1. Introduction: Metamorphoses of adaptation

> Behind all the objectifications, sooner or later the question of *acceptance* arises and with it anew the old question: *how do we wish to live?*
> *Ulrich Beck, 1986*[1]

> Och, if I were going there, I wouldn't start from here…

Might it be the case that the modern ideals of progress, emancipation and democratisation are simply the wrong starting point for an analysis of the present state of society and its foreseeable future? That an analysis that reifies modernisation may fail to register real changes occurring in society? That we need to define both the present and the prospective society in defensive – rather than expansive – terms? Might it be the case that society's true lodestar is not individualisation but adaptation, not progress but survival?

Two decades into the twenty-first century, that certainly seems plausible. The global financial crisis of 2008 took the system to the brink of collapse, only for enormous resources to be poured into 'rescuing' pillars regarded as 'too big to fail'. Rather than striking out on a transformative path, the shards were gathered up and stuck back together. Rather than a conscious fresh start, the response was the same old practices of *structural adjustment* to the requirements of capitalism that have always characterised the policies of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. After another decade of crisis, societies across the world are still seeking real alternatives. But wave after wave of disruption – including the

Covid-19 pandemic – has locked them into reactive mode, from the heights of politics and economics to the nitty-gritty of everyday life and personal affairs. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced Western societies into a defensive stance, from which they will not be able to escape by ramping up arms spending. Their version of internationalism is not global progress and solidarity in the style of the classical left of the twentieth century, but fortifying defences as and when dangers appear on their radar. And looming behind these acute crises, of course, is the ultimate threat of climate catastrophe.

It is arguably very difficult to tackle the risks proactively. Modern human society apparently has a destructive relationship to the natural world (while massively overestimating its own ability to control events). Even those who still believe it might be possible to influence the trajectory of capitalism – calling for another 'great transformation'[2] to blunt its destructive logic through social re-embedding[3] – are generally less sanguine about the chances of actually realising such a shift. This is especially clear in relation to climate change,[4] where the frame has narrowed to merely *adaptive responses*: mitigation and resilience to survive the inevitable.

Yet contemporary social analysis remains dominated by the modernisation paradigm, in particular the ideal of individualism (self-realisation). The original modernisation liberated the individual from the repressive ties of blood, soil and church, shattering the 'mechanical solidarity'[5] of pre-modern communities, exploding feudal power relations, and substituting in their place free association of individuals, dynamisation of the social order, and democratisation of personal 'life chances'.[6]

Most accounts would see this logic continuing into late modernity, with a further radicalisation of the freedom to individuate, to singularise the self.[7] Modernisation still means liberation in the sense of expanding opportunities for the individual.[8]

Or at least the possibility thereof. The formats of power associated with (late) modernity have in fact been thoroughly ambivalent, piling ever more responsibility onto the individual, demanding that we choose and curate our lifestyles. Contemporary capitalism forces us to be the architects of our own fortune – with no one but ourselves

to blame for failure. Like it or not, we must operate within a dynamic order, pursuing our life chances amidst an illusion of meritocracy.[9]

Emancipation and authenticity tend to be idealised, while adaptation is frowned upon as a characteristic of traditional societies that shun personal development and demand conformity. Yet escaping such contexts – village, church, family or rigid gender roles – generates its own adaptation pressures: once the traditional ties have been broken, *there is no alternative* to individual responsibility. Adaptation is unavoidable. If you want to 'get on', you must obey rules over which you have no meaningful influence. The transactions are non-negotiable. The price of a house, a car and a fitted kitchen in the post-war era was conformity to a standardised way of life. In order to secure their swanky apartment, electric SUV and Instagrammable holidays, today's professional must bow to the demands of flexibilisation, exhibit complete self-motivation and even fund their own pension. In other words, adaptation *forces*, adaptation is repression.

The idea that adaptation is the opposite of freedom builds on a string of assumptions that appear increasingly implausible today. As a guiding principle, self-realisation is highly contingent. The opportunities of individualism only open up to the broader population once the fundamental issues of *survival* have been resolved. The fulfilment of basic needs like food, shelter and a modicum of social security is, as Ronald Inglehart demonstrates, a necessary condition for the cultural primacy of self-actualisation.[10] From a materialist perspective, that is precisely why the ideal of self-realisation (or individualism) is so closely bound up with the modernisation of society. By driving economic growth and relativising the question of naked survival, modernisation creates the essential preconditions for the flourishing of individual subjectivity.

The decisive point here is that the implicit consensus that our material existence is secure no longer holds. Thus, the systematic return of questions of survival – which is itself an effect of the modern self-realisation paradigm – must form the linchpin of any investigation of the present, and particularly the forthcoming society.

In and of itself, that insight is nothing new. Back in the mid-1980s Ulrich Beck was already discussing the problems generated by modernisation in terms of individualisation and risk.[11] Beck argues

that the negative side effects of modernisation become lodged in the public consciousness, creating ever-increasing demand for new forms of risk compensation. The unfortunate outcomes of mankind's supposed domination of nature – environmental degradation, chemical spills and the latent threat of nuclear war – formed the backdrop to this reappearance of fundamental existential questions.[12] Beck shows how the modern self-realisation paradigm brings forth its own crises of self-preservation. The adaptive response to these is both an effect and a precondition of the possibilities of individualisation. If we take this observation seriously, we can no longer simply denounce adaptation as the opposite of freedom. Instead, adaptation turns out to be its precondition – and a fundamental paradigm of a society confronted with systemic (modernisation-related) threats to its own survival.

This is especially pertinent given that risks, as Beck indicates, tend to be managed rather than resolved, while ongoing modernisation generates new and cascading risks. Existential threats are potentiated, further heightening the sense of a loss of control. This is most obvious in the climate debate, where we can now enumerate the repercussions in great detail: loss of biodiversity (species extinction), specific health risks, rising sea levels, and dramatic shifts when particular *tipping points* are crossed. In other words, we are dealing with a proliferation of secondary dangers.

However well the risks are managed, pressure of adaptation will remain. Even where effective action would theoretically still be possible, the capacity to do so remains conspicuously limited. In the political mainstream, 'manageable climate change' still means a world whose average temperatures are 1.5 to 2° C higher than they were in the pre-industrial age – while the current warming of roughly 1° C is already wreaking havoc, from extinction and disease to devastating forest fires and climate-driven depopulation of entire regions. The question is not *whether* threats to survival will arise but *how grave* they will be and *whom* they will affect.

Comparable problems are glaringly obvious in the economic and geopolitical spheres. Global capitalism is chronically crisis-prone, requiring permanent state intervention to save it from collapse. Its economic practices have brought the ecosphere to the brink of doom,

while enriching a tiny elite at the expense of the masses. At the same time, over-exploitation of the natural environment has itself become a crucial source of economic instability, while alternative political economies are nowhere to be seen. The swansong of US hegemony puts questions of geopolitical self-preservation back on the table. Europe's Cold War fears of nuclear annihilation have given way to anxiety over waning US interest. It is increasingly obvious that we are generating incalculable dangers that we can perhaps temporarily 'externalise',[13] but certainly do not have 'under control'.

So, almost forty years on from Beck's *Risk Society*, the associated hopes have been largely disappointed. In the 1980s and 1990s it was still possible to believe that Beck's brand of individualism would enable us to contain the risks: that consumer boycotts, recycling, lifestyle choices and political pressure could rein in the excesses of risk capitalism, that peace activism could bring belligerents to their senses. Those hopes of a better, or what Beck calls a 'reflexive modernisation' now appear absurdly overoptimistic.[14] Neither subpolitical risk containment, which has certainly occurred to an extent, nor reflexive management of the consequences of modernisation have been able to avert escalating existential threats. Instead, the reflexive paradigm of converting unpredictable dangers into calculable risks has apparently exhausted its possibilities. Nuclear power stations (and increasingly also weather events) are uninsurable because the magnitude of potential claims would plunge even the largest insurer into bankruptcy. The likelihood of devastating forest fires and the pace of rising sea levels may be calculable, but their predictability is scant consolation. Individualisation gains have systematically exacerbated survival risks, generating increasingly tangible pressure of adaptation.

But how should one describe a society that is characterised more by the problems of survival than the benefits of self-realisation? Whose guiding lights are not progress, emancipation or individual liberty, but adjustment and adaptation? Intellectual interventions building on the perspective of adaptation have already begun sketching the outlines of societies moving beyond ruthless prioritisation of the self. In place of the classical metaphors of body and machine, the emblem of today's social analysis is the fungus. What the modern

reflex perceived as a nuisance to be eliminated or a resource to be harvested, consumed or sold at market has now become the symbol of a paradigmatic after-modern way of life.

Eva von Redecker proposes fungi as a counter-model to the isolating individualism of the modern age. Many fungi form extensive underground root-like structures (mycelia) that supply nutrients to trees, receiving in return sugars generated by photosynthesis.[15] Von Redecker conceptualises this as a way of life based on symbiosis, reciprocity and solidarity, upon which we could draw in our relationships with one another and with our natural environment. We need only decide to do so, she asserts.

While von Redecker's romantic take still revolves around the heroic, emancipation-seeking and thus fundamentally modern subject, other fungi-related theories go a good deal further. In her economic and social analysis of the matsutake mushroom, US-based anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing describes a fundamentally adaptive society that has abandoned any hope of modern progress.[16] Like the risks of late modernity themselves, matsutake are an unintentional side effect of modernisation, as they grow only in industrially managed forests. After Japan shifted to more natural forestry methods towards the end of the twentieth century (and the fallout from Chernobyl made fungi from European forests unsafe to eat), a new centre of matsutake-gathering emerged on the West Coast of the United States. Tsing observes a specific arboreal ecology, and with it a specific social ecology, emerging around the matsutake mushroom in forests ruined by capitalist exploitation. Matsutake sustain the wounded forest without healing it. They are aides of adaptation in multiple respects. Quite aside from the woodland ecology, they also form the basis of niche economies for the precarised groups that gather them in the forests of Oregon. Here, Tsing found outsiders and outlaws, and above all Asian immigrants whose sense of community remains foreign to the realities of life in modern America. Together, they form a community of adaptive precarity encompassing trees, fungi and humans, which Tsing interprets as reflecting the condition of a globally networked but fragmented world.

What we are starting to see here is a different, non-modern conception of adaptation. This is no heroic choice of symbiosis, no vision of a society to come. Instead, the social ecology of society itself is imagined as an effect of capitalist destruction and comprehensive loss, while adaptation is a condition of the capacity to make a life in a world where there can be no return to progress and modernity. Tsing sets out to explore the possibilities of 'life in capitalist ruins',[17] where the relationship between power and personal meaning is thrown into sharp relief. Here we begin to discern the contours of a subjectivity after modernity, where visible and invisible networks of solidarity make it possible not only to survive biologically but to thrive socially. Tsing finds the corresponding sense of meaning in the interactions of survival, in niches occupied by unlikely alliances of precarised human and non-human life forms. These provide a glimpse of a possible future, in which accidental ecologies and non-modern communities create the possibility of a 'successful life'.

Our vantage point for this tentative preview of the next society lies on the margins of the present one, where the promises of modernity were abandoned long ago: a ruined forest where uprooted humans are largely left to fend for themselves, where the ambulance never comes on time.[18] One could argue that it is not just modernity, but society itself that has been abandoned here. The social division of labour, as the driving force of capitalist integration, naturally still forms the backdrop; ultimately, the fungi are destined for the world market. But the positive aspects – solidarity, freedom, meaning – are properties of the micro-communities of the dispossessed. In a very fundamental sense they are fending for themselves at the margins of society. What we are looking at here are adaptive communities, not an adaptive society.

We encounter the latter where society is mobilised in response to an acute threat, as was the case with Covid-19. The pandemic has often been discussed as a preview of the kind of crisis that will characterise the twenty-first century. The pandemic was not just an outcome of our society's brutal exploitation of the natural environment. It also presaged the present and future climate crisis, in the sense that it posed acute danger to human life, mercilessly exposed deficits of political management, and elicited

fundamental – if temporary – reconfigurations of the political economy. It was also a crisis of capitalism, not only because the underlying relationship to nature can be characterised as genuinely capitalist,[19] but also because the associated economic and social repercussions delivered significant shocks to the capitalist mode of economy itself. The fundamental shifts revealed by this paradigmatic crisis of adaptation tell us a great deal about the character of the adaptive society. The pandemic suddenly transformed the neglected problems of a vulnerable and self-destructive society – the questions of reproduction and survival – into the core concerns of everyday life, and placed them at the very centre of public debate. For a moment, fantasies of individual liberty and self-realisation took a back seat as strategies for protecting life moved to the fore, along with an emphasis on social interdependencies and interconnectedness. That dynamic led to profound changes in modes of societal coordination: the impromptu division of the labour force into essential and implicitly non-essential workers springs to mind immediately, as do the temporary mobilisations of volunteers and military personnel. For a time survival took precedence, sidelining activities that normally enjoy much greater social status and prestige. For a brief period, in a social praxis of adaptation, the spotlight fell on the tasks and professions that are most central to the preservation of society. This time, the ambulance did arrive on time. Collective adaptation, it transpires, is a specific form of labour directed towards maintaining life and conducted within the foundational sectors of the economy.[20] Adaptation, it would appear, is to a significant extent a matter of infrastructure. It prioritises the general over the specific, collective duty and individual responsibility over competitive self-realisation.

So what else do we find, if we place adaptation at the heart of social analysis? What concepts of emancipation, what ideas about time and history, what promises of a subjectively good life, and what political perspectives characterise an adaptive society? As these genuinely sociological questions reveal, there is much more at stake than mere biological survival. The problems of self-preservation that characterise our discussions about society need to be considered as questions concerning the ways people make sense of their lives. For the way we live forms the elementary basis of all complex societal

structures, and is in turn sustained and reproduced by them. If we are to grasp adaptation as social praxis, then we are dealing first and foremost with the configurations of an adaptive way of living. The central point of reference here is Max Weber's famous analysis of the social origins of capitalist modernisation. As Weber argues, these lie in specific horizons of meaning that are predicated on the possibility of future salvation.[21] In his treatise on the Protestant ethic, Weber lays out how the Protestant frame of eternity fostered the this-worldly asceticism that spurred capitalist development.

It is not hard to see how such a perspective also raises questions concerning power and authority in society. The way life is conducted structures the social, from the configurations of inequality to the modes of political power. It makes a difference whether one views liberal democracy from the perspective of a labourer or a manager. The former sees and despises an exploitative system; the latter affirms the source of her success and recognition. Any critique of society must thus start from the ways of life that shape it.

The decisive point for any contemporary social analysis is that the *possibility* of 'a way of life' can no longer be assumed where the threats to society become existential. Instead, a basal realisation that the modern way of life is fundamentally endangered by its own unintended side effects is inherent to the adaptive society. The adaptive constellation thus raises the sociologically decisive question: What ways of social life are possible where survival is endangered?

The short answer to this question, which I will unravel piece by piece in the following chapters, is that, firstly, an adaptive society generates its own sources of meaning through an adaptive praxis whose basic outlines are rejection of the modern concept of personal emancipation, reflexive renunciation of the ideal of progress, and a post-narcissistic ideal of life based on competence and responsibility. Secondly, life in the adaptive society generates a specific political dynamic that I would define as a *technocratic yearning*. In so doing, I treat adaptation as a genuinely *social* phenomenon. My interest is to conduct a neutral examination of adaptation as a central social praxis, not to praise or bury it. We need to dispense with the normative connotations acquired in the course of the modern age. In that tradition, 'adaptation' and

'adjustment' often have a cynical or denunciatory tinge: cynical, where adaptation means stabilising a social order that actually needs to be changed; denunciatory where adaptation is understood as an affront to the individual's right to self-realisation. I therefore start – in Chapter 2 – by discussing the traditional sociological understanding of adaptation and siting it in relation to the current crisis of late modernity. It transpires that all the relevant examples of societal adaptation arise, as intimated above, in contexts of a normative primacy of self-realisation. Switching the perspective to existential problems opens the door to a new understanding of adaptation as an integrated praxis of individual and collective transformation and a precondition for liberty in the adaptive society. At the same time this challenges the modern norm of personal emancipation. Adapting our understanding of adaptation also bears – for all the inherent contradictions – its own perspective on freedom. If the cultural primacy of individualism is transcended, its burdens can also fade away.[22]

On the other hand, the adaptive society represents a categorical departure from the classic modern understanding of progress as constant optimisation and boundless self-realisation. The rise of the adaptation paradigm, as manifested in concepts like mitigation and resilience, is therefore associated with a collapse of temporal horizons, as I explain in Chapter 3. The adaptive society, it follows, is already further advanced than most of the social science observing it. Its praxis, its way of life, has abandoned the project of social progress, of heroically 'conquering the future' through relentless betterment and limitless individualism. Here again an inherent perspective of liberation shimmers through. Renouncing progress also relieves the subject of responsibility for the discredited project of social optimisation.

Relief from the burdens of self-realisation and from responsibility for a destructive modern project is, of course, a perspective of negative freedom. It will be liberating if we no longer have to make a show of our individuality; if we no longer have to emphasise the solitary over the collective; and if we no longer have to pretend that we will be able to solve planetary problems just by putting in a little more effort. Seeking positive perspectives on freedom, I turn in Chapter 4

to a body of literature that provides an affirmative concept of adaptation as a praxis free of the compulsion to aggrandise and accelerate,[23] a creative and rebellious praxis challenging cultural norms and social rules. The focus on survival lends the adaptive revolt – as manifested, for example, in the new climate movement – a political logic of its own, expressed as a desire for rational technocracy.

This technocratic yearning reappears in Chapter 5, in which I turn to the adaptive society in action. I tackle this question empirically, using qualitative interviews with essential workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. My intention here is to focus attention on the key actors of adaptation, the workers most centrally involved in the collective adjustment of society. One could call them the adaptive avant-garde. I understand their experiences during the acute phase of crisis as a natural experiment in adaptive praxis and its interpretation. The interviews reveal their criticisms concerning their own situation and society at large, and their perspectives on freedom. The subjects describe massive overwork and stress within a social order they perceive to be fundamentally bifurcated – a division they attribute to narcissistic cultural influences and a systemic crisis of political capacity. As the interviews reveal, they ultimately hope for relief through a depoliticisation of survival risks, implemented by a competent technocracy.

The concluding chapter explores the implicit political vectors associated with the adaptive society. The central political interest associated with survival is neither democratisation nor personal emancipation. Instead, we see a longing to address existential threats without political strife; this is true of protesters and technocrats alike, and of political theories that take as their starting point questions of survival. Under the primacy of survival, depoliticising risk becomes the decisive condition of political legitimacy. In sharp contrast to the age of individualism, prioritising survival points us towards a civilisation where freedom is defined in terms of depoliticisation. *Protective technocracy* is the logical social contract of the adaptive society.