

## **Chapter 10: Global democracy, the Elections, and the Future**

September 2022 – June 2023: On forming a global, democratic, sustainable postgrowth society

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### **The plan**

It is spring. 2023. A Monday evening, around five o'clock.

The young activists are sitting around a huge table. But they are not alone. It is not only the young people who are now meeting, but also representatives of Extinction Rebellion; churches and other faith communities; the Mothers Rebellion; all the For Future Groups including People For Future; the people from A22 are also here, and so are Amnesty, environmental organisations, and many small and bigger antiracist, feminist and social organisations. Every second Monday evening, they meet to prepare an action week in September. Internationally, too, groups are working on a similar plan.

“What is the ground we're standing on?” someone asks. “We need a name.” After a thorough discussion, the name is decided. The project will be called the “Week of Action for Social and Climate Justice”, and – as in September 2019 – it will be framed by big Friday strikes at the beginning and end of the week. A sense of confidence takes hold. The procedures of consensus democracy are clear. After first exchanging information, their second step is to gather everyone's ideas. Thirdly, they collect arguments and listen to everyone's needs; they then make a proposal for a consensus in terms of values and actions for the week. They do a “temperature check” to reflect opinions in the room, before allowing everyone to express their smaller and more serious worries, and then they make changes to reflect them. They confirm whether there are any vetoes and whether a text needs to be rewritten, and check how many people are not entirely content but can still support the action or text – and so, after four or

five meetings, they have a clear statement and a definition of the forms of action. All of them should be able to contribute to the week in their way, as long as peaceful and democratic means are used; that is the final text.

Images of the last few months go through my head and for the first time in a long while, tension and grief dissipate and are replaced with a kind of excitement about the next months. The elections in Sweden half a year ago were very depressing, and the apocalyptic “battle of Lützerath” (Schüpf 2023; BR 2023; Maier 2023) only took place a few weeks ago. I ask myself: What can we learn from these months for the time that’s now approaching? How can we organise the solidarity which is so urgently needed?

## **The evening of the elections – a world falls apart**

Because six months earlier, on Sunday the 11th of September, 2022, at eleven in the evening, something happens which shocks the whole movement in Sweden (and in Europe); it is symptomatic of the elections in other countries in the world, from Italy to the Philippines and Turkey.

It is exactly four years since the beginning of the strike and the founding of Fridays For Future. A new parliament is being elected. There has been a strange election campaign. It put the environmental movements and the justice movements in a seemingly impossible situation. They emphasise again and again that no party is offering policies that implement the Paris Agreement, including the left-wing and green parties. They have been striking in front of the left-wing and green parliament for four years, after all. And still: a win for the right-wing conservative parties would be even worse – especially for those who are already marginalised and for a planet worth living on. What should people do when what they want to fight for is not represented? A new party has formed, the “climate alliance”, and doesn’t even gain one percent of the vote.

The first numbers begin to come in at around eight. It looks good for the red-green block. The greens ought to make gains, it seems. No more talk of them losing their seats in parliament, as it looked for a long time. The Social Democrats are stronger than anyone has ever imagined. They are expected to get around 30 percent of the vote. But then it happens. The numbers – and with them the power balance – begin to collapse. The right-wing “moderates” suddenly look as if they are going to get 19 percent rather than 17. This changes the whole structure. The centre-right block, together with the Sweden Democrats

(SD) get the majority, though only just. This becomes clearer and clearer as the night goes on.

The SD party, which was founded by Nazis (Ekström et al. 2020), has become the second biggest party in the country, because of the votes of the male population. It gains power and now belongs to the “base of the government”. A Sweden Democrat candidate calls out something like “Sieg Heil” to the television cameras (SVT 2022). More and more speeches and proposals pile up during these days, about how some people who come from other countries and look different will not get permanent residence anymore; that if they “behave badly”, they will immediately be deported (DN 14.10.22); and that the climate crisis does not exist (SVT 19.10.22). One of the first measures of the new government is to close down the Department for the Environment (EnvironmentAnalyst 2.11.22).

Many of the adults try to comfort the younger people. And each other. What is the best way to do that? One of the central questions of the last four years. Listen to them. Make it possible to understand the situation, and offer protection, security. Security. That is the word they’re twisting round, the ones who are now coming to power, I think, with enormous grief. They talk about nothing but security; and what they mean by it is SUV machines, nuclear power plants, razing forests, segregating cities, and so on. And through that, they make so many things insecure and fuel the crises. They probably don’t see the security which really holds: that of caring encounters on an equal footing. Because care is needed. So many of the fears are justified, after all: living costs are rising, enormous social inequality is spreading (Cervenka 2022), as well as violence in the society (Ahlander/Johnson 2022); there is increasing segregation between city and country and between the centres of the cities and the outskirts. In the countryside, especially, climate policies meet with scepticism; everything just becomes more expensive, and no one really offers policies to integrate this into real help. Someone would have had to present a plan for the next ten years to guarantee basic security to everyone, I say to myself.

## Formal and substantial democracy

It all started so well. Only two days earlier, the Fridays activists marched through the centre of Stockholm with the adults of People For Future, thousands altogether, ending up back at Mynttorget. But the most crucial debate seemed to be missing. What was clear to many people two years ago during the

pandemic, namely the fact that work and life should be the core, supported, healed, educated and repaired by care, so that everyone has enough resources, has disappeared as a basic idea. The idea of deepening democracy has also disappeared: ideas about redistributing power, breaking down the segregation of cities, redistributing the enormous wealth, and radically reducing emissions as well as protecting the soil and the forests; as the project of building a new, flourishing, inclusive democracy.

And when the media report on the strike in the evening, new reports of drought and floods appear on the same day – in Pakistan and China, for instance (CarbonBrief 2022). Many people are losing their homes forever. Terrible droughts are spreading across Italy and Spain, and huge rivers are running dry in the worst drought in 500 years (EUSI 2022). In France, too, they are suddenly gone: the Loire has disappeared. In China, there is a drought followed by gigantic floods. And coal production continues. Liz Truss' new UK government announces that fracking is allowed, and that oil and gas will both be extracted from under the North Sea.

Four years have passed since the youth began to strike. Most citizens have accepted that humans are having a devastating effect on the environment and the climate. And still, the extent of the crises and the effects of tipping points still don't seem to have got through to people; or else, they are in denial.

Not only authoritarian regimes but also formal democracy – when it is not tied to substantial democracy – can lead to election results which destroy everyone's living conditions and with them the possibility of democracy itself. As societies, we seem not to have understood that. To that extent, elections are only a small part of democratic activity. We need to root the formal in the substantial aspects of democracy.

After the evening of the elections, it is the overt racism that scares people the most. On Tuesday morning, the idea of a spontaneous demonstration comes up. It is to be organised together with all groups across society which see a connection between anti-racism and climate justice, in solidarity. Who will contact whom? When and where? And so, the embryo of the broad movement emerges, which then organises the strike week in September. A few days later, the demonstration takes place. The fear of attacks by right-wing groups hangs in the air. The official organisers are: FFF Stockholm, People For Future Sweden, Black Lives Matter Sweden, Extinction Rebellion Sweden, "No one is illegal," Greenpeace, Amnesty, the Kurdish Women's Council, Friends of the Earth, Doctors Against Racism, Queers Against Fascism, and many more. In the speeches, there is a whole series of descriptions of everyday racism and the

underlying structures. The common fabric of integrity, the substantial aspect of democracy, is damaged, everyone's equal dignity. How to repair it?

## #BeyondGrowth in the EU parliament - a new vision

How can we change the way we live together nationally, across Europe, and globally, so that real substantial democracy can be established?

While some set off on the journey to Lützerath and others work on bringing together all the climate and justice movements in Stockholm, still others are working on political and economic solutions during this spring 2023, and on changing the structures which create injustice in the first place.

It is still early morning at the EU parliament, one day in May. Adelaïde has the floor. In front of her sit hundreds of young climate activists and researchers. Already in autumn 2018, together with Anuna and many other Belgians, she reacted to the Mynttorget group and helped to establish the school strike movement. Now she is making a speech, and after her one speaker after the next comes to the podium. Together, they outline the concrete elements of a new way of living together, a new view of what economics and politics are. #BeyondGrowth is the name of the three-day conference (<https://www.beyond-growth-2023.eu>). The president of the commission, von der Leyen, says the opening words and then hands over to those who are demanding a way of living which would be very differently structured from the one her commission is holding on to.

Many follow these speeches online on the live stream across the world during the three days. And slowly, the feeling takes hold that something is shifting, here and now. A new future is becoming visible to those who have gathered. The 300 or so professors and young people paint an astonishingly consistent picture. Kate Raworth says – firstly – that we can align our society with a “doughnut” goal, rather than with abstract GDP growth, which means focusing on a “secure and fair space” to guarantee that all needs are met with enough means for a dignified life, without breaking the planet's limits. Jason Hickel adds – secondly – that for this, basic services can be established collectively and provided to everyone unconditionally (not only regarding health and education, but also transport, energy, and housing). Thirdly, the debts of the Global South should be cancelled, and reparations should be paid. Raj Patel calls – fourthly – for this to be combined with a transformation of the economy in the Global North, meaning that people and nature in MAPA regions would

no longer be exploited. Julia Steinberger then describes how resources worldwide are enough for everyone, if we pay attention to the logic of sufficiency. She also tweets that she feels like Pippin in *The Lord of the Rings*, achieving historic deeds beside Gandalf, Aragorn, Gimli, and Frodo – though such comparisons make it particularly noticeable that so many female professors and young people are setting the tone here. For a few hours, it feels as if a convivial, globally just postgrowth society might be a possible future.

What would have been unthinkable four years ago is now right in front of us: a vision, and not a niche phenomenon but a potential new mainstream. What has long been discussed at universities and among youth activists, is now entering legislative spaces: queer feminist texts in the tradition of Silvia Federici, inspired by the early texts of intersectional feminism by writers such as Angela Davis, and by decolonial theories and the ecological theories of Vandana Shiva.

And still, during these hours it also becomes so clear that barely any party is standing up for this vision at all, including the left-wing and green parties who are hosting the event; they could change. And soon, we also hear from people such as Emma River-Roberts (2023), who point out that the perspective of the workers' movement is still mainly lacking, and is at most mentioned generally, for instance in the context of trade unions. If this vision of society comes across as being focused on limiting the use of energy and the throughput of material, then hardly anything will be gained; that is the argument. That is why the voices seem so important which emphasise all aspects of democratisation (including Bell 2020): from organising workplaces, to property relations. And that everyone, ultimately also on a global level, has access to the basic services which are necessary for a secure existence, particularly workers in the fossil sector.

Many of those who then take the floor (including Johan Rockström) also explain what the alternative would be – what it would mean to continue as we are. The climate crisis is currently growing at a brutal rate. Southeast Asia is breaking all records. And the global meteorological organisation WMO suddenly shocks everyone by saying that there is a 32 percent chance that the next five years will, on average, already exceed the 1.5 degree rise in temperatures (WMO 17.5.2023).

## On the way to global democracy

These ideas are also discussed by the activists who have gathered in Stockholm when they found the new united movement for the September week and – even globally – for the next years.

It is no longer only about movements protesting for general demands. And it is not about parties or organisations standing up for a concrete program. It is about combining both to make a movement with a concrete global “system change program” for intersectional justice. This raises two questions: how this new movement could be organised, and which forms of action are appropriate – so that the “*BeyondGrowth*” society can truly be realised with the “doughnut” goal.

People are afraid that the next four years in the media and in politics – globally, too – will be shaped by a false, contrived conflict between two worldviews: between the perspective shaped by authoritarian nationalism, a male, patriarchal, and conservative insistence on the superiority of one's own culture and nation, and the neoliberal perspective which is focused on growth and global markets. But this depiction of the problem is wrong, according to many people. Neoliberalism has abandoned people to a competitive fight against each other within a capitalist market over the last thirty years, public organisations have retreated from the countryside, the cities have been segregated, schools and the health system have been weakened, and all of this has contributed to the shift to the right, according to a large part of the research (Brown 2019). Right-wing populism has grown rapidly, including in countries such as Germany and the USA.

So we need a different description of the actual conflict, some say. With the insights of the *#BeyondGrowth* meeting, this could be described in the next months and years as a conflict between those who legitimise domination (over nature and other humans), whether authoritarian or neoliberal, both relying on fossil fuels – and those who want democratic, humane sustainability.

And again, as in the first days of the war, which are now already almost a year ago, I think of this idea: that we can only stop global heating and the extinction of species if we realise this idea of one shared humanity (see the chapter about the war and the new global order).

The activists are in contact with the Fossil Treaty group, which is driving fair global transformation in all areas beyond national borders; with the “commons” group around the Earth4All project, which stipulates that the most important ecosystems belong to, or must be looked after, by all people transna-

tionally (Dixson-Declève et al. 2022); with the Doughnut Economics Lab (with its focus on everyone's needs within planetary limits) and the Faculty For a Future; and with the organisers of the “Global People's Assembly,” as well as with those who are working to transform UN structures on a radically democratic basis.

These initiatives are open for all people and organisations to join; they complement each other, and all aim to democratise the global transformation. Those who are interested in stopping the fossil fuel industry can join the fossil Treaty Initiative. Those who want to change universities and schools as students or teachers can join the Faculty for a Future or Scientists for Future and Scientists Rebellion. Those who want to create sustainable societies locally and globally can join the Doughnut Economics Lab. And of course, there are justice movements everywhere which focus on global transformation, like Climate Justice Now, and international labour movements; and finally, democratic grassroots movements such as Extinction Rebellion, the For Future groups and for the younger ones Youth For Climate and Fridays For Future. Without these movements, it is not very likely that fundamental aspects of our societies will change, if we look back at history.

We can change. Societies can change; they have changed before. But we have to dare to raise our voices, to organise and unite – against what amounts to a crime against humanity but is presented as “normal” by so many people; the parts of society which follow a logic of domination.

The workers' movement seems to be divided on this, between the official direction of the trade unions, which globally has a social democratic orientation, and the groups in the tradition of an international struggle for a just, postcapitalist societal structure, in global solidarity. Somewhere in between, the newer movement for a global “Green New Deal” is located, which brings together figures such as Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Caroline Lucas, and Asad Rehman, and continues the work of groups in the Global South and indigenous populations, who have already been fighting for so long for a change in thinking (Taylor 2021).

What shows itself in all these social initiatives and movements is a spirit of global democracy: to make a common fabric of integrity visible, everyone's dignity. In these movements, many are already trying to implement this approach. We could call it a kind of global “performative” approach. They already want to see themselves and treat each other as global citizens, so that they can measure legislation against this and demonstrate through civil disobedience that the current situation harms our common humanity.

## The (not really) final strike

And on Friday the 21st of April 2023, they gather from all corners of the city once again, as they do every week, to strike in Mynttorget. This time, there are around a hundred young people and adults. The atmosphere is similar to spring 2019. They have spent more than 250 Fridays together since then, almost five years.

For the first time, as a definite sign of spring, the ice cream stall is once again in the square, in all its glory, just as it was in spring 2019. It is warm, a wonderful spring day, and everyone sits on the wall in front of the canal which separates Mynttorget from the parliament and brings the water from the Mälaren lake to the sea. And the first images of the strike appear on my social media, as they do every Friday. From Japan, Brazil, Finland, while the climate scientists on television predict the warmest summer since records began.

During these days, it is warmer than it has ever been in human history, for a whole week (WMO 31.7.2023). One day after another. The world is burning this summer. Italy reaches 48 degrees – a first in Europe. More than a hundred people die in Hawaiian wildfires. The sea is warmer than ever before; it has warmed up much more quickly than expected; with implications for the Gulf Stream and the future weather patterns around the globe (Readfearn 2023). Soon, a large part of the world that has been a habitable “niche” for humans could be uninhabitable (Lenton et al. 2023). And the profits of the oil companies are at record levels again (Ambrose 2023).

And then it comes, the school strike on the 9th of June, which is technically the last one for some of the young people who started the strike movement. They will be finishing high school before the summer holidays, and thus their school days will be over. From now on, for some of the young activists, it would have to be called a “uni strike” or Friday strike. They have held out for five whole years. Every Friday, they have left school to address the public, and with them so many of the global group.

On those cold November mornings five years ago, I said to myself that I would mobilise adults so that the children would not be left alone on the hard ground. That I would not leave them alone. And so it happened, one Friday after another – and through that, the chance opened up to cooperate on founding Scientists For Future and to help form Extinction Rebellion, to work together with the best scientists and contribute to democracy research – and to build an intergenerational global movement with the young people, fighting for their lives and for those of their peers. “Until politicians adhere to the Paris Agree-

ment” – that was the official formulation at the start of the school strike. That has not happened – yet.

What they have achieved in the last five years is incredible. I am often not sure they really understand how they have changed all our lives and what they have done for all “earthlings”. What a difference they have already made through their bravery and courage. Through their friendships and their imagination. I’m not sure they understand how much work they have put into this fight for their peers, and how grateful so many of us are; and how concerned we are for their health. And how many of us wish that all the elders would take responsibility. We should say: we understand; we see you; we get the problem – we are taking action.

In the last three years of the strike, half of the entire quantity of CO<sub>2</sub> has been emitted which could still be emitted within a 1.5-degree budget, which is the limit mentioned in the Paris Agreement (Forster et al. 2023). In three years, it will probably all be gone, this budget, forever. Tipping points of the earth system are being reached. And as if nothing were going on, politicians are still just talking about “net zero emissions in 2045 or 2050.” As if the earth would not be unbearably warm by then, with further hundreds of species going extinct; and fellow humans suffering around the world. Ultimately, this is a denial of reality, an activism for the inhumane status quo.

## The big picture – into the future

New York suddenly goes dark because of forest fires in Canada. The image goes around the world: UN Secretary General Guterres stands at the window and looks out at the filthy yellowish air (IPCC 2023).

The 1.5-degree boundary could already be crossed once for the first time this year or next year (WMO 17.5.2023); soon it would also be exceeded as an annual average. The countries of the world, including all democracies, are not adhering to the Paris Agreement they ratified.

Emissions are still rising worldwide. They ought to stop. The news arrives that the Arctic ice will disappear completely during the summers, regardless of how humanity responds (Carrington 2023). And this will continue to fuel the self-perpetuating processes.



Why are politicians and politics still not reacting and changing, some people ask in the newspapers. There is anger everywhere about the situation – and love, seeing all the creatures suffering, and all the people who are struggling to stop it and create better structures.

It seems that we are still trying just to understand and to establish what substantial democracy would be – in our societies and in activism, locally and globally. The idea only spreads slowly: these are structures of domination which shape society to a large extent, structure huge parts of politics and the economy, lead to crises, and even control forms of activism. They can be replaced by another world view, new knowledge, structures and practices.

The goal is to create structures and circumstances in movements and in society, schools, universities and workplaces so that no one is forced to give up the connectedness to oneself, others and the idea of being humane. This means especially that adults must create a society which enables young people and children to live in circumstances which don't force them to lose contact with themselves and with humanity, through fear, anxiety, lack of resources, and the sense that the future is insecure and existentially threatening.

There is work for everyone there; a whole range of different kinds of work; from organizing strikes to helping with the fundamental transformational initiatives.

But this demands new knowledge, new practices of what I called here “substantial democracy” on a global scale: how to create those social spaces and re-structure the economic basis (see the chapter on Davos and economics); and

redefining our relationships as a sustainable “being towards the world” (see the chapter on the “many fights”; and the chapter on education for the description of a prototype centre and the diabolo-model).

A “one people, one planet” movement for all of us could be organised around these new centres for knowledge and practices. Every school and university could develop one, every village and city; not as elitist locations for very few, but as people’s movements for the broad public.

These centres can bring together the initiatives which have been presented throughout this book. They can foster a bottom-up movement for a fundamental transformation of our local and global society, ending domination (class, gender, ethnicity etc.) and replacing it with substantial democracy and care: the Doughnut Economics Lab (new postgrowth, regenerative economics, forestry, agriculture etc.); the Fossil Treaty Initiative (from fossil to renewable society); the faculty for a future (education); the concept of bioregions; the Earth4All creation of commons; and so on. In terms of governmentality: they are all open to everyone, all individuals on this living planet, as well as to organisations and movements. They act on the level of citizen movements but work with the creation of new binding rules.

But this is not enough; the movements which act as handbrakes are still needed. Real change comes from open, democratic people’s movements – not to stand in the way as privileged, is central; not creating pressure to fit in with middle-class NGO culture and communication skills or drop out with shame (see Bourdieu 2010).

A school strike by children is still one of the strongest political forces we can imagine. And we need a complementary movement of older activists to disrupt the status quo for example at workplaces, through non-cooperation on Fridays or other similar peaceful means. New centres could provide the safety of mutual aid which is necessary to organise strikes and non-cooperation in workplaces, to stop the machinery of the fossil society.

We could unite this function of movements as emergency brakes with the task of building a society which makes everyone’s dignity visible and experienceable; fighting for the new political framework which guarantees unconditionally and without structures of domination the resources to live a life in dignity (see appendix for the three pillars and the two principles).

In the same week that the fires are raging in Canada and darkening the UN headquarters, I take part in a “stress research day” at Stockholm University, together with Isabelle. Loukina, from Switzerland, will be visiting in a few weeks; the two of them have now known each other for more than four years and have

organised so many trips and strikes together. At the university we talk about the experiences of young people worldwide and about the responsibility that falls on all of us. About anger and fear. About exhaustion and grief, the enormous grief. The emissions must stop. The forests must be protected. The fossil fuels must remain in the ground. And this has to happen fairly. And quickly.

We know that this is possible. There are enough resources for everyone here on this living planet. What is needed is that we, the people, stand up for a global, humane democracy; not only as professionals in civil society, creating “narratives” and “campaigns”, but as human beings organizing ourselves to fight for new democratic rules and structures, in a transparent way which is open to everyone. Everyone is needed.

In a report on the 17th of May, 2023, the World Meteorological Organisation states that one of the next five years is very likely to see temperatures more than 1.5 degrees higher than preindustrial levels. There is even a 32 percent chance that the average will be above 1.5 degrees in the next five years. This is drastically worse than previous prognoses (WMO 2023).

The world's seas are also suddenly heating up enormously. This, too, is a development which was not predicted (Readfearn 2023). The razing of the Amazon rainforest is continuing unabated (Grattan 2023).

In the first quarter of 2023, the oil companies BP and Shell make unimaginable profits of around 15 billion dollars (Ambrose 2023). Similar profits are made by the financial sector investing in the fossil industry (Bukold 2023).

“The richest 1 percent grabbed nearly two-thirds of all new wealth worth \$42 trillion created since 2020, almost twice as much money as the bottom 99 percent of the world's population”, says Oxfam (2023), while showing that the richest 10 percent account for about half of all carbon emissions in the world (Oxfam 2015).

And carbon emissions are at an all-time high in June 2023 (Harvey 2023).

In the journal *Nature*, an article points out that current policies will lead to global warming creating lethal living conditions for billions of people, during the lifetimes of the children who are now protesting. A third of the global population live in regions which will then no longer fit into the “niche” of what is bearable for humans (Lenton et al. 2023).

