

Chapter 3: The Week For Future

September 2019: The coordinated uprising
of eight million people across the world

“The house is on fire” – returning to Mynttorget

The forest is burning. Two weeks have passed since the meeting in Lausanne. It is the end of August 2019. The Amazon rainforest is on fire while Greta sails through the currents of the gulf stream. Countless fires are raging and destroying the lungs of the world.

The tundra in Siberia is burning (Cormier 2019). The Arctic. Is burning. Hurricane Dorian destroys the Bahamas completely and turns around shortly before reaching Florida. Miami is spared once again. The rainforest is burning because governments are letting it burn, and because Europeans eat meat (Mackintosh 2019). For that, the forest has to be cut down. It happens quickly. Worldwide CO₂ emissions continue to rise, and a strike year is coming to an end.

On the train back to Stockholm, I sketch out a text for the third global strike on the 20th of September, the beginning of the Week For Future, which is quickly approaching. “We have to change. We are the ones, the adults, who are being told by the children that we are destroying their future, daily, by carrying on as usual. We must do as they are doing and pull ourselves together. We must finally take responsibility.”

Preparations have already begun, with designs for placards and flyers. Some of the young people are talking to the unions. The 27th of September, the closing day of the week, should be a workers strike in which all adults will take part, and a new intergenerational cooperation emerges.

The Week For Future, from the 20th to the 28th of September

On Friday morning, they are sitting there again, as they did exactly one year ago, the ones who were the first to join the strike.

Sometimes you feel that a preparation is almost complete, a festival, a theatrical performance, something is about to come, and you have forgotten what is at the heart of it all. Something is missing.



It is the 27th of September, a beautiful autumn day in Kungsträdgården, blue sky, the leaves of the trees already turning, cool but not cold. The first Scientists for Future and researchers from “Researchers’ Desk” are standing around trying to attach their question-answer cardboard signs to the street-lamps. I look at the huge stage and start to wonder. What can it be. Something is missing. I look at the schedule of the sixty-minute the young people have put together and are presenting. First comes sustainability researcher Line Gordon, the director of the Stockholm Resilience Centre. Then the Sami singer and activist Sara-Elvira from the indigenous people of Sapmi, the area taken away from the Sami by the Swedish state. They have felt climate change much more than we do here in the capital. Their vegetation is changing very quickly, very drastically, and with it their income opportunities, their culture, their

way of living together. There is something magical about the singing. Finally, seven representatives of different religions, then another band, the young people with their speech and at the end Robyn, the world-famous musician.

I walk slowly past the stage, cross the bridge which we blocked back then with Extinction Rebellion, a year ago, and reach Mynttorget. The hours fly past. Final preparations. Yellow vests for those of us who will be protecting the march. Getting water. And always this feeling that something is missing.

The Week For Future is coming to an end today, and it is already a huge success, in terms of numbers. In Germany, 1.4 million people took to the streets, already on the previous Friday. My scepticism towards the NGOs has not dissipated, but the basic idea of a shared “movement of movements” has borne fruit and can be expanded.

The young people have painted new posters, bright yellow, which hang everywhere in the city. I have written to the heads of all the Swedish Universities and published the open letter in the magazine ETC. In it, I called on the academic world to join the strike and change their approach to education, take the climate crisis seriously, change their didactic approach and the content of their courses, in all subjects, from architecture to economy (see the chapter on education). Most of the university heads at least replied personally, with a similar argument to the unions, saying that they supported the strike day but did not want to call for a strike. This part of the world of adults does not yet understand how it could and should act, I think to myself angrily. There is not enough information about the crisis and not enough awareness of what kind of action would be possible. The people running the unions and universities ought to see their responsibility. This is about job security, about solidarity with those who are most affected worldwide, and about waking up the research institutions.

And finally, it starts, one little group after another gathers from all different parts of Stockholm's population. Big and small, young and old, with all their colourful signs. The march begins. When we turn the corner at the head of the procession and walk from the Malären lake past Mynttorget on the way to the Kungsträdgården, there are around 50 or 60 000 people following. It is the biggest political event in Sweden since the Iraq war demonstrations, one of the biggest in post-war history. More and more people come and walk over the Slussen bridge into the old town, a seemingly never-ending column of people.



We stand behind the stage and look at each other. “What have we done?” one of them asks again and again. The strange thing about the situation is that such a small group organised everything in the last weeks, a team which has become extremely close-knit, which has brought about the three global strikes. Without a budget. The costs run to around 7000 euros, for the march and the program on stage for an audience of 60 000. The young people have run a crowd funding campaign, and the biggest NGOs take on costs of about 1500 euros each, which are vanishingly small costs within their annual budgets.

They have spent countless afternoons and evenings in the Greenpeace branch, including the Monday before the large-scale strike. They watch Greta walking on stage in the UN office in New York and beginning her “How dare you” speech. And although thousands of kilometres lie between them, it is clear that she is one of them, appealing to the passive governments. A profound sense of shock and grief makes itself felt. What a good thing they have each other, I think, as they comfort each other until late in the evening and at the same time work on press releases.

The hours in Stockholm with thousands of people are magical. The speeches, the singing, the dancing, and the music. The atmosphere is cheerful, peaceful, but also full of expectation. The world can change. But still, something is missing. A few hours later, Greta will lead the march of 500 000 people in Montreal. Half a million in a city of 4 million. The populations in

thousands of cities are giving their governments a signal which could hardly be clearer. We will not accept your hesitation any longer. We are ready for a transformation of our societies. We are striking, leaving our workplaces, and joining together. Altogether, it will be 7 to 8 million people who go out to protest on the two Fridays, in more than 160 countries. For the first time in 30 locations in Russia.



I am again responsible for passing on news from the world to the young activists, as at the first global strike in March, so that they can then announce it from the stage. But now there are so many more places. In Bangladesh alone, countless locations appear on my Twitter feed. Once again, the strike begins in Wellington, in New Zealand, when it is still the middle of the night in Europe, and comes closer, via India and Nigeria to Stockholm. In Bern, Loukina stands onstage in front of almost 100 000 people and calls on every generation to get started and unite in 2020.

And I begin to sense what was missing. Suddenly two of the young speakers in Stockholm rush past me. Isabelle says: "I'm nervous." Then they go out, leave the shadow of the little roof over the stage, and stand at the very front, facing the people of the city.



Their speech begins. And I feel an enormous sense of relief. This could easily have become a beautiful day, a magical day, a Woodstock day with a 1968 atmosphere. But here they stand, daring to address the politicians directly with all the anger that they continue to feel. You must change your policies, you're doing the wrong thing, you're deceiving people. We will not leave. Their speech becomes ever more vehement, and ever clearer. "This is not a demonstration. This is a strike. A rebellion. We will make sure that you reshape our societies. We do not accept that you are holding onto the wrong rules." In this anger and in this courage lies also the love for the strange creatures who stumble around on this planet, I think to myself.

In the days afterwards, the governments and rulers of the world, including those in Sweden, respond with silence. It is as if nothing had happened, as if the capital had never transformed itself – on an ordinary Friday – into one big protest march. Mynttorget feels cold in the ensuing weeks. That is not just because of the arrival of autumn and winter, but because of the parliament building, which stares down at the square, motionless, and because of politics, which remains the same.



But in this week in September 2019, a global climate movement has formed from all parts of society, young and old, workers and students, in thousands of cities in the world, and found a shared goal. Millions of children are becoming aware of the meaning of the ecological and climate crisis.

How can we not only mobilise but bring about a change in the rules? How can politics change if those who rely on “campaigns” and demonstrations set the tone – and thus push those into the background who have had the courage to organise real disruption on a large scale: a real school strike including solidarity strikes at workplaces? They do not see themselves as a part of a well-behaved “civil society”; but as a rebellion against the rules which jeopardise their future. Demonstrations can be ignored. Professional campaigns can be ignored. Striking children and workers in solidarity cannot, not in the same way. Three tasks are emerging: how do we maintain the continuity of the movement, even between these largescale events, in such a way that the children, those most affected, and the Global South can take on a leading role? How do we agree on demands, a political framework behind which the population can steadily unite? And: how do we find the means, with the help of civil disobedience and strikes, to push this new politics through beyond demonstrations and campaigns?



At the national elections in Switzerland on the 20th of October, the Green Party makes huge gains: no party in Swiss history has ever achieved such an increase in seats in one election. The Green Liberal party also increases its support by several percentage points. Meanwhile, the Social Democrats lose out, as does the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP). The media talk about a green landslide and a Greta election. The conservative majority in parliament is replaced by a green-centrist majority. Meanwhile, in California and Australia, the forests are burning as they never have before. Venice is flooded.