Abstract:

In "The Society of Singularities", Andreas Reckwitz develops a new theory of Western late-modern society. The book combines a novel theoretical framework for analyzing the social with detailed sociological analysis of the core fields of late-modern society: the transformation of the economy and its world of goods; the transformation of work; the emergence of digital technologies and media; the emergence of a new class-structure, their lifestyles and forms of subjectivity; finally the transformation of the political sphere.

The core argument of the book is that late-modern society differs from classical, industrial society by developing profound and far-reaching processes of singularization. Whereas industrial modernity was based on processes of standardization and generalization - with singularities existing at the margins, for instance in art - , late-modernity is based to a large extent on practices of producing, evaluating and using 'singular' entities, i.e. objects, subjects, events, places and communities which appear unique (with standardization still working in its background). The book works out the causes, the structures and the consequences of such a "social logic of singularities", emphasizing the problems and new social polarizations in a society of singularities.
Besides, singularization is closely tied to processes of culturalization, with culture being understood as practices of attributing value (and of depriving of value, respectively). Being perceived as unique and as a carrier of value - be it cities or schools, individuals or goods, artworks or events, communities or regions - is thus the core ideal of late-modern society, around which vast complexes of production, consumption and not at least evaluation have been formed.

Chapter 1 provides the conceptual framework of the book, developing a model of culturalization/rationalization and singularization/standardization for social analysis. For late-modern society, the transformation of the economy and of technologies provide the basic conditions of processes of singularization. Therefore, chapter 2 analyses the rise of cultural capitalism as an 'economy of singularities' (Karpik), studying in its specific forms of goods which undergo an 'authentication' and its specific form of winner-take-the-most-markets in which markets of attention and the accumulation of 'singularity capital' turn out as basic. Chapter 3 focuses on the corresponding transformation of work in the knowledge economy into a work sphere of profiles, performances and projects, amounting to predicaments of justice. Chapter 4 interprets digitalization as as double process of algorithmic standardization backstage which frontstage enables technical singularization (via data tracking of individuals) and cultural singularization within a market of visibility. Chapter 5 studies the transformation of late-modern class-structure and the culturalization of inequality in the new middle class, old middle class and new underclass. The lifestyle and form of subjectivity of the new middle class - which its techniques of curating and hyperculturalization in areas as food, education, the body etc. - is studied in detail as basic carrier of a contradictory singularized life. The cultural devaluation of the new underclass (and partly of the old middle class) is interpreted as the other side of this development. Chapter 6 is dedicated to the political transformation: It works out the basic political antagonism between liberalism (including neo- and left liberalism) and diverse forms of cultural essentialism (fundamentalism, populism etc.) which mirror the late-modern class structure and which are both based on specific ideas of culture and singularities. The last chapter has the form of an outlook, asking the question whether there is a 'crisis of the general/universal' in the society of singularities and whether there are alternative paths visible.
Reckwitz's book provides a comprehensive and highly original, systematic theory of contemporary Western society and culture at the beginning of the 21st century. In its fundamental direction and structure it is comparable with books of authors like Jurgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck oder Manuel Castells in the past.
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