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The Society of Singularities

Regardless of where we look in contemporary society, what is socially and culturally expected on both the local and global levels is not the *general* but the *particular*. What is increasingly being advanced and demanded and what has become the focus of people's hopes and longings is not the standardized and regulated but the unique, the singular.

Travel destinations, for example, can no longer simply be uniform vacation locations suited for mass tourism. It is the uniqueness of a place – a special city with an authentic vibe, an exceptional landscape, an unusual local culture – that attracts tourists' attention. A similar development has taken hold of the entire late modern global economy. True for material goods and services alike is the fact that the mass production of uniform products so characteristic of the old industrial economy has been replaced in the cultural capitalism of the present by events and objects that are not similar or identical but that strive to be singular. The passions of subjects are focused on extraordinary live concerts and music festivals, on sporting and artistic events, as well as on lifestyle sports and the imaginary worlds of computer games (see generally Rifkin 2000; Howkins 2001).

And yet the displacement of the general by the particular goes far beyond this, extending, for example, into the field of education. It is no longer sufficient, as it was 20 years ago, for schools to teach the material mandated by the state. Every school wants and is compelled to be different, to cultivate its own profile, to enable students to shape their own education, to have its own *spirit*. Or take the field of architecture, where the International Style, with its now purportedly dull *serial* buildings, has been cast aside in favor of the predictable surprises of star architects and their singular museum constructions, concert houses, residential buildings, and flagship stores (see McNeill 2009). The singular has quite clearly extended its reign over the subjects who move about in these different settings as well. In late modernity the subject is not just responsible for themselves, as is typically suggested by the term 'individualization,' but strives above all to be unique. Digital social media – perhaps paradigmatically the Facebook profile with its carefully curated and updated postings from one's personal life, with photos and likes and links not to be found anywhere else – offer a central location for the presentation and formation of this singular self and its performance of authenticity (see Miller 2011).

Note: This article is touching on a topic that I explore in greater detail in Reckwitz 2017a.

But this displacement of forms of generality by those of particularity also extends to the social, collective, and political realms. Formal organizations, major political parties, ultimately even the modern form of the bureaucratic state are on the defensive, having lost some of their appeal. On the rise are those particularistic and temporary forms of sociality that are not universally identical but claim instead to be unique. This is true of a wide range of forms of sociality, including professional and political projects, each of which is singular as an emotional entity with selected participants and an expiration date. It is true of scenes, events, short-lived aesthetic networks, and gatherings. And it is, finally, true in a different sense of neo-collectives – the new religious, national, or regional *imagined communities* that promise to endow members with identity in a way that bureaucracies or institutional churches do not seem capable of (see Castells 1997).

I have begun with a kaleidoscope of empirical phenomena that all point in the same direction. In late modernity, societies are being reconfigured based not on a social logic of generality but on a social logic of particularity – a particularity that I will attempt to define by means of the term singularity. This phenomenon involves a very crucial transformation of what defines *modernity* and *modern society*. I would like to sketch out this fundamental argument and then explore it in greater detail. I consider it of central importance that as a result of this logic of singularities, the structural principles of classic modernity, a modernity of industrially organized societies, are being eclipsed by new structural principles. The basic precepts of classic modernity were generalization and standardization, which were associated with the process of formal rationalization (see Wagner 1994). The antithesis to modernist rationalization is culturalization, and the phenomena of *singularization* and *culturalization* are inextricably connected to one another. In the first part I will therefore examine the oppositional differences between a social logic of generality and a social logic of particularity.

In the second part I will look more closely at two institutional mainstays at the center of late modern society. One is the transformation of the capitalistic economy from industrial mass production to cultural production, that is, to an *economy of singularities* (Karpik 2010), with the associated restructuring of markets, labor, professions, and forms of consumption. The second is the digital revolution of media technologies, which in turn also fosters singularities in subjects, images, texts, and other cultural elements. This is a decisive insight that I would like to emphasize: while in classic modernity the economy and technology were the most important motors of the standardization of the world, that is, of a social logic of generality, the most advanced forms of this same modern economy and this same technology have become powerful generators of singularities and culturalization.

1 The Social Logic of Singularization

To justify my diagnosis, I must first clarify how a modernity of rationalization and generalization and a modernity of singularities and culturalization are distinct from one another. To do this I will first describe the structural principles that gave rise to modern industrial society. Though quite easy to oversee, the fundamental trait of classic modernity is that it systematically strives to achieve the total generalization, schematization, standardization, and universalization of all elements. At the core of classic modernity is what I would call a social logic of generality. This standardization and universalization of social structures and processes, of subjects and objects, is closely related to the fundamental process of modernity that Max Weber (1968) referred to as *formal rationalization*.

The formal rationalization of classic modernity attempts to systematically foster a social logic of generality. The social logic of generality means that all potential elements of the world are observed, evaluated, produced, and adapted as copies or instances of generally valid patterns. The social logic of generality follows in part the principles of theoretical generalization (as required by the modern sciences) and in part those of normative universalization (as required by modern law with its precepts of equality). Yet, above all, formal rationalization is an expedient to achieve a comprehensive optimization of all societal conditions and an institutionalization of rules, which are intended to generate predictability, efficiency, and innovation. The reign of the general is to be found on all levels: objects are produced and used in a standardized and uniform manner. Disciplined subjects find orientation in functional roles and performance standards that apply to everyone. Space is utilized in invariable constructive series so that industrial cities appear interchangeable. Time also becomes an object of rationalization in the sense that it is systematically controlled and the future is, so to speak, colonized. Rationalized orders are objectified orders in which emotions are controlled and emotional intensity is minimized.

Of course, the modernity of formal rationalization and the reign of generality and uniformity are not dead. Many of these structural principles have been retained in late modernity, that is, in the period after 1980. Yet the countertendency that I mentioned at the outset is also to be observed: the spread of a social logic of singularities that is connected to a process of culturalization. To clarify this, I would like to more precisely define the term 'singularity,'[1] which up until now I have been using in a somewhat ad hoc manner based on different examples.

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[1] Two major sources of inspiration for this concept are Kopytoff 1986 and Karpik 2010.

1. An entity is singular in a sociocultural context when it is not produced, experienced, and evaluated as a uniform copy of a general type but as something particular. As such it appears to be unique, incomparable, and non-interchangeable. Singularity makes reference to a certain *quality* and cannot be reduced to quantitative properties,[2] which places it outside the schemata of generality. For in the realm of generality, entities can also differ from one another to some extent, but these differences can be described by such terms as better/ worse, more/less, that is, they can be compared. Singularities, on the other hand, do not just vary to a greater or lesser extent, they have a completely different quality, they are distinct – and for this reason do not seem interchangeable. A Bach cantata seems fundamentally different from a Janis Joplin song. A trip to Venice is completely different from one to Nepal. And for the creative agency, employee X with his special profile and talents isn't just slightly different – the way applicants with different exam notes might be – but offers a critical qualitative advantage for the company. Of course, as Kant (2000) pointed out, there is always and inevitably the general and the particular, whereby – at least according to Kant – the general emerges from concepts (*Begriffe*) and the particular from intuition (*Anschauung*). But what is sociologically interesting is the fact that dependent on the form of society, a complete social logics of singularity can emerge, in which singularities are observed, evaluated, fabricated, and adapted in a certain way.

2. It is of central importance that singularities emerge in the form of very different entities and elements relevant to the social world. For this reason, singularity differs from the concept of individuality, though the two are, of course, related. As a rule, individuals are human subjects, yet to attribute singularities to humans alone would be to greatly underestimate their importance. Singularities can be observed on one initial level that I would like to put special emphasis on: in the realm of things and objects. This is true of fabricated things, which in modernity often assume the form of products and goods, but also of images and texts, of works of art or religious relics, and of three-dimensional things like architecture (as well as natural entities). Singularities can, however, also be identified on the level of spatial and of temporal entities. Spatial singularities are in the field of spatial analysis generally known as *places* (in opposition to spaces) – non-interchangeable, non-comparable locations. Temporal singularities are moments or episodes: a single instant perceived as such or a unique, discontinuous episode with a distinct beginning and end. Humans can of course also appear as singularities and be introduced to the world as such, here we are

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2 See in this regard also Callon et al. 2002.

in the realm for which classically the term individuality was reserved. Finally, on a fifth and particularly interesting level certain kinds of collectives can also become singularities. Traditionally this is the case for what Ferdinand Tönnies called communities, but it also holds true for nations, and in late modernity it applies to such new socialities as projects, collaborations, and scenes.

3. In a social context singularities are ascribed a cultural value. In this sense they differ from the social logic of generality: while in the framework of the latter the individual element is attributed a derivative use or function in the framework of the rational order, singularities seem to have a value in their own right. This is true of works of art or relics, as well as of locations, moments, events, communities, scenes, and individualities. Singularities are to a certain extent not so much a means to an end but an end in itself. They are cultural in the active or robust sense of the term. This cultural autotelism of singularities can have an aesthetic dimension, but it can also have a hermeneutic, symbolic or narrative dimension, or a creative or ludic one. Yet, all in all, singularity always involves a certain performance, it is enacted in front of an audience. The intrinsic value of singularities is, however, not simply present: it depends on social processes of value attribution, on *valorization*.[3] Such valorizations can be consensual and hegemonic, but they can also be – at least in the modern period – extremely controversial, dynamic, dependent on discourses about valorization. Thus, there is a process of singularization taking place within the processes of valorization.

4. Singularities are generally associated with strong affects. It is not the general but the particular that leaves no one cold. While affective reactions to the universalities of modernity – rules and roles, mass-produced goods and statistics, serial buildings and serial cities – are minimal, affects related to singularities are all the more pronounced. These can include fascination, arousal, enthusiasm, and quiet satisfaction – or, on the other hand, such negative affects as aggression and hate. Closely connected to the emotional power of singularity is the fact that an intrinsic value is not just assigned but also experienced (or not experienced, as the case may be) in the participants' practical processes.

5. Singularities are in this sense to be distinguished from idiosyncrasies. Idiosyncrasies are unique traits that come about unintentionally and are often disregarded. They disappear or are viewed with indifference. Singularities, on the other hand, are socially and culturally fabricated. They are made, fabricated, intentionally shaped, or encouraged. In modernity this is true of works of art and design objects, for cities shaped by *cultural regeneration* and, of course, for

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3 See for an analysis of valorizations Muniesa 2012 and Thompson 1979.

subjects who *are* not just individual but who *work* more or less consciously on their own individuality, who produce performances and profiles. Singularities are to be understood here as processes of singularization. Whether referring to objects (artefacts), subjects, events, or collectives – all of them are singularized through practices of making (*Verfertigung*), practices of observing, practices of valorization, and practices of perceiving. To speak of singularities as a noun can only be a snapshot. Henceforth, singularities exist solely in the process of singularization – whose downside is the desingularization, the loss of the unique status.

One additional explanation is also necessary: What do I mean by *culturalization* and how is it related to these singularities? It may initially seem strange to speak of the process of culturalization as antithetical to the process of rationalization. What can culturalization even mean if culture is everywhere, that is, if every activity depends on broader contexts and systems of meaning? Here I would like to distinguish between a general, weaker use of the term culture, and a more robust, narrower understanding of the term culture. In a general sense, of course – and this is an insight achieved by the study of culture – the social is always culturally determined, is based on often implicit systems of classification. In this way rationalization processes always have cultural preconditions, for example measures of efficiency or equality. This is the cultural realm. Against this backdrop, I would like to apply a more narrow yet more robust understanding of culture that allows for sociotheoretical distinctions. In this robust sense cultural objects and cultural practices only refer to those select objects and practices to which not a use or function is ascribed but rather an intrinsic *value*. Raymond Williams (1958) has correctly stressed this aspect of value as a component of culture. The antithesis to culture is in this case rationality, especially *purposive rationality*. While in the logic of purposive rationality an action, object, text, or image is the means to a further end and thus has instrumental significance, a cultural practice or cultural object has an intrinsic value in its social context. This intrinsic value can be and often is aesthetic in nature, yet it can also be narrative, hermeneutic, creative, or ludic.

In principle, cultural practices and objects can be quite varied, extending far beyond those related to art or religious rituals: playing football or collectively watching a football match, political ceremonies, experiences in nature, designing and decorating an apartment, or even work, provided it is not wage labor as a means to an end but work with an inherent value – all these things are cultural practices and objects in the strong sense of the term. In contrast to rational and normative practices, cultural practices thus contain a distinct element of lived experience and a distinct element of affective identification. To echo Georges Bataille's (1991) somewhat hyperbolic anthropological position: In comparison

to purposive rationality with its dictate of efficiency and thrift, that is, in comparison to the world of necessity, the world of culture always contains an element of overexertion, of excess, of more than what is rationally needed.

We thus can see to what extent singularization and culturalization are related. Singularities are cultural in this robust sense of the word, laying claim to an intrinsic cultural value: the event and ritual, the specific location of a city or landscape, the singular object (be it work of art or of design), the individuality of the subject, the project, the scene, or the post-traditional community – these are not primarily purposive-rational institutions, rather to them an intrinsic value is *ascribed*. My principle argument is that following certain historical precedents that emerged from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, in late modernity the social logic of cultural singularities has spread both quantitatively and qualitatively. The social logic of singularities implies that at the center of society processes are taking place in which objects, subjects, collectives, locations, and temporal episodes are seen, evaluated, produced, and adapted as singularities, i.e. are singularized. All the examples that I cited at the beginning of the article are instances not just of the societal force of singularities but also of a process of culturalization.

2 Structures of the Late Modern Society of Singularities

Yet what form does a society that is oriented around cultural singularities assume? I will now list six traits that will be explained in greater detail in the second part of the article:

1. While historically cultural practices and objects and their singularities are often defined and shaped by the state, church, or a dominant social group, the widespread culturalization and singularization of late modernity is defined by an economy, a global cultural economy, that is also closely connected to a specific technological structure: the digital world. The structural framework is what I would call the global *cultural creative complex* (see Reckwitz 2017).
2. Cultural elements are valued highly in late modernity for their singularity because they are associated with the modern idea of authenticity.
3. The cultural creative complex seeks to continuously fabricate *new* singularities, which means that it is based on a regime of innovation, a regime of the culturally new, a regime of creativity.
4. In essence, cultural elements are negotiated in a social constellation made up of creators and an audience. Cultural elements are thus enacted and presented as performance.

5. Singular cultural elements are presented to an audience in a constellation of competition for attention in a hypercompetitive market of visibilities.
6. New forms of purposive rationality are emerging that are adapted to the interchange of cultural singularities. These forms are no longer based on a logic of generality but on one of particularity. The result is what I would call general infrastructures for particularities.

In fact, the spread of the logic of the culturally particular in late modernity can only be explained as part of the far reaching structural transformation of the economy from the mass production of industrial goods with utilitarian value to a post-Fordist fabrication of singularities, that is, of singular goods and services that contain the promise of something authentic and non-interchangeable. It has been possible to observe this incremental transformation since the 1970s. Yet the spread of the logic of the culturally particular also depends on a second phenomenon: the media technological revolution of computing, algorithms, and the World Wide Web, which, since the 1990s, has enabled not only the introduction of new cultural elements to the world (photos and stories, works of graphic art, films, games) in a historically unprecedented manner, but also the creation of a mobile realm of permanent competition for attention, in which singularities are to be made visible for potentially everyone and everything. The cultural creative complex encompasses the development of cities into *creative locations* by means of cultural regeneration as well as the global computer, internet, film, and music industries. It encompasses the development of such personalized services as individual care and counselling and the pervasion of everyday life by digital search engines like Google, by computer games and by social media like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. It now also encompasses virtually all consumer goods ranging from aesthetic design and so-called *moral consumption* to religious markets and the spiritual practices industry. Last but not least, it encompasses the vast touristization of global landscapes.

However, the emergence of the social complex of cultural singularities cannot be reduced to those economic and media technological structural conditions alone. Rather, the Western culture of authenticity is an ultimately discursive background for the triumph of such a social logic of singularities. Initially established within the social niches of artistic subcultures at the end of eighteenth-century Romanticism, it gradually spread throughout society (see Taylor 1989; Reckwitz 2006): Against the rationalism of mainstream modernity in the culture of authenticity, the idea and conviction emerged that the subject – if freed from all constraints – strives for authenticity, self-realization, and self-expression. To be authentic, however, means to be special, singular. In a second step, this search for authenticity is projected onto the whole world, which now is perceived in

the expectation of the singular: a singularization of nature, places, communities, objects (artefacts), beliefs, and other subjects. Furthermore and ab initio it is closely linked to an ideal of creativity, a permanent self-creation and creative shaping of the world as well as a culture of intense emotions. Against this post-romantic background, which acted as an irritant countermovement of an 'other modernity,' classical, organized modernity of formal rationalization and the reign of generality seemed to suffer from a chronic lack of affect, authenticity, creativity, and singularity.

Now, Ronald Inglehart (1977) already described a fundamental change in values in the 1970s – certainly influenced by the counter culture of the late 60s – which was critical of rationalism and appreciated post-materialistic values, such as self-realization, the singular, the authenticity of a way of life, and the creative. Its social dominance could only be established by the onset of cultural capitalism and digitalization since the 1980s. This economic and media technological modelling generated a novel and very specific form of singularity. Late modern economy and media technology is driven by the subjects' orientation towards singularity, but is pushing it in an altered direction. This new social logic of the singular, which is institutionalized widely by the cultural creative complex, contains the characteristics that I already mentioned briefly above and which can be summarized as a constellation of *competitive singularities*. One prerequisite is the creator-audience-constellation: The cultural creative complex actively and purposefully produces singularities for an audience. The creation and design of singularities is thereby linked to a creativity orientation: it's all about the singular, which acts with a demand for novelty (see Reckwitz 2017a). These fabricated cultural elements with a claim for particularity can be aesthetically interesting artefacts as well as stories growing around goods, offered by therapists or narrated by an institution about itself. It can involve whole atmospheres fabricated for an experience of driving and living, live performances of various kinds, political-ideological models of identification or a moral value of a certain diet; it may concern luxury pleasure, beauty or sentiments of security, education, or – not least – the participation in a game (*gamification*).

It must be stressed that rather than disappearing, forms of purposive rationality are undergoing a transformation within this late modernist dynamic. Of its own accord, purposive rationality has begun to adapt from a logic of generality to a logic of particularity, or better: they develop into general infrastructures for the production of singularities. Here, systems of purposive rationality are developing an interest in and capacity for – and this is historically new – the production, analyses, and comparative assessment of singularities. With the help of software and 3D printers, unique products can be manufactured. Human resource management of the singular talents and potential of employees in the cultural

economy and algorithmic data tracking of consumer profiles are focused not just on general patterns but on unique properties.

Decisive here is the fact that this creative cultural production of singularities is aimed at an audience made up of potential consumers. We have become so accustomed to the ubiquity of audience functions that it is easy to oversee how historically extraordinary they are. Yet the cultural elements produced in this context always exist as performance – a performativity for and in the presence of an audience. The cultural elements in the cultural economy, like those found on the Internet, are aimed at an audience. But in both the cultural economy and the Internet, there is now the constellation of a permanent competition between singularities for the attention of audiences (see Franck 1998). This is a constellation of competitive or even hyper competitive singularities, which are circulated on a market of visibilities. It is quite striking how the post-Fordist cultural economy and the Internet have institutionalized the same constellation of competitive singularities. Socioeconomic studies on *cultural markets*, that is, on markets for products of cultural singularity ranging from films to design objects, have shed light on this special phenomenon (see Caves 2000). In cultural singularity markets there is always a certain amount of overproduction of cultural goods, of which ultimately only a few will attract an audience's attention, though this attention is correspondingly massive. At the same time a great amount of cultural products will attract very little attention and have no appreciable success. This is precisely what is so peculiar about singularity markets: what appear to be minimal differences between products are perceived as absolute, qualitative, emotionally distinct differences between non-interchangeable items.

The culturalization of economic markets tendentially transforms them into *nobody knows*-markets as well as so-called *winner takes it all*-markets with strong asymmetries of visibility, attention, and success (see Frank and Cook 2010). Industrial economy pursued a standardized production, i.e. a standardized work process of standardized goods in a standard matrix organization of controlled markets for customers within a schematized *mass* consumption. The cultural economy on the other hand pursues a production of cultural singularities – goods or services – within a work process, which has itself a singularistic structure in ways of non-exchangeable projects on a market with consumers who work for a singular way of life by means of consumption.

A similar competition between the singularities regarding their visibility also structures the World Wide Web. Interpreting the process of digitalization only as another step to information and knowledge, society falls short. The discourse on knowledge and information society remains rooted in the logic of the industrial society, where texts and images could primarily be understood as cognitive and affect-neutral parts of information. However, the digital medialization means to a

lesser extent an accumulation of cognitive knowledge but takes shape as a portable cultural space of images, narrations, game situations – a cultural hypertext, which constantly accompanies every subject and wherein an overproduction of cultural singularities is taking place (see also Stalder 2016). These singularities are under an on-going battle for the scarce attention by subjects and this battle is usually not one between pieces of information, but rather between affective intensities of images, narrations, and games with their aesthetic or hermeneutic offers. Not least, it is the subjects that are affected by the competition of visibility between the singularities who present themselves on the web, be it on YouTube, in Blogs, on Facebook, on Twitter, or future social media. The social media appear in fact as late modern generators of singularization.

The social media make particularly apparent how late modern subjects no longer take shape aligned to an organized modernity, but rather as singular subjects with a strive for authenticity and what it entails: this singularization converges in one social format, which is typical for the society of singularities in general – the *profile*. Digital subjects present themselves primarily through such profiles. In their profiles they compete with each other for visibility. Within these profiles there is a practice of what I would call a *compository singularity*: because here the subject becomes singular, especially in the composition, the configuration, the combination of various elements: news of the life of the self, likes showing certain cultural preferences, links relating to ones' interests, the timeline of biographical events of the past and not least, of course, the photographs from ones' own life. Singularity thus is not owned, it is *curated*. The authenticity of the singular subject here always adopts the paradox form of *performative authenticity*: authenticity has to be presented in front of an audience and hope to be perceived.

The exact same mechanisms of profile development can be seen in the cultural economy. Here again the singular cultural good has to develop a profile to attract attention as sustainably as possible – a whole brand is working on such a profile. In the cultural economy every single employee has to create a singular profile – beyond the standardized job requirements of the industrial society – to be of interest to projects of the working world. Overall, the culturalization of late modernity that has institutionalized a structure of competitive singularities leads to both an intensification of emotions and a dehierarchization of the cultural. While the formal rationalization of organized modernity has cooled off and minimized emotions, in the culturalization of late modernity we see an intensification of emotions and affects related to singularities. This is true of both the goods and services of cultural capitalism and of the events, experiences, claims to authenticity, and moralistic sensitivities that it fosters. Likewise, this holds true for singular labor in the creative professions and to a great degree for the emotional

charging of images and narratives that circulate in the media, especially in digital form. It is true of the subjects whose performative authenticity emotionally correlates to their success or failure, and it is, of course, true of the cultural collectives that emerge within this same framework. Yet, at the same time, as a result of this focus on singularity, culture has been dehierarchized. Cultural hierarchies, such as the familiar stratification of high culture and popular culture, are being eroded. Every singularity can claim to have a legitimate value: football game or opera production, yoga retreat or computer game. By placing emphasis on the qualitative differences between singularities, the culturalization of late modernity has led to a *de jure* equality of singularities. *De facto*, however, there is an ongoing dynamic of inequalities and asymmetries among the singularities on the market for valorization and attention.

Two factors are primarily responsible for these asymmetries among singularities. The first is the antithetical processes of valorization and devaluation that affect cultural elements. The second is the self-reinforcing effect of the inequalities in attention mentioned above. That a singularity is recognized and experienced as such is neither self-evident nor obvious. Instead, in a society of singularities, societal processes of valorization and devaluation are of great importance. A cultural item in the cultural economy can, for example, lose its singularity and its cultural value if it does not appear or ceases to appear *authentic*. Locations or brand names – Ibiza or Adidas, for instance – that lay claim to an intrinsic cultural value can be de-singularized, reduced to little more than the expression of cheap mainstream consumption. In a society of singularities nothing is more fatal than to appear fake, a product of mass appeal, a mere expression of generality. The flip side of this kind of devaluation process is re-singularization, by means of which something that was once perceived as conformist or mainstream suddenly appears singular and non-interchangeable. The canned Hollywood movies from the 1950s will then be discovered as complex works of art and the nerd suddenly achieves the status of a hipster. Especially regarding subjects, the attribution or non-attribution of recognized, attractive singularity contains a considerable potential of cultural discrimination as well as glorification. Whereas the subject became problematic when subverting standards of normality during the organized modernity, it now risks – in a much subtler, but partly even more fatal way – to lose its recognition as being singular.

Concurrent to these processes of valorization and devalorization of qualities and singularities is the extremely disparate or unequal attention paid to elements on cultural visibility markets. This inequality of attention is at the outset of the career of a product, subject, location, etc. highly coincidental. Striking are the self-reinforcing effects of visibility that follow: once something manages to become visible it is not likely to lose this visibility very quickly. Analogous

to the Matthew effect, attention is given to that which is already known, which is also the logic according to which such statuses as classic, celebrity, famous, cult, or star are assigned – exactly this is what winner takes it all-markets are about. Sighart Neckel (2008) observed in the context of the transformation of social inequalities that in late modernity the criteria that determine a subject's status have shifted from achievement-based to success-based. In fact, this shift from achievement-based to success-based criteria can by and large be explained in terms of the late modern structural transformation from industrial societies and their logic of generality to post-industrial societies and their logic of cultural singularity. In rationalistically organized modernity, gradual differences in objective achievement, especially in the professional world, lead to gradual differences in status. Yet, an economy that rewards absolute differences in exceptional singularity, visibility, and the successful accumulation of attention (regardless by what means) tends in fact to legitimize far more drastic social inequalities. These asymmetries in inequality affect products, companies, locations, and subjects alike. While achievement was defined by the fulfillment of general standards of better/worse or more/less, success results precisely from the seemingly non-rational properties of the singular performance that prevail on the attention market: the particular brand name, the particular location, the particular individual.

In contrast to organized modernity, the society of singularities gives thus rise to a new range of societal problems. The society of cultural singularities does not in any way imply that the classic modern realm of necessity has been replaced by a post-modern realm of liberty, free of cultural expediency. Instead, the societal preference for the unique is associated with a devaluation of the general, which yields, in turn, new problems: not least of which are problems of equality.

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