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The Society of Singularities: Reply to Four Critics

Abstract: In this article, Andreas Reckwitz replies to the four critical commentaries of Patrick Baert, Andreas Pettenkofer, Austin Harrington and Sally Haslanger on his book *The Society of Singularities*. In this context, he discusses the general position of this book within the landscape of contemporary social theory and the question of what a 'social logic of the unique' means. He enters the question in how far his analysis of the new middle class differs from Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the new petty bourgeoisie, emphasizing the combination of an orientation towards inner experience and social prestige in his account of the new middle class. He discusses the question of whether neoliberalism is responsible for the proneness to disappointment which the late-modern culture of self-actualization implies. Finally, he works out the differences between the type of critical analytics which his book implies and normative critical theory.

Keywords: social theory, individualization, Bourdieu, neoliberalism, critical theory, Foucault

After *The Society of Singularities* was first published in German by Suhrkamp in 2017, the book has been widely received in German-speaking countries in recent years. I am grateful that with this book symposium of *Analyse &* Kritik an English-language debate is now also establishing itself, referring to the English translation published by Polity Press in 2020. Meanwhile, translations in other languages have appeared or are in the process of appearing, so I am curious to see what happens when the discussion leaves the specificities of the field of German sociology. In fact, I have never understood the book as a particularly 'German' one: The subject matter, Western society of late-modern Europe and North America, goes far beyond the German case. Besides, the theoretical-conceptual tools, which I employ in my works, largely are not drawn from a specific German tradition—among which Luhmann's systems theory and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School are certainly the most prominent and influential ones today—, but rather from English-

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and French-speaking research perspectives, such as practice theory, poststructuralism, pragmatism, actor-network theory, theories of postmodernism or of cognitive capitalism.

I am grateful to Patrick Baert, Andreas Pettenkofer, Austin Harrington, and Sally Haslanger, for making the effort of engage with *The Society of Singularities* (2020) and, in part, with elements from the two follow-up books, *The End of Illusions* (2021) and *Late Modernity in Crisis* (2023, written with Hartmut Rosa). It is not possible, at this point, to deal with all the questions they raise in as much detail as they would be deserving of. I must confine myself to a discussion of individual aspects and take them as an occasion to try to clarify some points, which are crucial for the analysis of society in *The Society of Singularities*.

(1) *Patrick Baert* rightly points out that my book is a combination between a novel and a classical mode of argumentation. Novel and contemporary are the concepts I use and the aspects of the theory of late modernity to which I refer, but classical is the concern itself, namely, to pursue the project of a theory of modern society. Baert notes that this concern used to be very prominent in the English-speaking social sciences from the 1980s to the early 2000s—one might think here of a whole range of authors such as Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Scott Lash, Manuel Castells, Jeffrey Alexander or David Harvey—but that it has since receded into the background. I perceive this situation similarly to Baert, but I would like to emphasize that I find this development in the English-speaking social sciences of the last two decades highly problematic and that my work should, in part, be understood as a response to this issue. There seems to be a kind of retreat from the project of a theory of society in anglophone sociology, and this precisely at the moment when the crisis-ridden development of late-modern societies is particularly dependent on sociological theory for the purpose of its self-enlightenment.[1]

Indeed, since around 2010, public interest in fundamentally positioned social analyses has considerably increased. This is not surprising, given the crisis-ridden consolidations of financial crises, the rise of populism, insight into climate change, and so on. In public debates of the English-speaking world, however, comprehensive propositions of theory have recently tended to come from history or economics, or from intellectuals outside the academic field. The reasons why sociology, on the other hand, is in retreat in this respect would be worth its own discussion. Institutional mechanisms such as the short-term reward of research projects and publications of journal articles at the expense of work on theories, which is inevitably long-term, an empiricist tradition that sees not theory but empirical research—preferably in quantitatively standardized research designs—as the

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1 In the introduction to *Late-Modernity in Crisis* (2023) Hartmut Rosa and I elaborate on this issue.

touchstone of scholarship, and the influence of a certain form of postmodern critique of science, in which general theory appears not only selective but also always biased in specific ways, each contribute in their own way to marginalizing social theory. In contrast, the theory of society continues to play a stronger role in the German and, incidentally, also in the French academic field. From my point of view, it is the task of these continental European traditions to take up the cudgels for theory on an international level. However, I am not interested in an abstract 'grand theory' that is largely removed from socio-historic reality, but in theorizations that are close to it, that are curious and open to the paradoxes of socio-cultural change in Western and global societies. When I studied at Cambridge in the 1990s, I was highly impressed by the vibrancy of the English-speaking theory scene, which seemed so very different from the somewhat stiff model platonism often cultivated in Germany at the time. My own theory production attempts to connect to this open spirit that prevailed in the English-speaking theory discussion of the 1970s to the 1990s and to revitalize it in a contemporary way.

(2) At the core of *The Society of Singularities* is the distinction between two structuring social logics, the social logic of the general and that of the particular. Baert poses the question whether one can really distinguish these two logics in a strict way. Is it not rather the case that in reality a combination of both modes of perception always takes place? And how then can one actually speak of an increase of singularization processes in the history of modernity when there are always both logics at work? Indeed, even in the introduction to the book, I note with Kant's epistemology—Baert points this out—that all human action and perception necessarily contains both, the general and the particular. On the one hand, general categories, concepts, and schemes are used, on the other hand, reference is always made at every moment to the 'appearance' of something particular, to a particular person or object, for example. I think that at the level of a social ontology, this can be stated in such a basic way to begin with.

For a theory of modern society, however, the distinction becomes interesting only at a second level: namely, when in institutional orders and forms of life and thus in the form of practices of evaluating, observing, receiving, and producing, a high value is ascribed to the particular (or to the general) and therefore it is systematically worked on it in the form of social practices. Here specialized 'doings singularity' or 'doings generality' occur. To put it differently: In any form of society, one will for instance address a particular family member or a close acquaintance as an 'individual' ('this is X'), but this fact does not reach the structure of 'qualitative individualism' as Georg Simmel (1972, 249ff) identified it in modern society. For, qualitative individualism forms *a whole cultural order* that ascribes a *socially recognized high value* to the individual. Modernity's culture of singularities, as I thematize it, praxeologizes and, in a sense, renews Simmel's perspective:

not only do the institutional orders and forms of life of doing singularity ascribe a high value to the unique, against this background they also *develop specific practices*—from online valuation to creative production, from the aesthetic sensitization of the recipient to the architectural-historical lexicon—, which systematically deal with these particularities and open up a social world centered upon them. *How* this specialized and heightened preoccupation with the singular takes place, *which* complex social forms—for example, of competition for attention or of valorization by experts or of the subjectivation of a creative-aesthetic subject—are formed around it, that is the question which is, in my view, interesting for sociological research.

(3) *Andreas Pettenkofer* interprets my book's perspective on late-modern singularization processes as an application of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice and, in particular, as an extension of Bourdieu's analysis of the 'new petty bourgeoisie', as it is known from his work in *Distinction*. This leads—according to Pettenkofer—to my book being subjected to the well-known problems that characterize such a class analysis à la Bourdieu. Now, I do not want to downplay the relevance of Bourdieu's work for my own. I think that Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) continues to make a valuable contribution to the current discussion of practice theory; and the analysis of the 'new petty bourgeoisie'—of persons working in the knowledge economy—in *Distinction* (1984) undoubtedly represented a clear-sighted examination of a new social group, which was only beginning to emerge in the 1970s, from which one can learn a great deal for an analysis of the new middle class in present late modernity. This is all the more true if one adds the subsequent, more flexible analyses of the new middle class surrounding the Anglo-Saxon interpretation of Bourdieu, such as the groundbreaking work of Mike Featherstone (1991) on postmodern culture, Beverley Skeggs (2004) on the difference between the new middle class and the working class, or the recent work of Mike Savage (2015). Nevertheless, my analysis is fundamentally different from this tradition of a Bourdieu-style class analysis. For me, Bourdieu was *one* source of inspiration, but there were others, some pointing in a very different direction.

To begin with, I want to emphasize: The starting point of the analysis of the forms of doing singularity in *The Society of Singularities* are *not* classes or forms of life, but institutional orders, more precisely: the structural change of the economy and that of technical-medial practices. At its core, the late-modern economy is developing into an economy of singular goods on singularity markets, the characteristics of which I examine more closely. In this respect, I am strongly influenced by the analysis *Valuing the Unique* by the French economic sociologist Lucien Karpik (2010). Besides, at the same time as my book Boltanski's and Esquerre's book *Enrichment* (2020) was published, between whose analysis of cultural capitalism and mine I see strong similarities. Most fundamentally, I assume a dual

structure of society, always consisting of both institutional orders and forms of life/classes. This is a distinction rich in tradition, as implied by Max Weber and subsequently found, for instance, in David Lockwood's (1964) difference between system integration and social integration, in Jürgen Habermas's (1984) distinction between system and lifeworld, and, incidentally, in Bourdieu's difference between social fields and lifestyles/classes. Institutional orders form specialized complexes of practices, while cultural lifestyles shape the biographies and everyday lives of subjects.

Thus, in order to trace a particular social structural transformation, one must always keep *both* in mind, institutions and forms of life. Understanding the transformation from organized modernity to late modernity first requires understanding the structural change from industrial capitalism to cultural-cognitive capitalism and that from mass media to digital media technologies. In both areas, there is a changeover from doing generality to doing singularity, within the framework of which corresponding structures of competition for attention and of valorization are formed in each case, a structural change which I pursue in detail from the second to fourth chapters of the book.

In order to understand social change, however—and this distinguishes my perspective somewhat from systems theory à la Niklas Luhmann (2013), which is still prominent in Germany—one cannot avoid asking about the social carrier groups of change and seeing how it precipitates at the level of forms of life. This is where the new middle class comes into play, which I examine more closely in the fifth chapter of the book. As I said, the analysis of the new petty bourgeoisie by Bourdieu and some of his followers is certainly a valuable impetus for this. However, it is not sufficient—and not only because historical change has meanwhile catapulted this social group into a key cultural-political role, but also because Bourdieu's analysis is conceptually too one-sided. The central problem I perceive here is that Pierre Bourdieu describes the practice of lifestyles primarily as a logic of social distinction. In this theoretical framework, actors are always concerned, consciously or preconsciously, with strategic differentiation from others in order to increase social prestige. So one ends up with a sort of reductionism of social distinction.

In this respect, I have always seen Gerhard Schulze's analysis of *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (1992, *Experience society*), which was prominent in Germany in the 1990s, as a necessary and illuminating contrasting foil to Bourdieu. For Schulze, the equivalent to Bourdieu's new petite bourgeoisie is what he calls the 'self-actualization milieu'. Apart from the fact that this is given a much stronger position in his account—it turns out to be the most important driver of late modern culture—, one can only fully understand its way of life if one sees here—to use Schulze's terminology—an 'inward-oriented semantics' at work, which in many respects replaces the outward-oriented semantics which used to be prominent in classical

modernity. What does this differentiation mean? Subject-cultures that are guided by an outward-oriented semantics are characterized by a reference to the social outside, for example, by a striving for survival or security or for social status. In the case of the late-modern self-actualization milieu, according to Schulze, however, an inward-oriented semantics is at work, namely in the form of experience orientation: the subjects pursue their form of life in a way that enables an evocation of a sequence of positive experiences in their psycho-physical interior. This inner lived experience has a value for the subject in itself and evokes positive emotions in them.

Thus, according to Schulze, late-modern subject-cultures can only be understood if one recognizes a primacy of an experience orientation and not a mere status orientation. A well-paid job, for example, is not enough, it should bring emotional satisfaction; marriage is not entered into for the purpose of provision, but for mutual enrichment; leisure time should bring experiences worth remembering, and so on. Schulze explicitly refers here to Abraham Maslow's psychological hierarchy of needs, according to which, as soon as 'externally oriented' needs are satisfied, the internally oriented ones take effect.

Central for my analysis of the new middle class and its processes and practices of singularization and culturalization is that it *combines* Schulze's model of inward orientation with Bourdieu's model of status orientation. The primacy, for the new middle class, is thereby the inward orientation; status orientation does play a role, but a secondary one. The immanently contradictory cultural pattern that thus emerges in late modern culture, is that of 'successful self-actualization'. This means that on the one hand late modern subjects are initially guided by a pursuit for self-actualization; striving for singularity is insofar inwardly oriented. Life thus appears satisfying and authentic when it is inhabited by singularities that fit oneself: other individuals, places of life, professional activities, travel destinations, successful moments, communities, and so on. One wants to experience the singular for its own sake. This is a lifestyle of expressive individualism, in the sense of Robert Bellah (1985). On the other hand, however, it would seem naïve to understand the processes of singularization and culturalization *exclusively* in terms of internality, meaning in terms of values and emotions, as is the case with Schulze. It can hardly be denied that status and distinction orientation plays an *additional* role in the new middle class, which Bourdieu recognizes clairvoyantly, but then wrongly absolutizes.

So the new middle class revolves around socially '*successful* self-actualization'. In this framework, ideally, the authentic life also obtains a high degree of social recognition. Insofar, the accumulation of singularity capital, which can be used strategically to achieve social prestige, is part of the lifestyle of the new middle class. However, successful self-actualization cannot be reduced to the side of

success and status alone: it is precisely its contradictory dual structure which characterizes it.

(4) *Austin Harrington* elaborates at length on my analysis of the cultural pattern of 'successful self-actualization' as the dominant subject-culture of late modernity, as well as on the mechanisms I treat—especially in *The End of Illusions*—as generators for the systematic production of subjective disappointments within this framework. Harrington's critical queries to this analysis concern two aspects in particular: Can a normatively substantial core of the modern value of self-actualization be distinguished from the problematic and very specific conditions of the late-modern culture of self-actualization? And, are the moments of disappointment to which this form of life lead to a lesser extent rooted in the cultural logic that I am focusing on, but rather in a specific political-social logic of late modernity, which can be summarized by the concept of 'neoliberalism'? Is not neoliberalism, then, with its constraints of the market and its dismantling of social securities, largely responsible for the precarious character that the culture of self-actualization assumes in late modernity?

I would at least partially agree with Harrington on the latter point. There is no doubt that the economization of the social, which one can observe in Western societies since the 1980s, is an important factor fueling subjective disappointments in the form of life of expressive individualism, and I have discussed this factor in more detail. Yet, I prefer the more fundamental notion of the economization of the social to that of neoliberalism in order to describe this constellation. Neoliberal policies, whose 'competition state' (Jessop 2002) has promoted market elements throughout society, for example in housing or pensions, and this considerably stronger than it was the case in organized modernity with its welfare state, certainly provide *one* condition for this. This economization of the social, in the sense of an expansion of competitive structures even beyond the economy, goes far beyond this neoliberal politics and also includes, for instance, the establishment of a market of digital 'attention economy'. Such market structures, which produce not only winners but also losers, undoubtedly provide a factor for the constant production of disappointment in the late-modern form of life.

But this is only one factor and I would be sceptical about focusing on it too much. For, in the social science literature of the last two decades, both in English- and German-speaking countries, there is tendency to a temptingly simple explanatory scheme according to which many contemporary problems have the same 'culprit': neoliberalism. When it comes to the production of disappointment in late-modern forms of life, however, I would like to avoid such a simplistic narrative, namely because there are also other factors at work here, inherently part of the cultural logic of striving for self-actualization itself, threatening to throw this way of leading one's life out of balance. This applies to the romantic-status-paradox of

the coupling of self-development with social prestige and to the immanent logic of increasing self-actualization, which manifests itself in the 'Fear of Missing Out' (FOMO), or to the erosion of semantics that give meaning to failure. So, if suddenly neoliberalism and the economization of the social disappeared, the problems of disappointment of the self-actualization culture would by no means be completely dissolved.

I would answer Harrington's question, as to whether these cultural elements mentioned 'necessarily' belong to the culture of self-actualization, in the negative. There is no such logical inevitability. However, I do not see it as my task in the book to ask for a universally valid normative content of self-realization. In fact, there are always only historically specific manifestations, which can undoubtedly be very different. I do not think, for example, that self-realization necessarily has to be tied to the pattern of self-growth: it is also conceivable to have a cultural pattern according to which one adheres to an 'authentic' form of life, once found, without any imperative to experimentally surpass it over and over again. Besides it is also not inevitable that only certain singularities are socially recognized as valuable and others not; one can well imagine a culture that approves of *every* singularity. My analysis is concerned solely with the characteristically late-modern culture of self-actualization, which differentiates itself from historical antecedents as it is likely to be from future models. I understand Austin Harrington's concern with trying to carve out, within the framework of a normative critical theory, an ideal substance of modern self-actualization—I understand it especially, because I, too, am not concerned with denouncing this modern pursuit of self-actualization per se. However, I do not take this path into the direction of normative social philosophy, because I want to work out the existing immanent paradoxes of cultures of self-actualization and I see precisely *in this* the task of a critical analytics. This, however, brings us to a fundamental question that several of the commentators are concerned with: the relationship of critical analytics, as I favor it, to normative critical theory.

(5) In particular, *Sally Haslanger*—who otherwise agrees with me to a large extent on practice theory—takes a counter-position in this regard by arguing for a normatively oriented critical theory. I think one must look at the situation a bit more fundamentally, because in relation to critique, different options present themselves in the current theoretical landscape. On the one hand, there are those theoretical approaches that remain indifferent to the question of critique or consider it outdated altogether. In the German theoretical landscape, this position is quite popular, and it can be found, for example, within systems theory. In the field of those approaches which, in contrast, opt for 'critique' to be an important stake in social theory, I perceive three different paths: normative critical theory, the sociology of critique, and critical analytics. Put simply, in normative critical theory, found

especially in certain factions of the Frankfurt School where sociology and philosophy merge, the structures of modern society are measured against certain benchmarks of the 'project of modernity', for example, freedom, justice, communicative rationality, resonance, and so on. The sociology of critique, as advocated by Luc Boltanski (2011) in the context of his pragmatist theory of action, on the other hand, rejects the adoption of such a supposedly 'superior' observer perspective. From this direction, it is rather a matter of taking a closer look at how in society itself with recourse to which forms of justification critique of social conditions is exercised. Thus, criticism becomes an object of sociological investigation, and the sociology of critique follows the path, to a certain extent, of the actors and, for instance, their violated sense of justice in certain social groups.

I think that both directions have their legitimacy, I myself, however, join the third one, the critical analytics, as it has been applied by Michel Foucault and other authors, especially in the vicinity of post-structuralism (cf. Haker 2020; Saar 2007).[2] Critical analytics is concerned with carving out in detail how historically far removed or socially diffuse powerful structures, as well as paradoxes, work, which the actors themselves are often unaware of and which contradict a certain 'official' self-understanding of modern ideals. Critical analytics thus engages in an intellectual opening of contingency: what is apparently 'normal', necessary, rational, and free of contradictions in modern society turns out, from this perspective of analysis, to be unusual and presuppositional, to be dependent on specific powerful historical and cultural circumstances, to be anything but rational and thoroughly contradictory.

In *Will to Knowledge* (1998), for example, Foucault worked out how sexuality, which supposedly belongs to the subject naturally, could only be declared as the 'core' of the subject against the background of very specific modern discourses and regimes of truth. And thus, it turns out that the project of sexual liberation by the 68 movement continues, against its own intentions, the fixation of the sexuality apparatus of the 19th century. In this context, one can refer to Pierre Bourdieu again, who has a different intellectual background than Foucault, but whose analysis in *Distinction* (1984) in a different way seems to be equally guided by ideas of a critical analytics. The starting point here, as is well known, is that of aesthetic taste in the sense of Kant's aesthetic theory, which proves, against its own claim of universality, to be highly dependent on a cultural habitus and cultural capital, on the conditions of socialization of the educated classes. In terms of a critical analytics, these books are not about judging a constellation as morally 'bad'. Rather, it is about making conscious a socio-cultural-historical constellation under which seemingly

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2 I elaborate further on this topic in Reckwitz/Rosa (2023), 61ff.

compelling circumstances become possible in the first place; these thus turn out to be historically, socially, and culturally contingent. What normatively and politically follows from this is open-ended—critical analysis thus passes the ball on to the political-normative debate.[3]

It is in this sense that my analysis of the *Society of Singularities* is influenced by the idea of critical analytics. Of course, one could ask in Haslanger's terminology: Are the singularization processes ideological, that is to say, is oppression built into their practice? Undoubtedly, they contain elements that can be interpreted in this sense as ideologically 'oppressive'. For, singularized culture exposes the subject to social expectations, indeed coercion, to conform to the ideal of the singular—it would otherwise close off a central source of social recognition and subjective self-worth. In addition, singularized culture produces not only winners, but also losers, who certainly try to meet these expectations, but for the failure of their efforts they are regularly held responsible themselves. However, to see only social limitation or 'oppression' at work here seems to be too one-sided. For the culture of singularities also opens up possibilities of development and satisfaction for the subjects, the culture of self-realization opens up a space of practices that are not instrumentally rational, but can be pursued for their own sake, because they appear valuable to the subjects. I would agree with Austin Harrington that the ideal of self-actualization and also of uniqueness/individuality holds a thoroughly positive promise—so there is more in it than just social coercion.

Thus, in the background of my analysis is this assumed *ambivalence* that the culture of singularities plays in late modernity. Instead of conducting a normative discussion—which, to reiterate, is quite useful and necessary—critical analytics examines the singularization processes themselves. And here one immediately sees what is critical about this. For 'singularity' often appears in social practice itself as something given, which precedes the social: something simply is unique or not, it defies substantiation. This is a position rich in tradition: *individuum est ineffabile.* In the praxeological perspective, the point is to demonstrate that this is an illusion, and that what appears to be singular depends on rather very specific social practices of evaluating, observing, receiving, and producing, which form entire social arenas in which singularities are negotiated. In a sense, critical analytics thus engages in a 'disenchantment' of the society of singularities: it looks behind the scenes at 'how it is fabricated'—not to claim that singularities do not exist at all, that they are mere imagination or facade, but to scrutinize *how* they emerge and produce effects in social practice. Praxeology, in its interest in the 'how' of the social, in the

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3 Nevertheless, there is a kind of basic normativity also in critical analytics. It implies the normative judgement that rendering social structures visible and thus becoming aware of their historical contingency is in itself a good thing. Basically, this is what 'enlightenment' is about.

processes of the fabrication of the social and thus in the de-essentialization of facts in the direction of *doings*—doing gender and doing rationality, doing singularity and doing universality, doing loss and doing authenticity—seems thus predestined to make contributions to a critical analysis of modernity.

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