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The Theory of Everything: A Sympathetic Critique of Andeas Reckwitz's *The Society of Singularities*

Abstract: After situating Andreas Reckwitz's *The Society of Singularities* within the broader context of the tradition of social theory, we discuss in detail the obvious strengths of this book, notably its impressive range and originality. Subsequently, we elaborate on two limitations of Reckwitz's argument. Firstly, we argue that Reckwitz's use of categories such as 'singularity' and 'universality' is too all-embracing, lacking the clarity and focus needed to sustain a productive line of inquiry. Secondly, and related to the previous point, we contend that Reckwitz's claims about the recent trend towards increasing singularity are so broad that they are difficult to refute empirically. Further, we discuss briefly contemporary political developments to demonstrate why the core societal issues at stake cannot be explained through all-inclusive categories such as singularity. Finally, we maintain that existence theory can provide an alternative fruitful perspective on some of the phenomena discussed in this book.

Keywords: social theory, modernity, existence theory, neoliberalism, cultural capitalism, populism, individualization, surveillance capitalism

Andreas Reckwitz's *The Society of Singularities* is both refreshingly novel and quaintly old-fashioned. On the one hand, it presents a new take on the current state of play—a novel reading of the contemporary societal constellation. Reckwitz captures the present social condition under the heading of 'singularity', an enigmatic and captivating term, which, as it turns out, means a variety of different things, including for instance, authenticity, uniqueness and creativity. Whilst this ubiquity of the singular might be particularly visible in the context of platform and surveillance capitalism (Srnicek 2016; Zuboff 2019), where individuals and specific products compete for attention and are constantly evaluated, Reckwitz seems to refer to a broader cultural shift which predates the digital technologies

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and which celebrates distinctiveness and ipseity rather than the general (see also Reckwitz 2017).

On the other hand, the book follows a well-trodden path of grand social theory, associated with the writings of Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and many others (e.g. Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994)—a tradition that had gone out of fashion somewhat in the early 2000s by which time it had become obvious that some of the generalisations (and optimism!) of its earlier exponents had been misguided. This intellectual genre of grand social theory draws on a variety of disciplines, including empirical sociology, philosophy and history, but it is clearly distinct from each, using empirical data more loosely than hardnosed sociologists do, introducing abstract concepts in ways that jar with the practices of analytical philosophy, and providing a broad-brush picture of long temporal spans that contrasts with the historians' eye for empirical detail. Still, the outcome of this type of intellectual exercise is intellectually impressive, arguably more so than its constituent parts, and the major exponents of this genre achieved a prophet-like status, acting as secular visionaries—authoritative public intellectuals (Baert 2015, pp. 185–9). Like Beck's musings on the risk society and Giddens' on reflexive modernity (Beck 1991; Giddens 1991), the arguments presented here encompass several centuries, are concerned with the distinctive nature of modernity, and with the contradictions and the different phases within modernity. It makes for a riveting read.

For this reason, Andreas Reckwitz is to be commended for the ambition and breadth of his work, as well as for its significance within this particular genre of grand theory. Likewise, I recognise how imaginative and thought-provoking *The Society of Singularities* really is, encouraging us to think very differently about modernity and current societal developments. Particularly attractive is the attempt to capture such a broad range of societal developments under one theoretical umbrella, ranging from digital technologies to populism. Whilst some of the claims in this book had already been made by Boltanski and Chiapello's in their widely acclaimed *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2006), Reckwitz manages to broaden the scope and integrate some of the empirical material into an all-embracing theory of late modernity (*Spätmoderne*)—this is no mean feat. I am also broadly sympathetic towards the post-positivist perspective adopted here, especially the notion of theory as 'toolkit' (as opposed to a mirror or copy), although I would not necessarily associate the term 'positivism', as Andreas Reckwitz does, with what pragmatists call a spectator theory of reality (Baert 2005; Dewey 1930); throughout history, there have been many self-declared positivists who adopted an instrumentalist notion of knowledge.

Rather than getting bogged down in semantics, however, I would like to focus instead on the main gist of Reckwitz's arguments and his particular form

of theorising. I struggle with some of the basic assumptions underlying this type of intellectual exercise, notably the general pronouncements about the nature of 'modernity' or 'late modernity', as well as the use of all-encompassing categories such as 'singularity' which ultimately acquire remarkably diverse meanings in different contexts.

Firstly, both 'universality' and 'singularity' are relative concepts in the sense that the applicability of either term really depends on the focus of one's analysis. For instance, is the much-maligned 'culture industry' an instantiation of 'universality' or of 'singularity'? Well, the answer really depends on what aspect of this entertainment business one wishes to analyse. On the one hand, following Adorno and Horkheimer's perspicacious analysis, its economic logic makes for the replication of successful set formats (see Adorno and Horkheimer 1979, 120–60; Adorno 1991), and this surely hints at mechanisms of universality or homogeneity. On the other hand, from its early beginnings, the business model underlying this industry has been centred around the introduction of novel creations, disruptions to the market—by all accounts 'singularity' in Reckwitz's model. Of course, the novelties operate within a particular structure. In other words, it can be singularity and universality, depending on how one looks at it.

Let me give another example. Is communitarianism indicative of 'singularity'? On the one hand, the answer is positive as it posits, from the point of view of political theory, the significance of specific cultures over the nation-state. On the other hand, there is also an element of 'universality' as identity (and possibly rights) becomes submersed in broader communities. It all depends what one's focus is.

What about social media—'singularity' or 'universality'? Well, the algorithms certainly make for an element of individualization, as we know all too well from the tailored adverts and 'sponsored' posts we receive. At the same time, the well-documented phenomenon of the echo chamber makes for increasing homogeneity: information circulates between people with similar values and beliefs, thereby increasing internal similarities.

What is most odd is that Reckwitz comes close to recognizing that any phenomenon can be seen from the vantage point of 'singularity' and 'generality'". Indeed, a brief interlude about Kant leads to the admission that ". . . it is possible to interpret every element of the world either as a specific individual entity or as an example of a general type . . . " (Reckwitz 2020, 4), but this is quickly followed by the assertion that from a sociological point of view this is 'trivial'. The really important point, so he continues, is that there are 'social complexes' or indeed entire societies that promote or enhance the general at the expense of the singular, and there are such social phenomena that do the exact opposite. But there is no recognition on Reckwitz's part of the role he (or indeed any observer) plays in

attributing singularity or generality to what is being discussed. These concepts are simply too broad to allow for the kind of analytical clarity that is required for insightful social analysis. Reckwitz's cavalier use of these terms is reminiscent of Heidegger's infamous 'nothing nothings' ('Das Nichts selbst nichtet'): in the end it becomes difficult to see what we have really learned.

Secondly, and following directly from the previous point, I remain unconvinced that it is fruitful or informative to make all-embracing claims about increasing or decreasing 'universality' or 'singularity'. Again, those claims are too general and too vague, so much so that they can never be proven wrong. Indeed, it is unsurprising that Reckwitz is able to provide a tremendous amount of evidence to support his claims about recent historical developments towards 'singularity'. In his analysis, he conveniently talks about singularity even when people define themselves as part of a larger group—the rise of populist sentiments is then seen as yet another empirical instantiation of the march of the singular. In fact, he would be able to provide equally compelling evidence to the contrary if he had decided to interpret the phenomena in question from a different angle. In other words, given that most, if not all, relevant social phenomena can be described both in terms of 'singularity' and 'universality', I remain unconvinced about Reckwitz's claims about the rise of 'singularity' and feel those assertions are in need of further specification.

In similar vein, what Reckwitz calls 'cognitive-cultural capitalism' does not necessarily involve 'singularization'. It might well be true that, from close-up, the streaming services which individuals use provide them with specific cultural products, tailored to their 'needs' (as defined by past behaviour). The further one zooms out, however, the more homogenous this culture appears to be. Andreas might be right in following Boltanski and Chiapello when he claims that, for roughly half a century now, sectors of the middle class have been embracing notions of authenticity and creativity, but these values have been implemented according to well-defined patterns, making for a far more homogenous culture than Andreas seems willing to acknowledge. To put it in Andreas' terms, authenticity and creativity do not necessarily amount to singularity.

The confusion around terminology and description ties in with a broader problem with explanation. For instance, I find it difficult to agree with Reckwitz's generalisations about the political ramifications of the 'society of singularities', arguing as he does that it is precisely the primacy of singularity that has somehow brought about populism (Reckwitz 2020, 269–309). I do not see what is to be gained from describing the current political constellation as a 'crisis of the general'—again, it really depends on what kind of 'general' to which one is referring. As so often in Reckwitz's analysis, singularity appears as a convenient *deus ex machina* to account for a significant social and political phenomenon, but, if

anything, the case of populism demonstrates the need for finer-grained analyses. For me, one of the important political shifts, which took place over the past few decades, has been around the redefinition of 'left' and 'right'. In the second half of the twentieth century, the difference between the two, at least within the context of mainstream political parties in Europe, came down to the degree to which the economy and politics should be led by market forces, and conversely, the extent to which the state would have an important role to play in stimulating the economy and redressing inequalities and providing welfare.

As we moved into the twenty-first century, this particular juxtaposition—this specific articulation of the difference between left and right—has become politically less significant. Between the 1990s and the early 2010s, reacting to the electoral success of centre-right political parties, centre-left parties started to embrace neo-liberal policies and distinguished themselves from the centre-right primarily in cultural terms, for instance by promoting a mixture of political ideas around identity politics, ethnic diversity and gender equality. Electorally, this initially appeared to be a winning strategy, with, for instance, the Democratic Party in the US particularly successful in the 1990s and the Labour Party in Britain in power from 1997 to 2010. We now know, with the benefit of hindsight, that this shift in positioning by centre-left political parties inadvertently created, at least from an electoral point of view, a niche in the market, with a group of older and less privileged voters no longer feeling represented in any meaningful way by their erstwhile centre-left parties.

As a matter of fact, they felt deserted twice: economically and culturally. The cultural gulf between centre-left parties and their traditional constituencies was epitomised in various condescending descriptions by prominent centre-left politicians: there was famously Hilary Clintons' 'a basket of deplorables' to denigrate Trump voters, but also *François* Hollande's 'those without teeth' ('les sens dents') as a reference to the poor in France and Emily Thornberry's' sarcastic 'white van, flags' to sum up the patriotism of the Northern working class in Britain. The New Right managed to capitalise on this by focusing precisely on cultural issues centred round migration, tradition and identity. In the process, the distinction between 'left' and 'right' was redefined: the former became associated with a form of cosmopolitan liberalism—what Goodhart (2017) called the 'anywheres'—and the latter with a form of primordialism and conservatism—the 'somewheres'.

This perspective is not miles away from Reckwitz's. Yet, to bring this all back to an issue of increasing singularity, as Reckwitz does, is not really helpful or illuminating. It is far too blunt an instrument to cut through the issues at stake. Of course, developments in left-leaning political theory have moved away from the 'universalist' approaches, associated with John Rawls or Jürgen Habermas,

towards a more fragmented vision, whether it is in the form of identity politics or multiculturalism; and this shift away from a universal or inclusive vocabulary has certainly played into the hands of those on the right who, rightly or wrongly, can claim that progressives are no longer adopting an inclusive language or indeed are no longer speaking on behalf of the white working class. But none of this has to do with the magical power of singularity. Or, at least, little is gained from seeing it in that light.

Thirdly, for me, the most prevalent case of increasing 'singularity', at least for some categories of people, takes place in the context of what colleagues and I have called the pursuit of 'existential milestones' (Baert, Morgan, and Ushiyama 2022). By 'existential milestones' we refer to the type of key accomplishments which individuals consider integral to a complete, fulfilling life ('gelingendes Leben'). Traditionally, these milestones might have centred around, for instance, formal education, marriage, children, and so on, with a reasonably rigid sequence and timing.

Now, for some younger middle-class people from affluent countries, there seems more flexibility as to the type of existential milestones they wish to pursue and the timing involved: they expect to be able to define for themselves which milestones to pursue and when to do so, at least more so than their counter-parts, say, fifty years ago. Increasingly, technological innovations have made this flexibility possible, reproductive technologies being a particular prominent case in point. It goes without saying, however, that this type of 'singularity' (if this is indeed the right term to use in this case) is broadly indicative of the cultural dispositions of the urban professional classes in advanced economies, with their aversion towards tradition and their predilection towards individual choice. It is also the prerogative of those with considerable financial resources, who, in other words, are able to pay for further education, artificial insemination, and so on. This 'individualisation' of existential milestones (as we call this phenomenon) for the well-heeled sectors of affluent societies is often dependent on those with less financial resources and sometimes even makes for the latter's inability to achieve existential milestones: striking examples include worldwide circulation of surrogate mothers and nannies who give up their own ability to create families.

I have highlighted some of my reservations, none of which should detract from the obvious strengths of this book, notably its ambition, contemporary relevance and depth. Indeed, it is testimony to its breadth and depth that a variety of issues and thoughts surface.

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