4. Adaptive rebellion

Listen to science!
Fridays for Future

For all the criticisms of emancipation and progress laid out above, the existential imperative offers its own perspectives of freedom, in the sense that the adaptive society promises relief from the impossible dictates of late modernity by rejecting the tyranny of progress. I am certainly not arguing against freedom per se.[1] But abandoning the modern ideal can also be understood in positive terms, as an effect of reflexivity rather than bending to the (possibly internalised) social milieu. The contemporary sense of crisis is ultimately enlightening and reflects a specific desire for meaning drawn from the adaptive life itself. What would a society that rejects the ideal of progress look like? What ways of life would it involve? What kind of 'good life' can a truly adaptive society offer?

Those questions, to which I now turn in the remaining three chapters, could fill an entire research programme on life in the adaptive society. The details – from resilience coaching and quasi-religious teachings to resonance theory[2] and reciprocity – undoubtedly merit sociological exploration in their own right. But that path leads quickly into the weeds, and would distract from the broader picture I am seeking to draw. Instead, before moving on to examine a slice of empirical evidence in Chapter 5, I would like to outline two important theories of adaptation. These are Marshall Sahlins's observations on life in societies that had no concept of progress and Robert K. Merton's challenge to the idea that adaptation means conformity and obedience. If we are looking to explore adaptation as a positive praxis that can create opportunities

and expand individual and collective freedoms, we need to consider how societies might function without modernity's imperative of progress. Given that we can only speculate about the future, we had better start with a look back at the past.

Affluence and *prosperity* were the watchwords of the 1950s and 1960s.[3] After the hardships of the first half of the twentieth century, Western societies now placed a premium on economic growth and consumer goods for the masses. John Kenneth Galbraith's highly influential *The Affluent Society* (1958) laid out the Keynesian case for government investment in infrastructure and a strong welfare state to eliminate poverty.[4] Ludwig Erhard, who led West Germany's 'economic miracle', proposed 'prosperity for all'.[5]

This discourse was challenged by ideas emerging from the counterculture of the sixties. Setting aside the conventional fixation on the production and distribution of goods and services, they turned critical attention to the question of what affluence really means. This turned out to be particularly productive where alternative frames of reference cast a new light on modernity and its obsession with progress. In the 1960s, for example, anthropology witnessed a debate over the question of affluence in the context of human ways of life before the advent of sedentism and agriculture.

In 1966, a young cultural anthropologist named Marshall Sahlins made waves with his concept of an 'original affluent society'.[6] Hitherto, it had been widely assumed that hunter-gatherer societies had barely scraped a living. Incapable of generating any meaningful economic surplus, they had lived from hand to mouth, always on the brink of starvation. Sahlins pointed to evidence that certain groups of hunter-gatherers had been able to satisfy all their needs directly from their environment. And because their needs were modest and demanded relatively little labour, they were able to live a life of abundance – in particular with respect to time. Sahlins's hunter-gatherers easily found the little they needed. They savoured their free time – with leisure and feasting – rather than performing unnecessary additional work.

The attraction of this concept (apart from its obvious appeal to teenagers) lay principally in a way of life very different from the 'white heat of technology'. Sahlins explicitly challenged the doctrine

of economic scarcity,[7] which treats access to fundamentally scarce goods as the driver of all human activity. People, he argued, have not always wanted more than they can get.

From a sociological perspective, the economic motivation is characteristic of capitalist modernity. Modern societies generate compliance[8] by promising that discipline will be rewarded with access to economic goods. Those who fit in and knuckle down can expect their tiny slice of society's cake. Adaptation is key here. If you want to join the game, you have to play by the rules.

Ultimately, this mechanism of 'dynamic stabilization'[9] offers little more than trivial pleasures and technological distractions. Its brand of freedom boils down to the choice between McDonald's or Burger King, Apple or Android. Where the economist sees only eternal human nature, a sociologist would point out the desire for deeper meaning. In this scheme of things, the individual's actions in the here and now are guided by a yearning for progress, for a better future. Scarcity is the foundation of the entire edifice.[10]

Sahlins's hunter-gatherers had no concept of scarcity. They had no unbounded desires and lived largely in the here and now. Desiring little, their wants were 'easily satisfied'.[11] All the same, they did have to adapt to changes in their environment. A particular source of food might appear only seasonally or become depleted. Hunter-gatherers were by necessity nomadic, moving on as their material needs dictated. And that in turn predicated frugality, to the point of an aversion to extraneous material possessions. Everything had to be carried. Superfluous portable goods restricted their mobility, while fixed property had to be left behind and was essentially worthless. This way of life mitigated firmly against any accumulation of material objects. Instead, as long as their minimum subsistence was ensured, their acceptance of limits enabled them to adapt their needs and way of life.[12]

The hunter-gatherers were not seeking a better future, but maximising their free time in the present. This is not the driven, progress-seeking existence of the modern age. Sahlins suggests that they were able to fulfil their material needs with five hours of daily work. A skilled craftsman might spend 'most of his time talking, eating and sleeping'.[13] As far as Sahlins was concerned, the transition

from the hunter-gatherer existence (which represents 90 percent of human history[14]) to agriculture (with seasonal crop storage and accumulation of surpluses) must have been a process of violent enforcement, given that it abolished a situation of abundance and replaced it with an order where ordinary people had to work harder. That cannot have been attractive to Sahlins's hunter-gatherers.

Sahlins discusses the hunter-gatherers' 'adaptively stabilised'[15] way of life as the explicit opposite of hierarchical society and in particular industrial modernity. His 'original affluent society' demonstrates the possibility of a way of life where 'progress' actually meant doing without the modern regimes of time and value. Instead of describing the hunter-gatherers as *poor* because they own nothing, Sahlins argues that they should be regarded as *free* – for exactly the same reason. This introduces a specific understanding of freedom based on agency in the here and now (rather than in some spiritual otherworld or abstract set of rights).[16] Everything they gathered and hunted had to be consumed more or less immediately. Just as material goods restricted mobility, food storage was regarded as unnecessary and in fact counterproductive. Sahlins notes that the original affluent society had no problem with 'low productivity of labor'. But their 'economy' was 'seriously afflicted by the imminence of diminishing returns',[17] in the sense that the harder they worked to increase their material possessions, the harder it became to reproduce their way of life.

Sahlins's theory has been widely discussed and debated in the interim, and there are certainly details that needed to be revised and corrected.[18] But Sahlins was plainly also commenting on the narrowness of the economic debates of the 1950s and 1960s and proposing an alternative critique of capitalism.[19] For present purposes, we are especially interested in the 'good life' lived by his hunter-gatherers. This is a concept of freedom that challenges entrenched ideas about property and power, predicated on an adaptive way of life to which the modern idea of progress is entirely foreign.

This way of life is opportunistic rather than conformist. Interestingly, 'opportunism' is another concept that is derided in the modernist canon. In fact, all it means is taking chances that are offered under given conditions. In this original sense, adaptation

means seeking out opportunities and following the simple priorities of survival. You use what you find, saving time and energy by keeping things simple.

The way of life described by Sahlins existed within narrow limits. The cycles of nature were stable; time was flat and unhistorical. Changing the world was not a concern of human activity, and the fearsome engine of 'civilisation' had yet to roar into life. Moreover, adaptation occurred in a framework where expectations were relatively dependable – and very different from today's.

The question of progress only arises in a dynamic society in which diverging expectations about the future compete with one another as political ideologies. One central heuristic here is Karl Mannheim's three native ideologies of modernity and their different perspectives on the future.[20] Liberalism regards the future as a blank sheet, socialism ties it to liberation, while conservatism seeks to preserve cultural difference into the future. Despite their different perspectives, all three see the future as a special preserve: of the liberal individual, of a historically predestined class, or of a particular cultural community.

As well as offering growing opportunities for individualisation and self-realisation, modernising societies are naturally also subject to conflicts, tensions and pressure to adapt. Over time, these traits are recognised as both imminent to the society and challenging to the individual. Yet there is little in the way of sociological theory that recognises adaptation as a positive, flexible and explicitly *transformative* praxis.[21] The theory of adaptation developed in the 1930s by Robert K. Merton represents an important exception.

Merton's starting point is the existing social order, in which adaptation is the norm. He is interested in social change and everyday responses to crisis. Merton's analysis of adaptation as a potentially transformative praxis builds on the work of Émile Durkheim, who pioneered the understanding of anomie as normlessness and social disintegration.[22] Durkheim describes anomie as an unbalancing of the social order and locates its causes in the disruptive effects of modernisation. Merton also regards anomie as inherent to modern society, seeing it as a constant side effect of gradual social change. Pressure to adjust is thus universal and

fundamentally systematisable. As such, Merton connects adaptation primarily with conformism (sometimes positively connotated, sometimes negatively). Merton's adaptation is a flexible, even creative praxis.

Merton explores the social roots of deviance in his seminal essay 'Social Structure and Anomie' (1938), where he identifies two central aspects: Firstly, what sociology at the time defined as deviant or abnormal behaviour was in fact largely a praxis of adaptation; secondly, these practices are the outcome of social constellations that place subjects in impossible situations. The clerk who appears strangely distracted and incapable of applying any personal initiative to his bureaucratic tasks does not do so because there is something wrong with him personally. The school student who devotes her energy to successful cheating is not necessarily morally delinquent. Instead, Merton shows how such problems are created by the gap between culturally prescribed objectives and the means available to achieve them. His distinction between *culture* and *society* points to tensions that individuals handle in different ways.

The clerk, for example, rigidly adheres to administrative rules – to the detriment of the organisation – because he sees no personal perspective in his work. He is denied promotion, ignored by his boss and rejected by the colleague he would like to flirt with. The cultural goals he expected to pursue through his work – career, recognition, social integration – are unachievable. Society's rules are to blame. Promotion requires a qualification he will never have, while his boss treats him as a function rather than a person, and his colleague knows that workplace relationships are frowned upon. His recourse is to conduct his work in an exaggeratedly formal manner. Merton describes this as adaptation to the erosion of particular cultural values; today one might call it 'coping'. But he does not give up. His cranky attitude is but a symptom of his adaptive 'ritualism'.[23]

The school student is a different matter. She wants to be successful. Good marks mean achievement, praise and perhaps extra pocket money. What she does not believe in is the rules that govern her success. Her problem is not with the dominant cultural values (in this case, success) but with the means society grants her to achieve it. Merton recognises this as a typical and absolutely realistic perspec-

tive of the lower social classes. They know that games are won by those who are quick to grasp the explicit and implicit rules. Those are – as any educational sociologist would confirm – the others. The school student sees no alternative to bending the rules if she is to achieve her goals. Her strategy of adaptation is 'innovation'.[24]

Alongside ritualism and innovation, Merton describes three further modes of adaptation: conformism, retreatism and rebellion. While critical theory understands conformism as the forced adaptation experienced by the powerless, Merton's reading casts it in a different light. As he points out, the conformist must be able to afford to conform in the sense of both embracing cultural goals *and* possessing the means to achieve them. In this sense, it is the typical attitude of those who profit from the status quo. Retreatism, by contrast, is the ultimate outsider practice. A person who rejects the norms and values of a specific culture and stands outside its institutions is, strictly speaking, no longer part of society. Merton identifies this mode of adaptation with 'psychotics, psychoneurotics, chronic autists, pariahs, outcasts, vagrants, vagabonds, tramps, chronic drunkards and drug addicts'.[25]

Rebellion, finally, is the mode of adaptation of the rising classes. In Merton's words, 'It is typically a rising class rather than the most depressed strata that organizes the resentful and the rebellious into a revolutionary group.'[26] This is the most dynamic of the five modes of adaptation, standing not only for rejection of the existing culture and society but for implementation of the new. Merton distinguishes rebellion from resentment, which he interprets as an aggressive form of innovation whereby values are maintained, but the rules are applied aggressively (the state should take care of the poor – and deport the refugees).

Unlike the founders of critical theory, Merton is not thinking about adaptation to rigid power structures. His interest is adaptation in the context of social change experienced as crisis. Under this perspective, adaptation is diverse and even creative. It can be a strategy for personal salvation – or a praxis of collective awakening.

Adaptive generations

So can we apply this typology of adaptation to today's society? Is there any sign of positive, creative approaches to the crises facing us today? According to the theories outlined above, we should be looking for these among groups that are addressing the root causes of the problems, operating as agents of social change, and advancing adaptive programmes. Merton points us to the 'rising classes' as the standard-bearers of rebellion. We need to understand this in the context of modern industrial society, where questions of affluence and class are so central. His term 'rising *classes*' suggests conflict over resources, opportunities and progress. Do 'rising classes' offer any perspective for today's pressing questions of survival, or do we need to look for other actors? If we begin empirically, by considering who is already rebelling against the crises, we find ourselves looking at generations rather than social classes.

While there is a tendency to project characteristics onto entire generations, sociologists tend to be more interested in generational *elites*. These are often comparatively smaller groups that are perceived (especially retrospectively) as the political voice of their generation. Generation and class each play a role in social transformation. Karl Mannheim's understanding of generations combines natural and social time: it is the social aspect of the biological cycle of birth and death that enables the renewal and transformation of society.[27] As Heinz Bude notes: 'An assertive generational consciousness is part and parcel of a dynamic world, looking to the future and striving for renewal. It breaks with the known and familiar to enable the new, the unknown and unfamiliar.'[28] In the second half of the twentieth century, that dynamic shaped the cultural project of liberalisation and individualisation. In Germany, for example, the 'new social movements' of the 1980s have been described as 'engines of modernisation'.[29] Dissecting the French example in their influential investigation of the 'new spirit of capitalism', Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello identify the artistic critique of the 1960s as the driver of a restructuring of industrial society, seeking to expand the opportunities for self-realisation.[30] Those generations were

dedicated to progress and emancipation. By the 1980s, the dreams of the youth had turned to nightmares.

If we apply these concepts to the present day, we can identify specific qualities in the current protest generation that mark out its members as possible agents of rebellious and transformative adaptation. First of all, the heart of the current wave of climate protests (especially the Fridays for Future movement) is a demographic that could quite plausibly turn out to represent a generational elite.[31] The idea of a 'rising' group, which Merton associated with class in industrial society, applies here too – in a generational sense where the young are always the rising cohort of the coming period. In the case of the new climate movement, it is the (future) educated elites who are powering the protests. The movement initiated by Greta Thunberg (who was herself just fifteen years old at the time) is overwhelmingly young, largely female and heavily skewed towards the more educated.[32] Surveys of Fridays for Future participants in Bremen and Berlin in 2019 found that the 14-to-19-year-olds were by far the largest cohort (51.5 percent) followed by the 20-to-25-year-olds (19 percent).[33] School and university students where one or both parents themselves have a university education were strongly overrepresented in the FFF demonstrations. The participants' perceptions concerning class were equally telling: 63.4 percent said they were upper middle class.[34] Similar patterns are found internationally. Mattias Wahlström and his colleagues conducted field research at FFF protests in thirteen European countries and found the preponderant age cohort to be the 14-to-19-year-olds (45 percent).[35] They also confirmed that overrepresentation of participants from highly educated families is an international phenomenon. A total of 72.3 percent of their surveyed school students reported that at least one of their parents was a university graduate. So this is a movement that is generationally and socio-structurally predestined to arrive in the upper echelons of society.[36]

Here, we also see the confluence of natural and social time that typifies generations. The climate activists feel that their biological youth lends them a special right to speak about the future – which they will experience but older generations will not. At the same time, natural time – which is now characterised by the crisis of the plane-

tary ecosystem – becomes a problem for the protestors' social time. The movement's belief that the environment is severely out of kilter precludes any talk of progress – which assumes the natural world to be external and stable – and politicises intrinsically personal questions of survival. Who wants to say the future belongs to the young when we are apparently all going to hell in a handcart?

That, it seems, is actually one of the aspects that define this generation. The generational elites of modernity were shaped by intense shared experiences such as war and depression that coloured their subsequent understanding of society. The youthful climate protests are very clearly motivated by the anticipation – rather than experience – of grief. The 'children of the apocalypse'[37] see a dystopian future and are mobilised by the existential threat. For the climate movement, the question is not *how* the future will look but *if* it will happen at all.[38]

This time around, the generation is defined by expectation rather than experience. And a measure of reflexivity is observed. Acting on future catastrophe is no trivial exercise. Most people don't even try. Ideas about progress are almost completely absent from the movement's demands. If progress is mentioned at all, it is in the context of progress towards climate neutrality by 2030. Here, progress is nothing but 'an answer to the doubt and the hope that things will finally get better, that people will at last be able to breathe a sigh of relief' (Theodor W. Adorno).[39]

The movement's ideas about the future are correspondingly modest and revolve largely around the imperative of collective survival. The 1.5 degree target must be met at any cost.[40] If it is not, they say, the consequences for humankind and the natural environment will be catastrophic. Questions of self-realisation look very different under the primacy of survival. For example, Luisa Neubauer and Alexander Repenning, two prominent leaders of the German Fridays for Future, write about 'the luxury of riding a bicycle'[41] as a life choice that combines freedom of movement, ecological transport and control of time. They contrast this with the false freedom of a highly individualised 'fossil' lifestyle. Self-realisation trimmed for survival tends to follow the maxim that 'small is beautiful'[42] rather than the extensive logic of progress

(maximising consumption and productivity). It requires us to remember that natural resources are finite, and we should use them responsibly in harmony with the animate and inanimate world. That perspective is not so far from the 'Zen road to affluence' followed by Sahlins's hunter-gatherers.[43]

Alongside its survival paradigm and rejection of progress, a third feature of the movement's output also points to a constellation of adaptation: its political programme makes no distinction between individual and collective change. Even if the climate movement has been trying to move beyond personal moralising to advance a broader politics, most of its activists are well aware that both tracks are required: climate-motivated action by individuals and action by governments and businesses to promote and institutionalise the actions of individuals. To consume responsibly and to hold businesses responsible. To buy second-hand clothes and boycott plastic bags, while also introducing supply chain legislation to regulate the fast fashion industry and its sweatshops.

The new climate movement could be seen as the political spearhead of an essentially adaptive way of life – emphasising survival, renouncing progress, and combining individual and collective praxis. It has taken flak from the left for its lack of imagination in developing alternatives.[44] In this respect, it could be seen as a classic risk movement, as the bearer of a subpolitical challenge to representative democracy that has been bubbling since the 1980s. In other words, it functions as a pacemaker of democratisation.

That interpretation skates over a peculiar characteristic that is rather at odds with the democratisation dynamic. At least in its public presentation, the new climate movement exhibits an extraordinary confidence in experts. As Ingolfur Blühdorn argues, that 'positivistic perspective is devoid of any memory or awareness of the decades of discussion about the subjective core of all supposedly objective science, or of the responsibility shared by experts who claim a monopoly on objectivity for the sorry state of contemporary society'.[45] This is pithily summed up in the slogan 'Listen to Science!' and manifested in the movement's close relationship with the 'Scientists for Future'. For our present purposes, it is irrelevant

whether we regard this as naive or strategic.[46] Seen in connection with the movement's enthusiasm for a strong state,[47] it amounts to the rudiments of a political vision – ultimately a vision of depoliticisation. Essentially it boils down to an evidence-based technocracy, seeking to remove questions of survival from the arena of political conflict and democratic deliberation.

The visionary Ulrich Beck saw this coming in the 1990s. The inflation of subpolitics, he wrote, could end up hampering political and administrative agency by creating a 'congestion' that would massively obstruct political progress.[48] Applied to the present case, that would mean that the depoliticisation sought by the adaptive generation represented a response to frustrated expectations. Existential questions need to be solved. They *must* be solved. Real existing democracy has not exactly covered itself with glory, despite decades of subpolitical dynamisation (civil society). From the movement's perspective, it has exhibited the kind of political/administrative paralysis that Beck described as a 'congestion'. Today's civil society activism, which ultimately includes FFF, finds itself frustrated by its own success, with a subpolitically blocked democracy apparently unable to implement the decisions required for survival within the necessary timeframe. In that light, the positive technocracy of the new climate movement can be best understood as an attempt to accelerate the political in response to an apparently inevitable survival crisis – rather than a desirable resonance with nature, which Hartmut Rosa describes as mediopassive.[49] A positive concept of adaptation would mean switching the cultural reference from personal growth to collective survival and challenging the rules that govern society. Today, adaptation is rebellion.