Explores the mundane symbols, interests, and power structures that increasingly permeate and define American society.

THE TRIUMPH OF IGNORANCE AND BLISS
Pathologies Of Public America
James Polk

It is James Polk’s belief that North Americans have largely abandoned the public sphere for the sake of individual fortune. In *The Triumph of Ignorance and Bliss*, he examines the foundations of a culture that he sees as favoring firepower over diplomacy, passions from the pulpit over rational critique, and the star appeal of media idols over the struggle with real problems. Where engaged public discourse should channel effective dissent, there is ignorance; where public outrage should ignite corrective action to oppose the status quo, there is bliss.

Polk portrays a society sidetracked by television-inspired fantasies of fame, fun, and perfect bodies, where public school systems are close to collapse; where millions live without health insurance; where tax policies openly favor the wealthiest; where corporations brazenly take control, not only of decision-making processes, but also of the very means by which issues, content, and public priorities are defined, communicated, and dealt with; where the optimism of the past has been replaced by a sense of despair and foreboding because of abuses of trust.

“James Polk’s portrait of America is riveting...his arguments are sound and convincing. An important, fascinating book written with a strong message.”
—Norm Goldman, Bookpleasures.com

Deeply influenced by both the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and twentieth-century phenomenology, JAMES POLK holds a PhD in philosophy for his work on Kant and Heidegger. Other publications include essays and translations in social philosophy and comparative social history. Polk currently teaches at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.
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For my mother.
THERE IS SOMETHING PROFOUNDLY perverted about a mindset that throws collective fits at the sight of a woman’s nipples while sheepishly accepting the mutilation and slaughter of its sons and daughters for reasons deliberately contrived. Adding insult to injury, where engaged public discourse should channel effective dissent, there is ignorance; where public outrage should ignite corrective action to oppose the status quo, there is bliss. *The Triumph of Ignorance and Bliss: Pathologies of Public America* examines the foundations of a culture that favors “bring-em-on” firepower over diplomacy, passions from the pulpit over rational critique, and the star appeal of media idols over the struggle with real problems.

Under the banner of neo-liberal economic policies, America’s conservative-corporate power apparatus has unleashed forces unprecedented in their ability to stymie dissent, thwart potential counteraction, and dismantle the public sphere. State-sponsored spins on reality not only dispel critique, but also rob potential opposition of even the appropriate language with which the instruments of dissent might be carried to and used by society’s growing number of victims. While employees struggle to stave off the permanent effects of Wal-Mart practices and a seemingly inexhaustible supply of cheap labor in and from developing societies, those most affected by an unmitigated redistribution of wealth and by the destruction of the natural environment are blinded by the relentless pursuit of fun, games, and firmer abs.

Preoccupied with irresistibly snazzy marketing images, sports icons, and the sex appeal of the weekly *People* persona, few Americans care about the class war being lost around them, or about the disastrous long-term consequences of their actions. Instead of storming the Bastille in response to the
most terrifying government/industry-induced changes in living memory, the people placidly continued with business and niceties as usual.

As we are largely ignorant of our Selves as specific moments within the history of ideas and the continuum of struggles for power and influence, the themes of the following chapters may at first appear disparate. We must not forget, however, as Marx reminded us in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that “the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” The symptoms highlighted in these mere slices of everyday American life find their unity in modernity’s own promises and shortcomings. For those willing occasionally to step back, the historical structures and tendencies that have shaped our world become most visible in the mundane itself.

Peering beneath the surface is not easy. The deafening din of consumption-driven immediacy has filled our minds with grotesquely misplaced priorities held in unworthy reverence and blinded us to the most urgent cosmopolitan issues defining our era. Encrusted ruts of perception present a formidable barrier to those still seeking a better world. As Theodor W. Adorno so aptly put it in *Minima Moralia*, “the value of a thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of the familiar. It is objectively devalued as this distance is reduced; the more it approximates to the preexisting standard, the further its antithetical function is diminished, and only in this, in its manifest relation to its opposite, not in its isolated existence, are the claims of thought founded.” With neither the appearance of completeness nor claims of methodological stringency, the following narratives may, it is hoped, help to break open the surface of our fossilized constructs and to widen the opening for greater opposition to the status quo.

Just as people are judged by the company they keep, civilizations and their eras are assessed in terms of the dominant motifs that shape public interest and the ideas that capture the essence of daily life. As an exploration of the quotidian, the present study takes to task a lifestyle that has catapulted the mundane and banal to undeserving levels of importance while acquiescing to policies inimical both to working people and to the only life-sustaining environment we have.

*James Polk, June 2008*