

3. Modernity adé

[I]t could be said that progress occurs where it ends.

*Theodor W. Adorno (1969)*¹

In the previous chapter we established adaptation as a central concept in late modernity. This plainly involves more than a critique of individualism. In fact, we are dealing with a new era – and a new relationship to time – that opens a door to adaptive ways of life. Classical modernism was essentially characterised by the idea that a society could and should create its own future. This represented a radical departure from the premodern religious frame, in which an all-powerful God governed people's fates for all eternity. To the post-Enlightenment liberal mind, the future was essentially a blank sheet on which the modern subject could – and should – draw whatever he (and occasionally she) wanted. New ideas about social organisation incorporated the real experience of the subjugation of nature to generate expectations of inexorable progress in the fields of science and technology, art, philosophy, ethics and society, and, importantly, advancement for humanity as a whole. The idea of striving for perfection became society's *raison d'être*.² From the eighteenth century, progress became a 'quasi-religious rallying cry'.³ The combination of ideals of perfection with real advances in modernisation was simultaneously utopian and pragmatic.⁴ The ideal of progress supplied incentives for industry in the here and now, working towards a chosen future. As such, progress became the watchword of the modern era.

Sociology has never been satisfied with merely observing these developments. As a genuinely modern discipline it is often (at least

implicitly) committed to progress⁵ – especially in the ‘emancipatory sociologies’. Sociologists track improvements in social conditions (or their absence), noting any worsening of social inequality, discrimination and other problems and scouring social classes and protest movements for emerging forces of progress. At the theoretical level, critical sociology reflects on threats to progress and seeks possibilities to expand freedoms even in opposition to the zeitgeist. Even the gloomiest still need the emancipatory logic of freedom as the foil for their scenarios of loss and regression. A sociology that operates within those coordinates remains trapped within the frame of modernity: ‘The story of decline offers no leftovers, no excess, nothing that escapes progress. Progress still controls us even in tales of ruination.’⁶

Nevertheless, the idea of progress remains central to critical analysis, without which its criticisms would be directionless. In other words, sociologists are attached to a construction that valorises their own role. They can see themselves as agents of change, laying out the theory for a practice that is dedicated to creating a better future. If sociology is not to be an entirely self-referential system, we must assume that society is responsive to its ideas. If the audience is to be inspired, it must at least be interested. But is that the case?

For some time now, sociological diagnoses have tended to suggest the opposite, pointing to a growing disaffection with the idea of progress. In particular, belief in historical progress is no longer a driver of political action. As long ago as 1982, the Shell Youth Survey found that a majority of young Germans (58 percent) took a dim view of the future.⁷ Even the more optimistic among them expressed little or no hope for real improvement. They anticipated disaster and were prepared for the worst: environmental destruction, pollution, resource depletion, nuclear war, economic crisis and famine.⁸ The study also found that the young people with the grimmest outlook were the most likely to be politically active and most motivated to resist the developments they feared. The authors suggested that the protest movements were rejecting the very idea of progress:

[These young people] pursue politics rather like a fire brigade that knows (or at least suspects) that the fire can no longer be extin-

guished. They may be able to create a few firebreaks and rescue a handful of people, but the fire is still going to burn. Of that there is no doubt. ... Yet still they respond. And they do so without any expectation of fundamental political or economic change, without any hope of a political majority or revolution for real change. *This pragmatic optimism in the face of an apparently hopeless future sharply distinguishes the new protest movements from those of just a decade ago.*⁹

By 1981, the political avant-garde was no longer 'modern'. The youth had abandoned the idea of forging a better future, and that perception guided their political engagement. As the cited passage underlines, this led neither to dystopian uprising nor to doom-laden paralysis. Instead, we see a shift from the modern fixation on the future to a stance that is more concerned with survival in the present. This formed the decisive point of reference for a political praxis whose theme was now salvaging the future rather than shaping it. Rather than striding towards a shining dawn, the uppermost concern was now survival: *to ensure that there would be any future at all.*

Looking beyond the natural toing and froing of politics, that impression has only grown over time. The Shell Youth Surveys conducted since 2002 describe a 'pragmatic generation' that tends to focus on the present – in spite or because of their material insecurity.¹⁰ Their utopias rarely extend beyond the present; what they desire is stability. Rather than striding into the future they want to preserve the present: ideally everything should stay as it is. Private happiness looms large. Personal advancement, personal relationships and personal recognition are their frame of reference, not social change.

The ice of political abstinence starts to thaw around 2015,¹¹ when interest in politics begins to grow again and a majority now see the future positively. This development is confirmed by the 2019 Shell Youth Survey, in which 52 percent said that they were optimistic about social developments, and 58 percent expected their personal life to improve.¹² However, a growing proportion also worry about climate change and its consequences for society's

future. In other words, the key issues for the political avant-garde of this generation – articulated above all by the new climate movement (Fridays for Future) – are also reflected in the survey data.

Today, the young generation really does appear to be re-engaging with the big questions concerning the future of society, specifically global warming and the environment.¹³ But they remain wary – to say the least – of the idea of progress. Their relationship to the future is predicated primarily on preserving the status quo. Instead of explicitly mapping out a desired future, their political activity revolves around securing a living and preventing catastrophe. But the ecological question has seen a shift in attitudes. Where the youth of the early 2000s retreated into private life, today's young generation has come back to the idea that the problems of society require collective responses. Like in the early 1980s, their political action is anything but utopian. Accepting the existence of real dystopia, their attention revolves around surviving the present. Now personal prospects are discussed as a question of collective practice.

Here we are dealing, it would appear, with a heightened risk awareness: any promise of a golden future must simply (and rightly) appear implausible. The origin of the observed rejection of progress lies in the emergence of a public debate around threats to survival.

It goes without saying that the nineteenth-century concept of progress is dead and buried. But even into late modernity, the idea that 'the future' might offer guidance in the here and now was still broadly accepted. The material basis was a still largely unbroken trust in the stability of the natural world – a luxury that appears thoroughly anachronistic today. The current generation is dealing with a future that has mutated from promise to threat (a process that is itself an effect of progress having become a problem). As already noted, the theory of reflexive modernisation understood the sense of crisis observed in the mid-1980s as an effect of real modernisation gains (i.e. progress).¹⁴ Only if subjects were liberated from institutional constraints, Beck argued, would they be able to develop an awareness of the side effects and externalities of the modernisation process. This reflexive freedom was an effect of modern individualisation; renouncing it would ultimately open the door for anti-modern authoritarianism.¹⁵

From this perspective, the attitudes outlined above do not represent mistaken ideas (or false consciousness) that could be counteracted with a new, improved concept of progress, but rather a struggle with reality in the sense of seeking adaptation to real environmental conditions. In such a situation, preaching progress is simply futile – and for critical sociology, tantamount to denying its own diagnoses. Precisely the phenomena identified in sociological diagnoses of crisis – the socio-economic, subjective and ecological problems of the present time, in whose positive resolution neither the public nor sociologists themselves seriously believe – offer plausible causes for the observed rejection of progress. This represents a fundamental shift in timeframes. Just as the change from ‘eternity’ to ‘the future’ as the central point of reference characterised the modern relationship to time, the shift from ‘future’ to ‘now’ characterises the adaptive society.

Reflexivity implies heightened awareness of society’s vulnerability to crisis, in the sense of the shift from individualism to survival, and is thus centrally relevant to adaptation.¹⁶ It also explains the emergence and popularisation of new concepts relating to adaptation in academic, political and public debates. The concept of resilience has risen to prominence in this context since the 1990s. Its meaning has evolved over time, while its field of application has expanded enormously.

In material science, ‘resilience’ is associated with the flexibility and elasticity that allow a material to return to its original state after being subjected to strong external influences.¹⁷ ‘The future’, in the sense of change of form, is suspended. The point is for the material to return to its temporarily endangered original state. The term’s migration to the fields of psychology and social ecology – to which its contemporary popularity is attributable – reveals the idea of an assumed original state to be problematic. As applied to dynamic entities like individuals, groups and societies, resilience is primarily about preserving identities, socio-ecological equilibrium and social stability. Here, again, we are looking at a reflexive understanding of crisis rather than a positively connoted future.

In psychology, ‘resilience’ refers to the personal resources and abilities that people employ in order to cope with negative life

events. Resilient individuals are less at risk of being dragged down by an unfavourable socio-economic environment or unbalanced by traumatic events. Resilient individuals are capable of recovering from shocks and growing with their challenges, and thus more adaptable to future stress situations. Change represents reactions to moments of crisis and preparation for future stress.

The normative connotation of resilience as a dynamic and fundamentally positive process of adaptation to unfavourable external circumstances¹⁸ has spread from academic psychology into broader society. Its expressions include a multitude of commercial counselling applications, a flourishing advice literature, successful podcasts and individually tailored coaching. Perceptions of crisis popularise such offers. For example, resilience was a hot topic during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in the discussions about the effects of lockdown on mental health.¹⁹ Its aura as a central objective of personal development was boosted by psychological studies asserting that resilient individuals suffered less depression and anxiety during lockdown.²⁰

In social ecology, on the other hand, resilience describes the complexity – and thus to an extent the unpredictability – of human-environment interactions at the systemic level.²¹ The term was first used in this sense in the early 1970s to explain the stability of ecosystems in response to disturbance.²² This made it possible to understand highly complex systems involving interactions at different temporal and spatial levels. This was the point at which humanity was first understood to be impacting ecosystems on a global scale. The models became more robust and reliable as they took account of fluctuations and gradually moved beyond the linear. This led to decisive advances in knowledge about real ecosystems. The idea that the behaviour of ecosystems could be reliably predicted and controlled was now abandoned. Instead, socio-ecological systems were expected to show unpredictable reactions and fluctuations and possess the ability to change and adapt. One objective of this strand of research is to enable decision-makers to enhance the resilience of socio-ecological systems in response to anthropogenic environmental impacts – for example, creating upstream flooding zones to protect cities or introducing

new tree species that are better adapted to withstand climate change. Here, again, we find change functioning as an adaptive response to ensure stability. Securing survival (or preserving the present) represents the central objective of resilient social ecologies, with adaptive transformation playing a central role.

Sociology also discovered resilience, albeit much later.²³ The term became a new paradigm in the field of disaster and security research in the course of the 1990s, and found its way into national, supranational and transnational security policies.²⁴ The sociological aspect brings together the systemic perspective of social ecology and the individual perspective of psychology. In this context, resilience is understood first and foremost as protecting public infrastructure against disruption.²⁵ But individual citizens are also expected to contribute, for example by stockpiling emergency supplies. So resilience already stands for adaptation practices that are in certain respects based on the same combination of personal and collective effort that we have already identified as characteristic of a conceivable adaptive response to the contemporary crisis.

Wolfgang Bonß introduces an important distinction that helps us to understand the spectrum of resilient practices. He describes 'simple' resilience as concrete responses to past events, while 'reflexive resilience' defines practices that mobilise resources preventively, in anticipation of coming events.²⁶ In the context of climate change, *mitigation* represents a practice of reflexive resilience. Mitigation means creating and/or strengthening institutions, strategies and practices in an effort to cushion the impacts of a particular development, or ideally to prevent them altogether – for example, planting trees to limit desertification and loss of grazing land. It is not restricted to the climate context. Sending vaccination teams accompanied by social workers into disadvantaged neighbourhoods during a pandemic mitigates the spread of the virus; removing names and photographs from job applications mitigates structural discrimination.

Describing mitigation as a practice of reflexive resilience places it under the umbrella of adaptation practices and leaves it open to misinterpretation. In the context of climate discussions in particular, the two concepts are frequently (and wrongly) treated as

mutually incompatible. While mitigation has been interpreted as tackling the causes of climate change (for example reducing CO₂ emissions by expanding electric mobility and green energy systems or absorbing CO₂ through afforestation), adaptation has been taken to mean simply coping with the effects – and accepting a tragedy that could actually still be averted. The fear is that speaking too soon about adaptation will undermine mitigation efforts and make the situation even worse. In political terms, this controversy seems to be largely behind us, probably because the empirical findings of climate research make it increasingly clear that even sweeping mitigation efforts cannot avert the need for massive changes to our ways of life. As well as the pressures generated by extreme weather events, mitigation practices themselves will inevitably require massive interventions in conventional lifestyles. For example, heating a home and running a car may become unaffordable, or afforestation may compete with other land uses.²⁷

In sociological terms, that is beside the point. Reflexive resilience involves precautionary practices under a logic where persistent recurring crises are already very much baked in. It seeks above all to prevent the worst rather than turning the clock back or changing the game. No grazing land is won back from the desert, the disadvantaged housing estate does not become a leafy suburb, and reformatting job applications does not make racism go away. While mitigation in this sense does seek to ameliorate symptoms, it does so without any faith that the causes of crisis can really be prevented. As such, it embodies the shift in modern expectations that lies at the heart of this book. Acceptance of a degree of irreversibility is inherent to the practices of reflexive resilience. If it were really possible to avert trouble, one would be bound to do so, rather than simply watering down its impact. The modern illusion that ‘anything is possible’ is largely suspended here. Certain things cannot be undone. Some things we will have to live with, even if we can still influence the severity of the consequences. The future is no longer a blank sheet on which the modern subject can write whatever they want. It is dynamic, precarious, uncontrollable. But not impervious to action. What we are seeing is attempts to preserve the present by adapting to the future.

Mitigation creates a future without any need for progress. Instead, the point is to prevent the worst. As it transpires, reflexive resilience is not foreign to modernist thinking. The practice of mitigation seeks to protect the status quo through actions that are guided by risk calculations. The term suggests that adequate precautions based on accurate analysis can at least ensure a degree of stability in our natural and social environments. In other words, mitigation is a matter of the scientific management of insecurity. So the modern concept of managing risk remains the objective. And this leads to a scientification of insecurity, which is especially visible in global climate strategy. The ubiquitous premise that the two degree ceiling promises a 'manageable' path is symptomatic. Here, mitigation promises predictability through proactive interventions based on increasingly complex risk calculations. However, the precautionary function associated with mitigation is by definition oriented more strongly on the current status quo than on any kind of future progress. Adaptation is key to preventing further deterioration and preserving the positive aspects of the status quo. So, by implication, action is guided more by normative assessments of the present than by modernity's promises for the future. We are no longer striding towards a bright future. But resilient practices might at least preserve a few openings for self-realisation that would otherwise be lost. Another way to look at this would be to see mitigation as a bridge to adaptation.

Contemporary critical sociology takes a dim view of the rejection of progress described above (whether simple or reflexive). Its attitude to resilience is heavily coloured by the classical sociologists of freedom and vacillates between rejecting the concept as ideological and bemoaning its very existence. Adaptation programmes are criticised for blocking discussion of possible alternatives, essentially arguing that they are intellectual distractions from real and desirable forms of emancipation. That line of argument generally asserts that emancipation will enable individuals to make sensible, rational decisions, and that the prospect of a better future is central to the corresponding practice. A person liberated from alienation will not only freely give up their fancy car and foreign holidays, but develop an entirely new and better way of life. This school of sociology sees

the rejection of a modern concept of progress as a cardinal error. In effect, this brand of sociology has dug its own grave: its own increasingly dramatic diagnoses of crisis have successively discredited the modern project of progress. Sociology itself has promoted this turn. Criticising a shift in ideas for which they are themselves responsible, these sociologists are scrabbling to prop up an outdated normativity rather than investigating the role of the rejection of modernity in shaping our coming society.

The upshot of this is digressions that seek – implicitly or explicitly – to defend the modern ideal of progress against the reflexivity of society. For example, subject-centred analyses do acknowledge the relevance of resilient practices, but view them with scepticism. Their take on adaptation verges on the denunciatory (in a form all too familiar from the modern sociologies of freedom). Methodologically, the bird's eye perspective of discourse analysis dominates, formulating far-reaching hypotheses about the changing nature of contemporary subjectivity. Investigations of the resilient subject revolve around resilience, adaptation and vulnerability, as concepts rooted in the biopolitics of neoliberalism.²⁸ They tend to be more interested in the implications of resilience discourses for subjectivation and the underlying power structures than in the actors' reflexive synthesis. In the tradition of Foucauldian biopolitics and governmentality studies, analyses of this kind focus not on the experienced impacts of resilient practices, but on the modes of subjectivation that normalise these practices and thus impress them into the structures of society. They seek to reveal the invisible power structures behind everyday routines. These theories at least imply that the subjectivation – as the process by which the subject internalises their conditions and is in turn shaped by them – must change if the prevailing conditions are to be overturned. This form of practice embodies their understanding of emancipation and progress.

That is the perspective on self-regulation of the resilient subject developed by political scientists David Chandler and Julian Reid and sociologists Ulrich Bröckling and Stefanie Graefe. Chandler and Reid place resilience in the context of adaptation and vulnerability in order to examine contemporary psychopolitics and its effects under

the neoliberal regime.²⁹ Under the resilience dispositive, they argue, security is increasingly regarded as a mission to be accomplished by the citizen – rather than the responsibility of the state – with external threats reinterpreted as personal challenges. Offloading responsibility onto the individual in this way is supposedly the only way to deal with the threats and risks that arise in the highly complex societies of late modernity. This creates and promotes a subaltern subject who appears to act autonomously but is in fact always adapting to the dangers of their environment. Each and every personal choice must be carefully weighed (and potentially justified). The resilient subject is left to accomplish this alone, in the face of persistent guilt and self-doubt. This, Chandler and Reid argue, creates a mechanism of control that far exceeds the possibilities traditionally ascribed to the democratic state.

Chandler and Reid see the sustainability discourse as the midwife to this involuntarily resilient subject.³⁰ Its emphasis on the biological, they say, projects permanent threats to life. The acute compulsion to adapt that is inherent to the resilience discourse has a pacifying effect and functions to ideologically buttress existing social power relations. The resilient subject's heightened ability to adapt to dangers subverts the path of political action to change the world. In this understanding, adaptation is the opposite of transformation. What is needed, Chandler and Reid conclude, is a subject that is capable of achieving a state of enduring security without heed to their biological vulnerability. The crux of this unmasking of the resilience ideology is plainly an idea of progress that implies something that the reflexive subject simply cannot have: a state of absolute security.

Prominent German cultural sociologists point us in a similar direction, although with less emphasis on security and progress. Ulrich Bröckling, for example, shows how the resilience dispositive forces subjects to expand – more or less boundlessly – their ability to adapt to the unavoidable and unpredictable. The resilient subject will always be surviving crises and dealing with the disruption they cause, so it is only logical if they reject any positive talk about the future. The subject, he argues, is trapped in the treadmill of the

present and denied the possibility to meaningfully structure their own biography.

Bröckling comes to a similar conclusion for social systems. Beyond a certain degree of complexity, he argues, social systems must be exposed to danger if they are to survive. Promoting resilience means expanding the options for dealing with plausible threats – which are thus essential for the system's development. In the context of resilience, Bröckling reinterprets adaptation as opportunity. Although he does concede that programmes promoting resilience in pedagogical and even social-ecological contexts could certainly convey useful information, he points out that they would tend to offer a particular understanding of reality rather than concrete guidance for action. This, he argues, would offer a positive framing for the negative associations of risk prevention.

Other authors have already abandoned hope. Stefanie Graefe takes an analysis of burnout as the starting point for her critique of the resilience discourse. She asks what forms of autonomy might promote a governmentality of resilience and argues that the resilience dispositif tends to normatively reinforce and practically concretise practices of self-organisation and self-regulation (individual responsibility) rather than promoting autonomy. It is therefore no coincidence, she argues, that practices of resilience are associated in the first place with addressing personal trauma and seeking post-traumatic growth and development.³¹ The autonomy of the resilient subject consists in gaining a more positive perspective on crises and the possibilities for overcoming them, accepting the changes and pursuing one's own goals. The promise of happiness through resilience normalises the idea of a satisfied, authentic life immune to disruption. Graefe criticises the way this pathologises states that were not previously regarded as abnormal.³² She challenges Bröckling's interpretation of 'Homo resiliens' as a regressive variant of his 'entrepreneurial self'.³³ Instead, she argues that the resilient individual represents a form of subjectivation that is more about self-preservation than any entrepreneurial logic of self-realisation.³⁴ We should maximise meaning rather than utility, promote flexible development over linear growth, she says. Graefe aptly identifies resilience as a kind of reality shock,³⁵ confronting

the entrepreneurial self with the consequences of capitalist crisis – and thus injecting reflexivity into the late modern ideal of progress.

According to Graefe, resilience dispositives hinder the emergence of stances critical of the status quo (as did the modern critical orthodoxy). Indeed, she warns against reinterpreting resilience as emancipatory. Like Bröckling, she regards the resilient self as a master of adaptation, but one that is at risk of becoming embroiled in fictitious threat scenarios. Paranoid anticipation supplants positive imagination. The family garden is no longer a place for leisure and relaxation, but a totem of self-sufficiency if supply chains collapse. In the city, there is danger round every corner, few pleasant surprises, never freedom. Rather than pursuing conformity and stability under resilience dispositives, Graefe concludes, the point is precisely not to fit in, but instead to attack the human conditions that cause crisis in society. In the modern dichotomy between emancipatory progress and adaptive stability, it goes without saying that strong, resilient subjects are needed.

Terms like *resilience* and *mitigation* thus define a post-progressive condition that has long been present in contemporary society. The associated sense of crisis demands action – not out of any expectation of progress but through an awareness of vulnerability. The writing on the wall might appear paranoid, but climate science and sociology are not exaggerating. What might at first glance look like a ‘discursive strategy of depoliticisation’³⁶ reappears in this light as a reflexive attitude towards plausible expectations of crisis. Sociologists’ reservations about rejecting progress appear negligible against contemporary empirical trends. Rejection of progress does not cause political paralysis or lack of ambition. Instead, adaptation opens up spaces where ways of life can survive that would otherwise be lost. The critique of resilience even recognises that concern for survival can engender criticism of capitalism.³⁷

Similarly, the widely observed insistence on individual responsibility can only function as a mechanism of power in isolation from collective activity. But if it is true that the imperative of survival will promote both personal politics and collective action in the coming society, adaptation cannot be the repressive social practice denounced by the sociologists of freedom. Instead, it opens up a field

of social struggles that lie largely outside the modern semantics of progress. The question is no longer how to achieve a fair distribution of growing economic prosperity, social entitlements and individual liberties, but how best to husband fundamentally scarce resources (be they raw materials, other environmental goods, economic profit or subjective capacities). Conflicts over values are also unavoidable, for example between solidarity and exclusion. Who to prioritise during a pandemic? The old who raised us or the children for whom we are responsible today? Who deserves our solidarity? The Ukrainians whose country was invaded or the pensioners who can no longer afford to heat their homes? Here we enter the field of adaptive conflicts: these are real conflicts over real sacrifices.

The modern semantics of progress has little or nothing to offer here. In the Aristotelian tradition, questions of survival lie outside the political process, given that biological reproduction occurs in the private household (*oikos*). That division of spheres collapses when survival is at stake – as seen in collective crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. It is thus no accident that Andreas Reckwitz concludes that the immediate health emergency of Covid-19 underlined the need for adaptation practices to be seen in a more positive light: anticipating negative futures can help us to develop long-term strategies. Reckwitz, who is otherwise closely aligned with the cultural sociologists discussed above, goes as far as to describe this learning process as ‘society growing up’,³⁸ treating resilience as a collective political praxis.

Reckwitz plainly does not want to abandon the idea of progress entirely, even if he steers clear of the ‘classical maxims of modernity ... – freedom, prosperity, emancipation – and the belief that society can be shaped’.³⁹ Instead, he attempts to reconcile adaptation and progress. Stability and resilience are not ends in themselves, he argues. We need positive visions for society: ‘a politics that transcends risk minimisation, a politics with positive ambitions to improve society, whether the ultimate objective is autonomy, prosperity, justice or sustainability’.⁴⁰ As the quote underlines, Reckwitz’s understanding of progress is unteleological. He is not seeking to define ultimate objectives for the political or personal sphere. Instead, he understands progress as a mode of

contingency opening (which in the context of resilience should balance contingency closure). Experimentation should certainly not be sacrificed at the altar of security.⁴¹

Reckwitz would like to see sociology tackle loss as ‘the flip side of progress’.⁴² Experience of loss is the taboo of a modernity whose ‘social praxis’ has consistently been characterised by ‘the model of normative improvement’. On the other hand, he says, ignoring and potentiating loss is part and parcel of the modernisation process. If Tesla builds a factory on the outskirts of Berlin, this brings progress to the region in the form of state-of-the-art electric cars and thousands of badly needed jobs. Who cares about the scruffy woodland that has to be clear-felled, apart from a few local dog walkers? Or the groundwater, which Elon Musk claims is bountiful while his company drains it away? The old must make way for the new. And, as Reckwitz notes, if modernisation means permanent renewal through innovation, rationalisation, democratisation, acceleration and economisation, irrevocable losses are unavoidable. One could say that, under this premise, contingency opening – for example the career opportunities Tesla creates in the region – forms the functional substitute for experienced losses. In other words, any progress that occurs in such a context should be understood above all as a promise of personal advancement offering solace for what has been lost.

However, Reckwitz sees the problem of loss exacerbated in late modernity, in the ‘combination of heightened sensibility to loss and escalation of loss’.⁴³ Today, when everyone knows that woodland and water are finite resources, any threat is directly affect-provoking and politicisable. Escalation of loss means escalation of our experience of loss, more so than in earlier phases of modernity. Reckwitz cites the popularity of narratives of doom as evidence for his theory: the death of democracy, the end of liberalism, galloping social inequality, the loss of social mobility, and so on. Sensitisation to loss, on the other hand, means first of all the loss of ‘repression of loss’ in the context of fading enthusiasm for progress. Here, Reckwitz puts his finger on changes in the modern zeitgeist that are reflected in a general reflexive caution. The people are not enthused. Not by vote-seeking politicians promising a gleaming future with high-tech jobs and

electric cars, nor by career coaches and financial gurus who peddle much the same on social media. Reckwitz regards this partly as an effect of a culture that treats ‘experiences of loss, sadness and pain’ as subjectively relevant and socially acceptable. It is okay to be sad these days. We no longer need to fake a grin for every mention of progress. Now experiences of loss are articulated, without being drowned out by a rigid collective narrative of progress.⁴⁴

The problem thus revolves around a highly subjectivised concept of progress. While hope for improvements in the broader social situation have gone thoroughly out of fashion (or society has abandoned progress), personal betterment is still on the agenda. We are left with just one side of the coin. Moreover, the idea of progress is internalised and frequently experienced negatively, as a discrepancy between elevated expectations of personal fortune and a hard reality that inevitably contradicts them.⁴⁵ To top it all, positive contingency opening can only begin after the existential problems have been resolved. But if survival (in the context of the adaptive society) becomes the crux of subjective meaning it must be expected that wishes for contingency opening will gradually fade away. Elon Musk is not only building factories in Berlin-Brandenburg and Shanghai but planning to colonise Mars. That might offer him a small degree of (subjective) contingency closure in relation to climate catastrophe – which he claims his electric cars will help to avert.

This ‘halved’ concept of progress in late modernity may have stabilising and structuring effects on personal perspectives. But ‘progress’ is no paradigm for societal responses to existential crises. In our new situation, hoping to ‘mend’ the idea of progress is about as useful as wishing for a return to a simple pre-reflexive modernity. From a reflexive perspective, the disenchantment of modernity actually represents the lifting of a veil. Rejecting progress enables us to encounter the world with an adaptive sense of reality and promises liberation from responsibility for a project that has lost its credibility. In the age of survival, we are no longer talking about the self-regulating powers of modernity, but only the self-stabilisation of an adaptive society. Like it or not, sociology is going to need to take that on board.