

Chapter 7: The Uprising

March – April 2019: The first global strike, and the London occupation

The 15th of March – the day of the global strike

The day starts undramatically in New Zealand: “Wellington is on the march” says the brief message on Twitter at eleven in the evening, when it is still the 14th of March in Europe. Smiling faces of primary school children. Then: Australia, easily more than 100 000 people are out protesting. The films from Sidney and Melbourne are impressive. Soon afterwards: Kathmandu, Nepal: hundreds. That must be the highest-altitude strike. It comes closer. The earth turns.

And in Stockholm, a hesitant rain is falling. How will the day be? Have the ones who travelled to Strasbourg even returned safe and sound? While we receive the first photos from South Africa at around 9 in the morning, a few activists from Stockholm are on the biggest newspaper livestream, “Expressen,” giving an interview on breakfast television. The evening before, they arrived back at midnight, happy after their EU demonstration. Now, on the morning of the global strike, they look out from the TV screen, just like their fellow activists from Mynttorget, who have been invited to the biggest private TV station, TV4.

“You’re really worried?” asks the TV presenter. “Yes. If politics doesn’t change, our life will become a catastrophe.” “And you’ve been on strike every week?” asks the co-presenter in admiration. They are suddenly – as they are again later on-stage and backstage – the ones who are looked at by thousands of their peers not just in recognition but in excitement: heroes who are reported on in the media and whom children talk about in the cafes where they go to warm up with hot chocolate and cinnamon buns on the day of the strike.

Week after week, they sat on the ground and hundreds, thousands of people just walked past them.



But in Mynttorget it is still quiet. A few more TV teams and journalists are there than usual, and the first school classes also appear amazingly early. Slowly the square fills up, it will be midday soon – and everything is going wrong. On the posters, the young people had written: we will meet in Mynttorget from 12. But a few of them had the idea a week ago that the high schools of the city could march in a star formation to gather on the main square in Stockholm, the Sergelstorg. Then they were to march onward to Mynttorget, which is close by.

Shortly before 11:30 some of them set off, curious to see what is happening in Sergelstorg. Are the school classes actually leaving their classrooms? No one has really organised this part, or even thought about it. The Drottninggatan runs directly from Mynttorget to Sergelstorg, through the parliament buildings, past the government building known as the “Rosenbad”, and then past the education ministry and up to Åhlens, the biggest shopping centre in the city. Microphones and cameras jostle each other in front of Greta, Ell, and the others.

The Drottninggatan is half empty. The only obstruction is the press – until they all walk round the corner and stand in the middle of Sergelstorg. There are not eight school classes there, but ten thousand young people, chanting and

yelling. All of them are just going forward in a kind of trance. And soon they are standing up on the Gallerie in the centre of the square. Chaos reigns, just as it does on other big squares across the world in Manila, Milan, Paris, Kampala, Berlin, Bern, Sidney, Buenos Aires, and Tokyo where Loukina, Mitzi, Sommer, Bianca, Nicki, Erik, Saoi, and Dylan are gathering with their friends.

Days ago, years ago, they thought that they were the only ones who were concerned, sitting alone in their classrooms or at home; haunted by nightmares of a burning planet. Now, they realise suddenly that they are not alone, and haven't been. That there are many more who care.

They stand still. Everything is blocked. For a second, it is as if time stands still and the sound diminishes.

"What should we do now?" "We should just go back and take the rest of them with us", someone suggests. "We can't go back. The police won't allow it." The only other possible route is a long detour through the Kungsträdgården, the most popular and biggest central park in the city, and then over the bridge in front of the palace, round the back way to Mynttorget. That means passing the junction which we blocked five months ago with Extinction Rebellion.

Many have their "There is no planet B" signs with them. And they will yell back when the young people half an hour later shout from the stage, "Keep it... in the ground. Keep it in the ground" – referring to coal, oil, and gas. That is what they care about, this whole generation. They know that ultimately coal, gas and oil must stay in the ground. In Germany, but also in China, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia. And that politically no path has been established to guarantee this in global cooperation, even if UN General Secretary Guterres tweets that night that he is going to organise an extra meeting in New York in September because of the global school strike, to guarantee that the Paris Agreement is followed.

Hours earlier, when the day began, the young people sat on the bench in front of the wall they all lent against in September, when it was so absurdly warm in Mynttorget. Swedish TV had finally arrived. "What do you propose?" the reporter wanted to know. "How should things continue after the strike? What should happen next?" "Everything has to change." "If we take the Paris Agreement seriously, everything has to change." What has been legitimised during entire lifetimes, the exploitation of nature and of other people, all of that has to stop, I think, it has to be seen as irrational and violent; the soil has to be ploughed sustainably and animals cannot be eaten. People cannot get rich from this violence. It is as if the whole of humanity has to wake up from a dream.



"There are a lot of people here." Greta looks at the masses of people in front of her. It is now after twelve and the march has finally arrived in Mynttorget. There are more than 15 000 children and young people standing there and listening to the beginning of her speech; in exactly the place where otherwise on Fridays about fifty people stand quietly talking to each other. Next to her on stage: the whole Mynttorget group, the "original crew", as they are now called. Many parents describe weeks later what the day meant to their children. "First I would like to thank you. Thank you for coming." Greta turns to the Stockholm young people who have dared to strike. They are supposed to be at school. Along with them, on this day, 1.6 million children and young people in 125 countries on this planet have left their schools. "Thank you to those of you who are standing on this stage." In her yellow raincoat, Greta looks at her companions, who have been by her side for seven months. "And thank you to everyone who has helped to organise this strike." Then a short pause for breath. "We children did not cause the problem of the climate crisis, it was just there. [...] We do not accept that! We don't let this happen! Therefore, we are on strike. And we will continue!"

The global Facebook chat is completely overcrowded. Everyone wants to know how it's going; new numbers are coming from countries we've hardly heard from before. Chaos breaks out, the Excel tables have to be started again twice. In the middle of the night, everyone in the main chat agrees that there

is reliable enough data for us to use the figure of 1.4 million when talking to the press; later, this is corrected to 1.6 million. Paris and Madrid – around 50 000 people. The police confirm it. Montreal and Milan – around 100 000 children and young people... Jonas is there with the Swiss numbers, Luca with the German ones, Janine and Benjamin are trying to keep track. When we pass the threshold of a million, at around ten in the evening, the news spreads like wild-fire; also to the strikers in all their suburbs in Stockholm. And everywhere in the world, children and young people are going to bed late, full of experiences which have changed their lives. They have power. If they seize it.



Looking at the map with the thousand cities on all continents, I feel for a second, how a world could be beyond all structures of domination, a world where everyone, every child, is treated as equal and free. And then, at the same time, it is clear: all of this makes no sense if we older ones do not react, tenfold, and reflect back to all of the young people what we have seen in their hearts and heard from their lungs during this day – and act.

“Everything must change” – a new foundation for the UN charter

“Everything must change.” On the morning of the 15th of March, two articles are published in The Guardian. One of them is by George Monbiot, the climate columnist. The other is by Greta and the seven or eight well-known European faces of the climate strike. Both agree that there is a basic problem with our

society. Rather than caring for and sharing nature and its resources, we regard them as the property of competing individuals and states, as property which is also defined as an object, or as Monbiot expresses it: as something we can use however we want. We can burn it. We can waste it. We don't have to care for it.

But the gap report by the UN (UNEP Production Gap Report 2019) shows that within this political approach and setting, so many infrastructure projects (coal power stations, oil towers, refineries, gas pipelines etc.) have been set up and planned on a contractually binding basis that in the next ten years these projects will already produce double the greenhouse gases allowed by the Paris Agreement and the IPCC-SR-15 report. How can we break away from this path to a nightmarish world that is three or four degrees warmer – a path which has been legitimised by Swedish, German, and Swiss governments? All of us have to gather around a table, I think on the evening of the strike day, in order to stop the fossil projects together and replace them with renewable projects. But this depends on a new way of thinking, a new way of seeing nations and property, of defining resources and nature, for all of us. In his short article, Monbiot refers to the ideas of John Locke, who still shapes our modern economic system today (see also von Redecker 2021): that nature can be private property, according to Locke through and for those who first claim it and “mix” it with their own work, by cultivating the soil, as Monbiot says, or by having slaves cultivate it. So it becomes our own; it becomes a thing under our control. More or less every one of the 1.6 million young people who are walking through the streets of Kathmandu, Melbourne, Stockholm or Rio will find this idea absurd, I think; at least the ones I talk to. It is a philosophical construct.

The intuition which many of the activists probably have is this: nature is something we find ourselves in; we can prune its trees to improve their fruit, and we can harvest the fruit, but nature is not a product. The modern concept of property is hardly appropriate when we think about forests, fields, and mountains, let alone the inside of the earth. If there was any message on this day, I think to myself, it's this: we are a population who depend on each other on a single living planet, and we want to look after each other in such a way that we can live together, as human beings.



The strike is really becoming global. Suddenly young people from all countries are standing together in the streets at the same time, close to their parliaments: in Europe, America, Australia, and also in countries in the Global South, which was exploited for centuries by colonial powers, dominated by western elites (see Margolin 2020, Hickel 2018), which extracted their knowledge, their work, their mineral resources, and, you could say, their humanity. It is possible and necessary that the populations of this world can come together and see all the riches of nature as something shared, that is the idea that now comes to the fore (similar: Dixon-Declève et al. 2022); and not as abstract property that can be used. There would have to be a global contract, I think to myself, setting out how we can leave oil and coal in the ground. Then there could be a new article, article “zero”, in the UN charter, I go on imagining the utopia. Of course, you’d think that the general assembly and the security council would never allow a

change to the foundation of the UN. But the basic premises have changed as the Amazon has burned. Even for governments, the climate has become one of the most important security issues (Hardt 2020).

After the unimaginable horrors of the Second World War, when the world picked itself up and set about creating a shared foundation, the UN charter was created, meaning the basic understanding, shared by all humans, of how states should behave towards each other, as a basis for what is legal and what is not. What was important and sensible at the time now reads differently. A crucial dimension is missing. Article 1 states that the global community must be organised in such a way that there is peace for everyone. Article 2 then explains that every state is responsible for its own territory and that everyone must respect this territorial integrity. Clever, when you think about the wars of aggression and about colonialism. This purely “negative” concept of our shared life on this planet, defined by the idea that we cannot interfere in other people’s affairs, reaches its limits when states can cut down forests on their own territory and burn coal, disturbing the whole planetary earth-system; and when we consider our shared history. The next step is to put this idea into practice (see the chapter on a new global order): to sit down together for a conference and make a binding agreement as “one people”, defining which stores of coal, oil and gas have to remain in the ground where; how we can work together in a fair way to reduce emissions by more than ten percent per year; and how we can provide enough resources to everyone so that they can live a good life – this would be a possible program under the heading, “We, the people... for future.”

We shouldn’t be allowed to take the toxic substances out of the ground; all of us are convinced of that. For that, we need to have some sense of a world community; and precisely that is embodied by the global unity of the climate strikers.

The occupation of London

In the week before Easter, everything comes to a head again. After almost a year of preparations, the “rebellion week” arrives, the uprising for which Extinction Rebellion was founded last summer. Now it is not just about a demonstration or a strike. It is literally about an uprising, with all the consequences. The centre of London is to be occupied, disrupting society in England until the government responds to three demands: telling the truth about the extent of the climate crisis, setting the goal of zero emissions by 2025, and doing so demo-

cratically through “citizens’ assemblies”. This form of uprising by a large section of the population for future generations, prepared for years, has probably never been seen before in a western democracy. Part of the population is prepared to go to prison to insist on a different politics.

In Stockholm, we know which protest actions are being planned in the centre of London, and we study the map to see where they will be taking place. Four critical locations in London are to be blocked, and above all permanently held, for days or weeks, so that the population and then the government will have to react: Oxford Circus and Marble Arch as the two centres of the shopping district, Waterloo Bridge as the central axis, and above all Parliament Square, right in front of the centre of power. For that to work, thousands of ordinary people must be prepared to block these places peacefully with their bodies and be arrested for it. No one knows how the police and government will react. How will the rebels be able to hold the open space in front of parliament, against hundreds of police officers?

We have also prepared ourselves for our blockade in Stockholm, which is taking place at the same time. There is to be a smaller, twofold action, straight away on Monday, at the same time as the beginning of the London occupation. First, there will be a “die in”, with everyone lying down as if dead in the middle of the parliament passage, and then the parliament bridge will be occupied and held for at least a day, even if there are arrests.

At the same time, Greta makes a speech at the EU parliament at the last session of the climate committee before the elections. She calls on everyone to take part in the coming elections, but also points out in doing so that none of the parties has an approach which really takes the Paris Agreement seriously. She has to bend over the microphone to speak. After a few sentences, she begins to list everything our civilisation is destroying, from the forests to the animal species which being exterminated by humans. In her voice, there is sadness, and a huge sense of grief comes over us who hear it. The regular strikers in Stockholm begin to write a message, sending love and support.

Many of them and even of the older activists have a sense of despair in these weeks. Some also call it eco-anxiety: not just a feeling of fear for all that will happen in the future; not just nausea because the older generation doesn’t care, breaks the attachment and leaves them alone; not just a feeling of being powerless, but all of this combined into a diffuse anxiety, as if a black hole were eating up every joy and the trust in humanity. Tori Tsui, a young climate justice activist from Hong Kong, points out how important it is in such situations to find a community that can offer support (Tsui 2023). And I think again: it

shouldn't be the young people who have to fight. It should be the generation that is now standing up and leading the fight in London.



We watch eagerly, following Twitter and Facebook to see the Londoners taking over the squares. Everything unfolds surprisingly peacefully (Taylor et al. 2019). At Marble Arch and Parliament Square, there are people dancing. Many of them have brought plants with them and turned the depressing tarmac designed for cars into a colourful living room. Musicians soon arrive, especially in the evenings, including classical performers, and begin to play. Oxford Circus blossoms into the centre of the speeches: a pink boat is driven along and screwed down in the middle of the street, the “boat of truth.” The most dif-

ficult part is defending the four entry roads onto Parliament Square against the police, who keep trying to clear them.

While we set up our blockade on the bridge, we hear about the first arrests in London. There will be many, hundreds, day after day. London's centre is becoming a battleground without violence. Parliament Square is surrounded again and again by endless chains of police. But it still doesn't fall, not on Monday evening, not on Tuesday, not on Wednesday. The lawyer Farhana Yamin, who was one of those who worked on the Paris Agreement, glues herself to a building so that she cannot be removed (Mathiesen 2019). For a day, in Stockholm, we hold the bridge which connects parliament with the government building. Most of the young people who are striking for the climate want to take part in the blockade, even though they know that they can be arrested. The adults from the Mynttorget group stand on the side facing the parliament, with Mynttorget in front of them, and next to them the Mynttorget young people with about a hundred rebels behind them.

In front of us are the police, and for a long time it is unclear how they will react and whether they will arrest people. We are standing in an area of the city which is regarded as requiring special protection, meaning that the police have extra powers. We keep the bridge despite all the uncertainty and fear, and after an hour in which we let a few passers-by through, the young activists block it completely for the rest of the day.

And that is how a key moment comes about: the spokesperson for the green party on climate policy is literally standing in front of us, separated from us only by a huge banner. The parties of the red-green government, dependent on the neoliberal parties, promised before the elections some months ago that they would implement the Paris Agreement. But now, they talk about "net zero 2045" as the goal – when we all know that the CO₂ budget for 1.5 degrees will be gone around 2030. And on top of this, the government's own climate council with around ten universities represented says that the established policies are not at all sufficient to reach this very inappropriate target of 2045 (Klimatpolitiska rådet 2019). Everything is wrong here; it goes against the fundamentals of democratic institutions and processes. If we know that 2045 is too late, we have to change the agreements even if these were made years ago by most of the political parties. And again, the most vulnerable in Sweden and globally, the children, are affected the most.

Should we just observe all of this, we ask the green spokesperson. And we say: it is legitimate to use methods of nonviolence to get the society on the road to a sustainable future for all. Many more should join. During the next four

years, the emissions must already decrease drastically. We are getting nearer and nearer to more tipping points. But emissions are not going down (Urisman Otto in Thunberg 2022). The Swedish banks and pension funds are still financing the fossil industry. But even after the discussion with the climate policy spokespeople during the blockade, it is unclear to all of us how Sweden is in any way thinking of reducing its emissions by ten or twelve percent per year; how the ten tons of CO₂ per person could decrease to two. Flying, driving “fossil” cars, eating huge amounts of meat, cutting down the forests, investing in oil shares – barely any limits are placed on any of this by political means; nor is there any debate how this can be done with justice and care for the ones with the least resources. The rich who produce the most emissions are even supposed to be receiving a huge amount of tax relief in the next four years. Why should people in China or India stand up for more climate politics when they see the inaction in Europe?

At the same time, it becomes so palpable that those who are intervening in the power relations with their bodies or making speeches about biodiversity at the EU parliament are vulnerable. There is no point imagining how we could shake off that vulnerability. That is not possible, and it is not a path we can take. That is precisely the path taken by those who are bringing the world to the brink of destruction: they build tanks, barriers, walls, weapons, SUVs and try in vain to hide their “condition humaine”. We are endlessly vulnerable and reliant on each other, on the care of others for our vulnerable bodies when we are small or very old, on help, on encouraging words. That is what Kierkegaard described as “absurd”: that we humans live our lives and even love other people and animals, wanting to build relationships, even though we know that at the next moment a branch can fall on our heads. We have to learn to deal with that. The society, the economy which we must build together in the next ten years will have to be founded on that, on the realisation that we need each other.

Some days later, in Rome, Greta focuses on this in her speech: for decades, some powerful and rich people have accepted the fact that the whole environment is being destroyed and that thousands of people are dying – in floods like the ones in Mozambique a month ago, in droughts like those in Syria, in storms and wars for oil. In Paris, Extinction Rebellion occupies the “Défense,” the area where the headquarters of the big banks are located, as well as oil companies such as Total.



In London, meanwhile, the police are acting ever more decisively against the protesters. Emma Thompson, the Oscar-winning actor, stands on the pink boat in the middle of Oxford Circus and encourages the rebels to stay, surrounded by a circle of police. In addition to this, the whole square is now surrounded by a further circle of police in yellow. Kate Raworth, the economics professor, tweets: hey, they're forming my doughnut, the shape of her vision of a fair and sustainable society. On English TV, Rupert Read, a philosophy professor at East Anglia University, is describing how serious the situation is. A week ago, George Monbiot was on television calling for the abolition of this system which stuffs more and more into itself because it is aiming for exponential growth – how is nature supposed to bear that? And in the evening, David Attenborough's documentary film is shown, which begins with him visiting us in Mynttorget, and which shows clearly how dramatically the situation has already deteriorated.

We all breathe out slightly. It is possible, after all, to spread this information in the media. But in contrast with this, the rest of Europe says nothing at all about the dramatic events in London. The Swedish papers don't report on them. The German papers barely do so. Where are they now, ZDF, *Le Monde*, all the familiar journalists who have excitedly stopped off at Mynttorget? Why are they silent now, when a real conflict is happening and it's not just a fuss over celebrities and children?

Again and again, the occupation threatens to collapse, especially in Parliament Square; on Thursday evening it is especially dramatic. But then suddenly a line of cyclists appears with the XR symbol on their backs. And when everyone thinks that the square is being completely cleared, a group of drummers marches into view, hundreds of people, reinforcements. And the police have to start again with their arrests. The protesters do not give up the square, for the whole of that first week. They hold Oxford Circus too, without the boat now. More than a thousand people are arrested (Swenson 2019).

Here, too, on the bridge we're blocking, the situation comes to a head. The police announce that they have the power to arrest us immediately. We take this in and say that we need to discuss it, to the astonishment of the police. And now the process starts which has been such an outstanding feature of FFF and XR in the last months. In the individual small democratic groups which we have formed, heated discussions take place and a consensus is sought and voted on, using the thermometer system: hands in front of you means "I don't know," hands up means "yes," and hands down means "no." A delegate is sent to the general meeting. None of this can be observed by the police, because we have turned the banners into a wall. We delay the decision. But then the band of rebels from Myntorget decides to go all the way with the blockade. They lie down in the street as a human carpet, and the police back off. The young people are the ones who behave most bravely, with the greatest solidarity, as a group.

In the UK and other countries, polls show that by the end of the week, people have changed their minds in enormous numbers, and now see the climate crisis as the main problem, and protest as legitimate (Kountouris/Williams 2023). The UK government declares a climate emergency.

The results of the Australian elections: against all predictions, the centre-right parties win. They are the ones who want to continue with coal production and expand it, and this makes it possible to build the Adani coal mine, one of the biggest fossil infrastructure projects worldwide which will affect the global climate in the next decades. The parliamentary discussion about this project already provoked the first international strike back in November. At the same time, temperatures of 49 degrees are recorded in Australia.