

Chapter 6: The Prelude to the Uprising

February – March 2019: The first international meeting,
and the founding of Scientists for Future

The global uprising emerges – the young activists are connected across the world

In these days, new countries join the Fridays for Future chats one after another. They act as a climate movement for all countries – these young people who don't want to accept any relations of domination anymore. We can no longer accept this way of treating people and nature, they tweet, from Uganda, Uruguay, Argentina, and Japan. That is why the idea of the global strike makes so much sense to them. What is happening is not an issue in just a few countries, but a systemic problem for all populations. For a few children in the Global South, the connection between pollution, global warming and labour exploitation is visible every day, as they report in the chats. And they can talk to their peers in the Global North about this twenty-four hours a day, as well as about the suffering, the heat waves and the floods which they see. It is not about abstract “populations” but about their aunt who can hardly breathe because of the air pollution from the burning of fossil fuels.

All together, they prepare themselves in their own ways for the 15th of March. The map and the homepage of Fridays for Future, created by Jan and Jens a long time ago, turn out to have a whole unexpected potential. In one city after another, across the world, a new dot appears marking where people are striking, at which location exactly, and who the contact person is for locals. An English Twitter account called Dormouse helps to keep a record of all locations. The map is like a treasure map, and like the fictional adventurer Nils Holgersson, we can use it to fly across the country and then the world, visiting individual rebels. It will continue to play this role until a year later, when a new

website is created by an international group of young activists around Simon from Mynttorget, with the help of Chris in Berlin.

Week by week, new countries join. Bangladesh, Pakistan, Kenya, and so on. To the delight of everyone in Mynttorget, it suddenly seems that a “global” protest action is really coming. What was initially nothing more than an idea in the minds of a few young people is gradually materialising. In many countries, we hear in Mynttorget, it is dangerous to go on strike; partly because it is forbidden by the regime, as in Moscow and China, partly because in many African countries the education system is not set up in such a way that strikes are easily possible. In many countries, such as Bangladesh, Friday is a holiday for cultural and religious reasons. Working groups emerge. Fridays for Future is on a good path internationally, I think myself, but it is still so unbelievably vulnerable. On the new communication channel, Discord, which is really a platform for gamers, it is possible for anyone to get involved and then suddenly act like they have a central position in FFF and suggest things that could mess everything up. That is also because many of the young people who are otherwise very active, the most active in their countries, don’t have time on top of that to read what is being said on an international channel and take part in the discussion. And every week there is a terrifying new report on the ecological crisis. The Keeling curve, which shows CO₂ concentration in the air, rises higher and higher, easily passing 410 ppm. Tipping points are already being passed: the permafrost is thawing, and the Greenland ice seems to be melting irreversibly, at least close to the sea (King 2020).

A homecoming, and a farewell

There is widespread relief when Greta finally returns from Davos and appears behind her sign. Everyone gathers in Mynttorget. The magazine *Spiegel Online* is here. So is the TV channel ZDF. A few more critical media are here too, including *Svenska Dagbladet*, and the *Spiegel* is taking an investigative approach and attempting to follow up all the rumours that Greta is trying to make money through her strike. That’s all nonsense, I say again and again; the movement is held together by Isabelle, Loukina and all the others. In the international chats, preparations for the 15th of March are in full swing, and more and more young people and their parents are hearing about the plan. Brice, Benjamin and Andreas, the French-Luxembourgian-Danish musketeers, are deep in discussion: Should we be presenting a unified list of demands? Now that we have the atten-

tion of the whole world for one day and can coordinate with each other, what should we ask for? The young people in Mynttorget are sceptical: let's focus on the collective uprising.

On this strike Friday in late winter, I go back to the university. The corridors are silent. The students here and at the other universities where I've taught still have too little idea of the ecological and climate crisis, existentially, I think to myself; and they do not learn the skills which are so bitterly needed in order to build up a global, sustainable, fair society. The heads of the universities ought to act. How to change that? The idea occurs to me of forming a centre for sustainability, a prototype which could be adopted by all schools and universities worldwide (see the chapter on education). I myself am more sad than anything else. My limited contract at Stockholm University is running out and I have soon to stop working with my students, who have become important to me. Maybe I can continue working at the next-door Institute for Children and Youth Studies.

Far away, in countless German-speaking lecture halls, academics in a whole range of subjects are having similar thoughts and are in the process of joining together. They will call themselves "Scientists for Future" – and they are composing a statement in support of the young activists. They have had enough of their institutions' passivity. Just in time for the global strike, the world is to hear about the most important research.

The conflict over the trip to the EU parliament in Strasbourg

The weeks of the global uprising have come. And at one focal point of this uprising are those who could change everything, the politicians in the parliaments.

We are standing at the edge of Mynttorget in a group of fifteen people: on the one hand, climate scientists from the Stockholm universities have gathered, and on the other, there are the environment and climate spokespeople of all the political parties in the Swedish parliament. After half a year of strikes on their doorstep, they seem to feel that they ought to take a stance.

In the centre stands a friendly, politically active climate scientist, a leader in his field: Douglas Nilsson, who had visited the strike already in the very first August week, and who is now speaking to a green liberal politician. "Yes, we welcome your research and also this strike," says the "centrist" politician. That's what all the politicians say who come by here, and then they take selfies. "But you're not even listening to what our research says; you have to make massive

reductions in emissions, right now, every year. Where's the legislation? That's your job." "We would like to, but in politics it's necessary to make compromises; that's democracy." That is the main argument which is made again and again. It is also made by the green climate minister and deputy prime minister Isabella Lövin, who sometimes comes by Mynttorget. "I would like to, but..." The climate action plan presented by the left-wing and green coalition government soon afterwards is criticised by representatives of all universities (the climate advisory group set up by the government) as entirely inadequate; particularly because it does not even make clear how much emissions have to be reduced by, or which measures could contribute to this and how.

In Switzerland, the climate activists demand that the government present a climate action plan for "net zero 2030". Together with scientists and civil society, they begin to make such a plan themselves, for all sectors including transport or energy. But the social democrat president Sommaruga also only signals hesitant agreement: "We have to make compromises. Do you want to undermine democracy?" she asks. "We want to strengthen it," reply the young activists. "Across generations."

But then the letter arrives from the green and social democrat MEPs in the EU parliament, sent to all European national groups of FFF. "You are cordially invited to join the climate discussion in Parliament on the 13th of March. We will pay for your travel and a hotel – 20 000 EUR." How should we react, the young people ask. The whole strike is directed against these very MEPs. For many of the young people, the trip is attractive, especially for those who have never met each other in real life. But isn't this a kind of takeover move – a potentially damaging one – some of them ask. The whole movement has the force that it has because it comes as the voice of a generation. Not as the youth organisation of one or two parties. Wouldn't the press have a field day: Oh, look, this FFF thing is just a youth group of the greens or the left? Some of the young people try everything to persuade the other countries not to travel there; and particularly not to fly. The mood becomes increasingly tense. But this question about visiting the EU is only the tip of the iceberg. In February and March, there are more and more challenges. Anything else would be improbable. A new democratic form of cooperation is supposed to come about, globally.

But now, before the big strike day, such questions have to be decided. Can someone – or individual important groups – "represent" the whole movement? That idea is rejected. How can joint statements and texts be composed for newspapers and press releases? The most active young people now know each other better and better; they have been in a state of emergency for weeks,

and they can argue and resolve their differences again. The easiest question is about the shared logos, the round green logos designed by Sophie in Germany. But already when it comes to the open letter to the Guardian, which is being worked on mainly by the Swiss activists with an international group, it becomes difficult. Who should sign it; can anyone speak for the whole of Fridays for Future? A heated discussion takes place on all the platforms and in all the chats.

The strength of FFF seems to me in these days to be the fact that the national groups have retained their specificities, including the different names such as “Klimastreik” and “Youth For Climate”, and so on. A varied mishmash of “bottom-up” initiatives. And that these national groups are just one actor. There are also lone fighters who are active in the chats, and groups which include different countries. Keeping all the variation and still managing to forge unity; how is that possible? The best option is to talk to each other, all the time. Should FFF accept the EU invitation? Who can go? What is FFF?



A Zoom meeting is agreed to decide this. Even arranging the meeting presents democratic problems. How can everyone be informed; how many people can take part; are all countries represented roughly equally? Online, there can be a strange kind of group panic which would never happen at an

analogue meeting. Who is paying for the invitation: the green and left-wing parties, or the whole EU? When it becomes clear that it is the whole EU, most people agree with the idea of the meeting. And soon, Isabelle and Tindra from Mynttorget, and Andreas from Falun are on their way to Strasbourg. They get stuck on the night train in Hamburg because of a storm, and only just make their connecting train.

The first international FFF meeting of sixty climate activists from across the EU is a success; so it seems to me. A protest action “against” – and not “with” – the MEPs is the focus. Generally, this remains the basic attitude: FFF does not cooperate but acts as an emergency brake, reminding people that real political change is needed. And so, the first important bonds are created which carry the European movement through the next years.

The sensation – the founding of #ScientistsForFuture

At exactly the same time as this journey, something happens which has probably never been seen before in the history of the universities or of academia. Thousands of academics across many disciplines, universities, cities, and countries agree to basic principles for grassroots cooperation in the future – and a central statement (see [scientists4future.org](https://www.scientists4future.org); and Hagedorn et al. 2019). Scientists for Future is formed. “The concerns of the young people who are demonstrating are justified.” They are not exaggerating. The media and politicians, who say something different, are not basing their statements on currently recognised global research but are distorting reality. It is serious. People everywhere have a right to hear this: without unprecedented drastic measures to make our societies sustainable within a few years, it is impossible “to limit global warming and halt the mass extinction of animal and plant species.”

It is not just a few German climate scientists who have agreed on this document after weeks of hard work (also with the help of Jörg from the group in Mynttorget), but leading scientists and the directors of almost twenty of the most important research institutes across the world: from Philadelphia to Manchester, Potsdam, and Zurich. One of the most respected climate scientists, Joachim Schellnhuber, describes what is happening as follows: “The solidarity between scientists and the young generation in the struggle for a new society with a sustainable economy and way of life is as powerful as the big bang.” The alliance between young activists and scientists is announced at a

press conference at Tuesday lunchtime – three days before the global strike. The young activists Louisa and Jakob sit next to professors from S4F (Scientists for Future). Already at this point, more than ten thousand scientists from all disciplines have lent their support to the statement and to the children's global strike.

On this Tuesday evening, while the Swiss activist Marie-Claire is speaking on Swiss television about the difficult state of the planet, and while Isabelle, Tindra, and Andreas are travelling from Mynttorget to Strasbourg to meet their fellow strikers from across Europe and are stuck on their train in the storm, academics look back proudly at the day and think about the question of what a university's task really is. Are researchers allowed to get involved? Isn't that dangerous for the scientific status of their research? What is the role of students and academics?



A lot of very different points connect the team around Gregor Hagedorn at the Berlin Museum of Science when S4F is founded. And none of them can be taken for granted. What is actually happening in strategic terms? First, the idea of a statement is the focus. Later, there will also be a charter, with values and a description of the meaning and purpose of the grassroots movement in which all academics worldwide can participate from this moment on.

But now, at the beginning, the core of the S4F-movement is about presenting the best and most reliable research. This statement is published in April in one of the most important scientific journals in the world (Hagedorn et al. 2019). However, at the same time, it is also distributed across the whole scientific community. Not only climate scientists should be able to stand behind it, but everyone who is open to the results of fundamental research. This creates a sense of momentum, because now they can be joined by people who have been working for years in all different areas to research sustainable transfor-

mation (in the realms of energy, transport, agriculture, digital technology, finance, but also: politics, education, economics). Local groups are formed, mirroring those of FFF, and email lists are made with hundreds of participants who can be reached at any time regarding science communication, debates, but also events. As a grassroots movement, it does not have any formal hierarchies, although the coordination team which is soon formed and the advisory board with around a hundred members do both play important roles.

As a central point, the press conference on Tuesday also establishes a further principle. This is not about presenting research results from different disciplines side by side. It should mean that there is finally action on something the university seems to promise in its very name – the possibility of seeing and conceptualising all disciplines together, as part of a system. The assumption behind this: we can only respond to the ecological and climate crisis as a crisis, stop emissions in such a short time and delay global warming if we are able to see the larger context and connect the specific details (solar energy; plant-based diets and so on) with these overarching contexts.

From the beginning, the project of S4F is therefore a project of the university itself: the knowledge of the humanities on theories of global justice and intersectionality should be taken into account just as much as environmental and climate sciences. That is the reason why an economist, Maja Göpel, sits on the stage in front of the media, beside Volker Quaschnig, a professor for regenerative energy systems, and Eckart von Hirschhausen, a doctor. It is about marking out the science-based framework in which politics must immediately find its way. How exactly this should look in concrete terms is still up to the democratic interplay of all the other actors involved. A vision emerges of a new, better, more sustainable interaction between science, politics, federal departments, the legal system, and the population.

In the ensuing months, my “double culture” comes in handy. On the one hand, I can establish a direct connection with the young people in Mynttorget. On the other, the German-speaking research institutions represented on the board are familiar to me, and cooperations emerge reflecting this (see the discussion of the EU climate law in the chapter on corona). What I hardly succeeded in doing six months ago in Sweden with the S4F project – or only to a very modest degree – now develops at an entirely different scale, to our delight in Mynttorget.

At the same time, I do feel a certain amount of scepticism. Aren't there also researchers who are not guided by FFF's compass? Who prefer to talk about 900 Gt rather than 420 Gt as the emissions budget in 2018; who do not want to take

note of any criteria of justice when calculating budgets – and all because they appeal to the idea of what is “politically and realistically” feasible, rather than what is truly feasible and what the Paris Agreement demands on democratic grounds. Didn’t the young people begin their strike because of precisely that attitude? And this criticism is not only catalyst for the new grassroots movement, but also that for the arguments over its direction (on this, see the chapter on Smile For Future).

How can we guarantee at all, I ask myself, that we, as S4F, are not going to ignore the young people in the name of some kind of “realism”? The scenarios have to be possible, but who can say what “realistic” politics is? We are in a crisis. And Scientists for Future, which soon has more than 25 000 participants, only exists as a huge academic movement because those five regular strikers have been returning to Mynttorget every week for months, through ice and rain. We owe it to them to make sure a “principle of caution” guides us, and also to create intergenerational justice (on the concept of intergenerational justice: Bidadanure 2021 and Wolff 2022). It is about reducing emissions now, with university science as the starting point. And because politicians are not doing that at all, the children are on strike.

And us researchers? There are weekly climate strikes by researchers in a few cities and in front of universities, and from Mynttorget we share their tweets with the world: in the long term, we need more than just statements.

The newspapers are now writing almost every day about the new environmental movement. My gaze wanders to the “global map” on the Fridays for Future website. More than one hundred countries have announced that they will be taking part in the strikes. Including China, Russia, Cuba, and Svalbard. A few are in contact with researchers in the Antarctic. Then all five continents would be on board. The whole world, united, for a fundamental change in the way we live together.

It has to be possible to stop the absurd global warming, to prevent the death of thousands of animal species and to ensure that there won’t be struggles for food and water among millions of people already within the lifetimes of those who are preparing so feverishly for Friday. The idea of a global political movement, which has been on my mind for years, comes up again. Isn’t this the first step, what’s happening now this Friday? Global solidarity between more than 150 countries, supporting FFF’s basic demand: keep to the Paris Agreement. Maja Göpel, the academic from Scientists for Future, implied at the press conference on Tuesday that a new political movement was needed. And we have been working here at the university for years to outline a new perspective on

the economy, health, education, and the energy system. FFF is the young people's movement. Can we as Scientists for Future – together with groups of Psychologists for Future, Artists, Workers, Teachers for Future and so on – come together as People for Future? So that everyone can join us?