2. The party and the hangover: From surplus to survival

> But it's our only way out: finding, together, a territory we can live in. This is the new universality.
> *Bruno Latour (2017)*[1]

If human society is going to prioritise survival, adaptation will be absolutely central. But that does not necessarily mean rejecting individualisation. The point is to explore the central mechanisms of adaptation through a shift in perspective from the modernist programme of emancipation to an as yet undefined programme of adaptation. Although adaptation is neither new nor inherently modern, the pressure to adapt in modern society follows a specific logic that we need to understand – and to distinguish from the kind of adaptation that will be required for survival.

In fact, of course, societies are always dealing with problems of adaptation. We must adapt our practices to events and conditions that are beyond our control. So adaptation is change. But not freely chosen. Ever-changing circumstances force us to adapt our everyday lives. This has been true throughout human history. In 'primitive' societies environmental change was the central driver of adaptation. The whims of nature defined what people could hunt and gather, plant and harvest. Any change in the environment automatically compelled them to adapt.

We can identify three principal characteristics of these *original* constellations of adaptation. Firstly, the relevant problems and threats were external to the society; they lay beyond the control of the affected community (or were at least perceived to) and were

not negotiable. Secondly, in this context, adaptation was above all a matter of survival: adapt or die. Thirdly, individual and collective adaptation were inseparable. The community survived together. Or not. Adjusting a collective way of life demanded more than merely individuals changing their ways.

Modern societies exhibit similar traits: change is in their DNA, as formations whose stability is inherently dynamic.[2] Living under dynamic stability – predicated on incessant economic growth, technological acceleration, cultural innovation[3] – means accepting permanent change and constantly changing rules. Here, again, adaptation is the normal state of affairs. In fact, it is a precondition of the accelerated modern society: rapid road transport depends on broad acceptance of the highway code; a successful career means obeying the school rules and conforming to the structures and strictures of the labour market. If we want to use new technologies, we have to follow the manual.

At an even more fundamental level, we are learning creatures. We observe and emulate others; we understand other people's expectations and try to live up to them. In this sense, adaptation is an absolute precondition for the existence of society. As the dictionary tells us, adaptation is 'the process of changing to suit different conditions'.[4] Whether it is characteristics, beliefs, customs or forms of behaviour that are subject to change, adaptation is plainly an indispensable precondition for 'participating in social relations and systems based on a division of labour – in other words, for handling the demands of social cooperation and the environment, and thus ultimately for the very existence of human society'.[5]

This makes adaptation an essential element in certain strands of modern sociology, because it solves fundamental societal problems – or really, one could say, *the* central problem of society: what is required to make society possible? There is certainly no reason to assume that people will automatically live together harmoniously, form societies based on trust, and develop a sophisticated division of labour. Quite the opposite. That is the central enigma, which brings us to Talcott Parsons and the Hobbesian problem of order:[6] the emergence of human society was not inevitable, and it demands explanation. Without society, the individual's personal safety can

never be secure. As Thomas Hobbes famously wrote, even 'the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger as himselfe'.[7] Individuals can obviously achieve much more if they work together. But how can cooperation succeed under conditions of such insecurity? This is of course where Hobbes's social contract comes in: the people grant the state a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force. It is adaptation to that set of rules that enables citizens to live without fear of one another.

Various sociologists before and after Parsons have conceptualised solutions to the Hobbesian problem of order. Émile Durkheim stands out as a theorist of order – and of the consequences of its erosion. It was Durkheim who identified the central role of functional differentiation (the division of labour) in the reproduction of the social order in modern societies.[8] By recognising the role their own work plays in the greater whole, individuals come to understand that they are an essential part of the entity that secures their social existence. In effect, this creates an 'organic' form of solidarity because it is clear – to stick with Durkheim's image – that no single part of the social body can survive without the others. It is the shared norms generated by functional differentiation of labour[9] that form the basis for social cooperation and the integration of the individual.

This is only possible if people obey the rules and heed the norms. In the early version of Parsons's famous AGIL paradigm, *adaptation* subsumes all the activities required to maintain an action system.[10] Appropriate adaptive behaviour is guided by the values that are (re)produced by the cultural system: individuals within a cultural system share a broad consensus about the behavioural adaptations required to maintain their social order. Or as Parsons puts it, 'Order in this sense means that process takes place in conformity.'[11]

Failure to adapt places the individual at risk. And in times of societal crisis, individual experiences may snowball into collective problems. When normality is lost, the social order itself is destabilised. It is no long clear which rules still apply, nor who is still following them at all. Society threatens to descend into anarchy, and its members lose their orientation. Durkheim speaks of 'anomie' and rising rates of suicide.[12] In this school of sociology personal

adaptation is simply a condition of a successful life, while a lack of normative ties represents an existential risk.

There is no successful life without adaptation, which remains a precondition for any possibility of self-realisation. Individual prestige, reputation and recognition are all nourished by society itself, presupposing that we act broadly in accordance with the expectations of others. In order to earn respect, one must play by the implicit rules of the institution – be it a graffiti crew, union branch or board of directors. Whether the context is a gang or a university, you need to stay in line if you want to get on.

Let us now move on to consider the sociologists of freedom, who ultimately seek to overcome established power relations. Their interest revolves around the question of what obstructs the expansion of freedom in modern life and what freedoms have been lost in the modernisation process. Their theories of power and freedom are characterised by their (more or less explicit) focus on the individual and personal emancipation. They regard the social order as a system of power that unnecessarily restricts the freedom of the individual. The inherent normativity of these theories prioritises opportunities for self-realisation over functional integration. As far as these authors are concerned, adaptation is not merely the precondition for society, but also one of its problems.

The classical sociologies of freedom thus tend to treat adaptation as a practice for losers, who are to be pitied. The unfolding modernisation process turns everything on its head: industrialisation transforms communities and modes of production; the development of the modern state transforms political organisation; new patterns of spatial and social mobility transform ways of life. Modernisation is a rationalisation process that touches on all spheres of society. As individuals, we experience it as an external force, a new environment that threatens to mutate into an 'iron cage'.[13] Change is driven by a minority. The majority simply have to bend and fit in, for better or worse.

The sociologies of freedom are not interested in the promises of existing structures, the tacit normative consensus. While the theories of order foreground the benefits – efficient modern administration, affordable consumer goods, security and stability –

the sociologists of freedom seek to transcend the bounds of the existing, or at least to find a specific form of freedom under the given conditions. Rather than celebrating the stabilising consensus of bourgeois culture, Max Weber, for example, puts his finger on the problem of obedience and the constraints placed on the individual by burgeoning rational administration. Modernity sweeps away traditional forms of legitimisation, replacing them with dry legal systems. Today we just read the rules, rather than following charismatic leaders or mysterious rituals. The possibilities to resist, the spaces for personal freedom, remain limited. Nevertheless, Weber still regards freedom as the ultimate objective.[14] In this scheme of thinking, a person is free if they dedicate themselves absolutely to the pursuit of a personal value. For example, avoiding eating meat out of personal conviction and consideration for the well-being of other living creatures and disregarding one's own cravings. As such, the question of freedom is absolutely bound up with the focus on power. As well as being the absolute opposite of power, freedom is understood as a way of life (indeed *the* way of life).

Marx is a different kettle of fish, of course, although he also understands adaptation as a necessary individual response to power and circumstance. Work or die. Exploitation or starvation. Those were the stark alternatives faced by the masses during the early industrial era. Freedom lies elsewhere, in a coming world where the tables are turned, where the necessity to adapt is minimised and personal freedom maximised:

> [I]n communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.[15]

To this day, Marx inspires theories that assume falling demand for labour, whether through automation or a structural weakness of capitalism.[16] Instead of mourning the loss of employment and income

(and in some cases also of meaningful activity), they see the reduction of socially necessary labour as an opportunity to chisel greater freedom out of the realm of necessity and to expand the possibilities for personal freedom.[17]

Marxian theories tend to take a negative slant on adaptation, identifying it with voluntary or enforced conformism and thus the opposite of emancipation. Herbert Marcuse speaks of 'voluntary compliance',[18] where sociologies of order would merely recognise a successful stabilisation of society. Those critical traditions would still have us trying to unmask (late) modernity's fictions of freedom. As the Frankfurt School's critique of the capitalist culture industry points out,[19] a person may seek to style themselves as unique – for example, by means of tattoos or jewellery – but this will always involve reference to (societal) ideas, fashions and identities. Or if they wish to stand out through their consumer choices, they will generally be choosing among products whose variance remains so limited (despite innovations like modularisation) that it is actually rather strange that they can be used to shape individual identities at all. A car is just a car, even if the buyer can choose any combination of ten different colours, ten types of engine and six kinds of wheels. These goods represent a hollow promise of freedom, for which the bearers of the 'happy consciousness'[20] sacrifice months of their lives to the 'pleasures' of capitalist exploitation: physical exhaustion, mental alienation, pressure to perform and conform. In the end, the dominant modes of individualisation are actually just expressions of repressive adaptation.

From this perspective, we can blame warped understandings of freedom on the temptations of the culture industry. Conformism is a structural compulsion. What alternative do people have, if capitalism is the only option? If welfare entitlements demand complex means testing?[21] If politicians treat citizens as consumers of democracy?[22] And if the most powerful technological innovations of the past fifty years are employed largely to push advertising and online shopping as the key to self-realisation?[23] Emancipatory critiques finger the tension between a conformity-enforcing welfare state (need must be proven according to a set of predefined criteria, benefits are distributed under pain of legitimation[24]) and the right

to existential security (as a precondition for realising individual opportunities). They criticise a technocratic polity that reduces its citizens to mere onlookers,[25] protest against the manipulative effects of surveillance technologies,[26] and condemn privatisation of the public sphere into the hands of powerful corporations.[27] According to such analyses, the institutionalised compulsion to adapt functions as a vehicle of oppression, thwarting any chance of emancipation. Any critical sociology that explicitly or implicitly foregrounds a subject-centred concept of emancipation must automatically be sceptical of the idea of adaptation. In this line of thought, adaptation is a question of power in society.

This strand of modern sociology seeks to understand and explain the causes of pressure to adapt. Unlike 'primitive' societies, to whom the demands of the natural world appeared external, the forces of compulsion in modern societies are evidently man-made. What robs workers of their freedom is an economic system controlled by bourgeois property owners and defended by powerful political actors. Power lies in the hands of bureaucrats and managers, with little or no democratic legitimation. Executives at Google and Facebook decide what we see. The possibility of attribution places adaptation in the realm of the negotiable, as the object of ire and above all of demands. A democratisation of opportunities for self-realisation is conceivable. As conflicts over 'life chances',[28] they form a central theme of modernity.

Three elements characterise the established understanding of adaptation. Firstly, it is acknowledged that the threats are man-made and inherent to society. Secondly, individual emancipation is the battleground, while conflicts concerning survival take a back seat. And thirdly, society is imagined as a central source of pressure to adapt. This has generated a critique driven by the idea of individual emancipation, whose core demand is the democratisation of self-realisation. Personal adaptation is seen as a repressive imposition, while the possibility of collective pressure to adapt is not even entertained, because the liberal social contract supposedly resolves all questions of survival. Putting collective problems of survival back on the table throws up questions over the

imagined 'natural state' and systematically challenges the modern social contract as the source of political legitimacy.

From individualism to collective survival

The cultural primacy of individualism has seen opportunities for citizens of the open industrialised societies expand like never before, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. This has included progress on women's equality, as well as legal recognition (and increasingly also public acceptance) of sexual, ethnic and cultural minorities. Even where complications cropped up, emancipation remained a positive touchstone. Ulrich Beck, for example, in his theory of a second – reflexive – modernisation, noted a growing awareness of the risks created by society, but regarded the simultaneous weakening of institutional ties as a welcome expansion of freedom. Beck did concede that his concept of reflexive modernisation was open to 'anti-modern' deviations and could certainly be directed against universal modern values. In a world of growing resource conflicts, for example, it is by no means certain that society will agree on humane forms of distribution. The cynical or chauvinistic exclusion of those in need from access to food, security and other necessities remains an option for the powerful – as observed in the conflict over Ukrainian grain exports in the wake of Russia's invasion. Nevertheless, Beck placed his hopes in a risk-driven democratisation of modern societies through empowered citizens acting in the 'subpolitical' sphere; their reflexive freedom would expand the positive aspect of individualisation and complete the mission of the 'first modernity'.[29] The new social movements and pressure groups of Beck's cosmopolitan society operate on a global scale, expressing a reflexive risk awareness that – like the radioactive cloud from Chernobyl – knows no national borders. This second reflexive empowerment is seen as the completion of modernity.

Today, that hope has lost much of its sheen. Almost forty years after Beck's *Risk Society* came out,[30] we must admit that the subpolitical 'democratization of democracy'[31] has not been able to

prevent the proliferation of risks in society.[32] Instead, the concrete social manifestations of the normative principle of emancipation have been recognised as a problem for the reflexive treatment of modernisation risks. Ingolfur Blühdorn in particular has drawn attention to this fundamental problem. In a logic of 'second-order emancipation',[33] subjects understand – and defend – exploitation as liberation. The 'old critical orthodoxy'[34] of sociology, he posits, clung to an understanding of emancipation whose concepts of freedom had lost their relevance. The 'counter-project of liberation',[35] Blühdorn argues, interprets this modernist critique as a reaction to alienation. What the critics forget is that the people themselves identify emancipation primarily with a consumerist lifestyle.

Blühdorn dismisses the talk of individual emancipation as an academic and activist distraction that ignores the way 'the market and consumption (even at the bottom end) have become the most important locus and mode of self-exploration and self-realisation'.[36] The modernist ideal of emancipation, he argues, offers the reflexive subjects of late modernity carte blanche for selfish individualism, but absolutely no motivation for sustainable ways of life based on reciprocity. A social criticism centred on personal emancipation will almost automatically be understood as legitimising wasteful lifestyles. Ultimately, he points out, the critique rests on precisely the order it supposedly criticises. In other words, critical orthodoxy systematically legitimises the normative precedence of individual self-realisation, rather than challenging it. My gas-guzzling Audi must stay on the road, even if the petrol comes from Putin's Russia.

So the sociologists of freedom are subject to unintended consequences of emancipation that turn their ideas on their head. Under the banner of realising the free, authentic self, for example, the personal is staged online, liked and hated on the social media platforms, even as their toxic promises leave millions of teenagers suffering from anxiety and depression.[37] With the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* adorning their bedside table, the prototypical subject of late modernity stares into their iPhone, searching for a cheap polyester costume for the next cosplay party, to be airfreighted from China within a matter of days. In contexts such as these, individualism and emancipation must be understood as drivers of

society's existential problems – and thus as sources of vital questions concerning adaptation.

In the recent past, we have seen supposedly existential societal problems cited to force through specific forms of social adaptation. In particular, the pressure to 'adapt' to the decline of Keynesian welfare capitalism (widely discussed as the neoliberal turn), as propagated by economic, political and academic elites since the 1980s, has left critical sociology fundamentally sceptical towards the very idea of societal adaptation.[38] It tends to identify adaptation with the depoliticising strategies of neoliberalism ('There is no alternative,' as Margaret Thatcher famously said) and the 'great adaptation'[39] to the capitalist market. As this criticism correctly notes, the supposed lack of alternatives is a function of very concrete group interests rather than any real existential imperative. As Blühdorn argues, the neoliberal turn (the 'technocracy of adaptation'[40]) has increasingly shunted central political decisions into post-democratic formats (such as expert committees, central banks and international legal instances), while democratic processes have become largely simulative.[41] Here, the prime concern has been the survival of capitalism rather than the survival of the species.

In fact, the question of survival has been explicitly instrumentalised for economic interests under the banner of adaptation to climate change.[42] Contrary to the popular narrative that adaptation to climate change only rose to prominence after the failure of mitigation (in the sense of prevention), political economist Romain Felli demonstrates in his analysis of the coevolution of climate policy and the neoliberal turn that adaptation has been the decisive response of the capitalist elites to the discovery of anthropogenic global warming since the 1970s.[43] Initially it was argued that reducing global warming was technically unavoidable and adaptation was the only option. As economic cost-benefit modelling proliferated during the 1970s, the capitalist market came to be regarded as the solution rather than the problem. This was led in particular by economists such as Thomas Schelling, William Nordhaus, Mancur Olson, Jesse Asubel, Gary Yohe and Lester Lave. Their response to calls for state intervention 'operated at two levels':

> First, they sought to relativise the climate problem, making it comparable to other economic questions: through cost/benefit analyses, the climate question could be treated not as a moral question but rather as a choice of how to allocate resources. Second, once climate policies seemed to have become an inevitability, the economists worked to ensure that these policies would conform, as far as possible, to the operation of the market. Together, these two responses implied the need to emphasise the theme of adaptation.[44]

Beck's proposition of a coevolution of personal self-realisation and societal development is contextualised in two respects by the capitalism-critical findings outlined above. Firstly, they underline the existence of a specific mode of capitalist economy behind the spiralling existential threats. Secondly, this capitalism-critical rejection of adaptation ultimately shares with Beck and the critical orthodoxy a perspective on the adaptive society that preserves modernity's primacy of individualism (although with a rather different framing). The theory of reflexive modernisation hopes to contain existential risks through a subpolitical subjectivity whose reflexivity gains are ultimately a product of successful individualisation – or in other words, self-realisation. The capitalism-critical perspective on adaptation, on the other hand, regards the narrowing of self-realisation to the sphere of the market as the real problem. Freedom, it would argue, lies outside of capitalism. And if capitalism declares adaptation an imperative, then adaptation is automatically part of the problem, not the solution. Thus, in their elevation of the ideal of emancipation, both share the normative frame of the critical orthodoxy described by Blühdorn.

My interest here is not to weigh one normative position against another. Instead, I want to underline that the perspectives laid out above fail to address the big existential questions at all. The perspectives of individualisation and self-realisation remain central here – whether as last resort (Beck) or normative backdrop (to critical orthodoxy and capitalism-critical stances). They all welcome any expansion of personal freedom and opportunity – despite the

risks[45] – whereas a sober assessment would more likely identify individualism as a driver of existential threats.

The risk logic that was central to the original theory of reflexive modernisation can also be identified within critical sociology itself. We can distinguish three fields of existential risk that are fundamentally bound up with the capitalist ideal of individualisation. Firstly, we have the problems of making a living under capitalism, especially in connection with questions of social inequality. In economic terms, it is broadly acknowledged that we are experiencing a secular growth and stability crisis. In the early 1960s, it was assumed that the economy would grow uninterruptedly, and that the highly developed economies had transcended the economic cycle of boom and bust.[46] Today there is enormous uncertainty about the longer-term trends. In response to the persistent stagnation of growth since the 1970s, the financial sector became a central driver of efforts to renew and revive capitalism.[47] In order to secure their legitimacy amidst falling rates of growth, states had to find ways to continue to fulfil the expectations of material and social security that had become established in the context of the post-war boom.[48] This required capital, which was largely supplied by the financial sector. The private sector also hunted for innovations to revitalise a sclerotic economy. The financial sector itself turned out to be a crucial crucible of renewal. Its 'innovative' investment products promised levels of profit that were no longer possible in the 'real' economy.[49]

The financialised capitalism of our age only survives by consuming its own future, devouring its own economic and social foundations.[50] Debt has become a central factor since the 1970s,[51] as the economy successively lost its ability to generate growth by improving productivity and expanding markets.[52] In essence, debt allows capital to be sold before it has even been generated. The more money is created, the more future resources can be consumed in the present, presuming stability of the currency. This orientation on 'consuming the future' has gradually crept into other parts of the economy. It is a central mechanism in the commercial internet, as the most important growth area of the past twenty years.[53] But this increases the risk of acute crises, because doubts over future profitability propagate especially quickly under conditions of

economic volatility and can bring investment crashing to a halt at any moment.

These efforts to stabilise capitalism have certainly led to a sharpening of social inequality and have exacerbated reproduction problems among the losers of the successive financial crises. For example many less-wealthy households in the United States lost all they owned in the 2008 subprime meltdown, while richer households' assets were more widely spread and better secured.[54] While all income groups suffered losses, the top earners recovered comparatively quickly,[55] while those on lower incomes were left fearing for their social existence. This pattern was then repeated during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the wealth of the biggest billionaires actually grew while millions fell into poverty.[56] Even without acute economic crises, the profits of the new capitalism are extremely unequally distributed. Despite a reduction in social inequality at the country level, the world's poorest and the lower strata in the rich countries have seen no gains since the late 1980s, while the wealth of the 'hyper-wealthy' quintupled in real terms between 1987 and 2013.[57]

Changes in the labour markets of the highly developed economies have further polarised the social structure. The tertiary and digital transformations have made knowledge the central driver of capitalist renewal,[58] alongside the traditional 'fictitious commodities' of labour, land and capital.[59] This has transformed production processes and education and labour markets in ways that make subjectivity a central source of value and place it at the heart of the restructuring. This created new opportunities for fulfilment that were unconstrained by sclerotic bureaucracy and industrial toil – in particular for highly qualified individuals.

But the rise of the 'cognitive-cultural' economy has placed new burdens and expectations on its subjects.[60] Credentialled expertise is often only half the battle. Highly personal characteristics like creativity, social skills, intellectual flexibility and reflexivity are also demanded. This new career profile is embedded in a culture that not only promises and rewards positive emotions and success but explicitly demands them.[61] Its paradigm is the 'entrepreneurial self',[62] exhibiting 'responsibility, initiative, flexibility, agility' and

creativity, but also subject to 'compulsory creative self-realisation'.[63] Drawing on the work of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, we can understand this constellation as an outcome of the artistic critique formulated by the radical movements of the 1960s, which railed against the cold objectivity and uniformity of a male-dominated 'society of generality'[64] and saw new forms of self-realisation as a practical critique of power. This cultural revolution opened up opportunities for enormous sections of society whose advancement had been institutionally blocked. In the first place, this applied to women, but has become increasingly salient on the axes of sexuality and ethnicity too.

The ambivalent aspect of this innovation is glaringly obvious, as is the price of the associated emancipation gains. In the social structure, for example, the cognitive-cultural transformation of capitalism has opened up new divides. The rise of the university-educated, generally urban, service classes[65] has been accompanied since the 1980s by the emergence of a growing and politically volatile 'service proletariat',[66] for whom maintaining an acceptable standard of living represents a permanent challenge. In geographical terms, this sets the beneficiaries of transformation in the most dynamic conurbations against the 'losers of globalisation' in the former centres of heavy industry, who have in some cases suffered massive loss of status.[67] The 'status panic' identified in parts of the middle class ultimately represents fear for their ability to preserve their way of life.[68]

The imperative of self-realisation in cognitive-cultural capitalism represents a separate source of specific *subjective* existential problems. The crisis of subjective stability forms the second set of threats that plague the self-image of the adaptive society. This is the dark side of the cultural primacy of self-realisation (whereby the changing form of capitalism should be understood as an expression – rather than a cause – of the rise of autonomy and authenticity as defining cultural values). One illustration of the subjective reproduction crisis is the observed shift in psychiatric diagnoses in the course of the twentieth century, from neurosis to depression.[69] While neurosis is a 'sickness of guilt', depression is 'a *sickness of responsibility*'.[70] Its origin lies, as Alain Ehrenberg

puts it, in the 'the weariness of the self'; the exhausting burden of having to be a special, unique individual. In many cases, the root causes of depression and burnout are personal experiences of disappointment, in particular personal failure to fulfil social expectations and requirements.[71] Because of its fundamental function in distributing opportunities, the capitalist market represents a prime source of such disappointments. Here, cultural values collide with social structures. Individuals are required to be ever more successful, unique, authentic and creative, while the market-driven society offers only a handful of them high-status positions, continues to demand functional conformity, and condemns many people to unrewarding menial labour. So the project of personal self-realisation through employment is frequently doomed to failure, and it is fortunate that society offers a growing spectrum of comparatively independent arenas of individualisation. If your work is unfulfilling, you can still become a popular football trainer, a talented karaoke singer or a recognised political activist.

Subjective problems arise where the channels of compensation are obstructed or blocked. It is no coincidence that burnout was first observed in the social and caring professions, whose practitioners tend to identify strongly with their highly demanding work.[72] That constellation creates obstacles to seeking compensation in other fields. Elin Thunman sees the combination of authenticity and altruism that is typical of the caring professions as a source of possible disappointments.[73] The risk, she argues, has been further heightened by the privatisation and competition that has infiltrated this sector since the crisis of welfare capitalism. Pressure to cut costs translates into pressure to work harder and longer, and makes it impossible to derive self-worth through external recognition of altruistic activities. If the time allowed for each patient or client is reduced, the personal aspect will inevitably fall by the wayside. What is left is the feeling of being unable to live up to one's own standards and losing hope of self-fulfilment. Their altruism places carers under permanent tension and encourages self-exploitation to the point of collapse: in other words, it endangers their subjective well-being.

These sociological perspectives on mental health bear a striking resemblance to older theories about the phenomenon of relative deprivation,[74] which attribute negative attitudes, states and actions to the experience of disappointed expectations. People believe that they are not getting what they deserve, either measured against cultural expectations or in comparison to relevant others. One student begrudges another's internship. Young academics are jealous of their older peers who 'had it so easy'. Established communities resent refugees who supposedly receive more from the state than they themselves do.

Whereas burnout and depression are experienced as personal problems, political sociology regards relative deprivation as a driver of social criticism and political rebellion,[75] especially when the disappointment is experienced collectively. From this perspective, the populist revolts experienced by liberal democracies[76] and the depressive exhaustion of the authentic subject are two sides of the same societal coin. Their common denominator in late modernity is the individual's inability to fulfil society's expectations.

Thirdly, after the socio-economic and subjective troubles, we come to the existential ecological problems. Capitalism has expanded massively since the end of the Cold War, with more than fifty countries opening up their economies to the capitalist market since 1989 (globalisation).[77] The confluence of three developments – the integration of eastern Europe into the global capitalist economy, the rise of China to become the factory of the world, and the creation of increasingly complex transnational value chains – opened up new geographies of capital accumulation, while natural resources were consumed in unprecedented volumes and with dramatic consequences. Capitalist development, which had always been extractive on the peripheries of the global system, meant the expansion of a resource-intensive mode of economy and way of life into these regions. The mass of resources extracted globally, for example, grew from 27 billion tonnes in 1970 to 92 billion tonnes in 2017, and with it the volume of greenhouse gas emissions.[78] Because the growing global demand for raw materials is largely served by low- and middle-income countries, the associated environmental costs are increasingly outsourced to those countries.[79] The expansion

of agricultural land by 190 million hectares between 1960 and 2019 occurred entirely in the Global South,[80] while the total actually shrank a little in the Global North.[81] Agriculture was the primary driver of the loss of 420 million hectares of forest between 1990 and 2020 – principally tropical rainforest in Africa and South America – with dramatic consequences for the biosphere (extinction of species and loss of habitat).[82]

Economic shifts in the capitalist centres have not fundamentally changed the catastrophic ecological impact of global capitalism. The developed economies have certainly been transformed since the early 1980s, with clean computer workstations replacing dirty coal mines and blast furnaces, tourism displacing resource extraction, ephemeral data supplanting mass and material. While this trend saw the consumption of the distinction-seeking middle classes become more culturalised and sophisticated,[83] it did nothing for the environment outside the developed economies: much of the heavily polluting 'old' industries were outsourced and relocated to developing and middle-income countries. To return to the example of the automobile: never have motor cars been as individualised as they are today (even if the aforementioned variations in colours and wheels may appear rather modest to the distinction-seeking consumer). But this is plainly anything but a resource-saving way of life. There is absolutely no sign of change when it comes to the trend of inexorable growth in global car ownership, which is estimated to have doubled every twenty years since 1976.[84]

Nor do the supposedly 'ecologically light' goods and distracting wonders of digital cultural capitalism offer any solution.[85] They turn out to make the ecological problems worse rather than better, because the associated technological infrastructures consume enormous amounts of energy and resources.[86] The so-called rebound effects of digital technologies also come into play here. Increases in productivity immediately lead to more consumption and greater use of resources.[87] Instead of reducing exploitation of the natural environment, the process has simply been redistributed extremely unequally across the globe. Today the smelters and blast furnaces pollute the air in India and China rather than Duisburg and Sheffield. Europe is not drowning in its own rubbish – but only

because it ships it to Asia on freighters burning heavy fuel oil, simply externalising the costs.[88]

The current climate discussions underline just how strongly contemporary society sees itself faced with existential ecological crisis. Present and future ecological risks are perceived as lying beyond the scope of human control to an unprecedented extent. The discussion about *tipping points* illustrates this especially clearly. A tipping point describes the moment (or threshold) where a complex system enters a new state from which it cannot return to its previous condition. If feedback loops are involved, the new state may be highly dynamic. The classic example is the prospect of global warming causing the Siberian permafrost to thaw. This would release methane, which is a powerful greenhouse gas, and could accelerate atmospheric warming to a point where stabilisation becomes impossible.[89] Runaway warming becomes a plausible threat. In other words, the existence of tipping points means that we cannot base our plans on the assumption that trends are linear. This implies a loss of control that was anticipated neither by the original theory of the risk society (where problems were managed on the subpolitical level), nor by older theories from the Cold War era – when the threat of nuclear annihilation was at least under *somebody's* control. The reflexive consciousness of late modernity appears to have lost faith both in the self-regulating power of nature and in human society's ability to calculate and control it.

This loss of control and expectation of collapse has inspired some to peer into the abyss. Jem Bendell formulates a heuristic of deep adaptation to (imagined) non-linear climate change. In his scenario 'dangerous and uncontrollable levels of climate change'[90] take important elements of the global ecosystem past tipping points and cause 'mass starvation, disease, flooding, storm destruction, forced migration and war', and ultimately 'inevitable collapse and probable catastrophe' – for which we must prepare. Bendell proposes 'four Rs' to guide adaptive praxis. To begin with, we must promote *resilience*. First and foremost, this means defining normative priorities, because resilience revolves around the question of which norms, values and practices a society wishes to preserve through a fundamental adaptive transformation. This

brings us, secondly, to the question of *relinquishment*: 'people and communities letting go of certain assets, behaviours and beliefs where retaining them could make matters worse'. That might mean coastal settlements, particular forms of manufacturing or certain consumer products. Thirdly, *restoration* means rediscovering ways of doing things that industrial civilisation had otherwise abandoned or forgotten: rewilding, seasonal diets, communal ways of living. Finally, *reconciliation* with one another and with the inevitability of social collapse forms the fourth pillar of Bendell's deep adaptation, concentrating above all on survival in the face of massive loss and disruption.

Whatever one thinks of Bendell's arguments about the likely inevitability of collapse, his concept of deep adaptation exposes the deficits of certain criticisms of adaptation. For example, Bendell is impervious to the objection that adaptation is ultimately a vehicle of capitalist renewal. In his concept, the question of capitalism seems almost too trivial to address explicitly, and the social practice he proposes plainly has nothing in common with the capitalist dynamic. Similarly, the denunciation of adaptation as conformism appears trivial against the magnitude of the existential threats Bendell lays out. His visions of *restoration* inevitably involve embedding the individual back into the community – implying social forms that sociology associates with greater pressure to conform. At the same time, Bendell's adaptation is an experimental and transformative (rather than primarily repressive) practice, as other proponents of such strategies also emphasise.[91] The concrete manifestations of societal collapse remain vague. Sometimes he speaks of 'starvation, destruction, migration, disease and war'[92] as absolute determinants of the transition to post-collapse communities. Sometimes it is economic implosion, although this 'does not necessarily mean a complete collapse of law, order, identity and values'.[93] The possible societies conjured by such descriptions are worlds apart sociologically. Furthermore, 'starvation, destruction, migration, disease and war'[94] already define the existence of millions today – and even in the absence of strong left-wing politics, many would probably welcome the disappearance of capitalism (assuming the preservation of basic social structures). But it is certainly

clear that Bendell's expectations amount to a catastrophe-driven transformation of industrial capitalism and the end of a society centred on individualism.

A radical emphasis on the existential – as exemplified by Bendell – allows us to construct an interpretation of the present that places our own concept of adaptation at the centre of social criticism. In such a practice, individual and collective adaptation coincide – as they do in hunter/gatherer societies – because adaptation is imagined not only as a necessary collective transformation, but as the only meaningful way of life. If sociology interprets these visions of adaptive practice as an expression of the consciousness of late modernity – which increasingly defines society more in terms of survival than self-realisation – we will also recognise the shift from personal prestige to collective transformation. The adaptive society plainly stands for more than just new burdens. There are also signs of new benefits. Ending the primacy of individual emancipation will allow the capitalist profit imperative, lifestyle stress and ecological guilt to fade away. At the same time, the primacy of survival generates its own problems of legitimacy because the focus on adaptation challenges more than just the concept of emancipation. It also means abandoning the paradigm of progress.