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The Society of Singularities—10 Theses

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Abstract: The article summarizes the content of Andreas Reckwitz’s book *The Society of Singularities* in 10 theses and briefly links it to the author’s overall work. *The Society of Singularities* applies a practice theory approach in order to outline a theory of Western (late-)modernity which recognizes in it a basic rivalry between two logics of social evaluation: a social logic of the general and a social logic of the particular/ singular. The question arises which historical causes for the surge of the social logic of uniqueness since the 1980s can be discerned, which structural features this type of society unfolds and which social and political consequences it has.

Keywords: modernity, late modernity, individualization, culture, social class, capitalism, digitalization

My books of the last two decades understand themselves as contribution to a sociological theory of modernity. This applies to *The Hybrid Subject. A Theory of Subject Cultures from Bourgeois Modernity to Postmodernity* (2006/2020), *The Invention of Creativity. Modern Society and the Culture of the New* (2017) and *The Society of Singularities* (2020). The essay collection *The End of Illusions. Politics, Economy and Culture in Late Modernity* (2021a) and my contribution to the book co-authored with Hartmut Rosa *Spätmoderne in der Krise. Was leistet die Gesellschaftstheorie?* (Reckwitz and Rosa 2021) are also part of this project. The main interest of my work is thus oriented towards a theory of modern society, which follows an overarching question: What are the structural features of the temporally and spatially highly specific social formation that we call ‘Western modernity’, as it has developed in Europe and North America since the 18th century? In this line of questioning, I follow the basic line of inquiry of sociology towards modernity ranging from Karl Marx and Max Weber to Niklas Luhmann and Michel Foucault.

My starting point of analysis is that Western modernity is not a temporally stable block, but has historically been transforming itself: Modernity itself has

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a history, and the theory of modernity thus must develop a corresponding historical sensitivity. A threefold scheme of social transformation has proven to be heuristically valuable for such a historically sensitized understanding of modernity: Bourgeois modernity as an early version of the modernity of the late 18th and of the 19th century is followed by the organized or industrial modernity of the 20th century, which in turn has been replaced by late-modernity since the 1980s. This is central for me: modernity has itself been profoundly reshuffled in recent decades, and the theory of late modernity thus provides the contemporary ‘department’ of the theory of modernity.

Generally, my perspective of a theory of modern society is guided by a specific vocabulary of social theory and a certain stance of the philosophy of science. In terms of social theory, my work connects itself to the field of theories of social practices (cf. Reckwitz 2002; 2021b), which strives to formulate a vocabulary of the social, seeking to leave behind the dualisms between structure and agency, between micro and macro, and between culturalism and materialism. In practice theory, the social is identified within the network of spatially spreading and temporally self-reproducing social practices, i.e. in patterns of activities carried by human bodies and artefacts, guided by implicit knowledge orders and interpretive schemes. Thus, praxeology views the social as practices which form a ‘nexus of doings (and sayings)’ (Schatzki 1996), and in which the social is continuously fabricated. In terms of philosophy of science, I start from a post-empiricist or post-positivist tradition, which understands theory as a ‘toolkit’ for social analysis (cf. Reckwitz 2021b; also, Bohman 1991).

Against this background, social theories and theories of modernity cannot positivistically ‘reflect’ social reality but provide a specific interpretative access to the heterogeneity of the social world. They provide a—hopefully informative and complex—conceptual framework for empirical research as well as impulses for the self-reflection of the humanities and for the political and cultural public sphere. Thus, from my perspective, theories of modernity in general have the character of a conceptually sharpened synthesis: they should bind together empirical material from the most diverse fields and at the same time reinterpret it with the help of newly contoured, sharpened concepts. In doing so, no theory can claim to provide the sole and total perspective, due to its necessary selectivity. *The Society of Singularities* has to be understood against this background: it is a theoretical synthesis of heterogeneous empirical material, using an overarching vocabulary to interpret it. Thus, it is not an easy task to summarize the content of the book. Nevertheless, one can argue that the following ten guiding theses provide the backbone of the analysis of the book.

(1) The book departs from the back assumption that in modern society, since its emergence from the end of the 18th century onward, two leading social patterns

of evaluation have been competing with one another: a social logic of the general and a social logic of the particular (or: the singular). Both are characteristic of Western modernity in all their radicalness: Being modern means to generalize to the extreme, but it also means—exactly the opposite—to singularize to the extreme.

In modern society, there is undoubtedly a plurality of very different social evaluation systems at work; Niklas Luhmann (2013) has studied them regarding functional systems, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006) regarding orders of justification, and Bruno Latour (2013) regarding modes of existence. But my assumption is that transversal to this plurality are the two basic evaluation systems of the general and the particular at work. The social logic of the general aims to revere entities of the social world as general forms: starting from industrial goods to bureaucratic officials, from the equality of subjects before the law up to serial construction. The social logic of the particular, on the other hand, is based on the appreciation of uniqueness: from the individuality of the subject via the originality of the artwork to the uniqueness of a place. Put simply and in terms of the history of ideas, ‘rationalism’ leading to a logic of the general is thus just as characteristic of modern society and culture since 1800 as ‘romanticism’ is, which forms the initial background of the logic of the singular.

Throughout the historical development of modernization, however, the weighting of these two social logics, and also the relationship between them, have been shifting. In classical modernity, i.e. in bourgeois modernity, but especially in the industrial modernity of the 20th century, the social logic of the general dominated, the logic of the particular existing only subordinately in niches of society; at the same time both principles were in conflict with each other. Yet, in late-modernity the processes of singularization have gained broad structure-forming power, achieving a leading role. The logic of the general has not disappeared, of course, but it now rather takes on the form of an infrastructural of the general, which works in the background and makes singularization processes possible.

(2) It is to be stressed that the logic of the particular is not reducible to the development of the individuality of subjects—a classical topic of philosophy—alone. Therefore, I do not use the common terms of individualization or individualism, as they have a long tradition in sociology too, but prefer the neologism of the singular. Now, singularization processes are directed at *different* units of the social (the same applies to generalization processes), all of which are valued in their non-exchangeability and irreducible particularity. Human subjects are only one type of these five units of the social, objected to singularization: *Objects* and things are likewise singularized, they are evaluated and shaped as unique, too, be they economic goods, media formats or works of art. *Spatial units* are singularized by becoming identifiable *places*, instead of generalized *spaces*.

Temporal units are singularized by taking on the form of non-repeatable events in the broadest sense.

Undoubtedly, human *subjects* are also singularized—whether from outside or through their own activity—and evaluated as ‘individual’ entities. Furthermore, singularization can be directed at *collectives*. Collectives in the form of communities, projects, political movements, regions, nations, etc., can be viewed and valued under the aspect of their non-interchangeability as well; as non-interchangeable collective worlds they acquire a special power of identification.

(3) Singularization is to be understood praxeologically. This contradicts a common understanding: Can’t one state that something is either really unique or not? In contrast, from the praxeological point of view there is no objectivity of given uniquenesses, rather a social unite is ‘made’ singular, it is socially fabricated *as unique*. This takes place in certain social practices so that there are processes of *doing singularity* going on. This perspective is in contrast with the common-sense intuition implied in the traditional notion of ‘individuum est ineffabile’ (Aristotle). Rather, a praxeological perspective means: We are not talking about pre-social singularities, nor about individualization as a process of liberation from social constraints. In contrast, it is only in social modes of fabrication in which an object, subject, collective, etc. is ‘made’ unique and is perceived as unique. Generally, to perceive something as singular always means to recognize it in its complexity of its own that cannot be reduced to the realization of general patterns or rules. However, the attribution of this individual complexity takes place in *social* practices and thus follows social patterns.

Four complexes of social practices play their role for this fabrication of singularities: evaluating, observing, receiving and producing. The fabrication of the particular (as well as the general) takes place in evaluative practices in which the unique is positively rewarded (for instance in art critique or in online evaluation platforms). Besides, practices of observation and perception are at work here, in which entities are interpreted as unique (which presupposes a corresponding sensitiveness, for instance a socialized aesthetic taste for the uniqueness of food or nature or a sensitiveness for the individuality of a human being). Practices of reception experience and appropriate objects, events, places etc. in the social logic of the particular (for instance in a certain style of traveling). Finally, practices of production are at work, in which entities are deliberately manufactured as particular (for instance in the creative industries).

(4) Processes of singularization are usually closely linked to those of culturalization, while the logic of the general is often linked to a process of formal rationalization. In fact, besides the distinction between a social logic of the general and one of the particular, the distinction between rationalization and

culturalization of the social is crucial to grasp the transformation of modernity. Here, too, two contrasting modes of formatting the social are at work: In *doing rationality*, the units of the social world are subjected to a purposive-rational (or normative-rational) logic; in the mode of culturalization, on the other hand, things appear to have intrinsic value—be it an ethical, aesthetic, or narrative value. Thus, in the process of culturalization, valorization takes place (understood as a special form of valuation), that is, a strong sense of (intrinsic) value is ascribed to the entities. To speak with Durkheim: In the sphere of culture, they are withdrawn from the profane and are ‘sacralized’ (cf. Durkheim 2008).

Since Max Weber (2011), the core structure of Western modernity has often been identified as formal rationalization of the social. These processes are indeed fundamental, but from the perspective I propose, the parallel processes of culturalization, and thus the fabrication of ethically, aesthetically, and narratively ‘charged’ units of the social turns out to be equally essential. While formal rationalization is known to make affectivity scarce, culturalization in this sense is regularly combined with an intensification of affects and emotions.

Especially in late modernity, processes of affect-intensive culturalization/valorization and singularization are closely intertwined: The singular counts as valuable and, conversely, valorization and affect-intensification are primarily directed at the singular. Though, it is crucial to realize that the valorization of culture always works with the distinction between that which is of worth and the worthless. Thus, symbolic asymmetries and exclusions arise, which are particularly characteristic of late-modern society of singularities.

(5) If I assume that in late modernity more and more structural features of a ‘society of singularities’ are forming, the contrasting comparison with the preceding historical form of modernity is indispensable: with organized or industrial modernity as it experienced its rise at the beginning of the 20th century, starting from the USA and from the Soviet Union, ranging up to the 1980s. In fact, this industrial modernity can be interpreted, speaking with Pierre Rosanvallon (2013), as a ‘society of equals’: The social logic of the general and the processes of rationalization reached their historical peak here.

The mass production of the industrial economy, the planning state as welfare state, the culture of the mass media, the way of life of the status-oriented middle class—they all contributed to the logic of the general (which was not immune to totalitarian radicalizations). In its time, industrial modernity appeared as *the* prototype of modernity, both in sociology and in the political public sphere. However, this makes the profound character of the structural change that has

taken place since then distinct: The supposed universality of industrial modernity opened up to late modernity and its different logic.

(6) Since the 1970s, three social factors in particular have been responsible for the increase in relevance of the social logic of singularities: an economic, a technological and a socio-cultural factor.

Due to the relative saturation with functional standard goods, since the 1970s in Western capitalist economy, the production of singular and cultural goods has been expanding. Industrial capitalism has more and more been replaced by cognitive-cultural capitalism: a capitalism of knowledge work and cultural, 'symbolic' goods which strive for creativity, authenticity or narrative novelty. Partly these symbolic goods are material objects to which singular qualities are attributed, partly these are events or services, such as in tourism. The structure of employment and of work has changed accordingly: The rapid shrinkage of industrial workers corresponds to the triumph of post-industrial knowledge work, but also to the rise of manual services. The world of work and that of consumption are closely tied to one another: Thus, cognitive-cultural capitalism, with its goods striving for singularity and aesthetic, ethical or narrative value has a formative effect on the forms of life with their consumption patterns and on the entire culture of late modernity.

In the field of technologies, the digital revolution since the 1990s has in various ways fueled the singularization and culturalization of the social, integrating them into everyday life. Digital technologies have given rise to the internet as a 'cultural machine' at the core of late modern technology: a sphere of uninterrupted and expansive production and reception of cultural entities (stories, images, etc.) in the online world. Here, both the role of the cultural audience and the role of the cultural producer gain formative power: Every subject now becomes a possible producer of cultural formats; at the same time subjects—especially via mobile devices—shift into the role of an almost permanent audience of cultural novelties and stimuli.

Generally, the internet constitutes itself as the sphere of a media attention economy in which, in a game of differences, the specificity of the singular profile (photos, text, etc.) alone promises public attention. At the same time, with communicative communities, spaces for collective singularities are formed: digital neo-communities with their own collective identities emerge. Finally, the personalization of the internet leads to users developing their singularized 'outlook' on world, which entails the dissolution of the 'general public' of traditional mass media.

It is remarkable that with the economy and technology precisely those two areas of modern society that were responsible for profound formal rationalization and a far-reaching doing generality in industrial modernity in their

late-modern versions now turn out as drivers of culturalization and singularization: in cognitive-cultural capitalism and in the digital cultural machine. In addition to these two conditioning factors of the 'society of singularities' there is a third one, which is closely linked to the first two. It stems from the socio-cultural sphere. Since the 1980s, in Western societies a 'new middle class' has been on the rise, which has transformed what a middle-class way of life means: Here an authenticity revolution of values has been taking place, stressing self-actualization and the quality of life (instead of a mere material social status) as leading values, amounting to a comprehensive singularization project of life.

The new middle class is a product of the expansion of higher education; it is a social group with high cultural capital derived from college education. Professionally, it is anchored above all in the branches of the knowledge economy of cognitive-cultural capitalism. The new middle class thus provides the main carrier of post-materialist value change, leading to a culture of 'expressive individualism' (Robert Bellah). It establishes aspirations to singularity in middle class lifeworld, favouring aesthetic and ethical criteria of the good life—from child rearing to consumption, from housing to work ethics.

(7) Singularization processes contribute to the emergence of institutional structures 'fitting' to a logic of singularity. This is particularly evident in the economy and in digital technologies. What can be observed here, are institutional contexts in which diverse units—from material goods over tourist destinations to YouTube stars—are 'made' singular and valuable (and can also lose this status again). Two mechanisms play a central role here: the creation of visibility and the establishment of a structure in which the scarce amount of (perceptive) attention is attributed; and the processes of valorization, i.e. the complex evaluation of entities as uniquely valuable. As to the latter, different time horizons from short-term hypes to long-term classics are possible. Singular goods regularly move on cultural markets—be they markets for the competition of cities or partnership platforms—that is to say, on markets for singular and cultural goods. Here, singularization and the economization of the social are closely intertwined. In recent sociological debates, the ('neoliberal') economization of the social is a popular topic, but from the perspective I develop its interlocking processes with singularization and culturalization lead to the very specific form of 'singularity markets', which contain a considerable affective appeal for its participants, and which at the same time bring about extreme forms of inequality.

These markets are no longer markets for functional standard goods, but for cultural singularity goods. They are markets of attractiveness (and partly also of cultural rarity): What competes here are entities that claim uniqueness. Within the structures of visibility/attention, as well as of valorization, it is socially determined which entities succeed in this endeavor, in the short, medium or even long term,

that is, which goods become visible and which attain long-term singularity capital. Cultural singularity markets often are ‘winner takes the most’ (or even ‘winner takes all’) constellations, in which only a few entities gain the status of singularity and many others go empty-handed. Thus, extreme inequalities are characteristic (e.g. from art to the real estate markets)—between winners and losers, between the ‘stars’ and the rest.

(8) Late modern society is characterized by a class structure in which, on the one hand, the new middle class achieves a social, cultural and political key position (and a new upper class is enthroned above it), and on the other hand, the traditional middle class and the new lower class tend to be in decline. The increasing social inequality of income and wealth, since the 1980ties, has been pointed out by many sociologists. However, inequality is not about material income and wealth alone. Here again processes of culturalization have been taking place: a culturalization of inequality. In late modernity, cultural capital takes on a decisive role in distinguishing between classes. So, classes differ in the degree and form of self-culturalization (and singularization) of their lifestyles.

The mechanisms of power between classes are now to a considerable extent those of conflict over cultural hegemony, of symbolic valorization and devaluation. Apart from the much-discussed new upper class with its wealth and assets, the new middle class—the bearer of the post-industrial economy and the liberalizing value changes, often situated in the metropolitan regions—turns out to be the socially rising group of late modernity: equipped with high cultural capital, its way of life is shaped by the project of singularization; and, at the same time, it strives for cultural dominance due to its institutional backing—from the knowledge and consumer economy to the health sector to the cultural sector. In contrast, the new lower class—the *new service class*—is the object of both social decline and symbolic devaluation processes, while the old middle class of the small towns, as the custodian of the general and the ‘normality’ of the levelled middle-class society, falls into a more subtle but nonetheless momentous position of cultural defense against new middle-class values.

(9) In general, in late modernity processes of singularization and culturalization result in social asymmetries and polarizations. Socially recognized singularity is a scarce and contested resource. The social asymmetries and polarizations encompass a wide range on different singularity markets: they effect the markets of goods of cognitive-cultural capitalism, in which extremely successful singular (knowledge and cultural) goods stand out against the rest, from the art to the real estate market, from the pharmaceutical market to world sport. Linked to this, they concern labor markets, where the ‘superstar economy’ (Rosen) of stars, high potentials, and those with the highest cultural capital and singularity profiles, on the one hand, are confronted with the ‘normalization work’ of so-called

simple services, which due to the interchangeability of workers decline to a low status and recognition.

It also concerns the partly extreme regional disparities between metropolitan boom regions and outlying areas at the level of social geography as they have been taking place in many Western countries, for instance in the United States, in France and in Britain: Here, the regions differ considerably in terms of their attractiveness or non-attractiveness for residents, investors, and visitors. It concerns the asymmetries within the late modern education system, in which elite universities and schools with 'singular profiles' for 'singular students' on the one hand, are opposed to 'average schools.'

Finally, it concerns the cultural forms of life with their different valences of valorization and devaluation. Interestingly enough, even within the new middle-class success and failure are close to each other. The form of life of the new middle class with its normative model of 'successful self-actualization' proves to be susceptible to disappointment, not least because of the fragile standard of the subjectively perceived authenticity.

(10) Finally, the simultaneity of valorization and devaluation processes has its effects in the political sphere. Late modern liberalism, which is particularly supported by the new middle-class and which includes both a neoliberal and a progressive wing, has made a decisive contribution to breaking up the industrial society's 'society of equals.' Meanwhile, his new liberalism sees itself challenged by a new populism. On the one hand, this new populism focuses on the cultural devaluation experiences and fear of social decline in the traditional middle class; on the other hand, it often uses strategies of cultural essentialism: it relies on the collective identity of national communities in particular and thus participates in the game of singularization of late modernity with different means.

On the political level, the society of singularities thus leads to a sort of 'crisis of the general'. The question arises: Is the reference to a (social and cultural) general—or even to universality—still or yet again conceivable? This concerns the social structures of recognition in view of status differences, mainly between the new professional class and the new service class. It also concerns an everyday culture, which is oriented towards the values of individual self-actualization and individual authenticity.

Finally, it concerns a sphere of the political in which the general public is in the process of dissolving itself in favor of partial publics. Some contemporary political movements are attempting to redefine the 'general' or the universal and make it a political issue (unconditional basic income, universal concern through climate change, infrastructure policy, 'common ground' of culture, etc.). However, the mechanisms of the society of singularities on an economic, technological, and socio-cultural level do not seem to be shaken by this—at least for the time being.

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