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Does Practice Theory Work? Reckwitz's Study of the 'New Middle Class' as an Example

Abstract: 'Practice theory'—a theory program that connects the goal of offering non-rationalist explanations to a strong focus on everyday routine activities, and builds on the work of Bourdieu but tries to gain a less narrow perspective—is being used more and more widely in the social sciences. Its advocates often argue that, since practice theory is a heuristic for doing empirical work, discussing it without addressing this empirical work cannot do justice to it. Therefore, this article analyses Reckwitz's recently translated book on *The Society of Singularities*, which its author presents as an example of the advantages of (one dominant version of) practice theory. As will be shown, the book demonstrates that this version of practice theory does not fulfil its promises. Looking at its difficulties is instructive, however, because it helps see more clearly how the goal of an integrative 'theory of practice' could be achieved.

1 Introduction

During the last decades, a family of theoretical approaches labelled as 'practice theory' (PT) has been used more and more widely in the social sciences and the humanities. It connects the goal of offering non-rationalist explanations to a strong focus on everyday routine activities, and promises to show how situational processes and large-scale social processes are interconnected. Its most common version builds on the work of Pierre Bourdieu—who coined the term 'theory of

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practice' (Bourdieu 1972)—but tries to gain a less narrow perspective, mostly by rearticulating Bourdieu's arguments in what its advocates suggest is a less dogmatic mode, and by connecting Bourdieu's concepts to concepts from other sources. Attempts to discuss how PT functions as a theory, however, often meet the objection that PT is meant as a heuristic for doing empirical work, and that analysing its conceptual structure without addressing this empirical work could not do justice to it. This view has recently been reaffirmed by Andreas Reckwitz, a much-quoted advocate of PT, in an extended account of what he, no doubt correctly, presents as a thought style that is widely shared within a community of like-minded researchers (Reckwitz 2021b). In this sense, PT includes not only a set of substantive sociological concepts, but also a general view about what sociological theory is good for, and how it can be meaningfully discussed—a view that also shapes the ways in which these substantive concepts are used.

Now, even before discussing the merits of this general view, one can easily agree that observing how a theoretical perspective guides concrete empirical investigations is a useful way for finding out more about it. This is what this article will try to do for PT. The substantive sociological inquiry that Reckwitz (2021b) mostly draws on in order to illustrate the advantages of PT is his own book on *The Society of Singularities* ([2017] 2020). While not grounded in empirical research done by the author, this book engages with a large set of empirical questions: Starting from a broad description of a 'new middle class', it seeks to give a general account of the current social constellation, touching upon quite different areas of sociology in the process. As an example of an application of PT, it is useful also because it has already been an object of a round of discussions that also examined some of its empirical claims, and offered its author an opportunity for clarifying his position. Therefore, in order to elucidate the conceptual presuppositions of this widely shared research style, this paper uses Reckwitz's book as an occasion to look at PT's strategies for making empirical observations and drawing conclusions from them; it examines how PT—its substantive concepts and its views on the use of theory—have contributed to the diagnosis of a 'society of singularities', in order to get a clearer view of PT's virtues and problems.

As I will try to show, the book demonstrates that this version of PT does not fulfil its promises. The empirical and conceptual weaknesses of Reckwitz's account that have been pointed out by critics result directly from this conceptual strategy. Looking at these difficulties is instructive, however, because it helps see more clearly how the goal of an integrative 'theory of practice' could be achieved.

The paper starts with a short reminder of possible reasons for the PT program of reconstructing Bourdieu's sociological theory and integrating it with other concepts (Section 2). It then briefly discusses the main theoretical decisions that characterize the version of PT that Reckwitz recommends, with a focus on Reckwitz's recent theoretical statement (2021a) that articulates the presuppositions of a widely shared research practice (Section 3). The main part of the paper discusses how this version of PT informs *The Society of Singularities* (Section 4); after a brief sketch of the book's central claims (Section 4.1), it discusses its strategy for choosing an empirical point of departure (Section 4.2), its mode of articulating a theory of society that contextualizes its description of this 'new middle class' (Section 4.3), its strategy of searching for instances of a 'singularist' cultural pattern (Section 4.4), and its strategy for ending the inquiry (Section 4.5). A short conclusion summarizes the results (Section 5).

2 Reasons for Reconstructing Bourdieu's Sociological Theory

Bourdieu has shown that concepts from the sociology of culture are much more useful for explaining social processes than an earlier social-science consensus had assumed. He shows that the stable differences which establish entities like 'social classes' are constituted by symbolic boundaries that introduce categorical distinctions where, otherwise, one would see only continuous distributions (Bourdieu 1979, 559);[1] one of his core ideas is that such boundaries are sustained by aesthetic objects which are part of the fabric of ordinary life, and more generally by the aesthetic dimension of everyday activities. At the same time, Bourdieu offers microfoundations that avoid the strong rationality assumptions which now dominate the social sciences. He argues that cooperation is made possible by sets of rules that are taken for granted, and that this taken-for-grantedness is continually being reproduced through social processes; this concept of social order is what the label 'theory of practice' first stands for (Bourdieu 1972).

These essential contributions, however, are offset by substantial problems. Bourdieu ties his non-rationalist explanatory strategy to a set of anthropological assumptions that severely restrict the empirical openness of this approach. First, his explanation *why* rules that guide cooperation usually are tacitly taken for granted assumes that the members of a given context have 'internalized' these rules; that these rules are part of their 'habitus'. According to Bourdieu, the

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1 See Weininger (2005) for a useful discussion of this aspect.

social stability that such rules create is first of all based on an *inner* mental stability: In the last instance, "social order is based mainly on the order that reigns in the brains (*l'ordre qui règne dans les cervaux*)" (Bourdieu 1980, 91, my translation).

This claim that such internalizations explain social stability makes it necessary to assume that habituations, once formed, are highly durable. In this sense, his theory of social order rests on the idea that there is an anthropologically constant propensity not to reflect. This makes for the specific character of Bourdieu's 'habitus' concept: Even in his last theoretical statement, after gestures acknowledging that a 'habitus' can be more fluid than his earlier arguments suggested, Bourdieu (2003, 231) returns to his claim that the presence of habitus can be observed most clearly when an actor proves unable to adapt to a changing environment. Unlike the concept of habit in classical pragmatism (e.g., Dewey [1922] 1988), Bourdieu's 'habitus' concept is not connected to a theory about the conditions under which reflexivity occurs.

A further anthropological assumption is added because of Bourdieu's goal to develop a comprehensive explanatory theory of class dynamics. In order to derive concrete predictions from evidence about resource distribution, he adds another presupposition: All action follows a logic of gaining and keeping power, of improving or maintaining an actor's social position;[2] even the "ultimate values of a person" should be seen as a "highly sublimated form of interests" (Bourdieu 1979, 310, my translation). With this, Bourdieu's sociology returns to a central presupposition of the narrow rational-actor theories it was meant to supersede (Honneth 1984). The result is rather similar to those more or less tautological versions of rational-actor theory which use a highly abstract concept of utility in order to claim that any observable action can be explained as deriving from actors' attempts to maximize their utility.[3]

This creates another difficulty: The claim that (almost) everybody is motivated by a universal power-orientation seems difficult to square with the self-understandings of many actors. In order to show that such self-understandings do not contradict this claim, Bourdieu needs a stronger concept of the way in

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2 This is not *always* a claim about anthropological constants; sometimes it works as an argument about specific institutions, like in Bourdieu's (1984) account of academic 'fields'. Here, he suggests how academic disciplines socialize new members into taking rules (like standards of excellence) for granted which sustain processes of continual hierarchization, that is, let members act *as if* they were motivated by a logic of power, but without requiring them to actually intend these effects, or even to be aware of them. Still, at his preferred level of generality, Bourdieu can defend his claim about a logic of power only by casting it as an anthropological assumption.
3 My thanks to Ulf Tranow for pointing this out.

which actors can be unaware of the reality of their own actions. He tries to solve this problem by assimilating the 'habitus', at least metaphorically, to a Freudian unconscious. Karsenti (2011, 122–24) points out that this does not make theoretical sense since this habitus concept builds on ideas from the phenomenological tradition, which are different from the relevant Freudian ideas. However, this assimilation enables Bourdieu (1979, 355) to assume that actions can be explained as resulting from "strategies of symbolic assertion (that are not conscious of themselves)" or, as a much-used formula has it, from 'unconscious strategies'. This decision locates a core mechanism in an 'inner' sphere that, at least with most sociological methods, cannot even be observed indirectly. Hence, it tends to shield Bourdieu's theory from many possible empirical objections. What started as an attempt to create instruments for critical reflection ends up as a strategy of self-immunization (Boltanski 1990).[4] This also affects Bourdieu's sociology of cultural classifications, because it severely restricts the range of possible observations. Using Bourdieu's theory, one always already knows what one will find. This is exacerbated because his sociology of classification emphasizes the (supposed) role of a tacitly accepted rule of distinction. This hypothesis makes it particularly difficult to identify behaviour that does not confirm it: Any behaviour that deviates from commonly accepted rules can still be interpreted as following the meta-rule that one should try to be different (Voswinckel 2018).

So, because Bourdieu's sociology is extremely fruitful as well as seriously flawed, the PT goal of integrating Bourdieu's arguments into a less narrow theoretical frame seems highly attractive.

3 Reckwitz's Account of Practice Theory

This version of PT is directed against the kind of theory-based closure that, as we saw, can also be observed in Bourdieu's work. Its explicit goal is to enable its users to do justice to their empirical material (Reckwitz 2021b, 30, 40). This goal leads to three main decisions.

The first is to aim for "theoretical multilinguality" (150)[5] in order "not to become a victim of the one-sidedness of one single theory" (149). Reckwitz proposes a strategy of integration that uses Bourdieu's concepts as well as concepts from related approaches. He argues for a "partial appropriation" of theories, as opposed to using a theory "in toto" (45). This is not trivial: Some of the approaches

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4 On the underlying rhetorical moves which make sure that "the critic is always right", see Latour (2004, 238–40).
5 Translations from Reckwitz (2021b) are my own.

that he wants to integrate have been developed against Bourdieu's theory (e.g., Butler 1999; Latour 2004) or, like ethnomethodology, have been appropriated for developing such an alternative (see de Fornel et al. 2001). This raises the question how such an integration can work, and how to make sure that the result will not simply be dominated by Bourdieu's theory, which tightly connects its core concepts through a set of quasi-determinist assumptions.

One strategy would rely on a systematic reconstruction that starts from Bourdieu's emphasis on taken-for-granted rules, and asks how other theories describe other ways in which such rules emerge, remain stable, or lose their power. After all, many of the approaches that are being discussed under the PT label focus on types of recurrent situations that sustain the plausibility of a given set of social rules (Pettenkofer 2017). Such a strategy of thinking in terms of functional equivalents could not only help integrate arguments from heterogeneous theories, as different partial answers to one overarching question. It would also increase empirical openness, by making it possible to confront every interpretation with alternative hypotheses about possible other ways in which cooperation could be stabilized in a given context, as well as by introducing a permanently open empirical question: There is, in principle, always a possibility of observing new mechanisms that contribute to sustaining this kind of taken-for-grantedness. Hence, this strategy would help go beyond the narrow rigid presuppositions from which, as we saw, crucial problems of Bourdieu's theory ensue.

A second step towards empirical openness could be to no longer take it as given that social order is (almost) always maintained by rules which are taken for granted, and to ask instead, as Dewey's pragmatist concept of habit suggests, under which conditions such states of taken-for-grantedness are interrupted, and reflexivity occurs (Dietz et al. 2017).

Such a two-step strategy would also have the advantage of not requiring strong assumptions about supposedly 'inner' 'mental' bases of social order: The PT approaches that highlight the role of social situations give less weight to 'unconscious' processes, and focus on observable processes of communication and signaling. Therefore, this strategy would no langer have to rely on assumptions about substantive action-orientations—like the universal power-orientation presupposed by Bourdieu—that (almost) all actors are supposed to share.

The version of PT that Reckwitz recommends, however does not opt for a systematic reconstruction, but for flexible conceptual ad-hoc couplings: The criterion for taking a specific concept out of its original context should be its "heuristic fruitfulness in a concrete situation of analysis" (Reckwitz 2021b, 46). If a concept does not work, one should switch theories: "For other purposes, one simply needs other tools" (47). The choice of this mode of conceptual integration is grounded in a deep scepticism about debates focused on constructing systematic

theories. That scepticism does not only concern the sterility of 'pure' theory debates decoupled from empirical questions (146–57) but, more generally, the idea of theories as systems. This is the second decision that shapes this version of PT: It tries to achieve empirical openness by avoiding systematic theory. The statement that practice theory is a "tool" (44) does not only mean that it should be used as a heuristic. 'Theory as a tool' is meant as an alternative to 'theory as a system' (44); the underlying assumption is that systematic theories have no heuristic value in themselves. From that point of view, thinking in terms of "rival" theories—which only makes sense if one sees theories as potentially competing systematic lines of argument—is already problematic (148).

It seems doubtful, however, that the program to select and recombine concepts from other theories can be made to work on such a basis. This does not only concern the question if it is actually possible to reintegrate such concepts without adopting (as suggested above) a systematic theoretical perspective. The question is already how to decide which elements of a theory are 'fruitful' for a given case, which can be ignored, and when it is better to switch to a different theory. Reckwitz does not treat this as a problem that needs to be addressed. This seems less obvious if we apply to our own work the insight (shared by Bourdieu) that actors usually cling to their intellectual routines. Theories are shared scripts for following intellectual routines; therefore, recognizing that a concept is no longer fruitful requires a disruption of such routines. Here, simply hoping for the effect of 'empirical data' is not enough. All general sociological theories offer ways to accommodate conflicting empirical observations—either by treating them as exceptions, or by reinterpreting them in the light of claims about mechanisms that cannot be observed directly.

As we saw, Bourdieu's theory makes its users particularly immune against such disruptions, because it locates central mechanisms in a sphere of the 'unconscious' that is difficult to observe empirically. (In this sense, the consequences of his assumptions about a *libido dominandi* are similar to those of the 'rational egoism' that some rational-actor theories presuppose.) Therefore, the kind of disruption which clearly establishes that an intellectual routine no longer works usually cannot be created by empirical observations alone. It requires observations *under a competing description* that blocks this kind of quick integration. This is why debates between competing theories are essential for maintaining empirical openness (Abbott 2004): They can demonstrate the (possible) importance of phenomena that one's preferred theory discounts, and/or show how phenomena that one's preferred theory highlights could be interpreted differently. For example, taking 'rival' theories into account can help identify different ways in which the tacit acceptance of a given set of rules can be preserved; it can also help identify conditions under which cooperation is

no longer stabilized by a mechanism of this type. Therefore, noticing blind spots is made easier by heuristically adopting the perspective of a rival theory. Already in this sense, opposing 'theory as a tool' and 'theory as a system' seems misleading.

The third decision that shapes this version of PT is a rejection of *Entlarvung* or 'unmasking' (Reckwitz 2021b, 140). Since Reckwitz's explanation of this decision is closely linked to his account of a 'society of singularities', this will be discussed in more detail below.

4 *The Society of Singularities* as an Application of Practice Theory

4.1 Singularities: The Central Claims

The book starts from the observation that some members of today's middle classes seem to feel that they continually, in professional and in 'private' contexts, have to make efforts to prove to others, and to themselves, that they are special. These efforts also seem to be driven by newly available online media that make it possible for them to continually present images of the special activities of which their daily lives consist. This seems to be not just an adaptation to external constraints, but also motivated by a specific idea of the good life. Reckwitz sees the constraining and the attractive part of this focus on being special as two aspects of one single cultural pattern that dominates the current social constellation. He sometimes calls this pattern a *Logik des Besonderen*, which the translation renders as "logic of the particular" (Reckwitz 2020, 4), though as far as the core of Reckwitz's diagnosis is concerned, 'logic of the special' might come closer.[6] This term would be compatible with the idea that 'being special' can be performed in quite different ways. The book's eponymous claim, however, is that there now is a single dominant mode of being special, namely, being 'singular', and that this mode also shapes large parts of contemporary working life. 'Singularity' is an exacting standard: It does not only require that an entity "cannot be exchanged for or replaced by a different but functionally identical entity" (35). One is observing a regime of singularity only if "differences are always absolute" and there are no

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6 The difficulty of translation results from an ambiguity of the German language—*besonders* can mean 'particular' as well as 'special' but also from an ambiguity in Reckwitz's argument: Individuals who follow a singularity norm the version of the *Logik des Besonderen* which is central to Reckwitz's diagnosis—try to signal that they are special, not that they are particular.

"rankings" among activities and entities, but only "a qualitative *otherness* which has the character of *incommensurability*" (37).

Within the discourse that is being portrayed, 'singular' works as a second-order attribute: For an activity or entity to be recognized as singular, it not only has to be seen as unique, or numerically singular. This (purported) uniqueness has to be valued as such, to a degree that it significantly contributes to the attractiveness of this activity or entity. Reckwitz emphasizes that this standard of evaluation originates from the sphere of aesthetic production, and finds its first prominent expression in the romantic ideal of the artist. His claim is that today, this standard is applied in quite different contexts, to the point of shaping the current social constellation as a whole; he sees this also as a consequence of the 1960s protest movements. The 'primary social carrier group' of "the late-modern lifestyle" is a "new middle class" (199) of the university-educated; here, Reckwitz attributes particular importance to the "relatively small but culturally influential milieu of those who are active in the professions associated with the creative industries in the strict sense (computers and the internet, media, art, design, marketing, etc.)" (199–200). While Reckwitz devotes chapters in his book to changing labour markets and to the internet economy, the explanatory role of this transformed economy is seen as secondary: It only "actively *fulfils* the [...] middle-class desire for [...] singularization" even if it "has not left subjects and lifestyles unchanged" (74). According to Reckwitz, the success of the singularity norm results primarily from an intrinsic cultural aspiration of this 'new middle class'. He tries to show that quite different social phenomena can be understood as effects of this pattern, e.g., the increasing use of the 'project' as a form of organizing work, the rise of 'right-wing populism', as well as a set of current cooperation problems that Reckwitz calls a "crisis of the general".

In what follows, I will discuss how the version of PT endorsed by Reckwitz contributes to this diagnosis, with a focus on the promises of this version of PT: Does this empirical investigation manage to use concepts not just from Bourdieu's theory but also from other theories? Does the integration of those other concepts succeed? Does this lead to a higher degree of empirical openness? And does it result in convincing accounts of the empirical phenomena?

4.2 The Point of Departure: Bourdieu's 'New Petty Bourgeoisie' as a Paradigmatic Case

The first inspiration from PT that shapes the 'society of singularities' diagnosis is not a theory-based line of questioning, but an empirical analogy. In an answer to critics, Reckwitz (2021a, 39) cites Bourdieu's portrayal of a "new petty bourgeoisie" in 1960s/70s France as an essential influence; while he also mentions

other references, it is quite obviously here that he finds a depiction of a cultural pattern that serves as a paradigm for his own analysis. This 'new petty bourgeoisie', characterized by a relatively high degree of 'cultural capital', exhibits an ostentatious open-mindedness and, at the same time, gives an impression of strain that never fully disappears (Bourdieu 1979, 419). Bourdieu sees both aspects as linked to the fact that, for them, cultural openness has become a norm that *ought* to be followed. He underlines this paradoxical aspect by talking about a "pleasure obligation" (*devoir de plaisir*) that makes itself felt in this milieu (422, my translation). This transformation of aesthetic criteria into social norms can, according to Bourdieu, also be traced backed to the origin of this 'new petty bourgeoisie' in the political movements of the 1960s (423).[7] Because of this normativization, any activity that could be seen to have an aesthetic dimension can acquire within this milieu, for those who perform it, the additional meaning of proving their cultural worth and distinguishing themselves from others; according to Bourdieu, the members of this milieu continually engage in games of distinction (418).

Reckwitz suggests one important modification concerning the dominant mode of distinction. Here, he builds on the work of Nathalie Heinich, an ex-member of Bourdieu's research group.[8] In her historical sociology of art evaluation, Heinich (1991; 2005) reconstructs how a new standard for judging art emerges in the 19th century: 'Singularity' becomes a positive—and defining—attribute of works of art. This is linked to a new distinction between 'qualifying' and 'disqualifying' forms of singularity (Heinich 2005, 139)—a distinction which reappears in Reckwitz's account, in a slightly different form, as that between 'idiosyncrasies' and 'singularities' (Reckwitz 2020, 34–5). Heinich underlines that this new standard is used to evaluate not only (aesthetic) objects but also persons: The artist's personal singularity now comes to be seen as corroborating a work's aesthetic importance (Heinich 1991; 2005, 135–36). Heinich (2010) already emphasizes that, as a consequence of this cultural transformation, the 'singular' artist is often seen as a paradigm for understanding individuality, which has led to the idea that being an individual means, in some sense, being like an artist.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu's 'new petty bourgeoisie' remains the paradigm for this account of the 'new middle class'. Crucially, Reckwitz holds on to the assumption that there is one single predominant cultural pattern; that this pattern motivates constant struggles for distinction; and that the way in which members

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7 This genealogy has been reconstructed extensively, and in a less polemical vein, by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), on whose work much of Reckwitz's argument builds.
8 Reckwitz mentions her 2005 book in a footnote (325, n. 24) but does not explicitly discuss it.

relate to aesthetic objects is determined by this struggle. In his version, this appears as a search for "singularity prestige" which "affects one's self-worth as well as the prestige that one has in the eyes of others" (Reckwitz 2020, 222), to a degree that all aesthetic objects become "an ensemble of cultural resources that individuals draw upon flexibly for the sake of their own singularization" (315).

However, as we will see even more clearly below, Bourdieu's assumption is not retained as a result of this inquiry starting from the perspective of Bourdieu's systematic theory. Rather, it is because Bourdieu's depiction of the 'new petty bourgeoisie' is treated as paradigmatic that this inquiry also holds on to the theoretical premises that went into this depiction. Looking at this starting point of the 'singularities' inquiry, one might already wonder whether this version of PT really creates a higher degree of empirical openness: In this case, the analysis is directly shaped not only by Bourdieu's theoretical arguments, but also by his decades-old empirical observations. This shows how concentrating only on specific results of a theory—rather than on the systematic theory itself – can lead to a strong reliance on analogies to concrete empirical findings. Using the same theory at its original level of abstraction might have made it possible to also see things that had not yet been observed before.

4.3   Generalizing (1): Articulating a Theory of Society

Since the *Singularities* study, while focusing on this 'new middle class', is meant to offer an account of the entire current social constellation, it needs a theory of society that shows how observing this class offers an access point for understanding this constellation. As we will see, this procedure of generalization is—quite in keeping with the methodological statements discussed above—not guided by a systematic theory. Instead, observations of what Reckwitz sees as structural features of this new middle class are used to draw conclusion about "late modern" society as a whole. Consequently, this theory of society is a theory of social classes. Like traditional class theories, it focuses on the economy but does not include an explicit discussion of functional differentiation (which makes it narrower than Bourdieu's theory, where a concept of social 'fields' offers a bridge between a theory of classes and a theory of functional differentiation). And in accordance with the empirical starting point, it is a specific version of class theory: It assumes that there is a *dominant* class (the 'new middle class'), and that the main mode of dominance is *cultural influence*. Two decisions in Reckwitz's book that have surprised some of its readers become understandable if one sees them as consequences of this particular strategy of generalization.

The first is his treatment of what he calls the upper class, defined as those who, in terms of income and assets, form the "upper 1 percent of society" (Reckwitz

2020, 261). He discusses this class only very briefly (261–3; Reckwitz 2019, 107–9) and seems undecided how deeply to integrate it into his argument: Sometimes, he talks about a "three-thirds society" (Reckwitz 2020, 204), which does not include the upper class, sometimes about a "three-plus-one class model" (Reckwitz 2019, 72),[9] which includes it but treats it as something apart and somehow less relevant. He justifies this by referring to their small number (66). This seems difficult to justify, since members of this class can exert a kind of political influence that also affects the distribution of those opportunities a sociology of class would usually be interested in (Hartmann 2021; Kumkar and Schimank 2021, 13). Reckwitz discusses this influence only in a highly selective way. Even in a follow-up book that is explicitly devoted to questions of class theory, the only concrete remark on the social influence of this class is: "International magazines like *Wallpaper*, *Monocle* or *AD Architectural Digest* function as windows on a lifestyle that is out of reach for almost everybody but nevertheless seems enviable for many, and therefore have effects that go far beyond the narrow circle of the super-rich" (Reckwitz 2019, 109). The decision to focus on the influence of economic elites only to the extent that it is wielded via magazines like *Wallpaper* may seem astonishing. It becomes understandable, however, as an application of the theory-sceptical research strategy at the core of this version of PT: Reckwitz starts by observing a social class that seems to exert social influence mainly via cultural display; hence, from his perspective, among the elements of the PT toolkit, only the concept of cultural capital seems fruitful; therefore, under the premises of this research strategy, it is only natural to see cultural influence as the only relevant type of influence (for the purposes of this research project); and if one focuses exclusively on this type of influence, there is not that much to say about this upper class.

Here, one sees how unswervingly Reckwitz understands the structure of society according to the paradigm offered by his 'new middle class', rather than from the point of view of a general theory. This becomes obvious if one asks what difference it would have made if Reckwitz had used the systematic theory of class closest to his own approach: As is well-known, Bourdieu does not recognize only 'cultural capital', but also economic capital and network-based access ('social capital'). Taking these resources into account would have pointed to other modes of influence that are available for this class, especially for its top segment (e.g., using the bargaining positions created by employer roles; making donations to political parties; funding lobbyists, think thanks, and research; conveying, in face-to-face meetings, their views on how things work). This would also be quite

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9 Translations from Reckwitz (2019) are my own.

relevant for Reckwitz's discussion of 'the crisis of the general', where the upper class is not even mentioned: The highly privileged can find it easy to believe that, whatever the problem, private solutions will be available for them, and that consequently, policies which invest in collective goods might create unnecessary restrictions on their own freedom.[10]

The second surprising feature that becomes understandable as a consequence of this research strategy is the decision to treat the creative industries as the *core* of contemporary economic structures (Reckwitz 2020, 83), and to conclude that they are the part of the economy that really matters for understanding the current social constellation. (This marginalizes, for instance, the fossil fuel industries that are at the centre of the climate-change conflict; and indeed, climate change is not a topic in Reckwitz's diagnosis of 'late modernity.') This decision may seem hard to defend (Knöbl 2017). If, however, one strictly focuses on this 'new middle class' and its performances of distinction, the creative industries indeed appear as the most important part of the economy, because they offer the cultural products that are used in these performances (Reckwitz 2020, 315).

Here, one can already see how useful it would have been to confront these empirical impressions with a systematic theory that would have helped ask questions which are not immediately suggested by the empirical case from which the inquiry starts.

4.4 Generalization (2): Looking for Analogous Instances of a 'Singularization' Pattern

The second generalization procedure that the *Singularities* study performs is a search for other instances of the 'singularization' pattern. This does not only concern the question whether this pattern can be found in other classes, but also the 'new middle class' itself. Certainly, the social location of Bourdieu's 'new petty bourgeoisie' has some similarities to that of Reckwitz's 'new middle class'; one of Bourdieu's inspirations was George Perec's novel *Les choses* Perec, (1965) that tells a story about two young advertising professionals (Bourdieu 1979, 422). Nevertheless, Bourdieu talks about a lower middle class whose members were academically less successful and now have slightly precarious positions (409–14).

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10 This would also be visible from the vantage point of a sociology of lifestyles: The upper class practices a resource-intensive lifestyle which is hard to justify in general terms. For example, according to Oxfam (2020), the richest 1% are responsible for 15% of cumulative carbon emissions. Therefore, using their political clout to block climate-change mitigation measures—a current instance of the 'crisis of the general'—might also make sense to them because it can be seen as defending their way of life.

It is, in the end, this precariousness that, according to Bourdieu, explains their ongoing efforts at using aesthetic objects in order to distinguish themselves from others. Reckwitz, however, wants to show that the same pattern also shapes the activities of the culturally successful and economically privileged members of an upper middle class.

About his generalization strategy, he says: "While writing, I was often surprised how a conceptual heuristic adjustment—looking at things through the lens of singularization and valorization—could make empirical circumstances appear in a different light." (Reckwitz 2020, 15) This is basically a strategy of *subsumption* under a pre-set conceptual scheme, which might seem at odds with his stated goal of empirical openness.[11] The specific character of this strategy becomes clearer if one contrasts it with a well-known different strategy to develop empirically grounded theories.[12] This alternative strategy is based on a deliberate search for phenomena that cannot be subsumed under the categories one has started with; it focuses not only on large contrasts (e.g., comparing 'late modern' with supposedly 'premodern' orientations) but also on *smaller* contrasts that point to *variations*, and to possible different *types* of the research object. Looking at both kinds of contrast cases is meant to help grasp the research object in its specificity, and to identify, in a more precise way, the large-scale processes linked to this phenomenon. Here, too, it can help to think in terms of 'rival' theories: Considering 'rival' accounts of the research object—the strategy described by Abbott (2004)—is highly useful for finding such contrasting cases that do not simply confirm the expectations of one's preferred theory.

Concerning the 'logic of the special', one way to look for such variations would be to ask: Which kind and which degree of being special has, from the point of view of the members, to be proved in which kind of context? And where does the effort to prove one's being special take the specific form of a search for the *singular*? This question also seems pertinent because a singularity norm creates an *extrinsic* constraint: Doing something because nobody else does it is no less heteronomous than doing it because everybody does; therefore, compliance with such a norm might be an adaptation to social pressure, and this pressure may vary

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11 The German original, talking about "eine einmal justierte Begriffsheuristik" (Reckwitz 2017, 25), is even more explicit about this logic of subsumption.

12 A classical account of this 'grounded theory' program is offered by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Of course, such a strategy of 'theoretical sampling' can also be used for developing theoretical arguments that reanalyze empirical work done by others, rather than relying on original empirical research. Surprisingly, for all his emphasis on the importance of empirical research, Reckwitz shows no interest in the procedures that 'qualitative' social research uses in order to actually achieve empirical openness.

across society. Already in the debate on which this PT program builds, one finds hypotheses that point to variations of this kind, and hence, to possible contrast cases. To mention just one example: Starting from Bourdieu's idea that cultural competences function as a type of capital, one notices that some educational credentials become less scarce and may lose some of their value (which Reckwitz mentions, e.g., 248). Therefore, forceful attempts at demonstrating one's being special might be particularly likely at those positions in the social structure where such devaluations have been particularly important, with claims to singularity being *one* form that such attempts can take.

Another possible search for variations would start from the fact that 'singularity', as a standard of evaluation, originates in the art world: What exactly remains of such a standard once it has been translated into other social contexts? Of particular interest for this question is Boltanski and Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), which Reckwitz repeatedly cites. They meticulously reconstruct such a translation process that happened during a conflict which started with the 1960s student movement and was also propelled by French labour unions. Their book shows how, as a consequence of this, a type of critique inspired by an idealized model of aesthetic production—their term is "artist critique" (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, 83–4)—has instigated changes in the organization of work and in the production of consumer goods. By tracing the history of this conflict, they capture the selection processes which ensure that some elements of this critique have much stronger consequences than others.

First, they show that the cultural success of a pattern of evaluation inspired by the romantic ideal of the artist does not necessarily lead to an emphasis on singularity: While "loss of singularity" (152) is one trope of the original 'artist critique', this aspect becomes (precariously) influential only in the production of consumer goods (535–41). The element of the idealized model of the artist that actually shapes conflicts about work is the motive of *autonomy* (83–4, 274). Second, while business associations and corporations adapt to a critique denouncing workers' lack of autonomy, they mostly adopt those elements of this critique that also seem useful from their own point of view (266–80). Hence, the result of this translation process is not a diffusion of the original aesthetic discourse, but a *new* set of norms; Boltanski and Chiapello call it "project-based polity" (chapt. 2) and clearly distinguish it from the 'artist critique'.[13]

Their analysis also has implications for the question which theory of society is useful here: The outcome of this conflict is not simply the result of a cultural

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13 Heinich (2010, 100) comes to a similar conclusion: Singularity, in the strong sense of the term, can be practiced *only* in the art world; outside this context, treating the 'singular' artist as a paradigmatic case of individuality is mostly a source of illusions.

influence of the protesters (or of the 'new middle class' they arguably represent); it is strongly affected by the strategies of corporations and business associations trying to adapt to a changing social environment. Thus, the selection process through which *some* elements of this aesthetic discourse become institutionalized is mediated by the preferences of the kind of upper class that Reckwitz mostly ignores. Moreover, the strategies that drive this selection process make sense to this elite because of the *economic* context in which they operate. By highlighting this selection effect, this analysis points to the importance of the questions a theory of social differentiation would raise: Could one observe different types of selection processes in, for example, academic or political environments? Does it really make sense to assume that there is one overarching cultural pattern which substantially shapes activities in all these different contexts?[14]

In keeping with his methodological decision not to think in terms of 'rival' theoretical accounts, Reckwitz does not discuss such questions. Instead, he quite candidly opts for a strategy of subsuming his observations under one overarching 'singularism' model. As we will see, he does this even when discussing phenomena that could have been used as contrast cases (for instance, because they point to the possible importance of normativities that do not fit into this model). This strategy, however, is possible only at the price of conceptual fudging. Avoiding three kinds of distinctions turns out to be particularly important for upholding the claim that there is an overarching 'singularist' culture:

4.4.1 Singularity Versus Excellence according to a Standardized Scale

Reckwitz (2020, 52) points to "the professional world, where extraordinary performance is desired", as confirming his claims about a culture of singularities. But this seems to confuse two different modes of being special, or extraordinary (Reitz 2019, 13; Rosa 2018): In many professional contexts, sheer incommensurability is not appreciated, quality rankings are common, and even for highly educated professionals, an 'extraordinary performance' often means being excellent according to a standardized scale—and according to the general norms that justify a given scale of this type. For example, it is hard to see how members

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14 Reckwitz (2021b) argues that when the category 'authenticity' appears in political debates, it already proves the role of a singularity norm. Obviously, there are examples of politicians who are seen, by some of their voters, as authentic because they fulfil the duties of their office in a singular way (e.g., Trump). But one just as easily finds politicians whose reputation of being authentic rests on displays of ordinariness (e.g., Biden). Here, the 'culture of singularity' claim seems plausible only if one exclusively focuses on cases that confirm its expectations.

of professions like law or medicine could improve their positions by aiming for singularity in the sense suggested here. This has another implication: Actions that try to fulfil such a standard of excellence certainly can be part of a struggle for distinction, or for being different. But this is not a necessary consequence of this kind of norm. For instance, a person who aspires to be a 'good doctor' may well wish that all other doctors, too, approximate that standard of excellence as closely as possible. The mere observation that actors strive to fulfil a given standard of excellence not only does not prove that they aim for a 'singularist' type of distinction; their actions need not be part of a distinction game at all.

4.4.2 Qualitative Singularity Versus Numerical Singularity

For Reckwitz (2020, 138-41), the increasing tendency to organize work in terms of 'projects' proves the singularization of work practices. But when a given advertising project happens only once, which makes it numerically singular, the advertisers will not necessarily remember it as special. Also, there is not necessarily an element of incommensurability, or an impossibility of finding equivalent substitutes: If a scheduled project collapses, the agency will try to replace it with another one rather than, say, grieve for a year.[15] The underlying confusion also appears in a slightly different guise: Even activities that are not perceived as singular in themselves are treated as confirming the 'singularism' hypothesis. Reckwitz does this by pointing introducing a concept of "compositional singularity": "Subjects become original and valuable through the unique composition of their various everyday practices" (213).

     This could seem familiar: Simmel ([1909] 1992, 479) already emphasized that processes of individualization can be propelled by the "immeasurable possibilities of individualizing combinations" which result from the fact that an "individual belongs to a plurality of social circles";[16] and of course the accessibility of such circles of activities has been increased by new media technologies such as the tracking tools that capture individuals' heterogeneous consumption

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15 It makes no difference if this project is numerically singular because of some attributes it does not share with others and, in *this* sense, can also be said to be qualitatively singular. As we saw, Reckwitz's criterion for 'singularity' is that members perform a specific second-order evaluation, i.e., not only attribute a unique quality, but value this quality (in its uniqueness) so strongly that, for them, it constitutes the peculiar attractiveness of an activity or object. The mere observation that an entity or activity has attributes which are seen as unique is not sufficient.
16 My translation.

practices (Reckwitz 2020, 184–85). But Reckwitz makes a stronger claim. According to his account, this combinatory singularity is now valued *as such*. Take, however, a person who watches Bollywood movies, tries to learn Portuguese, and goes fly-fishing on her weekends. She might never meet anybody who shares all her interests. This might make her feel unique. The 'singularism' explanation of her behaviour would imply that it is this uniqueness of their *combination* that makes these activities valuable to her, and that she goes to the trouble of performing each them because she likes the idea that, together, they make her different. But under what conditions would that be plausible? Reckwitz does not even ask the question. This shows how profoundly his diagnosis is shaped by Bourdieu's ideas about the primacy of a desire for distinction. Only under this premise does it become plausible to claim that new media technologies do not merely sustain a Simmelian individualization process, but contribute to elevating the production of 'singularity' into a dominant motive of action.

4.4.3 Singularity Versus Group Membership, Types Versus Tokens

Reckwitz (2020, 93–4) argues that even mass-produced goods, like the Eames Plastic Chair and the Hugo Boss suit, can function as 'singularity goods'. He justifies this with the argument that, in principle, *anything* can be singularized, given the right narrative (94). But even assuming this argument is true for these examples, it would not support claims about a (perceived) singularity of concrete objects. It would only show that some *types* of objects—e.g., brands like the Eames chair and the Boss suit—can be perceived as singular in relation to *other* types (other plastic chairs, other suits). The Eames chair in someone's flat, however, is merely a *token* of such a type. Reckwitz offers no reasons for supposing that such a token could be perceived as singular, or as conferring singularity on its owner. His own description of the "legendary Eames chair whose characteristic silhouette now adorns so many open kitchens of the global educated class between Seattle, Amsterdam, and Melbourne" (94) suggests that owning such a chair signals group membership, not singularity.

   Now, Reckwitz indeed goes on to argue that belonging to a group *can* make individuals singular. The occasion is the current success of religious and political movements that defend the presumed homogeneity of a collective (like the many versions of 'right-wing populism'). This success could have offered a reason for specifying the scope of the 'singularism' hypothesis. Instead, in a discussion of what he calls the underclass (i.e., one constituency of 'right-wing populism'), Reckwitz introduces an additional concept of singularization—the singularization of collectives (260), and writes about religious movements: "religious subjects [. . .] acquire singularity indirectly through their membership in an exceptional

collective" (299). But claiming that individuals can attain (or be seen to attain) singularity by becoming members of a collective of like-minded individuals is simply incoherent.[17]

If this religious activity is indeed part of a struggle for distinction, then (as in the case of the 'global academic class') it is about distinction by group member-ship. Then it would have to presuppose a norm according to which this group can be seen as admirable. If there is such a norm, however, group membership can also seem attractive to those who are not engaged in a struggle for distinction. So these examples, too, point to the limits of a 'distinction struggle' model.

4.5 A Rule for Ending the Inquiry: 'No Unmasking'

The last step of the research process amounts to applying a rule for when to stop pursuing the inquiry (which, in the *Singularities* study, means no longer asking if the observed social reality is actually shaped by a singularity norm). The rule that Reckwitz (2021b, 140) proposes is: "Critical analysis, but no unmasking (*Kritische Analyse ja—Entlarvung nein*)". As we will see, it is also because of this rule that he avoids many of the above-mentioned questions. Of course, Reckwitz emphasizes that this rule does not imply taking actors' understandings at face value: His perspective makes it possible to, for instance, point out that an emphasis on 'singularity' results from a specific cultural framework, and creates new constraints (132–34). What he wants to exclude, however, is a "sociological analysis that destroys the modern value of the singular (*Zerstörung des modernen Werts des Singulären qua soziologischer Analyse*)" (141). This would apparently mean questioning the *reality* of the singularity norm, or questioning whether actors really are guided by a value of singularity, or by norms derived from such a value.

Before discussing this decision, I will very briefly sketch *another* strategy that reacts to the difficulties of Bourdieu's mode of unmasking; comparing it to Reckwitz's solution can help to assess the benefits and the costs of the decision to avoid 'unmasking' altogether. The conclusion that Boltanski draws from his above-mentioned critique of Bourdieu's rhetoric of the 'unconscious' is not to give up on this whole line of questioning. Instead, while analysing two very different

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17 Of course, collectives can be perceived as singular in relation to other collectives. However, expanding Reckwitz's 'singularism' thesis by including claims about singular collectives destroys its historical specificity. As Reckwitz (2020, 294) admits, the idea of singular collectives already exists in early modern nationalisms. It can also be found in many religious movements. With such an extension of the concept, there would be no social constellation in Western Europe since the Protestant Reformation that one could not call a society of singularities.

objects—abortion in France (Boltanski 2004), the political role of elite networks (Boltanski 2012, chapt. 6)—he tries to show that many of the phenomena which Bourdieu wants to capture with this rhetoric can be better understood as effects of specific activities of concealing and looking away, and of the social constellations that sustain them (without assuming that these processes could be explained by one single model, or that drawing a full list of them would be a reasonable goal).

In this context, Boltanski (2004) describes activities of cooperatively avoiding talk about 'difficult' issues (113) or talking about them only in euphemisms (171–74), of not looking (201–2), and of avoiding reflection, if necessary, by taking drugs "in order to stop myself from thinking" (266, my translation). At the same time, he describes different social arrangements that make it easier to disregard such 'difficult' issues—from spatial segregation (110) to technical arrangements (176–78) and a lack of transparency, created through formal organization (Boltanski 2012, 344–49). These mechanisms can be observed with ordinary sociological methods; by focusing on them, Boltanski tries to avoid the epistemic difficulties of Bourdieu's unmasking strategy. But this does not mean that he gives up unmasking.

For example, Boltanski tries to show that, contrary to a common rhetoric, ending a pregnancy often is not experienced as an enactment of freedom but as an adaptation to labour market constraints (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, 449) and other external constraints; and that, because of the role of elite networks, the term 'democracy' is often a misleading description of how political decisions happen (see also Little 2020). As these examples illustrate, the question of 'unmasking' is not primarily about making or avoiding value judgments: Asking such empirical questions can, by itself, destroy the plausibility of a publicly accepted self-description. This effect can only be avoided by not asking such questions. Therefore, 'avoiding unmasking' can be a severe restriction for sociological inquiries.

Nevertheless, this is the strategy that Reckwitz chooses. His main tool for avoiding unmasking is the concept of *doing singularity*: The argument should not be about 'objective' singularity; rather, singularities should be seen as "results of a *doing singularity* which is accomplished through specific practices of observing, evaluating, producing, or appropriating the singular" (67).[18] From this point of view, actually *producing* singularities is just one among several possibilities (and one that Reckwitz does not talk about much). Evaluations that present something

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18 The corresponding claim in the *Singularities* book is that "that which is regarded as unique arises exclusively from social practices of perception, evaluation, production, and appropriation" (5).

as singular are enough. Moreover, in principle, "Any number of a subject's characteristics and activities can be regarded as singular" (51); a claim which reaffirms Bourdieu's central assumption that anything can become a marker of distinction, because the relevant acts of selection are always arbitrary (Bourdieu 1979, e.g., 40, 60).[19]

This rule to avoid unmasking greatly reduces the descriptive options offered by the concept of practice. It supports a focus on practices of self-presentations, and on what might be collectively maintained façades. Concentrating on such practices of self-presentation makes it difficult to see whether *other* types of practices are not shaped by other norms, rather than by a singularity norm. The importance of this becomes clearer if one looks at some alternative hypotheses that one would have to examine to find out if claims about a 'society of singularities' are true. After all, appeals to singularity could be quite detached from the dominant practice:

On the one hand, the main point of such appeals could be to mark a distance towards a dominant practice: An activity that is guided by the value of singularity might offer only a temporary respite from some dominant mode of activity—for example, as a hobby that coexists with a normal job (Kumkar and Schimank 2021, 22). Displaying a 'singular' activity could also be an attempt to prove role distance, i.e., signal that as a person, one is not identical with one's formal role ('I work as an accountant, but I love contemporary art')—even though one performs this role in the conventional way (Goffman 1961). 'Singularity' could also be a trope within a *critique* of some dominant practice, e.g., of a bureaucratic state, while only having a very limited influence on that practice (Mau 2021, 166).

On the other hand, appeals to a singularity norm could chiefly have the effect of maintaining façades that mask, and make possible, activities which are *not* guided by this norm. In such cases, 'doing singularity' would be an instance of those activities of concealing and looking away that Boltanski (2004) describes. This concerns the self-presentations of individuals: Displays of enthusiasm for 'singularizing' activities might just be strategic adaptations to constraints in labour markets or 'private' environments.

It also concerns the self-presentations of organizations. The German edition of Reckwitz's book has a nice example concerning schools which offer

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19 For this concept of 'doing', Reckwitz cites Sacks (1984) on "doing 'being ordinary'". Sacks, however, uses this concept to describe actors' ongoing efforts at making sure that their activity really is continuously being shaped by the category in question (e.g., 'ordinariness') and the norms it evokes. Reckwitz, with his focus on communicated evaluations that may be extrinsic to large parts of an ongoing activity, uses this concept very selectively.

'singular' profiles (deleted from the English version, perhaps because this particular school type no longer is important in the Anglosphere): "an emphasis on Ancient languages"—Latin, Ancient Greek—"creates a milieu that consists exclusively of children of highly educated parents" (Reckwitz 2017, 334). For the parents of these children, the 'singular' program is valuable because it guarantees social closure, which they might believe ensures academic excellence. Here, schools and parents may cooperatively maintain a façade of sharing an interest in an uncommon cultural practice, while everybody knows that the organization survives because it promises excellence according to a standardized scale.[20] And it concerns consumer goods: Claims about the uniqueness of such objects might simply be advertisement strategies trying to compensate for increasing standardization (Adorno 1955, 72).

Finding out whether there is some truth to such hypotheses is essential for understanding how a given social structure works, and what influence a singularity norm (or any other kind of norm) has within that structure. This requires focusing not only on façades; since the activities that happen behind such façades strongly influence the way a society works, one cannot defend ignoring them by saying that they are just part of a "background structure" (Reckwitz 2020, 10). It also requires paying attention to the kinds of invisibilization processes that Boltanski (2004) highlights. Asking such questions is only possible, though, if 'unmasking' is recognized as an acceptable activity. After all, as the above-mentioned examples show, this kind of inquiry can indeed destroy a belief in the reality of such norms. Rejecting such questions, however, creates fundamental flaws. As we saw, Bourdieu's specific style of 'unmasking' protects his sociology against empirical objections. In the version of PT that Reckwitz recommends, however, the rejection of unmasking has quite similar immunizing effects. The rule that one must not 'destroy the value of the singular through sociological analysis' protects the sociological claim that this 'value' constitutes an overarching cultural pattern that shapes social practices. At the same time, this rule protects the self-presentations of those who claim that their actions are guided by such a value (and not by adaptations to external constraints, banal egoism, a desire for social closure, etc.). Therefore, it might not really be helpful for articulating the critical analysis that Reckwitz talks about.

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20 Such questions are central to the 'neo-institutionalist' sociology of organizations (which started with an analysis of educational institutions—see Meyer and Rowan 1977): Do the norms that shape public debate, and that one might encounter in an organization's self-presentation, actually guide this organization's day-to-day operations? If not, does it nevertheless make sense to say that these public norms dominate society as a whole—or do frontstage and backstage activities follow different rules?

5 Conclusion

The Society of Singularities undeniably is a product of the research strategy that Reckwitz (2021b) describes. Unfortunately, it also suggests that this approach cannot fulfil its promises. First, this version of practice theory (PT) indeed seems to transform its users into what Reckwitz calls 'prisoners of one single theory': The book's argument is mainly guided by familiar schemes from Bourdieu's sociology. The goal to integrate ideas that originated in other theoretical frameworks is barely realized: Such ideas are either used only in highly diminished versions (like the ethnomethodological focus on 'doings'), or they are left undiscussed even when their relevance seems obvious (e.g., Boltanski and Chiapello on the transformation of the 'artist critique'). At the same time, because this version of PT rejects systematic theory, even the heuristic possibilities of Bourdieu's sociology are not fully used. Hence, the book disregards aspects that would have been essential for its topic—perhaps most strikingly in the decision to opt for a class theory of society without paying attention to economic elites.

Consequently, the result offers few new empirical insights beyond those that confirm the expectations of Bourdieu's theory, and does not offer a plausible account of the current social constellation. Of course, many of the phenomena described in this book will be familiar to those of its readers who work in academia, journalism, or marketing; for them, the mode of self-presentation on which Reckwitz focuses may often be required. Moreover, the Bourdieusian scheme that is used to interpret these phenomena has been, for decades, a familiar pattern of mutual critique among the academic middle classes. For that public, this two-fold familiarity may create a strong impression of plausibility. Nevertheless, Reckwitz's strategy of generalization turns out to be essentially based on conceptual fudging: Empirical observations that might contradict the 'singularism' model are accommodated by using the term 'singularity' in an increasingly vague way. A particularly regrettable effect of this search for generality-through-vagueness is that it seems to have impeded a substantial elaboration of the genuinely intriguing observations from which the book starts.

Obviously, none of this would justify objections against the general idea of developing an integrative 'theory of practice' that starts from Bourdieu's approach but goes beyond its narrow presuppositions. What Reckwitz's book proves is mostly that one cannot realize this program by assuming that sociological concepts have a higher heuristic value if they are not considered as elements of systematic theories. As the book demonstrates, the decision not to think in terms of systematic theories does *not* help to get rid of the presuppositions which are built into sociological concepts like Bourdieu's. By methodologically avoiding a dialogue with rival perspectives, this version of PT—of which Reckwitz's

book is just one particularly visible example—misses opportunities for reflection that could have helped to make the underlying strategy of explanation explicit, and to ask where it actually fits; therefore, this version of PT makes it easier to retain old routines. As we saw, heuristically adopting the perspectives of 'rival' theories would have avoided at least some of the weaknesses from which Reckwitz's concrete analyses suffer.

More generally, the example of Reckwitz's study of the 'new middle class' shows that, for the program of an integrative PT, systematic theories are useful tools: They help disrupt intellectual routines, which is necessary for selecting concepts that originate outside one's preferred theoretical framework, and also for integrating them into a new coherent argument; only in this way can Reckwitz's goal of 'theoretical multilinguality' be achieved. And finally, the weaknesses of Reckwitz's empirical arguments show that even theoretical discussions about PT should also consider the procedures that 'qualitative' empirical sociology relies on in order to help researchers go beyond their theory-based pre-understandings.[21]

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21 These procedures, too, focus on creating contrasts—either by looking for empirical comparisons, like the above-mentioned strategy of 'theoretical sampling', or by thought experiments that ask how a given empirical sequence could have proceeded differently, and what one can conclude from the fact that it didn't; such a question can be asked about interactional sequences—in particular, sequences of talk (Maiwald 2005)—as well as about longer historical sequences (Leistner and Böcker 2022). Here, too, adopting the perspectives of 'rival' theories is useful because it helps identify *interesting* hypothetical alternative sequences.

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