywood
- The image in Silicon Valley
- Frankfurt School in California
- Fascism in California
- Poets of California
- Disney
- The military-industrial complex
- The border-industrial complex
- The prison-industrial complex
- Migration and deportation
- California as a utopia and/or dystopia

- Eugenics and “human betterment”
- The politics of surf culture
- Social movements in California
- Anti-intellectualism in California
- The hippie movement
- Silicon Valley
- Central Valley agriculture and immigrant labor
- Nature and natural sublimity in California
- Religion, spiritualism, and occultism in California
- California, libertarianism, and the far-right
- California and finance capital
- California housing and real estate
- Antifascist, anti-capitalist, and abolitionist history, theory and practice
- Multiculturalism, tolerance, and NIMBYism

Please email all submissions to Kyle Proehl at kproehl@ucdavis.edu. On the first page of your submission, please include your name, institutional affiliation, and contact information. Decisions will be sent out in early February 2024. If you have any questions, please contact Cara Greene at cara.greene@coloradocollege.edu and/or Shaun Terry at sterry@ucsc.edu.

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