



The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology

Jeffrey C. Alexander

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Modern men and women go about their lives without really knowing why. Why do we work for such a long time every day? Why are we so obsessed with technology? Why do we continuously construct scandals? Why do we finish one war only to fight another? If we had to explain these things, we would say it just makes sense or its necessary or its what good (or bad) people do. But when we say that the war against terrorism is necessary and rational we use a rhetoric of good and evil, of friends and enemies, of honor, conscience, loyalty, of civilization and primeval chaos. These rhetorics rest on ideas and feelings, not just rational necessity, and they are of immense power and import. These rhetorics are cultural structures. They are deeply constraining but also enabling at the same time. The problem is that we dont understand them. That is the task of this book. In this pathbreaking work, Jeffrey Alexander argues for a cultural sociology that will bring these unconscious cultural structures into the broad light of day. Exposing our everyday myths and narratives in a series of empirical studies that range from Watergate to the Holocaust, he shows how these unseen yet potent cultural structures translate into concrete actions and institutions. Only when these deep patterns of meaning are revealed, Alexander argues, can we understand the stubborn staying power of violence and degradation, but also the steady persistence of hope. By understanding the darker structures that restrict our imagination, we can seek to transform them. By recognizing the culture structures that sustain hope, we can allow our idealistic imaginations to gain more traction in the world. A work that will transform the way that sociologists think about culture and the social world, this book confirms Jeffrey Alexanders reputation as one of the major social theorists of our day.

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