American Empire and the Exportation of Democracy – November 6-8, 2008
Advocates of the so-called American Empire insist that the United States has a moral obligation and a pragmatic need to promote freedom and democracy across the globe; critics claim that this practice violates our national ideals and increases global instability and violence. Military struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the looming possibility of expanded engagement in the Middle East, do little to resolve questions about America’s global role. Instead, they underscore how important it is to approach this thorny issue with thoughtful discussion and analysis. Is the American model of democracy a universalizable one? What counts as a democratic system, and what conditions are required for effective democracy? Can we resolve the tensions between a democratic electoral system and the exercise of imperial power?

The Dialectic of Enlightenment – January 15-17, 2009
In 1944 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer published a book that was to become a foundation of the Frankfurt School of theory, and a cornerstone of aesthetic and political criticism for generations of scholars. They recast the enlightenment as a movement that devastated humans’ ability to engage with the irrational and non-individual aspects of life, and postulated a “culture industry” that, stupefying the masses with simple pleasures, shores up the hegemony of capitalism and quashes the potential of the fine arts. This text-based seminar explores what we can learn from this influential work today. How do contemporary technology, art, politics, and economics reflect or challenge the conditions described by Adorno and Horkheimer? What political and economic work is achieved by today’s mass culture?

Troubled Waters – March 5-7, 2009
While the scarcity of oil and other energy sources dominate news and politics, the attention of concerned scholars is increasingly focused on water, a diminishing natural resource that is still more central to everyday life. Many commentators agree that water scarcity is taking over as the likeliest cause of conflict, in the Middle East and elsewhere, as fresh water is increasingly diminished by agriculture and industry or rendered unusable by pollution. Meanwhile, global warming threatens hard-to-predict changes to oceans and ice caps; molecular chemistry delves deeper into the unique properties of water’s structure; and new evidence from Mars offers hitherto fantastical possibilities for understanding the history and future of our own planet. This seminar will invite reflections from political scientists, economists, historians, and geographers, as well as from scholars in public policy, environmental, international, and area studies.

Religion and Morality – April 16-18, 2007
Ivan Karamazov famously concluded that if there is no God, all is permitted. Much of the academic community today, however, tends to discount the possibility that religion is essential to morality, or to argue the opposite: that the removal of God is the necessary condition for moral discourse and action. This seminar will examine debates about the relation between morality and religion, considering how this relationship has been figured and refigured in different societies and at different moments in history. How can teachers maintain appropriate distance from dogma without shutting down possibilities for understanding other cultures? What are the opportunities of and constraints on an intersection between religion and morality, particularly in and between modern, pluralist societies? What role can, should, and do particular religions play in an era of global moral problems like climate change and terrorism?