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Self-Realization and Disappointment in the 'Society of Singularities'

Abstract: This contribution focuses on Andreas Reckwitz's considerations on phenomena of 'exhausted self-realization' and 'disappointment' in *The Society of Singularities*, as well as in his follow-up volume, *The End of Illusions*. Under discussion is the range of analytical distinctions that tend to come into play in this area between what one might call a generally primordial concept of self-realization and more derivative articulations of the concept that exhibit various aspects of instrumentalization—variously termed 'self-maximization' or 'self-optimization'. The paper argues that while Reckwitz's work offers great resources for an understanding of how and why 'self-realization' so frequently appears to take on an instrumentalizing character in late-modern social behaviour, the extent to which his work attributes this tendency to a wholly immanent cultural-cognitive logic of lifestyle singularization is open to criticism. The reasons must also be sought from within the more directly economic contexts of diminished material security and solidarity typical of contemporary societies shaped by neoliberal economic governance orders at the level of policy.

Keywords: Reckwitz, society of singularities, self-realization, disappointment, disillusionment, late modernity, cultural capitalism, neoliberalism

In *The Society of Singularities*, Andreas Reckwitz proposes an account of the core cultural code of contemporary modernity, which he describes in terms of a shift from classical modernity's 'social logic of the general' to late modernity's 'social logic of the particular'. Processes of 'singularization' pervade phenomena such as the rise and expansion of the leisure economy, consumer product branding, post-material values, lifestyles and identities, digitization and new media technologies, urban gentrification and the rise of a new educationally certified middle class. In Reckwitz's assessment, these represent "the dominant form of the social in late modernity" where "things and services are singularity goods fighting for visibility

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and appreciation, and the same can be said of subjects, . . . cities and regions, schools, religious communities, and even terrorist groups".[1]

Crucial for Reckwitz is that these shifts not be read as the bare correlates of moves towards neoliberal economic governance policies since the 1970s. Singularization in things, services, identities and statuses reflects a market logic, but this logic is inherently cultural in nature—rather than secondarily so. Singularized phenomena are not the flipside of an ongoing structure of generalized capital accumulation in which symbolic differences and distinctions exist only in relation to a principle of the commercially ever-same. Although core logics of organizational rationality and standardization remain in place, these tend to recede into the background and assume more the function of an enabling infrastructure for processes of singularization. As norms of creative self-realization become increasingly the dominant form of business enterprise and work, a logic of singularization plays itself out in the realms of consumption, media, culture and aesthetics, driven by a search for the affectively engaging and intensively unique.

All of these developments have been objects of intense interest to sociologists for some time now, but Reckwitz brings to their analysis a comprehensive scheme of elaboration, deploying concepts of 'singularity capital', 'singularity markets' and other related terms. Of note is what he describes as a threefold crisis of late modernity, comprising a 'social crisis of recognition', a 'cultural crisis of self-actualization' and a 'political crisis of the public sphere'. The 'social crisis' consists in the sheer extent of polarization between an educationally accredited new middle class, oriented to the production of status singularities through performances and networked collaborations, and those class fractions trapped in low-skill service-sector jobs and debarred from any economy of cultural capital. This polarization reveals the disparity between the promises made on behalf of a post-industrial knowledge economy and the realities of a system of meritocracy that has been radically destabilized. The 'cultural crisis' reflects the frustrations of a value-system of individual self-realization arising first from the culture of nineteenth-century artistic bohemia, then fusing more and more with the twentieth-century mainstream habitus of the Western middle class—something that has proved to be "not only an engine of increased autonomy and fulfilling experiences but also a systematic generator of disappointment" (GS 313).

Of interest to me in this contribution are specifically Reckwitz's considerations on 'exhausted self-realization' and 'disappointment' in the society of singularities, to which he devotes a chapter in his follow-up volume of 2019, *The*

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1 Reckwitz (2017) (hereafter 'GS'), 311.

End of Illusions.[2] Here he reflects on frustration, rage, envy and other 'negative affects' as the concomitant of moves toward norms of creative enterprise and personal accomplishment, where strong societal expectations of the individually achieved and successful life carry in-built risks of failure. Moods of disillusionment and despair here frequently trail behind late modern society's leading 'positive culture of emotions', notably in inward-turning affects of anxiety or sorrow over missed or unrealised goals and opportunities or more outwardly in displacements of resentment and blame of others over their non-attainment.

What I shall consider more critically concerns the range of analytical distinctions that tend to come into play in this area between what one might call a generally primordial concept of self-realization and more derivative articulations of the concept that exhibit various aspects of instrumentalization—variously termed 'self-maximization' or 'self-optimization'. One great strength of Reckwitz's work is to furnish us with some very powerful tools with which to analyse exactly how and why 'self-realization' in contemporary social behaviour so often seems to take on this more instrumentalizing type of orientation toward optimal fulfilment and performance. But what will concern me in this article is a certain danger of this slide toward self-optimization also being reproduced rather more problematically at the level of the *conceptual models* of inquiry provided by sociologists themselves. By this I mean that some questions may remain as to whether or how far such instrumentalizing behaviours *must* be said to occur under the given conditions and whether there is not here a danger of analysis proceeding in such a way as to make their occurrence appear inevitable—as if contained *a priori* in the very concept of self-realization.

I will argue that while I do not think Reckwitz in fact commits such an assimilation at the conceptual level, it is at least a latency of his presentation in need of some scrutiny. And further, concerning the sense in which 'disappointment' and other negative affects comprise an accompanying underside to the culture of self-realization whenever it meets with any kind of frustration or inhibition, I will plead here for a certain widening of the relevant scope of 'disappointment' as an operational concept of analysis, such that under this term we can describe not only various typical affective states of particular actors in late-modern societies but also frequently certain structural characteristics of the *total social systems* of late modern societies that tend to give rise to such disappointed actors.[3]

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2 Reckwitz (2019) (hereafter 'EI'), 203–38.
3 This thesis is based on a current book project by this author, provisionally titled 'Disappointed societies: a social theory of disillusionment'.

But before elaborating on this proposal and explaining specifically why it might be salutary for an appraisal of Reckwitz's work, let me first move at this point to some closer details of his account.

1 Reckwitz's Six 'Disappointment-Generators' in *The Society of Singularities*

Central for Reckwitz is the sense in which any stylization of life as a journey of discovery inevitably sets up the personality for risks of disappointment; for if everything is in some way put on a footing of entrepreneurship, then it is also put on a footing of potential failure—since all enterprise involves a deliberate act of self-exposure to contingency. In the psychologically audacious move away from the protective carapace of standardized occupational roles toward putatively more creative vocations of the self based on 'intrinsic motivation', the subject embraces a vital wager of self-affirmation. Something opens for the self at the same time that it also, potentially, closes. On the one hand, limits appear to fall away; on the other hand, new limits may loom on the horizon, in the form of unforeseen barriers and exclusions. Emblematic in this are the fates of those numerous professional 'creatives' of the new cultural economy who may appear not ultimately to 'make it' in the competitive market for singularities and only to live out their lives in relative 'obscurity'—as rather hapless *artistes manqués*, so to speak.[4]

In particular, Reckwitz enumerates six main 'generators' of disappointment in the society of singularities (EI 221-32). A first, labelled as the 'paradox of romanticism versus status', refers to challenges of integrating disparate segments of experience in a way that satisfies a need for both authenticity of personhood and recognition from others for achievement and performance, i.e. status. Work must be intrinsically meaningful to the subject but self-realization must also reach outward materialization in some visibly successful accomplishment, based on 'investment in status'. Self-realization cannot realistically occur against, or outside of, society—as historically with the world-estranged soul of romanticism—but only through society's accredited forms of social, cultural and financial capital (also bodily health capital as demeanour and attraction). Individuals must not only inwardly feel but also outwardly *appear* authentic to others, through efficacious achievement. Yet all of this raises conflicting and possibly irreconcilable demands on the self, insofar as an assiduously realist outlook can provoke feelings of self-betrayal, and yet any too uncompromising concern for the latter may

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[4] Themes prominent also in Reckwitz (2012).

come at a cost of 'status-work'—which in Reckwitz's terms forms an essential 'framework condition' for accomplished self-realization.

Second in Reckwitz's scheme of disappointment-generators are late-modern society's manifold instances of market-logic penetrations into all areas of lived experience, resulting in systematically competitive situations. Indicative are the ubiquitous scenarios of winner-takes-all or winner-takes-the-most, in which often only a hair's breadth seems to separate winners from 'losers', in ways that can feel cruelly asymmetrical and disproportionate.

Closely related are, thirdly, the phenomena of invidious social comparison endemic to attention-economies of the sign and symbol, entrenched by digital media platforms and technologies of the 'like' and the 'share', and in general by relentlessly quantifying drives toward metrification of every aspect of life.

Combined with this are fourthly what Reckwitz describes as problems of an inherent fragility of criteria available for determining one's life as successful or fulfilled—in contrast to an earlier age of the postwar years shaped by less affectively equivocal markers of the good life, comprising for instance definite benchmarks of esteem based on salary and property, family situation or public service. When instead ideas of authenticity come to the fore, a qualitative assessment of success in life becomes more troubled. Any matter at all ambivalent will tend to be rated as negative and any subtle discomfort magnified in its emotive impact on the self.

Fifthly, and perhaps more contentiously (on which I'll return in a moment), Reckwitz speaks of late-modern cultures of the subject as wracked by compulsions to explore all available options and opportunities of experience at any given moment, and thus in this sense as stamped by a basic aversion to any kind of stance of *renunciation*.

Then sixthly and lastly, Reckwitz names the significantly diminished cognitive credibility of the resources with which Western societies have traditionally sought to process events of bitter fortune over the life-course under horizons of symbolic meaning—referring here in essence to decline in the established belief-systems of mainline religious institutions (although he also offers some qualification to this point, to which again I'll turn shortly).

2 Self-Realization versus Self-Optimization

With this very brief summary of Reckwitz's account in place, the question I now want to stage concerns whether there might be some need of his analysis to distinguish more sharply between what I have described as a more 'primordial' concept of self-realization on the one hand and other more derivative or 'ideological'

articulations of it on the other. For at least in principle, one might have thought—and here calling to mind initially the philosophical formulations of the concept familiar to us from Western thought since the Enlightenment period—self-realization implies an idea of the subject as autonomous or *causa sui* in its life and conduct, i.e. as its own 'end' or 'law', which necessarily excludes any orientation of the subject to an 'ulterior', 'extraneous' or 'heteronomous' motive, end or interest, such as might be denoted by preoccupations with 'status' or 'success' on the worldly stage. Thus, sociologically, the relevant question that might arise here is whether there might still be some intrinsic normative contents of the concept of self-realization that could be thought capable at least of muting or restraining the prevalence of more ideological or instrumentalist actualizations of the idea—and that could also be observed empirically as doing so in some degree.

And in a complementary fashion, one might also ask whether, in order to explain most fully why such tendencies to instrumentalization do nevertheless occur so frequently in real behaviour, it might be necessary to adduce some other, 'exogenous' rather than 'endogenous' factors for this process—where by such 'exogenous' factors I mean not only the cultural factors crucial to Reckwitz's analysis, however 'economized' or 'marketized' those cultural factors may be, but also certain more *directly economic* factors, stemming simply from the highly hollowed-out character of the welfare regimes typical of late-modern neoliberal economic governance orders.

Here a first important consideration would seem to be that while self-realisation is sociologically a habitus characteristic largely of the new professional middle classes today, it is still also, conceptually, simply the name that modern Western thought tends to give to ideas of individual human flourishing in the widest sense. And such ideas appear of course in all manner of iterations throughout European cultural history, from the Renaissance period onwards, in its reception of Greco-Roman notions of 'virtue' or *areté* and *paideia*, and so on (cf. Cassirer 1932). Thus in this perspective, might it be important not to link self-realization too exclusively, as Reckwitz does, to a nineteenth-century heritage of artistic romanticism or to the related popular influence of 1960s notions of 'personal growth', found typically in the writings of Abraham Maslow and other 'positive psychologists' of this time (GS 210-13; EI 212-13)? Is it not the case that as a normative idea, self-realization retains an inherently more universalistic validity-claim—arising principally from classical Enlightenment humanist conceptions of personal self-determination, as these develop in the thought of figures from Spinoza to Kant, Goethe, Schiller, Humboldt, Mill and the American pragmatists, as well as Marx and his followers, and are also invoked, importantly, in the foundational educational programmes of Western social-democratic states after 1945?

Some corollaries, I think, follow from this; a first being that self-realization need not entail any wholly egocentric type of behaviour—again at least, not in normative concept. Rather, it also potentially supports values of equity of regard for others, such that truly self-realised in this sense are only those individuals able to appreciate their fulfilment as dependent on an *equal chance of others* to seek the same—and further such that in those others' diverse undertakings, all may find an instructive divergence from their own subjective presumptions of life (cf. Mill 1859, chpt.3). Again, at least in intention if not in effect, it is this kind of thinking that we see *also* in the zeitgeist of the 1960s—for instance in regard to the then popular Marxian teaching of Herbert Marcuse and others concerning individuality as only genuinely thinkable on condition of some kind of communistic solidarity of liberations; of the working class, of women, of people of colour, and so on (cf. Marcuse 1956; Berman 1970).

A second corollary is that, conceptually, rather than arousing behaviours of denial or flight from experiences of failure, privation or limitation, self-realization implies a sense that a self should be capable of unconditionally accepting such eventualities and emerging from them in higher reflective maturity. At least such for example is the sense in which, in the prototypical *Bildungsromane* of Goethe, the protagonist self-educates and self-realises only essentially through inwardly absorbing personal failings and frustrations. And here a third, closely related corollary is that such conduct involves precisely *not* an aversion to renunciation but a *capacity* for it, in the sense of an ability to detach from perceived loss or lack—again, much in the spirit of the word *Entsagung* for Goethe in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*.[5]

Admittedly it is true that older humanistic contents of ideas may not seem to establish very much when what is sought is specifically some understanding of broad mass currents of social behaviour today. Yet I raise these points because I believe they may help clarify questions of the exact generative role to be ascribed to 'self-realization' in late-modern conduct of life and because I think a certain elision of concepts and terms stands as a tendency of at least some writers to whose work Reckwitz's shows similarities.[6]

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[5] *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, Book 3, chpt. 13. For another take on these issues, see e.g. Apparadurai and Alexander (2019); also, more familiarly, Taylor (1989), chpt. 21.
[6] I mean this as a tendency of at least some sociological commentators working within the paradigms of analysis delivered by authors such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski and other 'post-structuralist' theorists, broadly understood. It stands particularly in my view as a tendency of the work of Eva Illouz on late-modern love and intimacy, although space does not permit further substantiation of this claim here.

Certainly, Reckwitz is rightly guarded in his formulations. Notably in one passage he underlines that at issue is a certain 'unlimited dynamization' or 'intensification' (*Steigerung*) of self-realization, rather than self-realization itself (EI 229). In the section of his chapter in *The End of Illusions* headed 'Auswege aus dem Enttäuschungsspirale', he pinpoints a substantial scope of agency of the subject for reflective re-appropriation of disquieted feelings; and to this extent he rejects any sense of an inescapable collapse into sheer self-optimizing behaviours (EI 232-38). He notes how disappointments can serve as learning experiences that prompt altered expectations and goals or strengthened resolve; and he notes the role that psychotherapy alongside popular (though still generally serious) neo-Buddhist and neo-Stoicist self-help practices can and do widely play in encouraging thoughtful distance toward troubling emotions. In this sense he also rightly qualifies the force of the sixth of his disappointment-generators concerning decline in the symbolic resources of established religious faith orientations.

Even so, I think a few respects remain in which Reckwitz's explanatory theorem might be said to err on the side of the rather culturally or cognitively over-determined. I believe these can be glimpsed particularly in the claim he makes of compulsions to "activate the greatest possible plenitude of experience"—i.e. the fifth in his roster of disappointment-generators (EI 229). It is interesting that his main empirical discussion of this point centres around erotic life. After noting how late-modern public spheres come to recognise ever more pluralized and liberalized sexual and family mores—naming in particular single-parent families and same-sex partnerships—Reckwitz goes on to contend that all people who do not consciously explore diversity in their options of erotic life "are nevertheless regarded increasingly with suspicion". They include "for example people who, for religious or personal reasons (asexuality), abstain from sexuality, people who deliberately forego a partnership and prefer to live alone, or women who for whatever reason consciously decide against motherhood. All such people face a suspicion of not embodying the fullness of their possibilities and thus of not 'living out' a part of their personality . . . "(EI 230)

Arguably three matters remain somewhat disputable in this contention on an empirical level, together with a fourth matter of more conceptual significance.

Firstly these sentences, at least by implication, would seem to overstate matters of *choice* in this area, over against dimensions of necessity. Such elements of necessity rather than choice are surely clearly to be seen for example in the sense of inner personal necessity animating the LGBTQ orientation (the feeling that I *must* come out in order to be me, not just that I would like to), as well as in the more obvious external sense of necessity at issue in many single-parent family situations, via hardship, precariousness or poverty, and sometimes violence. Secondly, while it seems true that a stigma attaches to people living apparently

willingly in sexual solitude or inactivity or to the apparently voluntarily childless woman, this stigma surely is not as strong as Reckwitz's wording implies. And of course here there is also a related epistemological problem in that, for any uninvolved lay observer, voluntariness simply cannot be known with any certainty in an area of people's lives as private as this—in which case surely most often a default attitude is simply one of more or less discreet non-judgementalism. (I mean discretion, for the partner-less or childless person, whether voluntarily or involuntarily so; and in the involuntary case, certainly considerable understanding and sympathy also prevail).[7] Indeed, if anything—and here thirdly—surely the operative *overall* pressure in sexuality today remains a tendency more in the opposite direction; that is, not in the direction of any too-pronounced or overt sexual experimentalism but rather toward a generally conventional heterosexual life—even if undoubtedly less so than, say, compared with the 1950s.[8]

But fourthly and most significantly, it might well be argued that an 'exploration of every possibility' is simply not what self-realization need be seen as substantively entailing in erotic life—nor, generally, can be observed as entailing in most average sexual behaviours of Western societies since the 1960s. Although one must acknowledge that this point in the discussion is specifically the one in which Reckwitz writes only of a 'dynamization of self-realization' rather than of self-realization 'strictly speaking', it seems important to underline here that nothing of this need entail anything resembling a compulsion, say, to try out every depicted position in the karma sutra or a sex manual or porn video. It need only entail this one recognition: that sex represents a medium of free, spontaneous self-expression of the individual, irreducible to any purely species-subservient function of procreation, and that, as such, it invites the individual to engage in it on the basis of *just this one supervenient motive*—but no more than that. And this seems to me the essential original meaning of sexual liberation in the 1960s, which largely continues today—notably for example for women with a right of access to contraception and abortion, or for gay people with a right to live authentically rather than in a lie to themselves and others.

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7 For a memoir largely covering these issues, by an Anglophone journalist hoping for pregnancy in her 30s, see for example: Frizzell (2021).

8 I take it that this is the thrust of the term 'heteronormativity' as it is deployed commonly in much current sex and gender research. Cf. Weeks (1985, 2010). For example, E. L. James's 2011 erotic bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey* remains fundamentally conventionalist in this sense (James 2011).

3 Explaining Self-Optimization

Yet when we return to the question of why it is that in general, instrumentalizing behaviours of self-optimization do nonetheless tend to take the place of any more 'primordial' idea of self-realization in contemporary conduct, I want to propose another explanation for why this might be the case, slightly different from Reckwitz's. This is that we may say that if and when such behaviours substitute for the latter, they may be doing so less from any 'unlimited dynamization' or 'intensification' of it than rather from something like the opposite sense of these words: from a kind of *flight from*, or psychologically *defensive reaction against*, the deeper cognitive challenges that self-realization intrinsically raises. Those challenges are ones of truthful confrontation with, as well as vital affirmation of, basic freedoms and limits of human existence, deriving from our inescapable facts of mortality, fragility and fortuity of being—and those challenges are difficult, even under the best of material circumstances.[9] Predominantly self-optimizing behaviours in this perspective would be explicable not really as self-unfolding at all but rather as a species of reactive retreat or escape from truth, freedom and complexity of the personally lived situation. They would be explicable as forms of hedging, protecting and insuring against pains of reckoning deeply and expressively with pains of loss, failure or disappointment—in much the same way that problems of work-addiction have been viewed by psychologists as forms of self-medicalization against griefs and anxieties, or in the widest sense as symptoms of a compulsion to take advance psychological control of the horizons of future experience.

To be sure, obvious societal reasons exist for why one might think of individuals as chronically pushed toward defensive behaviours in this way. As Reckwitz himself illuminates trenchantly, the systematically competitive character of late-modern social relations means that few individuals can afford to step back unilaterally from chances to grab perceived options and opportunities—without potentially jeopardizing even basic material cushions of well-being (GS 131-60, 199-266; EI 220-26). Most especially in the crucial early stages of a career or employment trajectory, few can withdraw too definitively from networked openings as vital sources of 'capital'. Few can risk placing too many substantial commitments or arduous investments in 'one basket', insofar as they want and need to manage

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9 I mean these points broadly in the sense of the existential-psychoanalytic thought of writers from Tillich (1952) and Fromm (1941) to Becker (1973, chpt. 5) and others. Cf. also Craib (1994), Bollas (2018), Berlant (2011).

arbitrary outcomes and pains of rejection or exclusion—be these on the labour or dating or housing markets or admission to friendship circles, and so on.

Yet arguably the decisive point in this connection remains that so much of such behaviour should be seen as stemming ultimately from conditions of defective socio-economic *security* of life, and that such security is what might have obtained from socio-economic environments generally more institutionally solidary than those known to us today under the rule of predominantly neoliberal welfare orders. Unless social actors are already in possession of reasonably ample material means and leisure time, they are not in a position to desist from optimal strategizing and to turn philosophically inwards, for any sustained length of time. Without well-preserved institutional social supports, they are bound to act in a more or less instrumentalizing fashion, from chronic uncertainty and worry. In this perspective, putative cultural 'singularization' in the labour and other markets might well be viewed simply as a euphemism for states of competitive abjection, in which individuals race to signs of distinction only in the absence of the deeper securities and solidary relationships necessary for the building up of a more genuinely interior and less 'commodified' actualization of self.

Here I think a difference remains between Reckwitz's account and the position I wish to espouse here, which is that we should consider the slide toward self-optimizing behaviours to be occurring not exclusively from any wholly immanent logic of the 'culturalized economy' or 'economized culture' of late-modern singularities—as with Reckwitz's thesis—but rather *also* from an array of what I have called more 'exogenous' factors, to do with deficiencies of normative regulation of socio-economic systems over the past forty years or so. And by this I mean specifically *contingent* deficiencies, arising from policy measures at national and transnational governmental levels that *could* have been taken but largely have not.

It is this that brings me to the proposal for a widening of the applicable scope of concepts of 'disappointment' in sociological analysis, such that they encompass an idea of whole social systems as themselves 'dis-appointed', in the sense that may become poorly normatively integrated, i.e. 'not well-appointed'—using the word 'disappointment' in English here to some extent figuratively but nonetheless systematically. I mean a use of the word broadly in the spirit of Emile Durkheim's vision of conditions of societal *anomie* and *dérèglement*. The reason individuals find themselves driven toward calculatively self-maximizing behaviours lies with a lack of security, stability and general tranquillity of life needed to support efforts of acceptance of failure and limitation as constitutive pathways for a work of deep self-realization. We may say that socio-economic conditions are too uncertain, capricious and irregular to support any more existentially searching kind of self-realization, based on an effort of unconditionally re-appropriating

disappointments over the life course. Instead, as a consequence, individuals are thrown back constantly on short-term safety strategies and debarred from expressively facing the roots of their malaise in anything other than largely provisional or suppressive ways.

As a matter of recent historical narrative, we may say that while the cultural programme of late modernity was supposed to enable creative self-realization for all—beyond standardized role specialization—it has not done so, and therefore *that* is its disappointment. Late modernity has not turned out to allow the freedom from material risk needed to explore any more 'ontological' or 'existential' phenomenon of risk that is intrinsic to deep self-realization—at least not for everyone—and so this is what may be called late modernity's aspect of 'great disappointment', which is also felt collectively in some way as a consciousness or 'mood' in the public sphere.

In this optic, it would seem important here to return to the point that while self-realization describes a distinct life-identity of the new high-skilled professional classes, it remains a universalized 'value-idea' of modern Western ethical and political life, such that we should see problems of disappointment in self-realization as pertaining not only to middle-class groups but also in principle to all class sections and groups in contemporary society—including, that is, deprived or marginalized groups. And this means that we must ask how far such society-wide complexes of disappointment should be seen as being produced immanently by the dynamics of late-modern cultural singularization, in which middle-class conduct is explanatorily uppermost—as with Reckwitz's account—and how far they should be seen as generated *also* by other, more directly economic factors, where by this I mean primarily the power of neoliberal financial interest platforms, on the one hand, and a resultant loosening of normative societal *regulation* in the widest sense, on the other hand.

In short, might it not be important to consider an explanatory role here not only for *socio-cultural* elites but also specifically for *financial and corporate* elites?

At this point one might argue that while Reckwitz is right to state that late-modern singularization processes ought not to be reduced to neoliberal political economy, neither can they be divorced from them entirely. Self-realization, as a culture, gains underpinning from neoliberal economic policy shifts and at the same time becomes undermined in its democratic reach by tendencies within those shifts that trigger vast socio-economic inequalities. Therefore, we must again ask how far such tendencies are to be seen as structurally intrinsic to late-modern socio-cultural life and how far they should be seen as arising only from more contingent policy developments within particular countries at particular times, consequent on free-market interest lobbying in its extremer varieties. Can Reckwitz's thesis of a behavioural nexus that mediates between the cultural and

the economic account adequately for such more nakedly economic forces of power and interest? And by the same token, can it account adequately, on the other side of the equation, for moral-normative ideas whose claim is to regulate economic life equitably on behalf of the societal collective?

Certainly some passages of Reckwitz's writing acknowledge a more external and contingent character of the factors driving individuals to competitively defensive behaviours. He notes, for instance, the thinkability of initiatives for 'de-economizing the social', through policy reforms and efforts to push back in some way against the predominance of economic growth ideology (EI 234). Yet he also places certain caveats around this suggestion, writing of the impossibility of any significant 'steering' of the global capitalist economy; and crucially the coherence of his explanatory model *requires* him to posit such caveats (EI 234). For though in the final pages of *The Society of Singularities*, he writes, in a more prognostic vein, of the coming of a 'more regulatory' type of liberalism, moved to redress the fractures unleashed by an age of singularizations, the integrity of his theory is not one that can allow much scope for alternative normative orders that *might* have come into existence in Western countries over the past four decades, had only some variables been otherwise (GS 319). Rather, the logic of his model requires him to suggest—as becomes very clear from the concluding sentences of his chapter on 'Exhausted Self-Realization'—that optimalist growth ideology must be seen not only as analogous to individual growth culture in the Maslowian sense but also as some kind of emanation from the latter (EI 238). And precisely this latter proposition seems questionable to me. For while it remains important to note that growth-fixated neo-liberalization in economic policy could not have occurred without some mediating cultural logic of singularization, experiences of disappointed self-realization in late-modern society cannot be seen as stemming wholly from a purely cultural-behavioural dynamic of impulsive individual self-optimization. They must also be seen as arising from facets of the subtending economic policy systems that erode tissues of trust and security necessary for deeper projects of self-realization and for support of individuals against predominantly egocentric relations to one another. And importantly, those facets need to be seen as remaining contingently variable, such that in some countries they may not be as intensely de-solidarizing as they are in others, depending on the degree to which deregulatory lobbies have succeeded in neutering norms of civic equity and welfare.

4 Concluding Remarks: Singularization as Identity versus Singularization as Freedom

I have argued for a view that self-realization need not be seen in any unqualified way as a source of its own 'exhaustion' in late modernity. But what I now wish to underline briefly is also a sense of the empirical backing for this claim, which arises in part from the varieties of evidence we have from the past thirty or forty years for patterns of conscious detachment from mainstream status-seeking in employment culture and for steadily rising trends of opposition to neoliberal personal achievement norms. This evidence includes the longstanding public discourse on pathologies of 'burnout' (which stretch as far back as the 1970s), alongside influential if admittedly sometimes rather shallow notions of 'work-life balance'. Among higher earning groups, it includes rising rates of early retirement; and importantly it includes some patterns of stepping-back from the competitive ladder in mid-career, especially among women for reasons of child-care and family—although also men. Most recently it includes the much-discussed spate of career revaluations that have ensued in the wake of the corona virus lock-downs of 2020-21; and in regard to younger generational cohorts entering the job market from around 2010 onwards, it includes some signs of outward status achievements increasingly coming to be viewed with a diminished inner affective basis of credulity and more as a rather coercive game to be wearily played along with—understandable perhaps particularly against a background of the far higher financial insecurities suffered by these cohorts today compared with their later twentieth-century counterparts.[10]

Such cases might suggest some doubts as to how tightly the two sides of Reckwitz's 'romanticism-status paradox' are to be seen as comporting to one another. Certainly, Reckwitz is right to underline that from any general standpoint of sociological realism, inner self-realization is not conceivable in the absence of at least some outward corresponding platform of materialization on a social stage. But must this entail specifically an orientation to maximal singular performance in the sense of today's dominant neoliberal 'enterprise culture'? Here perhaps we should not underrate the significance of those numbers of people who consciously undertake certain compromises with themselves, such that, while retaining a

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10 On burnout, cf. Malesic (2022), Weeks (2011). On corona virus and workplace shifts, cf. Klotz et al. (2021). On youth dimensions, cf. Seemiller and Grace (2019). On some aspects of these trends and sentiments in the context of Ronald Reagan's 1980s USA, see also classically: Bellah et al. (1985), 1–24.

bread-earning job for reasons of expediency, they reserve a truer site of self-realization for expressive occupations spent in leisure time or in unpaid working time (including importantly for example in family care-work of child-raising, typically among women although also men)—in full acceptance of the fact that little or no outward status may be forthcoming from the latter.

Similarly, while employees resigning from a high-flying corporate position to work as an organic farmer or charity worker may of course simply enter yet another entrepreneurial market of singularities peculiar to the world of organic farming or charity work, still, a difference remains with the culture from which they have withdrawn—their motives now presumably valorizing material status symbols much less obviously. Admittedly, such resignations tend to remain a privilege of those already in possession of some considerable material safety. But then this may only tend to prompt further questions about the scope of Reckwitz's conception, insofar as anyone with at least a foothold in job security will tend, with age and career progression, gradually to prioritise inner values of integrity of self in a more definite separation from outward status concerns—including not least in the other-regarding dimension of care for loved ones (primarily children), with this more inward turn then reaching maximal significance as the person in retirement confronts his or her ultimate fact of creaturely finitude and mortality (cf. Erikson 1959). Reckwitz's concept seems strongest here as a depiction of the make-or-break situation of early adulthood—but less so outside of this admittedly crucial window.

More generally, questions probably arise about the global appropriateness of Reckwitz's use of the words 'romanticism' and 'realism' as a description of the situations of those vast numbers of workers whose cases do not match the paradigm to which his analysis is most applicable, namely that of young adults from more or less middle-class backgrounds with the citizenship rights of liberal-democratic states governed more or less by principles of equity and meritocracy. What are we to say of those large sections of working populations, globally, who may in some conscious way wish to 'get off the treadmill' and seek some deeper realization of self but know that they cannot afford to do so materially? What are we to say of those who may harbour significant feelings of unease and disquiet with the system of status achievements to they are bound and who may heartily wish to break free of that system, but know that they cannot? Would 'romanticism' be an appropriate characterisation of their state of mind? And is even the word 'realism' adequate to capture their situation, when confronting them is often not just an imperative of prudence but rather, in effect, something worse than this, namely a degree of *coercion*—such as the coercion felt by those with a substantial college loan to pay off or in receipt of a harassing letter from the welfare office

urging immediate uptake of a job at MacDonald's? To what extent are these words adequate to capture the mix of coercion and consent at stake in the plight of so many school and college leavers today?

Here I would argue finally that a certain elision may be taking place in Reckwitz's commentary between an idea of singularization as a quest for singularity of identity of the self and an idea of singularization as a quest for certain new horizons of *freedom* of the self. Is it not the case that what is in demand in the culture and politics of the society of singularities is not only that individuals should be different from the standardizing societal norm but also that they should be free from the constrictions that the standardizing norm imposes on them, and thereby more able to embrace the felt truth of their personal conditions of existence? Is it not the case that the ultimate motive in play is not only a desire to be distinctive in the eyes of others but also, in a fundamentally more private sense, to be 'in justice with oneself'—in a more existentially true relation to one's creaturely condition? To return to the case of erotic life discussed earlier, is it not the case that self-realization here means not only a will to appear special and attractive to others—which we might call simply singularization 'for the sake of it'—but also a will to be free and autonomous in one's bodily-libidinal life, as opposed to solely in conformity with a societal species-norm of sex for purposes of reproduction, which one may feel to be a 'repressive', freedom-denying kind of conformity?

Here something very similar applies, arguably, to several other key singularity phenomena of late modernity that are implicit in Reckwitz's account. I mean the singularity phenomena of those 'new social movements' of the past sixty years that range from second-wave feminism and gay rights to anti-racism and anti- or de-colonialism. These movements too must be seen as articulations of a certain turn against the hitherto prevalent modernist 'social logic of the general'; i.e. in their case, against a white-Western-male-heterosexual 'social logic of the general'. But then, are we to view these movements at bottom as movements for singularity of identity of the relevant group or rather ultimately as movements for these groups' *freedom of self-determination*? Are we to see them as struggling against a mainstream conformity because the mainstream conformity is non-singular, or, rather, because the mainstream conformity is liberty-denying, i.e. not truly equal in its claim to equality—only in reality masking unequal chances of self-realization for these groups?

Indeed, should we view feminism, gay rights, anti-racism and decolonialism as movements for singularization at all? Or should we view them rather only as movements for a more singularizing *interpretation* of normative values of social life that in themselves remain fundamentally *general*—because the values in question are the generalized basic values of freedom and equality? And

is it not the case that in their struggles since the 1960s for changes in policy and law, these movements have largely succeeded in their struggles, not only because they have dovetailed functionally with a new cultural market demand for singularizations of career profiles—politely known as the demand for 'diversity' in the workplace—but also because, fundamentally, they have won the *generalized moral argument*; that is, because they have won assent to these singularizing reinterpretations of intrinsically universal values? And conversely—now looking at these movements' more negative recent story—are we to see the relevant disappointment aspects of these groups' experiences as consisting predominantly only in the same kinds of frustrations faced by other groups—to do with limitless lifestyle desires triggered by free-market-generated opportunities that simultaneously become stymied by those market-based mechanisms, as with Reckwitz's central emphasis? Or do not their disappointments consist more specifically *also* in the fact that while late-modern social change has greatly sponsored these groups' cause in many respects, it has also inhibited it in other respects—and furthermore has unleashed forces of populist reaction against them as a result of the de-solidarizing tendencies of policy directions taken by the new neoliberal economic culture in its most untrammelled forms?

As a whole, all of these issues tend, I think, to be somewhat obscured by the avowedly non-normative post-structuralist theoretical style of Reckwitz's analysis. The issues of freedom, equality and solidarity return more clearly into the picture when treated from the standpoint of the more explicitly normative focus on them offered by social theory in the critical theory tradition, as well as in liberal political theory.

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