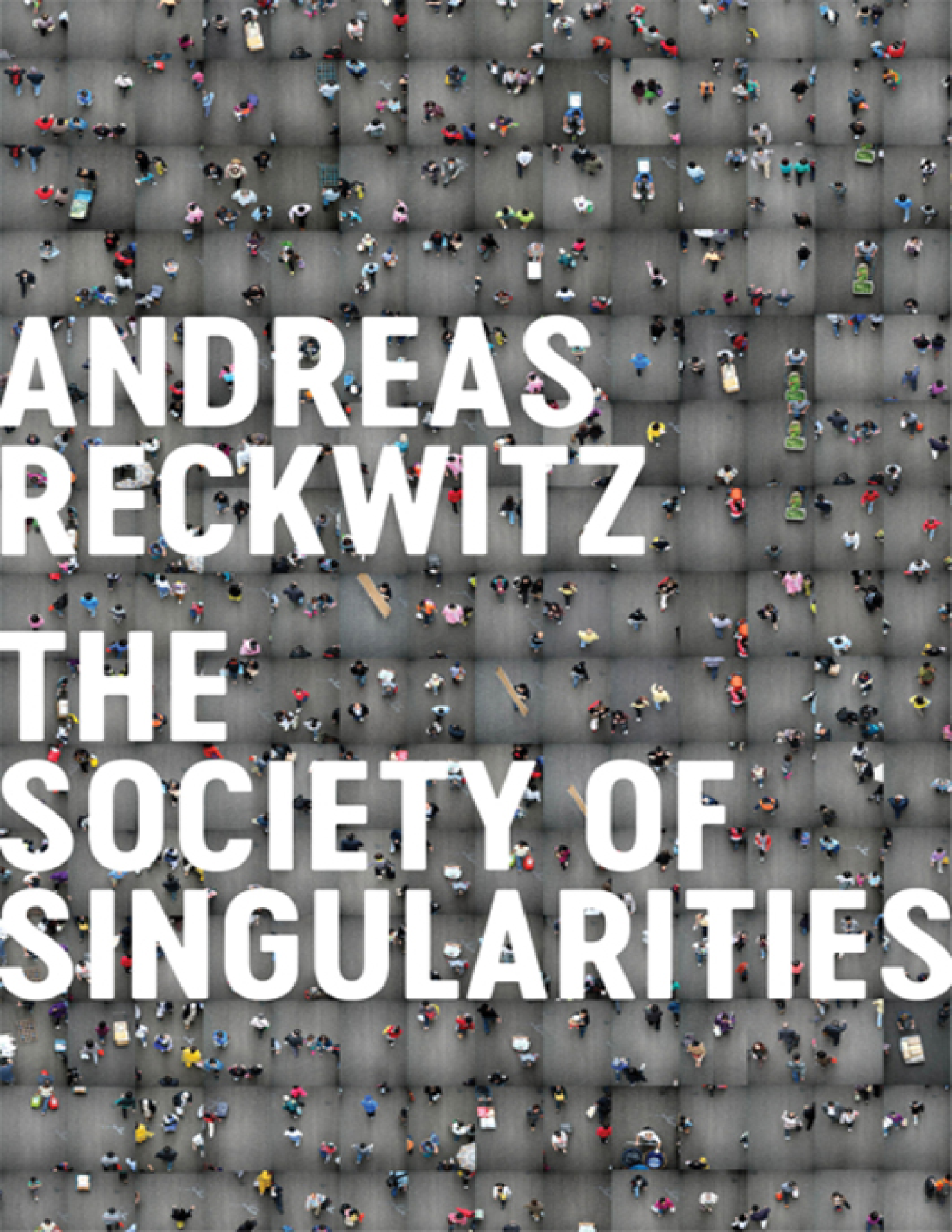
ANDREAS
RECKWITZ
THE
SOCIETY OF
SINGULARITIES

Contents

The Society of Singularities

Andreas Reckwitz
Translated by Valentine A. Pakis

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Introduction: The Proliferation of the Particular

Wherever we look in today's society, what has come to be expected is not the *general* but the *particular*. Rather than being directed toward anything standardized or regular, the hopes, interests, and efforts of institutions and individuals are pinned on the unique and singular.

Travelers, for instance, are no longer satisfied with the uniform vacation destinations associated with mass tourism. Instead, it is the uniqueness of a location, the authentic atmosphere of a particular city, an exceptional landscape, or a particular local culture that piques the interest of tourists. And this is only one example among many, for this development has encompassed late modernity's entire global economy. In the case of both services and material goods, the mass production of uniform products has been replaced by events and objects that are not the same or identical for everyone but are rather intended to be unique – that is, *singular*. People have thus become passionate about extraordinary occasions such as live concerts and music festivals, sporting events and art shows, but also about lifestyle sports and the imaginary worlds of computer games. The so-called ethical consumer has developed discerning tastes for different types of bread and coffee in a way that had previously, at best, been typical of wine connoisseurs. Instead of buying a new sofa "off the rack" (so to speak), many people prefer to search for a vintage piece, and a brand such as Apple offers not only the latest technology but a whole environment that is attractive and unique, and that the user would be unwilling to trade for any other. Finally, various forms of

psychological treatment offer tailored therapeutic or spiritual services.

More and more, the late-modern economy has become oriented toward singular things, services, and events, and the goods that it produces are no longer simply functional. Instead, they also – or even exclusively – have cultural connotations and appeal to the emotions. We no longer live in the age of industrial capitalism but in that of *cultural capitalism*.[1] This has profound consequences for the professional world as well. Whereas industrial society focused on clearly defined formal qualifications and performance requirements, in today's knowledge and culture economy the working subject has to develop a "profile" that is out of the ordinary. Now those who achieve, or promise to achieve, something extraordinary – something far above average – are rewarded, while employees who perform routine tasks lose out.

Without a doubt, the economy sets the pace of society, but by now the shift from the general to the particular has taken place in many other areas as well – for instance, in education.[2] Unlike 20 years ago, it is no longer enough for schools successfully to teach the curriculum required by the state. Every school has and wants to be different, has and wants to cultivate its own educational profile and provide pupils (and their parents) with the opportunity to forge a unique educational path. And parents, at least those in the educated middle class, regard their individual children as people whose particular talents and characteristics should be fostered and encouraged.

Another area in which the rise of the singular has been observable for some time is architecture. With its repetitive structures, the International Style seems rather monotonous, and it has largely been neglected since the 1980s in favor of unique designs, so much so that it seems

necessary for today's museums, concert halls, flagship stores, and apartment buildings to be built in an original style (sometimes these styles are striking, sometimes merely odd). Hidden behind all of this lies a fundamental transformation of spatial structures. In globalized and urbanized late modernity, the interchangeable spaces of classical modernity are to be replaced with recognizable individual *places*, each with a unique atmosphere that can be associated with specific narratives and memories. In the name of so-called cultural regeneration, cities large and small have thus made concerted efforts to develop their own local logic, one that promises a particular quality of life and has its own unique selling points. And the new middle class has flocked to these teeming cities, while other, less attractive, regions (be they in the United States or France, Great Britain or Germany) are in danger of becoming deserted altogether.

It is no surprise, then, that the late-modern subjects who move in these environments seek satisfaction in the particular. The type of subject that predominated in the West up to the 1970s – that is, the average employee with an average family in the suburbs, whom David Riesman described as being "socially adjusted"[3] – has become, in Western societies, an apparently conformist negative foil to be avoided by the late-modern subject. In this regard, Ulrich Beck and others have written a great deal about individualization – meaning that subjects have been liberated from general social expectations and freed to practice self-responsibility.[4] Singularization, however, means more than independence and self-optimization. At its heart is a more complex pursuit of uniqueness and exceptionality, which has not only become a subjective desire but also a paradoxical social *expectation*. This is especially pronounced in the new, highly qualified middle class – that is, in the social product of educational

expansion and post-industrialization that has become the main trendsetter of late modernity. Here, everything in one's lifestyle is measured according to the standard of "specialness": how one lives, what one eats, where and how one travels, and even one's own body and circle of friends. In the mode of singularization, life is not simply lived; it is *curated*. From one situation to the next, the late-modern subject *performs* his or her particular self to others, who become an audience, and this self will not be found attractive unless it seems authentic. With their profiles, the omnipresent social media are one of the central arenas for crafting this particularity. Here, the subject operates within a comprehensive social market governed by attractiveness, in which there is an ongoing struggle for visibility that can only be won by those who seem exceptional. Late modernity has turned out to be a *culture of the authentic* that is simultaneously a *culture of the attractive*.

Finally, the displacement of industrial society's logic of the general by late modernity's logic of the particular has had extraordinarily profound effects on the social, collective, and political forms of the early twenty-first century. It is not only individuals and objects that have been singularized: collectives have been singularized as well! Of course, formal organizations, political parties, and the bureaucratic state exist further in the background, yet even they are on the defensive against particular and temporary forms of the social that promise higher degrees of identification. The latter undermine universal rules and standard procedures by cultivating worlds of their own, each with its own identity. This is true of collaborations and projects in the professional and political world that, as affective entities with particular participants and fixed deadlines, are each unique. And it is also true of the scenes, political subcultures, leisure clubs, and consumer groups in the real and virtual worlds that, as aesthetic or hermeneutic

voluntary communities with highly specific interests and world views, distance themselves quite far from popular culture and mainstream politics.

The singularization of the social also applies to the ubiquitous political and sub-political *neo-communities* in which a given historical, geographical, or ethical peculiarity is taken as the basis of a commonly imagined culture. This is a broad field that includes the identity politics of ethnic communities and diasporas that have formed over the course of global migration flows. In many places, too, new religious and fundamentalist communities (mostly Christian or Muslim) have begun to spread that lay claim to a sort of religious exceptionalism. Within this context, the right-wing political populism that has arisen since the turn of the millennium has invoked the cultural authenticity of one's own people and their national culture. At the same time, but in a different way, "cultural diversity" became a guiding principle of liberal social and cultural politics around the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Like the shapes and colors in a kaleidoscope, the phenomena of present-day society discussed above, which at first seem to be highly heterogeneous, form a pattern, and it is this pattern that I intend to outline in the present book. My main thesis is as follows: in late modernity, a structural transformation has taken place in society, a transformation in which the dominance of the social logic of the general has been usurped by the dominance of a *social logic of the particular*. In what follows, this exceptionality or uniqueness – in other words, that which seems to be nonexchangeable and incomparable – will be circumscribed with the concept of singularity.[5] My theory of late modernity, and of modernity in general, thus hinges on the distinction between the general and the particular. This distinction is not uncomplicated, but it opens up a perspective that helps us to unlock the present. Originally a

philosophical matter, the difference between the general and the particular was subjected to a systematic analysis by Kant.[6] Here, however, I would like to free it from the corset of epistemology and discuss it in sociological terms. In the human world, of course, the general and the particular always coexist; it is a matter of perspective. According to Kant, “concepts” are always general, whereas “intuition” (*Anschauung*) is directed toward the particular. Thus, it is possible to interpret every element of the world either as a specific individual entity or as an example of a general type. As far as sociology is concerned, this is trivial. The sociologically interesting question is entirely different: there are social complexes and entire forms of society that systematically promote and prefer the creation of the general while inhibiting and devaluing the particular. And, conversely, there are other social complexes and societies that encourage, value, and actively engage in the practice of singularization at the expense of the general. *The* general and *the* particular do not simply exist. They are both social fabrications.

Late-modern society – that is, the form of modernity that has been developing since the 1970s or 1980s – is a *society of singularities* to the extent that its predominant logic is the social logic of the particular. It is also – and this cannot be stressed enough – the first society in which this is true in a comprehensive sense. In fact, the social logic of the particular governs *all* dimensions of the social: things and objects as well as subjects, collectives, spaces, and temporalities. “Singularity” and “singularization” are cross-sectional concepts, and they designate a cross-sectional phenomenon that pervades all of society. Although the thought may seem unusual at first, it must be emphasized that singularization has affected *more* than just human subjects, and it is for this reason that the concept of individuality, which has traditionally been reserved for

human beings, is no longer applicable. Singularization also encompasses the fabrication and appropriation of things and objects as particular. It applies to the formation and perception of spaces, temporalities, and – not least – collectives.

To be sure, the structure of the society of singularities is unusual and surprising, and it appears as though we are lacking suitable concepts and perspectives for understanding its complexity. How can a society organize itself in such a way as to be oriented toward the seemingly fleeting and antisocial factor of the particular? Which structures have given shape to the society of singularities, and which forms have been adopted by its economy and technology, its social structure and lifestyles, its working world, cities, and politics? And how can and should a sociological investigation proceed that wishes to subject the social logic of singularization to a detailed analysis? From the outset, it is important for such an investigation to avoid two false approaches: mystification and exposure.

Those who maintain a *mystifying* attitude toward singularities – which is widespread in the social world of art viewers, religious worshippers, admirers of charismatic leaders, lovers, music fans, brand fetishizers, and unwavering patriots – presume that the things that are valuable and fascinating to them are, in their very essence and independent of their observer, *genuinely* authentic and unique phenomena. In response to this tendency to mystify the authentic, the function of sociological analysis is to clarify matters. It should not be supposed that singularities are pre-social givens; rather, it is necessary to reconstruct the processes and structures of the social logic of singularities. “Social logic” means that singularities are not, without any ado whatsoever, objectively or subjectively present but are rather *socially fabricated* through and through. As we will see, that which is regarded and

experienced as unique arises exclusively from social practices of perception, evaluation, production, and appropriation in which people, goods, communities, images, books, cities, events, and other such things are *singularized*. That it is possible to analyze *general* practices and structures, which themselves revolve around the production of *singularities*, is not a logical contradiction but rather a genuine paradox. That is precisely the objective of this book: to figure out the patterns, types, and constellations that have emerged from the social fabrication of particularities. Singularities are therefore anything but antisocial or pre-social; in this context, any metaphor suggesting that they are in some way isolated or separated from society would be entirely out of place. On the contrary, singularities are the very things around which *the social* revolves in late modernity.

To dissect the social logic of particularities without mystifying uniqueness is not, however, the same thing as denying the reality of singularities and revealing them to be mere appearances or ideological constructs. Such efforts at *exposure* can often be found masquerading as cultural critique. The critic will gleefully set out to demonstrate that the apparent particularities of others are in fact just further examples of general types, examples of popular tastes or of the eternal cycle of circulating of goods: Apple products, the films by the Coen brothers, and gifted children are not *really* extraordinary, and behind all purported originality there in fact lurks nothing more than conformist, average types. My analysis of the social logic of singularities will go out of its way to avoid such reductionism. As I mentioned above, it is not surprising that, as Kant proposed, everything particular can be interpreted from a different perspective as an example of something general. What appears to be particular can *always* be typecast. However, the fact that singularities are

socially fabricated does not mean that their social reality should be denied. In this case, it might be best to recall the famous “Thomas theorem”: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”[7] In our context, this means the following: in that the social world is increasingly oriented toward people, objects, images, groups, places, and events that are felt and understood to be singular – and is in part aimed at creating them as such – the social logic of singularities unfurls for its participants a reality with significant, and even dire, consequences.

The critique that denies individual singularities the value of the particular can itself be interpreted – and must be interpreted – in sociological terms. It is a characteristic *component* of the evaluative discourses of the society of singularities. These discourses derive their dynamics and unpredictability from the fact that the special value of goods, images, people, works of art, religious beliefs, cities, or events is often disputed and caught up in debates about what society considers valuable or not.[8] In general, the social assessments of something as particular or as an example of the general are extremely volatile and have preoccupied late modernity to an enormous extent. Indeed, one could say that late-modern society has become a veritable *society of valorization*. That which is regarded as exceptional today can be devalued as early as tomorrow and reclassified as something conformist and typical. And whereas, despite all efforts, so many people and things never achieve the status of the extraordinary, others are catapulted into the sphere of singularity by one evaluation process or another. In such a way, a valuable piece of vintage furniture can be dragged out of a garbage heap, and a social misfit can become an accepted nerd. This is to say that, in the society of singularities, processes of singularization and *de-singularization* go hand in hand.

Both processes, however, confirm what is valuable: not the general but the particular.

It must be clearly stated: the social logic of singularity, whose proliferation has been observable since the 1970s or 1980s, fully contradicts that which had constituted the core of modern society for more than 200 years. The society of classical modernity, which crystallized in eighteenth-century Western Europe and reached its zenith as *industrial modernity* in the United States and Soviet Union during the middle of the twentieth century, was organized in a fundamentally different way. What prevailed then was a *social logic of the general*, and this prevalence was so radical and drastic as to have been unprecedented in world history. As Max Weber aptly observed, the classical modernity of industrial society was fundamentally a process of profound formal rationalization.[9] And, as I would like to add, every manifestation of this formal rationalization – whether in science and technology, economic–industrial production, the state, or the law – promoted and supported the dominance of the general. The focus everywhere was on standardization and formalization, on making sure that the elements produced in the world were equal, homogeneous, and also equally justified: on the assembly lines in industrial factories and in the rows of buildings in the International Style, in the social and constitutional state, in the military, in the "schooling" of children, in ideologies, and in technology.

As long as one remains attached to this old image of modernity, which is shaped by industrial society, it is easy to dismiss the emergence of singularities and singularizations as a mere marginal or superficial phenomenon. The logic of singularities, however, is not in the periphery but is in fact operating at the center of late-modern society. What are the causes of this profound transformation? My first answer to this question, which I

will elaborate over the course of this book, is as follows: during the 1970s and 1980s, the two most powerful social engines that had been propelling the standardization of industrial modernity were converted into engines of social singularization: the economy and technology. In late modernity, the economy and technology have become, for the first time in history, large-scale *generators of singularization*. They have become paradoxical agents of large-scale particularity, and we are the first to experience and understand the whole scope of this process and its social, psychological, and political consequences.

Between industrial modernity and late modernity there thus occurred a twofold *structural breach*. The first originated in the structural shift from the old industrial economy to *cultural capitalism* and the *economy of singularities*, with the creative economy as its main branch. The capitalism of the knowledge and culture economy is that of a post-industrial economy. Its goods are essentially cultural goods, and they are "singularity goods" – that is, things, services, events, or media formats whose success with consumers depends on them being recognized as unique. With this transformation of goods, the structure of markets and employment has fundamentally changed as well. Following the example of classic works such as Karl Marx's *Capital* and Georg Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*, social theory has to engage with the most advanced form of the economy if it wants to understand the most advanced form of modernity. The second structural breach is being brought about by the digital revolution, which marks a technological shift away from standardization toward singularization – from the data tracking of profiles and the personalization of digital networks to the use of 3D printers. Like nothing before it, the dominant technology of the digital revolution has the character of a "culture

machine” in which primarily cultural elements – images, narratives, and games – are both produced and received.

If one considers just the economy and technology – that is, cultural capitalism and the culture machine – it becomes clear that the society of singularities has afforded a central position to something that the former industrial society had tended to marginalize: *culture*. For the way that late modernity is structured, culture plays an unusual role. Through its massive preference for rational processes and formal norms – and much to the chagrin of cultural critics – industrial modernity went out of its way to devalue cultural practices and objects. Today, on the contrary, unique objects, places, times, subjects, and collectives are no longer simply perceived as means to an end; in that they are assigned a value of their own – be it aesthetic or ethical – they are now strongly regarded as culture itself. Later, I will go into greater detail about what constitutes culture and how it circulates, but for now it is possible to state that culture always exists wherever *value* has been assigned to something – that is, wherever processes of *valorization* are taking place. It is important to understand that practices of valorization and practices of singularization go hand in hand. When people, things, places, or collectives appear to be unique, they are attributed value and seem to be socially valuable. Significantly, however, the inverse is also true: if they appear to lack any unique qualities, they are *worthless*. In short, the society of singularities is engaged in *culturalizing the social*, and profoundly so. It is busy playing a grand social game of valorization and singularization (on the one hand) and devaluation and de-singularization (on the other), and it invests objects and practices with a value beyond their functionality. In late modernity, moreover, the sphere of culture has adopted a specific form: no longer a clearly delineated subsystem, it has rather transformed into a global *hyperculture* in which

potentially everything – from Zen meditation to industrial footstools, from Montessori schools to YouTube videos – can be regarded as culture and can become elements of the highly mobile markets of valorization, which entice the participation of subjects with the promise of self-actualization.

We have thus come to another central feature of the society of singularities: the extreme relevance of affects. With its logic of the general and its drive toward rationalization, industrial modernity systematically reduced the role of affect in society. When people, things, events, places, or collectives are singularized and culturalized, however, they then operate by *attracting* (or repulsing) others. Indeed, it is only by affecting others that they can be regarded as singular at all. Late-modern society is a society of affect in a way that classical modernity never could have been. To a great extent, its components operate in an affective manner, and its subjects long to be affected and to affect others in order to be considered attractive and authentic themselves. In short, whereas the logic of the general is associated with processes of social rationalization and reification, the logic of the singular is related to processes of social culturalization and the intensification of affect.

Thus far, I have focused on the fact that late modernity has undergone a historically unprecedented structural transformation that revolves around singularization and culturalization. Yet are these processes really entirely novel? And, inversely, has the old logic of the general been completely supplanted by the new logic of the singular? The answer to both of these questions has to be no, and this fact complicates the larger picture considerably. First, it is necessary to revise our image of *modernity* altogether. If we understand late modernity – our present time – as that version of modernity which has replaced industrial society, then we are obliged to discuss the notion of

modernity in general. However, the sociological discourse about modernity has frequently been one-dimensional in that it often conflates modernization with the processes of formal rationalization and reification. In my view, however, modernity should not be understood as a one-dimensional process in this sense, for, from its very beginning, it has been composed of two divergently organized dimensions: the rationalistic dimension of standardization, and the cultural dimension that involves the attribution of value, the intensification of affect, and singularization. The encyclopedic thinkers of the nineteenth century – Friedrich Nietzsche and Georg Simmel, for example, but also Max Weber – had a sense for this dual structure.[10]

The main impulse behind this second dimension – the dimension of non-rationalistic modernity – can be traced all the way back to the artistic movement of Romanticism around the year 1800, which may seem to have been marginal at first glance. It was the Romantics who first "discovered" and sought to promote singularities on all levels: the originality of works of art and hand-crafted objects; the diversity and poetry of nature; the particular features of picturesque locations; the beauty of a single moment; unique people, cultural circles, and nations; and, of course, the emphatic individuality and self-development of the subject. These themes did not die out during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; rather, they pervaded all of modernity – for instance, in the field of art, in religion, and also in certain versions of the political. The Romantic tradition, which gives primacy to the singular, exerted a decisive influence over any number of aesthetic and cultural-revolutionary movements opposed to rationalistic modernity, the most recent large-scale example of which was the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. It was this tradition, too, that also instigated the new middle class's post-materialistic shift in values, which revolved

around the idea of self-actualization and thus became a crucial precondition for late modernity's culture of particularity. In fact, I think it is possible to explain the rise of widespread singularization and culturalization as a convergence of three mutually enhancing structural moments: the emergence of cultural capitalism, the triumph of digital media technologies, and the new middle class's post-Romantic, revolutionary yearning for authenticity. All three of these developments will be examined in the present book.

Upon closer inspection, then, it becomes clear that modernity has been influenced from the beginning by standardization *and* singularization, rationalization *and* culturalization, reification *and* the intensification of affect. Without a doubt, modernity is modern in that it radicalizes and pushes rationalization to the extreme. Yet it is also and no less modern for having developed singularities in an extreme fashion. If, however, modernity is two-faced in this way and an age of extremes,[11] what is the precise novelty of late modernity? To what extent is it really a genuinely different and new form of modernity? As I hope to show over the course of this book, these questions can be answered by taking a close look at how the *relation* between the social logic of the general and the social logic of the particular has changed over the last 40 years. Of course, this process has *not* caused formal rationalization to vanish entirely. Instead, it has changed its *status*. This much can be said in advance: whereas, in industrial modernity, these two logics formed an asymmetrical dualism, in late modernity they have transformed into a foreground structure and a background structure.

Strangely enough, the mechanisms of formal rationality have been restructured in such a way that they are now "in the background" and function as general *infrastructures* for the systematic production of particularities.[12] Now,

essentially instrumentally rational technologies are systematically able to produce unique objects. A prominent example of this is genetic research, which promotes a medical perspective that no longer classifies human beings according to types of illness or standard values but rather identifies them as being irreducibly particular.[13] A second prominent example is the act of data tracking by search engines and internet companies, which use anonymous algorithms to register the unique movements of users in order to determine their specific consumer preferences or political opinions and thus to "personalize" the internet for them. Instrumentally rational infrastructures for creating uniqueness can also be found in complex valorization technologies that, by means of ratings and rankings, make it possible to compare the particular features of restaurants, universities, coaches, or potential spouses. In short, late modernity also has its share of standardization techniques, but they are often part of complex background structures that help to keep the processes of singularization running smoothly.

In order to understand the society of singularities, it is necessary to examine its forms, consequences, and contradictions in various areas. Its basic structure can be seen in the Western societies of Europe and North America. It is in these traditional regions of bygone industrial modernity that the transition to post-industrial society has most clearly taken place. This book is thus about more than just Germany or the national "container" of German society. Rather, I have had to adopt an international perspective from the beginning. National differences notwithstanding, the economic, social, and political patterns of the society of singularities can be found in the United States as well as in France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Scandinavia, or Australia. Besides, it would be shortsighted to reduce this configuration to the West alone. The process of

globalization has made the clear geographical boundaries between the global North and the global South porous, so that the formats of cultural capitalism, digitalization, cultural and knowledge-based labor, singularistic lifestyles, creative cities, liberal politics, and cultural essentialism now circulate throughout the entire globe and can thus be seen in certain areas of Latin America, Asia, or Africa as well.[14] In many places, the societies of the former global South have thus also begun to orient themselves toward the society of singularities. In all likelihood, they will determine our global future.

How does the late-modern present and future look? Will it be easy or difficult? For now, present-day society seems profoundly contradictory. On the one hand, there is a "brave new world" of design objects and international vacations with home exchanges, YouTube hits, the creative California lifestyle, events, projects, and aestheticized city districts from Shanghai to Copenhagen; on the other hand, there are also higher levels of stress, the social marginalization of a new underclass, and various sorts of nationalism, fundamentalism, and populism. In recent years, public commentary on late modernity has thus been extremely volatile, even nervous at times. Euphoric hopes for a knowledge society lacking the toil of industrialization, for an experiential society of multiple aesthetic pleasures, and not least for a digital society that profits from the opportunities of computer networks can be heard alongside pessimistic prognostications that foresee a dramatic rise in social inequality, excessive psychological stress, and global culture wars.

This book will take a step back from these frequently alarmist commentaries in order to make the more comprehensive panorama of modernity recognizable and, within this framework, to take a closer look at the specific structures of late modernity. And this is precisely what

should be expected of sociology: that it should not fall prey to the ever-shifting trends of media debates, with their tug-of-war sort of emotional communication, but rather that it should analyze the *longue durée* of social development in terms of its structures and processes, which can be measured in decades (or even in centuries). With this perspective on (late) modernity in mind, it will be difficult to dismiss the idea that the opportunities and promises of today's society have the *same* structural cause as its problems and dilemmas: they are both based on industrial society's logic of the general losing its primacy to late-modern society's logic of the particular.

Without a doubt, the society of singularities has led to considerable increases in autonomy and satisfaction, particularly within the new, highly qualified, and mobile middle class. It has a fundamentally libertarian streak, which tends to tear down social barriers to opportunity, and it enables the self-development of individuals to an extent unimaginable during classical modernity. At the same time, however, it has also become clear that the problems burdening late modernity stem from the erosion of classical modernity's logic of the general and the rise of the structures of the society of singularities, and that it is only within the latter's framework that they can be understood at all. Thus, first, the high value that late-modern culture places on uniqueness and self-development represents a systematic generator of disappointment that does much to explain today's high levels of psychological disorder. Second, the post-industrial economy of singularities is responsible for the blatant divide between the forms of work that characterize the highly qualified knowledge and culture economies, on the one hand, and the deindustrialized service economy on the other, which has given rise to new social and cultural polarization, class inequality, and grossly divergent lifestyles. Third, and at

the same time, it is the culturalization and singularization of collectives, with their current preference for particular identities, that has prompted the rise of late-modern nationalism, fundamentalism, and populism, with their aggressive antagonism between the valuable and valueless.

No simple assessments or short-term solutions should be expected from any sociological analysis of the society of singularities, and this is because the causes of the opportunities and the causes of the problems in today's society cannot be neatly separated. On the contrary, they are identical. In themselves, processes of singularization are neither good nor bad. It is therefore no more appropriate to join a romantic celebration of singularities or the uncritical choir of hopeful optimists than it is to reserve a luxury suite at the "Grand Hotel Abyss" – that is, to offer a sweeping cultural-critical condemnation of late modernity as a refuge for irrational and calamitous affect against the general. This does not mean, however, that sociology should make itself too comfortable on the high seat of the distanced observer. In my understanding, it should rather be engaged in a *critical analysis* of the present and its genesis. For me, however, critical analysis does not mean normative theory. Rather, it entails developing a sensibility for the configurations of the social and its historicity in order to recognize how it engenders structures of domination and hegemony whose participants might only be hazily aware of them. In such a way, it is possible to identify significant fields of tension, unintended consequences, and new mechanisms of exclusion.[15] Without imposing any conclusions itself, this book aims to consider the personal and political implications that can be drawn from the social constellation at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Part I provides fundamental theoretical explanations of the social logic of singularities, how it differs from the social