



The Dark Side of Modernity

Jeffrey C. Alexander

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In this book, one of the world's leading social theorists presents a critical, alarmed, but also nuanced understanding of the post-traditional world we inhabit today. Jeffrey Alexander writes about modernity as historical time and social condition, but also as ideology and utopia. The idea of modernity embodies the Enlightenment's noble hopes for progress and rationality, but its reality brings great suffering and exposes the destructive impulses that continue to motivate humankind.

Alexander examines how twentieth-century theorists struggled to comprehend the Janus-faced character of modernity, which looks backward and forward at the same time. Weber linked the triumph of worldly asceticism to liberating autonomy but also ruthless domination, describing flights from rationalization as systemic and dangerous. Simmel pointed to the otherness haunting modernity, even as he normalized the stranger. Eisenstadt celebrated Axial Age transcendence, but acknowledged its increasing capacity for barbarity. Parsons heralded American community, but ignored modernity's fragmentations.

Rather than seeking to resolve modernity's contradictions, Alexander argues that social theory should accept its Janus-faced character. It is a dangerous delusion to think that modernity can eliminate evil. Civil inclusion and anti-civil exclusion are intertwined. Alexander enumerates dangerous frictions endemic to modernity, but he also suggests new lines of social amelioration and emotional repair.

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