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Article

Equality in singularity

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Abstract

Starting with Andreas Reckwitz's historical sociology of modernity as described in *The Society of Singularities*, we show how the transition from a culture of the bourgeois subject to a culture of the individual as a unique subject marks a transition from gradual to conditional equality among social actors. This shift manifests in practice as an equality within inequality, where everyone is subjected to the valorisation and devaluation of their own particularities by others. This equality within inequality signifies a radicalisation of social inequality driven by the expansion of the culture of the singular subject, whereby social actors can rely only on themselves – specifically, on their investment in their own particularities – to escape social emptiness. We then analyse the theoretical framework Reckwitz employs to explain this transition from gradual to conditional equality, a framework rooted in the spread of the cultures of the individual in modernity.

Keywords

society of singularities; equality in inequality; subject cultures (*Subjekthaftigkeit*); diffusion thesis; culturalization of the economy; late modernity

Igualdad en la singularidad

Resumen

Partiendo de la sociología histórica de la modernidad de Andreas Reckwitz, tal como se describe en *The Society of Singularities*, mostramos cómo la transición de una cultura burguesa sujeta a una cultura del individuo como tema único, marca una transición de la igualdad gradual a la condicional entre los actores sociales. Este cambio se manifiesta en la práctica como una igualdad dentro de la desigualdad, en la que todo el mundo está sujeto a la valorización y devaluación de sus propias particularidades por parte de los demás. Esta igualdad dentro de la desigualdad implica una radicalización de la desigualdad social, impulsada por la expansión de la cultura del sujeto singular, por la cual los actores sociales solo pueden confiar en sí mismos, específicamente en su inversión en sus propias particularidades, para escapar del vacío social. A continuación, analizamos el marco teórico que emplea Reckwitz para explicar esta transición de la igualdad gradual a la condicional, un marco arraigado en la propagación de las culturas de la persona en la modernidad.

Palabras clave

sociedad de singularidades; igualdad en la desigualdad; culturas temáticas (*Subjekthaftigkeit*); tesis de difusión; culturalización de la economía; modernidad tardía

Introduction

In the context of post-Weberian *Zeitgeist* theories in the sociology of culture, Andreas Reckwitz's *The Society of Singularities* (Reckwitz, 2020; originally published in 2017) innovates by replacing the singularity thesis with the rationalisation thesis, which was the cradle of well-known debates in social theory during the second half of the twentieth century (Lepsius, 1989; Kalberg, 1996; Swedberg, 1998). These debates revisited the concept of rationality, historically idealised as being enlightened by knowledge and cultural cosmopolitanism, to broaden its scope after the Second World War to include the complexity of different forms of rationality on the one hand, and to examine how they are embedded within participatory processes of public deliberation about the future of contemporary societies on the other (Offe, 1985; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2003). These discussions contributed to relativising the concept of instrumental rationality in its narrow sense as selfish, opportunistic social actors seeking their own optimisation to enhance their social careers, as well as in its broader sense as social capital at the heart of mutual trust in modern societies (Coleman, 1990, 1993; Putnam, 1993), i.e., as both the ultimate individual and collective resource fostering the structuration of society alongside the channelling of individual and social opportunities (White, 1981a, 1981b). Sociological investigations emerging from these debates gradually moved away from a sociology of rational action sensu stricto (Granovetter, 1985; White, 2002; Azarian, 2003). However, they did not abandon their focus on the subject but expanded it to include phenomena that had been neglected in social theory, such as the role of personal emotions and feelings in shaping social life (Illouz, 2008, 2012). The desire to develop a sociology of the subject capable of addressing the multiple facets of social actors and explaining their role in shaping society was, at the same time, a way to challenge the approach of society in terms of structural determinism (Lahire, 1998; Martucelli, 2010), where the subject is viewed as an agent working to preserve society while maintaining their own interests and social position in the social space (Bourdieu, 1987). This movement is extended by Andreas Reckwitz's theory, and in *The Society of Singularities* he outlines how his approach differs.

Reckwitz challenges the idea that rationality and rationalisation are the primary influences shaping our modern societies during the shift from classical to late modernity. The term "formal rationality" mainly functions as a cultural code representing the culture of the individual that characterises classical modernity (Reckwitz, 2020, pp. 26 ff.). It is a temporary code within a sequence of transitions from one culture of the individual to another in modernity, driven by socio-cultural practices that seek to liberalise self-expression. This kind of total social fact in our contemporary societies provides the collective criteria adopted by actors to interpret and express their personal affects through symbolic forms, supporting the spread of the culture of the subject in social fields (also see Reckwitz, 2012). Here, Reckwitz revisits the essence of a historical sociology of modernity by illustrating how these collective criteria shape cultural profiles of what historically situated actors understand as a subject, as well as the capacity of such a subject to be affected by social experiences, which he refers to as one's own private subjectivity or *Subjekthaftigkeit*. The culture of the subject, seen as a singular entity, represents the dominant modern form of this *Subjekthaftigkeit* (Reckwitz, 2006, p. 10). Singularity broadens in our modern

societies (ibid., p. 50), imposing its own model of social in/equality on society.

Moving from one culture of the subject to another, we move from one conception of equality and, therefore, from one conception of inequality, to another. Reckwitz describes this move at both main levels of his sociology: on the one hand, at the level of his historical sociology of modernity, and on the other, at the level of his sociology of the structuration of society. In this essay, we describe this transition in the conception of equality, starting with Reckwitz's historical sociology of modernity. We show how the transition from a culture of the bourgeois subject to the culture of the subject as a singular subject illustrates the transition from a gradual equality to a conditional equality between social actors, whose formal principle in the society of singularities is the equality in difference, which translates in practice into an equality in inequality, where everyone is subjected to the valorisation and devaluation of their own particularities by others. This equality in inequality represents a radicalisation of social inequality, supported by the expansion of the culture of the singular subject, in which, to escape the social vacuum, social actors can rely only on their investment in their own particularities. We subsequently discuss the theoretical scheme Reckwitz employs to explain this transition from gradual to conditional equality, a scheme which is rooted in the diffusion of the cultures of the subject in modernity.

1. Singularity in the context of Reckwitz's historical sociology of modernity

Reckwitz (2006) formulates the thesis of singularity as a continuation of his work on the cultures of the subject and the cultural criteria of *Subjekthaftigkeit*, whose multiplication and transformation he traces to the emergence of the bourgeois subject from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. He locates this development at the intersection of three social fields of practice: the economy and associated labour practices, the field of intimacy and personal relationships, and the field of self-referential practices. While further criteria of *Subjekthaftigkeit* appear in other social fields of practice, these three fields have contributed most to the constitution and reproduction of the modern subject. Historically, they generate socio-cultural practices that contribute, in a dominant way, to the organisation of the daily life of the actors both quantitatively (what the actors do) and qualitatively (how they want to be). According to Reckwitz, the hegemony of these social fields of practice in modernity can be explained by the claim to a universalised bourgeois subject, whose delineations as a gentleman (seventeenth century), merchant bourgeois (eighteenth century), and man of the world (nineteenth century) are various expressions of this claim. They also lead to a corresponding expansion of the culture of the modern subject, which in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries extends into romantic figures of the subject – notably through the liberalisation of artistic practices and, more broadly, creative practices (ibid., p. 217) – such as the bohemian bourgeois (Reckwitz, 2006, p. 516; 2012, pp. 76 ff.). These romantic figures of the subject lead to a redefinition of the collective criteria favouring the kind of representation of the subject that society supports at any given time. As Reckwitz puts it: "The significance of Romanticism for modernity's culture of singularities cannot be overstated. This was the first radi-

cally singularistic cultural movement in history (...). The immediate significance of Romanticism lies in the fact that it radically oriented the human subject toward singularity, which was treated in the semantics of 'individuality'. This then served the comprehensive project of singularizing all elements of the world (...) the experience of picturesque places, the experience of other subjects in the form of friendship and love, the singular formation of the material world (in the case of handcrafted objects, for instance), a sensitivity to history as a venue for narratives and memories, the experiential sphere of religion, and identifying with the singularities of peoples and nations were all areas in which Romanticism subjected the world to a comprehensive process of singularization" (Reckwitz, 2020, p. 69). Behind the bourgeois subject of previous centuries, who realises itself through labour and seeks relations of "sympathetic similarity" (Reckwitz, 2006, p. 146), there is a progressive displacement of boundaries between what the bourgeois subject considers permitted or tolerated, and what is associated with prohibition and transgression. This shift occurs through the aspiration of "sensitivity and its psychologization" (ibid., p. 147).

The dynamics of this iteration are intrinsically linked to the non-homogeneous character of the collective criteria associated with the culture of the subject in general, and that of the bourgeois subject in particular (ibid., pp. 204-205). There exists a mixture of loosely connected criteria that can transfer from one culture of the subject to another and destabilise an established culture of the subject. This affects the bourgeois subject, especially in how it perceives its relationships with others, manages its sphere of intimacy, and develops its sensitivity, which indirectly reinforces a representation of the other – not only as someone analogous to us as a close friend but also as a subject of desire, love and sexuality. This turning point, where the relationship to the other becomes a source of fantasies and phantasms about prohibited relations that the actors' investment in the bourgeois subject favours, leads to a sensitivity for exclusivity at the core of the romantic subject. This sensitivity to exclusivity is the source of singularity. It is a sensitivity towards the exclusivity of both oneself and the other that sparks a shift in the modern conception of equality, from an equality based on recognising common shared attributes – such as work, education, culture, living conditions, and voting rights – to an equality based on acknowledging uncommon and unshared, and therefore exclusive, attributes of the subjects – such as talent, gift, or taste – as seen in social phenomena like fashion or love, understood as an exclusive and irreplaceable emotional relationship with another exclusive and irreplaceable subject (ibid., pp. 154-155; see also p. 219). This shift in the modern conception of equality also widens the distance between actors and the institutions in social fields that promote an impersonal conception of equality based on collective shared attributes of subjects, in favour of personal relationships of intimacy. They favour the acknowledgement of the distinctive difference of the subject and, thus, of its singularity, of its equal inequality to other subjects.

Consequently, the distinction made between the bourgeois subject and the romantic subject, which leads to the structuring of a regime of singularity, fosters the development of further distinctions. The first distinction is between two regimes of modernity: the modernity of the "society of equals, of equality before the law, and of social uniformity" (Reckwitz, 2020, p. 30), also called organised modernity or modernity of generality, and the modernity of singularity or late modernity, which has been developing since the 1970s

and the 1980s and continues to do so. Related to this first distinction between the modernity of generality and the modernity of singularity, there is a second between two registers of social relations: the modernity of generality is characterised by a register of universal relations to the world and others, based on what one has, or lacks, while the modernity of singularity favours a register of particular relations to the world and others, based on what one is, or is not. To this latter distinction corresponds a third, concerning the legitimisation of the subject supported by institutions in social fields within the modernity of generality (such as school, church, government, industries and firms), and by the network of other subjects more or less related in the modernity of singularity.

These three distinctions generated by the transition from classical to late modernity give rise to two different visions of equality: one being an equality with a claim to universality, which manifests as equal access to primary resources provided by social institutions; and the other being an equality with a claim to particularity, meaning equality within difference recognised and legitimised by other particular subjects in personal interactions, translating into a socio-cultural equality. Both visions of equality coexist in modern societies, because, according to Reckwitz, "the social logic of singularities is neither the system of the general-particular nor idiosyncrasies. In a certain way, singularities exist between the two" (ibid., p. 34; also see ibid., p. 7). Therefore, whether in the case of equality or other elements of the bourgeois subject's culture, there have always been aspects of the singular subject that accompanied the expansion of that culture, even if, at the time, one cannot speak of singularity in the exact sense of the term: "Such cases are not examples of singularities in the strict sense, however; they are rather instances of the general-particular – that is, they represent differential positions within the framework of a general order" (ibid., p. 26). This thesis of the coexistence of cultures of the subject raises the broader question of how one culture of the subject imposes itself on another, as is the case with the singularity that imposes itself on the culture of the bourgeois subject and the culture of the romantic subject in the early 1970s and 1980s (ibid., pp. 100 ff.). It also raises the specific question of the relationship between the two visions of equality.

Reckwitz's answer is general and does not explicitly address the question of equality. Rather, it focuses on how the modernity of singularity imposes on the modernity of generality, and in this context, he mentions the important role played by three factors: the socio-cultural revolution of authenticity, the post-industrial economy of singularities, and digitalisation (ibid.). These three factors recall the three social fields of practice that Reckwitz mentions in relation to the structuration of the bourgeois subject – intimacy, economy, and self-referential practices or technologies of the self. These same factors were already the origin of the emancipation of creativity, the crucial moment encouraging the sociality of modernity, which Reckwitz describes as an aesthetic sociality, meaning the modern form of social action that aims to aestheticise both oneself (e.g., fashion) and society (e.g., creative cities; see Reckwitz, 2012, pp. 35 ff.). From classical to late modernity, the contrasts that arise between the cultures of the subject therefore rest on the same three factors:

a) the reinforcement of intimacy;

b) the production and consumption of mediations that foster this reinforcement of intimacy, through consumer goods and services, as well as through the organisation of labour (such as in open spaces, creative teams, etc.); and

c) the orchestration of its attractiveness and its publicisation through mass media.

These three factors form the core of the diffusion thesis, which extends Reckwitz's discourse on singularity from his historical sociology of modernity to his sociology of the structuration of society. Let us now return in more detail to these three factors that support the diffusion thesis in order to understand how the cultural coding of modernity by a culture of the subject functions – and ultimately shapes – modern society. We can then consider what conclusions might be drawn from it regarding the type of relationship that the shift from classical modernity to a modernity of singularity fosters between equality in universality and equality in difference.

2. Intimacy

The first element of Reckwitz's diffusion thesis stems from Weberian-inspired models of diffusion, rooted in the entelechy of the subject. In his *Protestant Ethics*, Max Weber contends that the development of the Protestant way of life was facilitated by the fact that actors invest in themselves through labour, with self-realisation through labour becoming the primary goal that each actor strives to achieve, where labour becomes "Beruf" in relation to what Weber calls "Berufung", i.e., personal vocation or calling. "The conception of the calling thus brings out that central dogma of all Protestant denominations which the Catholic division of ethical precepts into preecepta and consilia discards. The only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling" (Weber, 1992, p. 80; for the original, see 2002, p. 187). In Reckwitz's discourse, labour in the sense of an economic activity is not the only practice that supports the actors' training practices ("trainieren"), aiming to appropriate and apply the socio-cultural criteria of the culture of the subject that prevails in their society at a given time. One must also take into account practices that fall within the sphere of intimacy – actors are training their "Innenorientierung", their orientation to their private world (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 40) – and practices that fall within the use of, and exposure to, mass media and contemporary digital technologies – actors are training their "Außenorientierung" or their orientation to the world around them (ibid., p. 41). This first level of dissemination, where the appropriation of intimacy goes hand in hand with the appropriation of exteriority, shows how each actor cultivates their disposition, how they structure themselves based on their inscription in the criteria of one culture of the subject, and how they reproduce this structure in practice. This double orientation of investing in intimacy, where cultivating one's own uniqueness leads to seeking the particular qualities of others as well as of things, events, etc., brings Reckwitz's conception of the subject closer to Bourdieu's concept of habitus (ibid., pp. 41-42), from which Reckwitz nevertheless dissociates himself concerning the argument of homogeneity. Bourdieu's structural homogeneity of habitus presupposes the reinforcement of habitus, where differences with others remain of interest only if they manifest a similarity to the actor's structure of disposition and, consequently, to his or her habitus (Bourdieu, 2019). From the perspective of the diffusion thesis that Reckwitz develops, such differences, which could challenge the homogeneity of actors' dispositions, are nonetheless considered

by the actors, whether they show a similarity to their dispositions or not, because they offer additional opportunities for learning and the potential to adopt new socio-cultural criteria related to the current culture of the subject in society. In other words, in Bourdieu's case, actors distinguish themselves from one another through their habitus, which is rooted in the asymmetrical social relations between social classes. In Reckwitz, however, actors distinguish themselves from one another in terms of the relation they establish to the current culture of the subject in their society. To express it in more concrete terms: the equality in difference imposes on the equality with a claim to universality within the modernity of singularity because, on the one hand, it displaces the valorisation (and devalorisation) of equality from relating to material needs (having or not having) to relating to various socio-cultural attributes beyond material needs (being or not being). As Reckwitz states: "What is crucial is not any objective achievement or long-term devotion to one's work but, rather, sudden success on the attractiveness market" (Reckwitz, 2020, p. 117). On the other hand, this displacement fosters a change in the meaning of the subject's individuation from the preservation of its identity to the advantage of the preservation of its social position, to the pursuit of its particularity across all possible social fields, favouring sector-specific (rather than universal) value and devalue. From an intimacy perspective, the shift from equality with a claim to universality to equality in difference corresponds to a dual weakening of the universal qualities of social values associated with society's material culture and their role in structuring society. According to Reckwitz, the diversification of practices that follow the various ways of investing in one's particularity prior to the investment in the socio-cultural criteria of a culture of the singular subject contributes to the differentiation of social activity spheres and, consequently, to societal structuration. Building on this, Reckwitz's diffusion thesis generates the thesis of the structuration of society with its division into fields of activity linked to corresponding categories of actors.

3. The economy

The second factor on which Reckwitz's diffusion thesis is based is the economy, not only as a practice of labour but also as an activity of producing goods and services that exerts a power of attraction on individuals who invest their *Subjekthaftigkeit* while consuming these goods and services. The significance of the economy for Reckwitz's diffusion thesis arises from the fact that, as a sphere of activity, it sits at the crossroads between actors' focus on their own inner world and their attention to the particularity of others and the outer world on the other. This double orientation is based on the attribution (*Zuschreibung*) of meaning to oneself, a form of self-hermeneutics ("Selbsthermeneutik"; Reckwitz, 2006, p. 46), meaning the sense of an "attribution of meaning to one's own person", which constitutes the "identity" of the subject (ibid.). The attribution of meaning to oneself underpins the attribution of meaning to what makes sense for oneself and thus lies at the root of the actor's shift from inside to outside. Consequently, attribution becomes a central concept concerning the diffusion thesis and, beyond that, regarding Reckwitz's thesis of singularity. Because attribution guides the actor from their sphere of intimacy to the external realm, it enables the inscription of feelings and experiences (*Erlebnis*) into objects and

services produced by the economy, where the actor's desire for an object enhances its desirability, and in turn, the object reinforces the actor's attributes as a marker of their belonging to the society of singularities. Correspondingly, there is a culturalisation of the economy within the society of singularities, a "cultural economization [which] pertains not only to objects in the economy of singularities, (...) but also to the relation that subjects have to one another (Reckwitz, 2020, pp. 177-178). If in classical modernity, actors make visible their way of investing the culture of the subject by showing their competences, power, and achievements – all of which Reckwitz summarises in the concept of *Leistung* (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 229; also see the translation of the term as *achievement*, 2020, p. 150) – in the society of singularities, identity is demonstrated through one's "performance" (*ibid.*). The concept of performance differs from that of achievement in that it presupposes a relationship with an audience (*ibid.*), i.e. with observers who value or devalue the performance, and who observe, assess, and draw conclusions about the actors' concretisation of their singularity. This transition from "achievement" to "performance" reflects an investment by actors in the most intimate aspects of their individuality, as well as the growing diffusion of this investment in one's own intimacy in society through digital technologies. This diffusion, contributing to the culturalisation of the economy, transforms it from a domain primarily linked to the subject's achievement into a space for observing and evaluating performance, since tracking the way in which actors invest in the culture of the singular subject enables the economy to renew its products, production chains, and value chains (also see Reckwitz, 2012, p. 142). The declining significance of the economy in shaping the social careers of actors, alongside its growing role in defining the criteria for the changing valuable (and valueless) singular attributes of the subject over time and space, links the two factors underpinning the diffusion of singularity – intimacy and the economy – thus altering the patterns of social classification and the resulting social structure. These transformations heighten the significance of equality and, consequently, social inequality in late modernity.

The modern concept of generality promotes equality among actors based on representing universal access to both the material commons and the institutions that ensure such access – including the law, labour, education, and participation in political decisions. This fosters a structuring of the economy centred on the idea that, although everyone can buy and use the products and services provided, a gradual divergence in actual and everyday access to these differences develops among social actors. On the one hand, there are well-equipped actors who, for this very reason, have easy access to the products and services available in society; on the other, there are less well-equipped actors who consequently find it more difficult to access these same goods. Consequently, with increased investment in the sphere of intimacy that characterises singularity, the culturalisation of the economy, and the equality in difference that results from it, modernity ratifies the idea that differences between social actors are no longer solely linked to whether one has, or has not, access to material resources and institutions that provide such access. Instead, differences between actors are linked to whether one is, or is not, deemed valuable enough to meet the conditions that grant or deny access to the products and services offered by the economy. On the one hand, there are those actors whose performance directly supports the structuring of the economy of singularities and who, therefore, are granted access to its goods and services.

On the other hand, there are those whose performance does not support this kind of economy structuring and who, consequently, are not granted access to its goods and services and are left to their own devices (see Reckwitz, 2020, p. 250).

What the economy reflects of the society of singularities at the level of labour, production and consumption of goods and services, is generalised to everything that exists outside of the economy by the third factor of the diffusion thesis.

4. The mass media and its public

Without an audience, the actor's performance loses its meaning as a performance, including its valued significance both economically and symbolically, while the actor's focus on uniqueness ultimately reduces to a single neurotic obsession that arises from any process of valuation or devaluation. This is why the mass media – and, in the society of singularities, especially digital media from the Internet to social networks – become significant (Reckwitz, 2020, p. 117). Because they organise audiences around the singularities they mediate, mass media and, more broadly, digital technologies support the diffusion thesis, meaning they ensure that singularity spreads throughout society and thus overrides the cultures of both the bourgeois subject and the romantic subject that dominated until the 1970s. Moreover, for the same reason, mass media and digital technologies alter the structure of these audiences, and this change aligns with the transition from modernity characterised by generality to modernity focused on singularity. Reckwitz's reflections on creativity in the nineteenth century can serve as an example. The audience mainly consists of spectators observing how actors embody the criteria of the culture of the bourgeois subject. With the rise of singularity in the twentieth century, the audience becomes an actor-audience that actively participates in how actors embody the criteria of the culture of the subject. With the Internet and social networks, today such an audience turns into an actively sanctioning audience that evaluates actors' investments in singularity positively or negatively: "Increasingly, the late-modern subject has become identical with his or her performance before an audience, and the internet is its central arena" (*ibid.*, p. 178). Like the Internet, digital technologies have not only enabled singularities to communicate constantly across the globe, challenging the social hierarchies of analogue society, but also led to a massification of singularities and contributed to giving them societal weight, while maintaining their modularity, which allows their expansion across all spheres of social activity. Over time, digital technologies have become true "cultural machines", producing audiences and evaluations of individual actors by those audiences (*ibid.*, p. 18). Due to digital technologies, the modernity of singularity now involves actors being permanently exposed to others to an unprecedented extent in societies. These technologies ultimately overthrow the cultures of the bourgeois and romantic subjects in favour of singularity. They ensure the culturalisation of the economy, reinforce actors' investments in their intimacy, and thus stabilise the renewal of the attributions of meaning both internally and externally. This is why, in a society of singularities, equality with a claim to universality becomes a nostalgia that must necessarily be surpassed to establish this culture of the subject and its related conception of equality in difference, granting it its dominant, and thus structuring, power in society. If intimacy and the economy in late modernity weaken the importance of an equality

claiming universality, the mass media and its public aim to replace this notion with an equality in difference, which is the only pertinent and structuring meaning of equality for a society of singularity.

5. The necessary overcoming of equality

The three factors of Reckwitz's diffusion thesis demonstrate how transitions in modernity transform and ultimately overturn the idea of equality through the development of cultures of the subject that have replaced one another to this day. Moving from an equality claiming universality to an equality claiming particularity, the equality in the difference as a formal principle of equality in the society of singularities in practice becomes an equality in the inequality that pervades all of society, because inequality becomes one mode of the particular. Inequality extends into society, not in contrast to equality, but as the legitimate way of investing of oneself, the legitimate mode of attribution of meaning, the legitimate mode of presenting and representing the self, prior to the production and reproduction of singularities driven by actors' performances. In other words, the singular coding of the principle of equality into equality in inequality normalises sociocultural inequalities and makes them the dominant resource in the generalised competition among social actors across all spheres of social life, thus normalising this competition. The modernity of the generality has created a society in which the gradual character of equality – and consequently of inequality – presupposes a conception of the surpassing of the social actors regulated by institutional breaks, which offers a form of security for these actors – who, even in precarious social situations, would not be left in a social vacuum. Because the modernity of singularity is no longer based on the idea of gradual equality, but rather supports a conditional in/equality, and it exposes social actors directly to this social vacuum. Ultimately, those actors who have not invested sufficiently in themselves, and consequently have not met the conditions of their valorisation or devaluation, are solely responsible for their failure to inscribe themselves into the society of singularities.

This conclusion aligns with Reckwitz's diffusion thesis and illustrates Reckwitz's view of institutions and organisations in the society of singularities: from the bourgeois subject to the singular subject, institutions and organisations do not foster or socialise actors before recognising them and being recognised by them. Such recognition, as well as the legitimacy that it can bring, has been reduced to unilateral sanctions only, with the institutions and organisations sanctioning the actors positively or negatively depending on the valuation, or devaluation, of their particularities in public, or to recall Weber's quotation above, evaluating the *Ruf*, not the *Berufung*. Because they are structured by the diffusion of the culture of the subject, because they are culturalised, they all reinforce the culture of the subject from which they emerge and which they contribute to institutionalise. This explains why in the framework of Reckwitz's thesis of singularity – which could be generalised as Reckwitz's sociology of modernity –, societal institutions like those of the law (recognition and legitimisation of rights), of education (recognition and legitimisation of titles), of culture (recognition and legitimisation of taste), of religion (recognition and legitimisation of belief) etc., do not provide legitimacy, which is all the more pointless

because singularity carries its legitimacy in itself and no one can be judged illegitimate in becoming who he or she is. This is Reckwitz's corollary thesis of the entelechy of the subject at the collective scale, whose consequence in the long run is to make any claim to equality all the more irrelevant as such a claim becomes increasingly suspect of preventing the rise of the particularities which the society of singularities needs in order to produce, and reproduce, itself.

This allows for a better understanding of Reckwitz's discourse on the polarisation that affects the middle class in our contemporary societies between, on the one hand, the fractions of the aspiring middle class oriented towards the upper classes, who value social inequality because they understand it as a lever of self-realisation, and on the other hand, the fractions of the fallen middle class for whom, conversely, singularity generates a social inequality that exposes their actors more seriously to the social vacuum. This polarisation at the origin of the crises of contemporary society, illustrated, for example, by the rise of populism in Europe and the protest movements against weak purchasing power, is only a transitional stage which is necessary for the generalisation of singularity in our societies and the normalisation of the model of inequality that comes with it. The horizon towards which our contemporary societies develop is therefore marked by the necessary overcoming of the conception of equality conveyed by the cultures of the bourgeois and romantic subjects, towards the generalisation of this equality on the basis of the inequality on which these societies structure and reproduce themselves. We will now return to some aspects of the thesis of singularity that deserve more detailed discussion.

6. Discussion

Thus far, the main strengths of Reckwitz's singularity thesis have been highlighted, and its implications for the prevailing model of equality in modern societies have been described. It has been stated that modern societies are transitioning from a model of gradual equality based on the principle of equality with a claim to universality to a model of conditional equality based on the principle of equality with a claim to particularity. This form of equality, with a claim to particularity, has been supported by the reinforcement of actors' investment in their intimacy and by the evolution of the economy from one that supports actors' achievements to one that evaluates their performance. Eventually, it has been generalised as the dominant conception of equality and inequality (hereafter, in/equality) in the modernity of singularity by the mass media, i.e., the Internet and social media. Examining Reckwitz's diffusion thesis, the relationship between these two conceptions of equality has been reversed over time. Suppose equality with a claim to universality prevails in classical modernity, within the modernity of singularity. In that case, equality in difference becomes the dominant model of equality which, because of its coding by the sociocultural practices in the society of singularities, leads to the normalisation of inequality as a structuring resource and a lever for the reproduction of the society of singularities. This lever is even more potent as it excludes any recourse to arbitration emanating from societal institutions responsible for regulating these societies. This is a consequence of Reckwitz's diffusion thesis, which asserts that these institutions are shaped by the singularity they support, as we have seen above in

the examples of the economy, mass media and digital technologies. Instead, personal social relations with other singular subjects are becoming increasingly relevant as contexts of acknowledgement and legitimisation of one's own singularity, where these other subjects may be one single special actor, as in love relationships, or the crowd liking (or disliking) one's Twitter post, Instagram picture, Facebook wall, etc. In what follows, we propose to return to some aspects of this diffusion thesis of singularity, beginning with an observation regarding Reckwitz's historical sociology of modernity.

Diffusion theses in historical sociology have the advantage of explaining how species of the same kind develop across space and time. The model par excellence of such an explanation in sociological theory has been provided, as mentioned earlier, by Weber's investigation of Protestant ethics and its crucial role in supporting the expansion of capitalism. However, diffusion theses face difficulties when it comes to problematising the changes caused by societal ruptures, such as those resulting from conflicts, crises, and natural or health disasters, because they tend to normalise these ruptures as continuous transformations of a single kind across space and time. Consequently, it becomes hard to find convincing evidence explaining what drives these ruptures, as well as how they relate to the normalisation of the diffusion of the kind under observation. Reckwitz's diffusion thesis does not entirely sidestep this issue. It allows us to better understand the transition between different cultures of the subject, which succeed each other in modernity, as various transitional stages within modernity that the different cultures of the modern subject represent. With its three main factors explaining the transition from classical modernity to the modernity of singularity, Reckwitz's diffusion thesis also supports the idea that such a transition does not replace one culture of the subject with another. Rather, the modernity of singularity dominates classical modernity in contemporary society by extending its principles to the entire social fabric. Simultaneously, as shown by the dominant model of equality in difference, the modernity of singularity underpins a radical conception of equality within inequality, where inequality becomes the primary resource structuring our modern society.

Yet, within the scope of the diffusion thesis, these differences consistently serve to reinforce – rather than slow down or rectify – the actors' investment in their own particularities. The cultures of the subject in modernity always assume their ongoing expansion, which is the expansion of the same investment in one's own subjectivity or *Subjekthaftigkeit*, depending on the same attribution of meanings to one's own particularity. Nothing disrupts this expansion process, and everything in society appears to develop in ways that support it, as if the various social and structural layers through which this investment in one's own particularity must pass to achieve its concrete and structural effects for both actors and society, always favour it. This observation may be expressed more generally.

The diffusion thesis certainly provides a coherent model of the transition between the cultures of the subject, leading to a corresponding description of the structuration of contemporary societies. However, this diffusion thesis lacks proper problematisation – less focusing on the unadjusted singularities, such as Reckwitz's discourse on the lower sections of the middle class, even if relatively undifferentiated, which is one attempt at such problematisation – than on the unadjusted social structures connected to individual subjects, relying on the selectivity of institutions and organisations in society. The example chosen here is from the field of education and aligns with Reckwitz's diffusion thesis, but then diverges in evo-

lution, specifically with the French *Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle* (CAP). Before 1943, when it became an officially recognised national certificate in France, the CAP was the first qualification linked to a professional education programme specifically designed in accordance with negotiations between the French state and representatives of various French economic sectors (see Brucy, 1996). The CAP is directly connected to the diverse needs of the French economy and therefore, after the 1950s, the CAP expanded to include a wide range of vocational offerings reflecting specialisations and the notably strong division of professions across French regions – such as "car mechanic", "rural craft tailor", "tailor for trousers", etc. (Lemêtre & Moreau, 2013). The CAP continued to support this diversity in the 1970s and 1980s. It served social groups and milieus that were not particularly privileged, did not pursue the *Bacca*lauréat, and remained rooted in their respective regions, which is why the need for training to acquire a CAP also exhibited significant diversity. The CAP could be obtained through an in-service training programme, by completing a course without practising a profession, via distance learning, or through direct training in a company without attending a vocational school. Yet, due to changes in the labour market on one hand and the growth of vocational schools, in-service training programmes, and other higher education offerings on the other, since the 1970s, the CAP has been continually adjusted and has consequently lost its diversity. Similar examples of the modification of the selection of educational institutions can be found in the French *Grandes écoles*, which educate children from upper-class backgrounds in France, such as *Science Po Paris* (see Albouy & Wanecq, 2003) or the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* (ENA; see Kesler, 2003), that face competition from universities and the departure of their traditional clientele to these universities. Additional examples of how uniqueness can be disrupted or blocked in society are seen in the thesis of the economisation of social fields (Schimank & Volkmann, 2008, pp. 382-393) and in the French economy of conventions. As Thévenot and Boltanski argue (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1987; Boltanski, 2007), following conventions assists actors in their social work and introduces multiple orders of justification for their actions, thereby fostering reflexivity on themselves and others, as well as stabilising and renewing their actions. The pursuit of singularity is therefore not the sole path to being valued in late modernity. Adhering to conventions can produce the same result at a lower cost if we recognise that it saves time and effort in affirming one's own uniqueness. Singularity, on the other hand, involves continuously strengthening one's training in the evolving socio-cultural standards of the dominant culture of the subject. As these examples illustrate, a more focused analysis of the unpredictable outcomes resulting from the diffusion of singularities would better distinguish the unilateral praxeological determinism of Reckwitz's current diffusion thesis. It would highlight areas of society where singularities are expanding, regions where such expansion encounters difficulties or is unable to develop, and others where a form of singularity emerges without individuals needing to singularise themselves but instead conforming to existing social norms.

The current state of the diffusion thesis, on which Reckwitz develops his singularity thesis, has implications for his sociology of social structure, extending his historical sociology of modernity. Its main implication is that the singularity thesis offers an overly simplified model of social structure, where actors form a privileged class that lives by creating its own singularity, and a middle class that Reckwitz divides into two fractions: one aligned with the privileged

class aspiring to singularity, and another comprising dropouts who reject singularity and, consequently, the lifestyle and practices of the actors who support it. In one sense, this would suggest that singularity becomes an observable and structuring social phenomenon only within the upper middle class. However, if we rely on the diffusion thesis and take Reckwitz's attribution scheme, i.e., this *Selbstthermeneutik* as a historical movement invested in one's own particularity in others and society, seriously, there is no reason to assume that singularity would only be pervasive within certain classes. The first consequence of this assumption is that the diffusion of singularity in society cannot fully explain the phenomenon of the diffusion of singularity. Indeed, to understand how singularity relates to social class and the implications of its widespread diffusion, we need a better understanding of its distribution both within and across different social classes and fractions. This would provide a clearer view of social differentiation based on different interpretations of singularity, supported by each class's unique ways of appropriating the socio-cultural code of the singular subject in society, which are evidently not confined to the upper middle class.

The second consequence of such an assumption relates to Reckwitz's discourse on the social lower middle class and, more generally, on the unprivileged classes. According to Reckwitz's diffusion thesis, there is no reason to believe that unprivileged classes do not also display their own particularities, since singularity is a widespread phenomenon that permeates society as a whole. Such a consideration would undermine the distinction Reckwitz makes when speaking of the middle class, separating the upper middle class, which promotes the diffusion of singularities, from the lower middle class, which opposes it. As mentioned earlier, we are thus faced either with the question of whether this distinction is still relevant, or with the question of other criteria that could enable us to differentiate class fractions alongside the diffusion of singularities in society – i.e., the question of the different kinds, meanings, and forms of singularity. More broadly, at the intersection of Reckwitz's diffusion thesis and his analysis of the social structure of contemporary societies, we lack not only a clear differentiation scheme based on the basis of the differentiation of singularity in society but also lack a proper allocation scheme that can identify both the boundaries between social classes and segments and, at the same time, the distribution of singularity within these classes and segments, thus supporting their differentiation from one another.

This remains one of the questions left unanswered for the time being both by Reckwitz's historical sociology of modernity and its sociology of social structure. From the viewpoint of the guiding theme of equality, addressing these questions nevertheless is important, since the thesis of the normalisation of conditional inequality as one of the main outcomes resulting from the expansion of the society of singularities depends on such questions, as well as the idea that equality in difference would be the dominant scheme of in/equality in contemporary society. The work on what may be referred to as the second field of problems opened by the singularity thesis also depends on the progress made in a third field of problems which is directly linked to the second one, and which refers to the actors, groups and societies to which the singularity thesis applies.

It is not difficult to understand how Reckwitz connects the most obvious signs of the culture of the singular subject to what he describes as the new professions and the actors who practise them (Reckwitz, 2020, pp. 247 ff.). The term "new professions" refers to professional activities in the realms of art and culture (such as

designers, academics, creative individuals) and, to a lesser degree, to professional activities in the economic and media sectors (like communicators, animators, publicists), and more rarely, to professional activities linked to the political or administrative spheres (such as communication advisers, consulting agencies). In other words, the actors involved in these professional activities are generally well-educated and predominantly work in service industries or within the immaterial economy (ibid., p. 46). Returning to the singularity thesis with Reckwitz stating that "'singularity' and 'singularization' are cross-sectional concepts, which designate a cross-sectional phenomenon that pervades all of society" (ibid., p. 5), it becomes apparent that there is a lack of proper argumentation within Reckwitz's sociology of social structure to explain how singularity structures in concrete terms all social activities beyond those solely related to enhancing one's lifestyle. These activities not only influence the social careers of the actors but also determine the way society regulates its own growth. Bourdieu, whom Reckwitz quotes to differentiate his thesis of singularity from Bourdieu's thesis of distinction, with which it shares some of its schemes (Reckwitz's *Selbstthermeneutik*, as we have seen, is inspired by Bourdieu's theory of habitus), relied on the theory of capital. This theory explains how strategies of distinction become generalised in society (Bourdieu, 1987). Because capitals – particularly economic and cultural capitals for Bourdieu – in terms of structure and volume both mirror the structure of the habitus and the social fields where the habitus develops, serve as the link between actors' subjective aspirations to rely on a specific position in a social field, and the objective structure of social positions in this field. The alignment of subjective social aspirations with the actual potential to achieve them depends on the control mechanisms of institutions within each social field, which sanction actors positively or negatively based on the structure and volume of their capitals, which rest on the structure of their habitus. Accordingly, Bourdieu argues that institutions within social fields use actors' capital as a reflection of their habitus to determine which actors can expect to occupy certain positions. Consequently, the regulation mechanisms of these institutions help reproduce the hierarchical order of social positions in each social field by replacing older actors with a given habitus with newer actors who show the structure of the same habitus, thus stabilising the social order within each field and in the whole of society, while reproducing and preserving the same kind of distinction strategies in society, where birds of a feather flock together.

This kind of theory, namely a theory of the transversality of singularity intrinsic to the singularity thesis at the level of social structure, is absent in Reckwitz's theory of singularity. As the comparison with Bourdieu highlights, such a theory cannot be developed without considering the role of institutions and organisations, such as collective actors in society. Instead, as we have seen, Reckwitz's theory emphasises the shift from a claim to universality – and, therefore, to the warrants of such universality through collective actors in modern times – towards a claim to particularity and its recognition and legitimisation within networks of personal relations. Let us briefly clarify why, in contrast to Bourdieu, this explanation could pose a serious challenge to Reckwitz's diffusion thesis of singularity.

Reckwitz's thesis, unlike Bourdieu's, does not support the idea that we have homogeneous criteria for the culture of the subject in modernity. Instead, it states that because such criteria are not homogeneous, they can be supported by different actors and groups within society. On the one hand, this is why, with Reckwitz, we

understand that singularity pertains to the entire society. On the other hand, this means we cannot identify specific social groups supporting corresponding specific criteria of singularity in modernity. This extends to the idea that within the scope of Reckwitz's diffusion thesis, there are no strict boundaries between social groups and the corresponding social fields in which these groups operate. This challenges Reckwitz's ternary model of social classes even more, as it does not provide a criterion to determine which social class supports, or does not support, which criteria of singularity, thereby weakening Reckwitz's assertion that singularity is most strongly supported by the upper middle class. Regarding the professions we have introduced in our argument, it is similarly not possible to establish that singularity expands in contemporary society due to support from actors pursuing "new professions". Not only is the term "new profession" either vague or too limited from a historical sociology perspective of modernity as proposed by Reckwitz, but it also inevitably creates misunderstandings about the diffusion thesis, which, on the one hand, links to the generalisation of singularities in society, while, on the other hand, this generalisation most notably applies to specific groups of actors linked in society to specific fields of activity.

To return, then, to the conception of in/equality that Reckwitz sees as dominant in the society of singularity: we have referred to it as an equality in difference, whose complementary part is a radical inequality because it is an inequality in being, or not being, particular in the eyes of other subjects. If such an inequality were to dominate in the society of singularity, then our discussion of Reckwitz's diffusion thesis above would indicate this to mean

- a) a transversal support of unconventional behaviours over conventional ones, which
- b) will not have to be reflected at the level of material resources of the actors and
- c) will not have to be sanctioned by collective actors in order to gain structural power to establish social hierarchies.

In other words, such an in/equality would only become dominant if it could be established – at least partly – outside its inscription in social practices. Or put differently, supporting this view on equality in difference in the society of singularity would inevitably weaken Reckwitz's praxeology according to which social practices are the lever of the expansion of singularity in modern society. This, in turn, would weaken the diffusion thesis itself, because according to Reckwitz, the diffusion of singularity presupposes the inscription of singularity in social practices.

To sum up, what the singularity thesis currently lacks is both greater flexibility in the diffusion thesis and a theoretical framework that allows for a deeper exploration of the expansion of singularities within Reckwitz's sociology of social structure. This would enable a more precise analysis of the sociocultural differences in how actors encode their practices and how organisations or institutions encode their processes. Without this, we would have to assume that these practices and processes are aligned, which for Reckwitz's diffusion thesis would imply supporting a kind of flat ontology, similar to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. This perspective emphasises the structural isomorphism of social practices and societal processes, where the practices of a criminal court, a family business, or an NGO are not considered fundamentally different from those of individual social actors.

Conclusion

The Society of Singularities is an impressive book that revitalises sociological investigations of the Zeitgeist and offers fresh perspectives on the development of our contemporary societies. It is arguably one of the key contributions of the sociology of culture to understanding the evolution of societies from a historical standpoint. Furthermore, it represents the culmination of Reckwitz's ongoing reflection on the subject as a sociocultural collective product rooted in practice. The present contribution highlights one of the theoretical aspects mobilised by the thesis of singularity, starting with the distinction Reckwitz proposes between two forms of equality: an equality claiming universality, typical of the culture of the bourgeois subject, and an equality claiming particularity, typical of the society of singularities. The theses Reckwitz employs to justify this distinction, moving from his historical sociology of modernity to his sociology of social structure, have been described. The implications of these theses are discussed regarding the transition from one regime of equality to another and their significance for social inequality. The thesis of singularity opens up new avenues for understanding radical social inequalities and the necessity of normalising them within the society of singularities, enabling such a society to produce and reproduce itself. The theoretical framework of the singularity thesis has been examined to explore its boundaries, and potential directions for further research on Reckwitz's diffusion thesis and its implications within his sociology of social structure have been proposed. In our view, further work at both levels of the singularity thesis – the history of modernity and social structure analysis – could enhance precision on critical issues such as the relationship between practices of sociocultural actors and societal formal processes, the differentiation of social activities and their related fields, and the question of the representativeness of singularities in contemporary society. Addressing these three areas is essential for the singularity thesis to strengthen the connection between the historical sociology of modernity and the social structure analysis of contemporary societies supporting such a thesis.

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