

## **Singularity: a new key for the sociological diagnosis of the present time?**

Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne*, Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017.

Triggered by Jean-François Lyotard's *Condition postmoderne* (1979), but translated to sociology by Ulrich Beck's *Risikogesellschaft* (1986), the debate about transformations of modernity has been going on for several decades by now. The initial challenge was to overcome the notion that “modern societies”, once firmly established, would no longer undergo major social transformations. By the early 1990s, this objective could be considered accomplished. The new sociological discourse about open-ended and apparently self-propelled trends of “globalization” and “individualization” sat uneasily with any idea of a coherent and well-ordered, functionally differentiated modern society, as they had dominated sociology at that time. But the ensuing opposition between theorists of “neo-modernization” and those of “multiple” or “alternative modernities”, rarely led in the form of an open dispute, was marred by too many conceptual and methodological problems on either side to settle the debate. As a consequence, the supposedly new modernity of our time kept being characterized by adjectives such as “disorganized”, “flexible”, “liquid”, which are more apt to denote the end of something than the beginning of something else. More substantive notions also came to be proposed, such as “network society”, “society of experiences”, “transparent society”, but they were either similarly emphasizing merely the dissolution of something or were looking at a particular feature of the present time rather than offering a comprehensive characterization of contemporary societies.

Firmly placed within this debate, Andreas Reckwitz's new book tries to do just that: it aims at capturing the recent “structural change of modernity” and proposes the concept of “singularity” as the key to understand our current socio-cultural constellation. The reasoning builds on a number of by now well-established insights, which it is worthwhile to underline because, despite being well-known, they are not generally shared: First, Reckwitz works with a broad historical perspective on social change and assumes that a major transformation of modernity started around the 1970s. This transformation leads into a new form of modernity, here called “late modernity”, clearly distinct from the preceding “classical modernity”, which is seen as having emerged around 1800. Significantly, the author also operates with a distinction within classical modernity between a “bourgeois modernity”, prevailing during much of the nineteenth century, and an “industrial” or “organized modernity”, which arose from the early twentieth century onwards. The latter distinction is absent in much grand theorizing about modernity, but it is highly necessary. Second, Reckwitz paints a broad picture and discusses in considerable detail technical, economic, socio-structural, and political aspects of modernity. This underpins his ambition to provide a comprehensive account of the current socio-cultural constellation, beyond merely underlining a particular feature of the present time. Third, the author introduces the notion of “social logics” of modernity, which serves both to define a socio-historical situation as modern and to allow the detection of varieties within such modern situations. Here, too, he draws on preceding theorizations of modernity by considering rationalisation and culturalisation as two “structuring principles of society” (p. 84), the force of which varies between historical constellations. This approach is very close to Alain Touraine's (1993) distinction between rationalisation and subjectivation (which is not mentioned), even though replacing subjectivation by culturalisation. Like Touraine, Reckwitz holds that modernity is characterized by the tension between these two structuring principles which plays itself out differently across historical periods.

Andreas Reckwitz takes his main step beyond the existing debate when he rephrases these two structuring principles as the social logics of the general and the particular. (He uses the terms “particular”, “unique”, and “singular” as synonymous, see p. 8, which is not without problems.) While those two logics are seen as being always at work, the central claim of the book is that

“organized modernity” gave primacy to generality over singularity, whereas the opposite is the case in current “late modernity”. The strength of this claim lies in the fact that it goes beyond the preceding notions that considered “organized modernity” as merely dissolving, and mostly without specifying why and how. With the idea that a striving for singularity becomes a prominent cultural orientation in current society, the argument is turned around and a motivational force is identified that supposedly directs social change. This idea is not without precedence, maybe most clearly in Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *Nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (1999), but it is here generalized as a cross-cutting societal phenomenon.

To support this claim, Reckwitz mobilizes an enormous amount of evidence from existing literature across a large number of different fields and genres. The range of sources as well as the competence with which the author draws on them is truly impressive. Nevertheless it is not easy to follow the reasoning, or to be fully convinced by it, and the author is aware of this, as many cautionary and qualifying remarks show. I want to address first some methodological issues before moving to broader questions of societal analysis.

A first concern regards the nature of the evidence. Findings of scholarly research are mixed with popular literature, including “how-to” books as well as fiction, without making clear distinctions. It might have been useful to, for instance, take a corpus of popular literature as the object of analysis, which then would be interpreted with the help of scholarly research, on the model of *Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Such approach would have had the merit of explicitly opening up the question, now only touched upon, in how far the discourse of singularity and uniqueness may be a tool of management and marketing rather than an indicator of profound social change. Furthermore, the references stretch across the past half century, and even beyond, and across Western societies (mostly the US, the UK and Germany) without systematically engaging with distinctions with regard to time and space. Thus, it appears as if the “society of singularities” has imposed itself in a homogeneous way on the Western world across recent decades. The numerous examples provided are just that, namely illustrations for a supposedly general phenomenon (ironically denying “singularity” to anything of sociological significance that happened within that time-space; see Boltanski 2018).

This imprecision with regard to the use of sources is mirrored in some imprecision with regard to the nature of the claim. Of course, Andreas Reckwitz is aware of the fact that the general cannot exist without the particular, and *vice versa*; he reasons in terms of a relation of tension between the two logics. But what does it then mean exactly to say that the social logics of the particular gains primacy during “late modernity” – a claim made even stronger by adding that this primacy concerns all dimensions of the social and that it happens for the first time in human history (p. 12)?

Some interesting elements are provided to answer this question. Far from denying that the logics of the general disappears, the author suggests that it forms the “background structure” upon which processes of singularization can unfold (p. 27; also “infrastructure”, p. 19). Such assertion seems particularly plausible for the transformations in technology and in economic practices since the 1970s, with digitalization and flexible specialization. It is also useful as it gives a sense of historical directedness, with transformations building on, while also transcending, the main features of prior constellations. But whether “primacy” is an adequate term for this relation is doubtful. In one major strand of sociological theorizing, at least, the “superstructure” (a term that Reckwitz does not use) remains largely determined by the infrastructure on which it rests and upon which it unfolds.

With regard to life-conduct and political matters, the nature of the claim is even more difficult to grasp. Without doubt, there is abundant evidence for what is here called singularization processes. Even the claim that those processes have become more widespread since the 1970s can largely be sustained for West European and North American societies. It is less convincing to say, though, that

these processes stretch through all dimensions of the social. Indeed, the instructive overviews of changes in social stratification and in forms of political allegiance provide a picture that, at first sight, is much more nuanced and gives ample space for what would here be called generalization processes. The author's general strategy for dealing with such evidence is to say that this might indeed be the case "at first sight", but that at a closer look even that which appears as generalization should rather be understood as singularization. Rather than applying strong capacity of interpretation, this looks to this reader more as an application of the law of the instrument, which in this case is a conceptual tool: "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Or, as he sympathetically admits in the introduction, Andreas Reckwitz was "often himself surprised how a once adjusted conceptual heuristics [...] let the empirical connections appear in a different light" (p. 25).

I do not want to go into more detail with regard to the soundness of evidence or the adequacy of the interpretation. Any conceptually ambitious and empirically wide-ranging account like this one inevitably will encounter questionings of this kind. Rather, I will now focus on some issues that necessarily underlie any analysis of the "structural change of modernity". The first question is why we should assume that modernity changes at all.

As said at the outset, to recognize historical transformations of modernity was an important insight that shook the rather static view of "modern society" that prevailed in the sociology of the 1960s. This insight was derived from a cumulation of observations made during the 1970s and 1980s, all indicating the dismantling of what had appeared as the firm pillars of modernity. But the question why the observed occurrences should cumulate to trigger a transformation of modernity was rarely addressed explicitly. Andreas Reckwitz is not very clear about the reasons, causes or mechanisms – whatever language one may prefer – behind the rise of singularization processes either. As far as I can see, he only gives two brief, and rather different indications. On the one hand, he does hint at technical and economic changes being at the core of broader societal changes (pp. 15-16). This would fit with the observation, already mentioned above, that singularization along these dimensions is clearly built on enormous prior work at generalization. And one might add that it would also be plausible to consider techno-economic changes as throwing the social and political structures of society in disarray, as many of the subsequent observations on social and political matters could be taken to show. But this is distinctly not Reckwitz's reading. He insists that there are singularization processes across all dimensions and does not assign "primacy" to any of them. He reserves the term "primacy" for the relation between singularization and generalization in our time – which leads us to the second possible explanation for the recent social transformation.

On the other hand, namely, the question about the dynamics of social change would in this context take the form of asking why this primacy came about. Reckwitz uses the conceptual pair generalization and singularization in close parallel to the pair rationalization and culturalization, which moves his reasoning nearer to standard sociological vocabulary. This step also allows him to place his approach within the field of theorizing modernity. Furthermore, he sees rationalization as addressing questions of scarcity and order, whereas culturalization addresses questions of meaning and motivation (p. 86). This connection to some notion of problem-solving might have led into the direction of theorizing the dynamics of "structural change in modernity": The move towards the primacy of generalization in organized modernity might have been triggered by deficiencies in handling scarcity and securing order under conditions of bourgeois modernity. In turn, the move towards the primacy of singularization might have been motivated by deficiencies in providing meaning and sustaining motivation under conditions of industrial modernity. But, again, the step is not taken. Reckwitz remains content with mounting up observations, sorting them in an orderly way and deriving typologies from them. This renunciation is surprising in two main respects: First, the ambitious and strong conceptual terminology he employs suggests that the aim is not merely identifying a major social transformation, but also understanding why it came about. And second, at

least some of his resources could have provided him with elements for understanding the dynamics of social change. I am thinking, for instance, of the notions of “social critique” and “artistic critique” in Boltanski and Chiapello's *Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, already mentioned above.

Asking then why the author did not take this road, one suspicion is that he tried it but it did not quite work out with the conceptual approach and empirical observations that he mobilized. And one reason for this failure may reside in the underspecification of the spatial configuration of modernity. In this regard, without being very specific, Reckwitz seems to adhere to the still widespread assumption of (neo-)modernization theory, which sees modernity both historically located and presently still more advanced in the “West”, while other societies, which are occasionally but rather rarely mentioned, are at best “emerging”. There are many reasons to be sceptical about this understanding, but the one that is most important here is that it does not permit a focus on the “structural” connection, as Reckwitz might have put it, between “modernity” and its supposed outside.

Reckwitz's analysis shows the peculiar feature of going beyond the national societies, which sociology used to compare with each other, without adopting a global perspective. Given current degrees of interconnectedness, the first step is demanded for many sociological questions, but not to take the second step is highly detrimental when aiming to grasp the “structural change of modernity”. Let me just give two examples.

It is certainly true, first, that the mass manufacturing of commodities has declined over the past decades in Western societies and has given way to “flexible specialization” as well as to the new commodities of the so-called “knowledge economy”, both of which are read by Andreas Reckwitz as singularization processes. But industrialization goes on worldwide and so does the supply of Western societies with goods that have been mass-produced elsewhere, according to what the author calls the logic of generalization. Second, that which Reckwitz characterizes as singularizing attitudes and behaviour in what he calls the “academic class” may well be diffused across one third of the population in Western Europe, as he suggests. But if we look globally, we see again that these orientations are shared by a small affluent minority only. In other words, if one compares the economic and social structures of the current global constellation with the West European one, say, at the beginning of organized modernity, then there may not be much of singularization but rather a prevailing dominance of generalization.

Now one may object that there is no need to take a global perspective because we are far from having a global “society”, despite increasing degrees of interconnectedness. But it is the global perspective that gives a clue to understanding the transformation of “Western” modernity, namely its reasons or mechanisms. The “enrichment” of commodities with higher value, the analysis of which by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2017) could have been made more central by Andreas Reckwitz, is not least a strategy of European owners of assets to defend their affluence differential in the global context against actors in so-called “emerging” societies. In turn, the industrialization of those societies is partly a result of “externalization” strategies in the West, trying to get rid of forms of production with high environmental impact and low skills and low wages, while still benefitting from the consumption of the thus produced goods (see recently Lessenich 2016; with more focus on selected Southern and Northern societies: Mota and Wagner 2019). The change in the relation between what Reckwitz calls generalization and singularization in Europe is to a considerably extent due to changes in the global context. If there is a “background structure” to singularization in Europe, it can most clearly be found in the rest of the globe, including the recent migrants.

Therefore, the reflections on “the crisis of the general”, with which the book concludes, come both too late and fall too short of what would have been required. Unlike the title of the section suggests,

these reflections do not add anything with regard to the reasons why organized modernity underwent the observed transformation. But neither are the brief notes about what the author calls “the crisis moments of late modernity” (p. 432) very illuminating. Andreas Reckwitz detects a social crisis of recognition, a cultural crisis of self-realization, and a political crisis, all of which seem to be due, following his own description, to something like an excess of singularization. Surprisingly, though, he refers to them as a “crisis of the general in the society of singularities” (p. 437). According to his notion of “social logics”, one should have thought that it is a crisis of the general that brings singularization processes about, and this from the 1970s onwards. But now it appears as if it is the society of singularities, once established, that is, in our present time, that creates a crisis of the general.

The notion of crisis would have deserved more reflection and a more central place in the analysis. As briefly mentioned above, transformations of modernity may occur precisely when a given interpretation of modernity falls in some way short of what is expected of it. This is a moment of crisis in the sense that critique and contestation arise because of deficiencies in the societal constellation (see recently Boltanski 2009; for my own view Wagner 2016a), and it is also the moment when action is taken to remedy the deficiencies and, so to say, to set modernity on a different path. Once one adopts an approach to modernity that does not stylize either rationalization or culturalization, but stays close to the experiences the inhabitants of modernity make and the interpretations they give to these experiences, then the notion that self-propelled progress is necessarily constitutive of modernity also disappears. As a consequence, there is no reason to assume that the current transformation of modernity, as wide-reaching as its impact may be, spells the end of modernity – an idea with which the author briefly toys (pp. 430, 437).

The merits of Andreas Reckwitz's book are the insights accumulated in a rich and wide-ranging review of literature on recent social change as well as the fact that it provokes further thoughts on a still insufficiently addressed issue, namely to provide an appropriate sociological interpretation of the present (for my own recent proposal, see Wagner 2015). But it is limited by its original but ultimately unconvincing conceptual proposal to understand the transformations of modernity through changes in the relation between singularity and generality. Ultimately, so this reader's conclusion, these terms lend themselves neither for sufficiently clearly categorizing social phenomena nor for identifying a dynamics of social change. To all those interested in a sociological interpretation of the present, I recommend the book nevertheless: It sensitizes us for the issues at stake in accomplishing this challenging task.

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