

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE DARK SIDE OF MODERNITY: TENSION RELIEF, SPLITTING, AND GRACE

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Modern societies in the 20th century first fissured, then shattered, into the warring camps of liberal democracy, the communist revolution and fascist reaction. So did modern intellectuals. The coinciding of these intellectual and social divisions was hardly unrelated. In fact, the social divisions can be framed, and in some cases were inspired by, the theoretical reflections of Marx, Nietzsche, and Weber. The terms of these divisions can be conceived as different answers to the question that has been revisited many times and in many ways: Is the universalism and abstraction that characterizes modern life good or bad?

Modernity has encased human action and institutions with abstract ethical demands and impersonal requirements—from the moral and secular law to the rule of expert advice, from income tax to bureaucratic controls, from market exigencies and currency adjustments to psychotherapy, from surveillance to democratic control, from peaceful coexistence under international statutes and laws to stand-offs produced via armed confrontation, tense vigilance, and techno-war.

The subsequent questions that arise in determining universalism and abstractions to be good or bad, given the abstract ethical demands and impersonal requirements, are: First, can they be lived with? If so, are they ‘user friendly’? Do they contribute to reform, humanism, justice, and inclusion? Do they make people fulfilled, authentic, or just plain happy? Do they make them civilized?

The answers to these fundamental questions are: 1) yes, modernity is a good thing 2) not quite yet but someday soon if we do something radical, and 3) no, modernity can never be a good thing. The “yes” answer is found in Parsons work, taken from Weber.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Parsons, 1971. Parsons also took this “yes” from Durkheim, especially the first two books of *The Division of Labor in Society* (1984 [1893]). To mention Durkheim

The transcendentalism of the radical Protestant tradition has issued in liberal democracy, which is rule bound in a good way. The scientific revolution was a great step forward, and it promoted a form of objective truth seeking that allowed social problems to be evaluated and alleviated. The modern personality is protean and capable, and handles this new discipline in an autonomous way. Barbarism can only be a product of premodern societies; in modernity, therefore, barbarism can only be the result primordial residues from earlier life. It is the result of primo Modern abstraction, autonomy, and discipline that supply the resources, and also the will, for a civilizing process that institutionalizes idealistic utopias in this-worldly form.

The second response, "not quite yet, but someday soon if we do something radical", is the position of left-wing revolutionaries. Although the liberal standpoint is true, their position is only valid and accurate to a certain extent. That is, What they have not realized is that the great energy and bounty of civilization leads not only to objectification in the good sense (viz., Hegel in the phenomenology, where it produces growth), but in the bad sense as well. Objectification in modern societies produces alienation in Marx's sense, reification in Lukacs's.<sup>2</sup> There is a dialectic of the enlightenment, such that inequality and oppression come out of modernity, and not just freedom and solidarity.<sup>3</sup> The latter are for the dominant and privileged classes; the former are for the lot of most of mankind. So the

and his relationship to modernity is to suggest the self-imposed limitations of the present essay. My ambition is to set the debate about modernity in the framework of the ambiguities of "rationalization" not only fact but as theory. This specific manner of framing the question of modernity has been enormously productive philosophically and sociologically, marking the German and German-influenced traditions most strongly, though it has emerged in other national traditions as well. Still, when American pragmatists like John Dewey spoke of rationalization, it was in a much different vein than the subjects of this paper. American pragmatists typically were more positive and optimistic, even if equally critical of capitalism. While there is little doubt that Parsons draws on this American tradition in his liberal incorporation of Weber, I wish to present his views on modernity, like the others, as systematic responses to the rationalization theme. For my most recent critique of Parsons' one-sided optimism about modernity, see Alexander, "Contradictions in the Societal Community: The Promise and Disappointment of Parsons' Concept."

<sup>2</sup> Lukacs, 1971 [1924].

<sup>3</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, 1973 [1944].

modern age has produced turmoil and strife, not amelioration and equilibrium.

But history has provided an opportunity to overcome this ambiguous legacy of the Axial age, in order to make it "good". The Puritans of old, under the yoke of modern abstraction, created capitalism and bourgeois democracy. Bearing the same cultural and organizational burden, the new Puritans—Marxists, Leninists, or Maoists—would create communism and workers democracy. Revolution is this-worldly asceticism in our own time.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the result is a just order; the deracinating promise of bourgeois modernity will finally be fulfilled in the next historical time.

The third response to the question posed is No, modernity, *tout court*, simply is not a good thing. The abstraction that men are bound to live with is fundamentally "other," and unbearable for that reason. It sets up tensions that tear man away from himself. The passions of human nature cannot be corrected or civilized through abstract morality, the hypocrisies of which man must be fundamentally in rebellion against.<sup>5</sup> Modernity unleashes, not enlightenment, but an even darker dark age. It cannot be saved through disciplined revolution, which would only make it worse. It must be discarded.

Some of these critics have argued that an alternative to modernity can be found by just saying No, by taking the route of other-worldly or this-worldly mysticism.<sup>6</sup> Others have insisted that modernity must be destroyed by violence of a right-wing, not left-wing, form.<sup>7</sup> Both kinds of critics agree that the new world must set aside the tensions of the axial age. Unity must be restored. Depending on which path to restoration is chosen, there will be concreteness, not abstraction—release, not discipline—fusion, not division—play, not work. Only if abstract morality and inner-worldly discipline are set aside can humans lead a truly human life.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Eistenstadt, 1978.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, 1956 [1872, 1887].

<sup>6</sup> Roszack, 1969.

<sup>7</sup> On the role that desire for transcendence played in radical right wing ideology, see Nolte, 1966.

<sup>8</sup> In simplifying so as to make its polemical point, this paragraph points once again to the self-circumscribed framework of this paper, which considers the history of modern society and thought entirely from within the framework of rationalization theory in its classical and modern form. A fuller treatment of the "no" reaction against modernity, for example, would have to explore romanticism. The

The historically specific conflicts in which these three answers were encoded during the 20th century apparently have come to an end. It seems unlikely that communist and fascist revolutions will rise again as alternative answers to the question of modernity, at least in the forms that are horrifically familiar to us today.<sup>9</sup> But, despite the escatological expectations of "1989," it has become clear that the more fundamental arguments over modernity remain. From post-modern nihilism to antimodern fundamentalism, there is still basic disagreement over the question of modernity, and the radical alternatives to liberal democracy remain robust if less ideologically coherent.

Eisenstadt's sociology allows us to frame this ontological anxiety of modernity in an historical manner. In his theory of the Axial Age, he explains that "fundamental contradictions" are immanent to modernity, tensions that can never be resolved and which take different social forms, depending on the balance of forces at hand.<sup>10</sup> These tensions reach their greatest intensity in the Western modernity, where this-worldly asceticism first had its day and profoundly affected the other civilizations spawned in the axial age. I wish to explore the results of these tensions in what may be a new take on the issue.

The Axial Age marked a sharp break from the unified cosmos, or at least from the more incrementally stratified cosmos and social structure of archaic religious and social life. It established a sharp and unbridgeable break between the heavenly, ideal world and the mundane world inhabited by mere human beings. Especially in what became known as the Western tradition, not only the Judaic-Christian but also the Greek, this development took especially severe and radical forms. Rituals were attacked for making things too easy. Salvation became a serious problem, and grace often an unattainable or at

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aesthetic, cognitive, and moral development of romanticism forms the key counterpoint to rationalized modernity. Emerging in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century literature, music, art, and philosophy – for one of the best general accounts of this movement, see, e.g., Abrams, (1953) – romanticism did not necessarily take an antidemocratic or anti-Enlightenment form. As Seidman (1983) pointed out, while Romanticism often opposed hyper or distorted rationalization, it did not oppose rationality in a broader sense, which would include such themes as expressive individualism, authenticity, creativity, and reciprocity. For this broader argument, see Taylor, (1989).

<sup>9</sup> Furet, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Eisenstadt, (1982): 294-314. Alexander, (1992): 85-94.

least unfathomable goal. Human beings were submitted to harsh judgments from a righteous and wrathful god. Judged by a powerful and distant god, man learns to judge himself in an equally unfor-giving way.<sup>11</sup> He must wear Rawls' "veil of ignorance" and submit to Kant's categorical imperative.

The social results of this-worldly asceticism, whether religious or secular, are there for all to see. The Calvinists created not only cap-italism but radical democracies—Walzer's revolutionary saints, Eisenstadt's puritan-like Jacobins.<sup>12</sup> This duality, with its guilty sense of obligation to find grace in this-worldly action, made Westerners into world transformers, history's greatest empire builders, whose dominion spread far beyond the West to transform and "modern-ize" the entire world.<sup>13</sup>

For liberal moderns, the tensions and opportunities of Axial civi-lization continue to mark the vital characteristics of the modern age. It helps us understand the restlessness that surrounds us, the exis-tential demand for self-examination so that we can act in good faith, not blaming others by shifting responsibilities away from ourselves.<sup>14</sup> It explains the need for continuous discipline and achievement, and for the feeling that charisma can never be fully institutionalized.<sup>15</sup> Grace is available but can't be bottled, even if it can be sold. But we are not only liberal moderns. There is a persistent unease with civilization,<sup>16</sup> and there are different answers, as we have seen, to the question of modernity first posed by the Axial Age. There is a dark spot in Axial Age theory that needs to be pressed much further, a weakness in the structure and culture of modern societies that has not been sufficiently, or systematically, explored.

<sup>11</sup> Weber, (1927).

<sup>12</sup> Walzer, 1965; Eisenstadt, 1999a.

<sup>13</sup> Eisenstadt, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> These quintessentially modern feelings are captured by such terms as "onto-logical anxiety"—first employed, in a psychoanalytic version of existentialism, by Lang (1966) and later by Giddens (1984)—and "psychological man," which Philip Rieff (1968) developed. The structural status of such anxieties explains why psy-chotherapy can make a claim to have been the most important and influential cul-tural invention of the twentieth century, and why so much contemporary popular literature is devoted to self-help guides for the perplexed and restless.

<sup>15</sup> Eisenstadt, 1995a.

<sup>16</sup> Freud, 1961 [1930].

I would phrase the question this way. Does the separated “ideal” that is posited by the Weberian tradition remain *whole* and *transcendent* in the manner that liberal social theory suggests?

*Transcendent.* The ability to tie the Axial age breakthrough to human progress, to the institutionalization of principled ethics and democratic reform, rests on the assumption that human beings can tolerate the tension without flinching or backing away. Perhaps this assumption, and this ability, seems obvious enough, but Max Weber himself expressed doubts.

In “Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions,” Weber outlined different kinds of flights from the demands of this-worldly asceticism.<sup>17</sup> Each of these efforts undermined the capacity of ethical judgment to exercise compelling moral demands. They undermined dualism, and they provided expressive outlets for symbolic process that took a mystical form. Weber speaks of aestheticism, of art for arts sake, which is closely connected to the Nietzschean rejection of the good for the beautiful and to his attack on the sustainability of modern moral claims. Weber also speaks of eroticism, demands for impulse release, and romantic love, whether the love of another or of divine representatives of god.

Weber presents here a range of forces that undermine discipline and autonomy and tempt moderns into bad faith. They are, in Fromm’s words, “escapes from freedom.”<sup>18</sup> There is in the mind of every modern person the conviction that freedom might be too hard, too unkind, and too intrinsically fulfilling. There is some evidence in Weber’s writings that he sees this need to escape not merely as a “micro” problem, or an incidental one, but as a systemic and dangerous macro-social strain. He speaks, for example, of militarism and various forms of popular enthusiasm as providing flights from asceticism that are positively sanctioned by society.<sup>19</sup> It is this strain in his theorizing that explains Weber’s attention to plebiscitarian democracy,

<sup>17</sup> Weber, (1946). For a broader discussion of Weber from this point of view, and a systematic comparison to Sartre’s dialectic of freedom in Being and Nothingness, see Alexander, 1988: 185–206. In the background to this discussion is Mitzman’s (1970) compelling and original, if also flawed interpretive.

<sup>18</sup> Erich Fromm, (1941)—Fromm’s work should be seen as part of the dialogue about the dialectics of rationalization; he was a connected to the Frankfurt school and a Freudian analyst, as well.

<sup>19</sup> For a recent and penetrating study that applies this perspective to contemporary American life, see Gibson, 1994.

which offers masses of people the chance to experience the charisma of the demagogue. Weber saw these modern prophets as distorting the Hebraic heritage and feared their great potential for wreaking havoc on the institutions of modern life.

While expressed in this admittedly fragmentary manner, Weber's insights into flights from modernity illuminate how difficult it is to maintain transcendental abstraction, or moral universalism, in the modern world. Illustrations of such flight mark modernity from its beginnings. Consider, for example, the experiments of the Puritan settlers in early America.<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that their covenant with God made it formally impossible to know whether or not they were saved, the Puritans soon found ways. They established the "half way covenant" to allow their children to be born into the church, to achieve election without having to earn it. They allowed good works to become evidence of good faith, rather than its result. When these Puritan Americans first conceived of themselves as God's chosen people, they conceived this status in the covenantal terms of the ancient prophets. Yet, it soon became a signal of their having *already* been saved. It awarded them a special righteous status that ensured their own goodness as compared with the faithlessness of others. It is hard to continually sit in judgment of one's self. It is much easier to release the tension and embrace the innocence of the already saved.<sup>21</sup>

*Wholeness.* The flight from transcendence in modern society is also connected to the way its regulating ethical structure has been continuously polarized. Righteousness has always been defined in connection with wickedness. Goodness has been inseparable from evil.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For this framing of the early American experience, see Morgan, (1958) and, most generally and powerfully, the various works by Perry Miller (1956, 1965, 1967). One of the great intellectual historians of American history, Miller's reflections about grace, salvation, social rationalization, and psychological release form an extraordinary counterpart to Weber's sociology. There has even emerged a "left-Millerism" that constructs violence less as a deviant than as a deeply institutionalized search for grace, e.g., Slotkin, (1973) and Gibson, loc. cit. Edward Tiryakian took off from this Miller tradition in American Studies in his thoughtful and imaginative discussion of the dilemmas of modernity (cite).

<sup>21</sup> Both because of the American nation's Puritan-Protestant religious core, and because of the vast influence of Perry Miller's historical framing, the escape from this-worldly tension and the paths this escape have taken can be seen as a constant theme in the non-Marxist criticisms that American thinkers have leveled against themselves and their nation. See, e.g., Riesman (1950), Cherry, (1970), Slater, (1970), Bellah, (1975) and Bellah et al., (1985).

<sup>22</sup> Alexander, 2003.

The fundamental fact of this splitting, of this binary thinking, allows us to understand the tension relief, the flight from transcendence that Weber described, in more systematic and theoretically sophisticated ways.

In psychoanalytic terms, this splitting can be understood in terms of Anna Freud's classical theory of the mechanisms of defense.<sup>23</sup> Unable to stand the anxiety entailed by autonomy and self-control, the ego splits the world and projects the causes of anxiety outside the self, onto others. The stress and strain are out there, not in here; we can now defend ourselves against tension by fighting against these outside threats.

This conceptual language allows us to connect ethical polarization to the flight from transcendence. But there are other theoretical languages that allow us to explain this process in more sociological ways. One is through the theory of social closure, which such thinkers as Dahrendorf, Erikson, Parkin, Brubaker, Lamont, and Giesen have conceptualized in a more instrumental or more cultural manner.<sup>24</sup> Closure theory operationalizes Weber's pessimism, via a model of social organization. Every collectivity demands a boundary, creating an inside and outside. Closure applies to small groups, such as sects, but also to larger societies, such as political parties and religions, and to nation-states and civilizations as well.

Closure theory needs to be culturally expanded. Semiotics shows that all thinking is binary, that all concepts are defined by their opposites. The late Durkheim, who inspired Saussure and thereby fathered semiotics, put a moral and emotional spin on this understanding.<sup>25</sup> He conceptualized inside and outside as sacred and profane, as right and left sacred, as pure and the impure. These ideas were developed by early anthropological theories of pollution and taboo, then by Caillois and Batailles, and later still by Mary Douglas. These thinkers demonstrated that pollution and stigma are fundamental processes in social life, even or perhaps especially in its modern form. This move makes both antagonism and transgression into fundamental processes of modernity.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Freud, (1936).

<sup>24</sup> Dahrendorf, (1959); Erikson, (1966); Parkin, (1979); Brubaker, (2002); Lamont, (1982); Giesen, (1998).

<sup>25</sup> Alexander, (1988); Alexander and Smith, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Batailles, (1985); Caillois, (1959); Douglas, (1966); "Drag Kings at the Totem



These lines of organizational and cultural thinking clarify, in a theoretical rather than empirical manner, why the beneficent power of ideal regulation that the Axial Age introduced, and modernity promised to perfect, has so continuously been fragmented and brought down to earth. This declension has been fuelled by the energetic obsessions of this-worldly asceticism and by the insistent drive to escape from it. What results is the perversion of the ethical demands imposed by the Axial Age.

In conclusion, it is because transcendence can be so easily undermined and wholeness so consistently broken that modernism and barbarism have so often been closely intertwined. We are the righteous ones that God has chosen. They are the evil ones who afflict us, and they are responsible for the troubles we are in today. We are pure, and they are polluted. We are innocent, and they are guilty. Our salvation depends, not on regulating our own desires and actions, but on purifying the outside world of those polluted others. By destroying them, we can ourselves be saved.

It is no wonder that God's grace has been so hard to find in societies that have been formed by this-worldly asceticism. The search for alternative pathways to (secular) grace has propelled self-defeating revolutionary experiments, of the left and the right. But it has also inspired humanizing kinds of mystical flights. Hinduism and Buddhism have made increasing incursions into the religious life of the Western educated strata. New Age movements have reversed Weber's historical preference for instrumental rationality in a more secular way. The deep underground spring that feeds this recent outcroppings is romanticism, which at the very beginnings of industrial society made its case that moderns should be vessels rather than merely tools of the divine. From that time on, romanticism, for better and for worse, has been interlarded with ascetic modernity. The ambition of this paper has been to explain why.

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Ball: The Erotics of Collective Representation in Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud," in Alexander and Smith, loc. cit.