



Andreas Reckwitz

The Society of Singularities

On the Structural Transformation of Modernity

(Original German Title: Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne)

Publication date: October 2017

480 pages

Clothbound

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2017

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.

Table of contents

Introduction: The explosion of the unique

I. Modernity between a social logics of the general and the singular

II. The post-industrial economy of singularites

III. The singularization of work

IV. Digitalization as singularization: The rise of the culture machine

V. Singularized forms of life: Lifestyles, classes, subjectification

VI. Differential liberalism and cultural essentialism: The transformation of the political

Conclusion: The crisis of the universal?

Detailed Table of contents

Introduction: The explosion of the unique

I. Modernity between a social logics of the general and the singular

1. The social logic of the general/ standard

The doing generality of modernity

Typifications and rationalizations

Standardization, formalization, generalization

Objects, subjects, space, time and collectivities as standards

2. The social logic of the unique

The general-particular, idiosyncrasies, singularities

Objects, subjects, space, time and collectivities as singularities

Practices of singularization I: Observing and evaluating

Practices of singularization II: Producing and applying

Performativity and technical singularization

3. Culture and culturalization

Doing culture as valorization and devalorization

Culturalizations and rationalizations

The practice of culture and its qualities: Between meaning and sense

4. The transformation of the cultural sphere

Non-modern societies: The fixation and repetition of singularities

Bourgeois modernity: The romantic revolution of the unique

Organized modernity: Mass culture

Late modernity: Competitive singularities, hyperculture and polarizations

II. The post-industrial economy of singularities

Beyond industrialism

The delimitation of the creative economy

1. Singularity goods in cultural capitalism

The culturalization of goods

Singularity goods: Originality and rarity

Things as singularity goods
Services, media and events as singularity goods
The performance of authenticity
Temporal structure: Moment and continuance
Cultural circulation and hyperculture

2. Cultural markets of singularities

Attraction markets as markets of attention and valorization
The culture-economization of economy and society
Overproduction and winner-take-all-competitions
Buzz-effect and the struggle for visibility
Techniques of valorization and reputation
Singularity capital
Quantifications of the particular

III. The singularization of work

Culture-economization and polarization of work

1. Work and organization in the creative economy

Cultural production as creative work
Projects as heterogeneous collaborations
Organizational cultures and networks

2. The singularization of the subjects of work

Beyond the formalization of work
The profile-subject: Competences and talents
The performativity of work
Techniques of singularization in the work sphere
Tensions of highly qualified work: Between artists' dilemma and superstar economy

IV. Digitalization as singularization: The rise of the culture machine

Vom industrial technics to digital technologies

1. Technologies of culturalization

Algorithms, digitality and the internet as infrastructures

The digital culture machine and the ubiquity of culture

Culture between overproduction and recombination

2. Cultural and technical singularization

The digital subject: Performative authenticity and visibility

Profile and compository singularity

Big data and profile of observance

The personalized net and softwarization

Digital neo-communities and the social in the net

Tensions of net culture: Between the obligation of profile and the affective culture of extremes

V. Singularized forms of life: Lifestyles, classes, subjectification

The late-modern self beyond industrial middle class-society

The new cultural class divide and its 'paternoster effect'

1. The new middle class: self-realization and status

Bourgeoisie and romantic counter culture: The new symbiosis

Self-realization and the valorization of everyday life

Curating life

Culture as resource and cultural cosmopolitanism

Investment in status and the prestige of the singular

2. Elements of a singularistic lifestyle

Food

Housing

Travelling

The body

Education

Work-life-balance, urbanism, juvenalization, degendering and the new liberalism

Tensions of life-world: The insufficiency of self-realization

3. Culturalization of inequality

Underclass-life: Muddling through

Cultural devaluations

Singularistic counter-strategies of the underclass

Late-modern class structure

VI. Differential liberalism and cultural essentialism: The transformation of the political

Politics of the particular

1. Liberalism of markets and of diversity

From social democracy to new liberalism

Competitive state and diversity: The two sides of new liberalism

Politics of the city I: New urbanism and global attraction market

Politics of the city II: Cultural governmentality and singularity management

2. The rise of cultural essentialism

Collective identities and the particularism of neo-communities

Ethnic communities and their culturalization

Nationalism

Religious fundamentalism

Right-wing populism

Cultural conflicts between essentialism, hyperculture and liberalism

Politics of violence - terror and rampage as celebration of the singular act

Conclusion: The crisis of the universal?