

6. Protective technocracy

Political life would be purified.

*Joseph Schumpeter (1943)*¹

As it turns out, the political essence of the adaptive society is the depoliticisation of survival. This is articulated – explicitly or implicitly – in a desire for technocracy, whether in the form of government by experts or the technical automation of central political processes.² Alongside personal experience and collective imagination, the process is driven by historical disappointment with subpolitical approaches and a growing awareness of the limitations of democratisation for tackling existential problems.

Criticism of democracy is nothing new, of course. It has always been an important strand of Western political discourse, especially when expressed in the guise of doubts over the competence of politicians. In fact, uncritical excitement about ‘democracy’ tends to be a more recent phenomenon.³ The idea that successful democratic practice requires limits to political participation has always been part of the discussion – frequently in the sense of restricting the participation of supposedly unworthy sections of the population.

Like certain classical philosophers,⁴ some of the founders of sociology were less than entirely enthusiastic about democratisation, in the sense of expanding deliberative and participatory processes. Max Weber supported Germany’s democratisation after the First World War, but what he had in mind was something like a ‘plebiscitary leadership democracy’⁵ – which was more about ‘rigorous selection of the best political leaders than fulfilling ideals of liberty, equality and self-determination’.⁶ Joseph Schumpeter was also sanguine about democracy and sceptical about its expansion.

In fact, he proposed restricting the sphere of deliberative decision-making and regarded the 'democratic method' above all as a specific form of 'competition for political leadership'.⁷

This critique was directed above all against an overly idealistic understanding of deliberative and participatory formats, and fostered a strategic depoliticisation of particular areas and questions. As far as Schumpeter was concerned, this was simply a necessary condition for the functioning of a political system whose leaders were inevitably always preparing for the next election.⁸ Someone had to do the actual work of the state. But this could not be expected of the politicians, who always had one eye on public opinion and their prospects of re-election. As far as Schumpeter was concerned, a lack of democratic legitimation across broad areas of public affairs was in fact an essential precondition for a functioning democracy. Judges, central banks, state-funded universities and public bureaucracies all required a significant degree of independence. For good reason, these were spheres where experts held sway. Securing their engagement by excluding them from the 'democratic method' was essential to democratic statehood.⁹

When it comes to adaptation, however, there is no need to throw the democratic baby out with the bathwater. Instead, it is only logical if the coming adaptive society takes a fundamentally agnostic position on questions of democracy in its political system. The absolute priority is for questions of survival to be tackled at all. How that occurs is secondary. Indeed, one could argue that the demand to depoliticise the existential is nothing other than what liberal theories of the state have always regarded as the precondition for the modern social contract and thus for democracy itself: that survival must be assured before there can be any democracy at all.

The problem in late modernity is one of legitimising political rule in a situation where the threats to survival appear permanent and proliferating. That breaks with the logic of modernity, and poses the question of the characteristics of the social contract in the kind of adaptive constellation we have explored in the preceding chapters. Technocratic depoliticisation of survival is plainly a decisive element

of processes of legitimacy management that might presage a 'change of form' but do not necessarily call democracy itself into question.¹⁰

Moreover, the adaptive critique does not require a technocracy defined by supposedly unavoidable economic and systemic compulsions (as described in the analysis of neoliberal adaptation rhetoric in Chapter 2). Instead, it demands the capacity to tackle the perceived existential problems adaptively, treating the system as an analogy of the lifeworld: our own adaptive ways of life become the model for a transformation of the political system.¹¹ Ultimately, these ideas boil down to a *protective technocracy* that frames and stabilises the ludic experimentation of the adaptive life and opens up spaces for meaningful cooperation.

Protective technocracy forms a significant vector of political imagination in the adaptive society. Once sensitised to the possibility, people recognise the obvious usefulness of formats of power based on technology and expertise for societies that seek stability rather than dynamism. Digital technologies play a central role in these visions. Their potential to detect, assess and respond to complex dangers ultimately raises the prospect of new forms of governance.

Popular culture supplies pointers to the potency of technocratic remedies in the self-imaginings of the coming society. The legendary computer game *Civilization*, which came out in 1991, offers a good example. The latest version – *Eras and Allies* – introduced new forms of government that become available to the players as soon as a society is globally integrated and digitally connected. While earlier versions of the game followed a relatively clear and recognisable historical path (complete with ancient, medieval, democratic, communist and fascist forms of government), now, one could say, they have added the political formations of late modernity. The latest version features an extreme neoliberal 'corporate libertarianism', a digital democracy using social media to maximise participation, and a 'synthetic technocracy'.¹² The latter is ultra-rational, data-driven and resistant to co-optation by particular interests. It strives to reflect the objective interests of the majority while ensuring that minorities are not left by the wayside. It relies on the involvement of non-human agents, in particular artificial intelligence. Algorithms

initially assist human decision-makers (who are ideally experts in their field) and replace them in the longer term. Because the synthetic technocracy essentially functions as a digital super-intelligence, it has no need for democratic debate. Its attraction is the depoliticised management of social reproduction (even if bugs do still cause accidents and other inconveniences).¹³

In that respect, the synthetic technocracy aligns with a broader contemporary mood. An emerging strand of left-leaning sociology also views digital technologies as decisive tools for managing the coming society, for example in the context of a renaissance of cybernetics. The background to this is a debate about the possibilities of socialist economic planning initiated in 1920 by Ludwig von Mises:¹⁴ The question was whether a socialist economy could be managed rationally to maximise efficiency and prosperity. Liberal economists like von Mises, and later August von Hayek, Wilhelm Röpke and Lionel Robbins, objected that socialist economic planning lacked any equivalent of the price mechanism and was therefore unable to base its calculations on reliable information. The absence of real-time data on consumer behaviour, they argued, made it impossible to calculate production capacity meaningfully or deploy resources rationally – and that left central planning without the means to keep up with rapid changes in the markets.¹⁵

Recent contributions have revisited that controversy, arguing that the information problem is now eminently solvable using digital technologies (whether within or outside of capitalism). Digital infrastructures for quantifying market processes in real time enable technological planning (for example through ‘red’ digital platforms¹⁶) and *adaptation* of economic processes.¹⁷ The index fossil of this line of thinking is Project Cybersyn,¹⁸ designed by the cyberneticist Stafford Beer for the Chilean government in the early 1970s. As Jasper Bernes puts it in his review of contemporary left-wing interest in cybernetics, Cybersyn was ‘more a rhetorical than a practical success’, but still offers ‘a vision of a counterfactual history, in which egalitarian, computer-planned economies displaced the market’.¹⁹

The idea of cybernetic ‘feedback infrastructure’²⁰ is in fact highly salient today: changes in consumer markets are instantly

reported to the relevant system controllers, which adjust the respective supply structures. In the opposite direction, feedback from resource extraction and industrial manufacturing can be used to send signals to the consumer markets, for instance to offload overcapacity or manage expectations. Proponents of cybernetic economic planning point out that the most powerful corporations already employ comprehensive digital planning systems.²¹ Retail giants like Amazon and Walmart use highly sophisticated digital systems to predict consumer behaviour and demand and adjust their ordering and production accordingly. The same can be said of major manufacturers.

The advocates of cybernetic counter-models propose using these feedback infrastructures to establish an economy free of the compulsions of profit and growth. Such analyses contain an echo of Schumpeter, who believed he had identified a stable, ultimately post-capitalist economy *within capitalism*.²² Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, Schumpeter argued that dispassionate planners – rather than dynamic entrepreneurs – characterised the capitalism of his age, keeping the system stable with their technological planning tools. Where Schumpeter mourned the death of the entrepreneur, contemporary critical cyberneticists see an opportunity to realise sophisticated planning using the advanced technologies of the present age. At the heart of this concept is the idea of stabilising a system – here an *economic* system – through *adaptive transformation*.

While the cybernetic discussions outlined above revolve around solving problems within capitalism through adaptive digital technologies, the same mechanisms are also discussed in the context of the primarily ecological questions of planetary survival. In response to accelerating climate change, James Lovelock foresees a digital ‘hyperintelligence’ stabilising global systems and resolving the existential threats generated by modern civilisation.²³ The political trajectory here is neither subpolitical renewal²⁴ nor a ‘democratisation of democracy’,²⁵ neither a new liberalism²⁶ nor a return to plebeian democracy.²⁷ Nor are we looking at a revolutionary mobilisation of all forces to fight an ecological war.²⁸ The hope associated with adaptive stabilisation is ultimately

depoliticisation: that a largely autonomous digital technology dedicated to survival will obviate the need for political conflict because the issues have already been competently resolved.

The experience of the pandemic boosted this line of political thinking. Benjamin Bratton, for example, argues for climate change to be tackled by means of a 'positive biopolitics', rudiments of which were already observed in the global responses to Covid-19.²⁹ The pandemic, Bratton writes, brought the collectivisation of existential threats to the forefront of public consciousness, highlighting the need for a global system of risk management. On the one hand, he argues, the virus swept away the illusion of the isolated, autonomous individual (in other words, the modern understanding of freedom). We all breathe the same air, and an understanding of our connectedness was vital to fighting the pandemic, for example through masking up. On the other hand, survival required a positive biopolitics to guide collective adaptation to the virus. Ideally, he argues, this 'epidemiological view of society' should be based on a sophisticated 'sensing layer' that would pool data from all sources: in the case of the pandemic, everything from personal test results and mobility data to hospital capacity and global weather data.³⁰ Such data could be fed into cybernetic simulations.

Managing human society as a whole would naturally be many orders of magnitude more complex than the Covid experience. It would, Bratton argues, require a kind of 'collective immune system'³¹ on a planetary scale, capable of coordinating global responses to climate change. He calls for a planetary cybernetic control structure based on digital systems and biotechnology, which is able to translate simulation-based knowledge into appropriate social policy: 'Climate science has all of these [epistemological and technological infrastructures] except the all-important recursive enforcement part. As of yet, it cannot act back upon the climate that it represents, but it must. Just as a medical model does, it must not only diagnose but also cure.'³² The stabilisation – or adaptation – of human society and global ecology enforced by such a technological Leviathan will be unimpeded by moral deliberations and political institutions: 'Perhaps most importantly, its functioning would not be dependent upon the moral performance of its participants nor

upon the unpredictable reasonability, superstition, competence or ignorance of whoever occupies a particular formal government.³³ Unlike Lovelock's abstract, autonomous hyperintelligence, Bratton's model is not about a passive population living happily beneath the shield of a planetary artificial intelligence. What Bratton proposes is a *participatory technocracy* in which – as the analogy of the pandemic underlines – human contributions at all levels are central to a planetary sensing system whose stabilising effect depends on recursive feedback loops. Depoliticising the existential in this way would create favourable conditions for efforts to stabilise society.

Ultimately, the visions of a protective technocracy involve abolishing the distinction between politics and science in the interests of social stability. This immediately raises questions concerning the legitimacy of such a constellation – questions that were also prominent in sociological discussions of older versions of technocratic thinking. Those earlier debates assumed a systematic difference between the spheres of politics and science, largely on the basis of Max Weber's distinction between the vocations of science and politics.³⁴ The duty of the scientist is to objectively rationalise modern society ('disenchantment of the world'³⁵), while politics requires 'partisanship, struggle, passion'³⁶ (even if, as Weber famously points out, the rationalisation of society is also reflected in politics itself, for example in its bureaucratic apparatuses): 'Only someone who is sure that it will not destroy him if the world, as he sees it, is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer it, and that he is capable of saying, in the face of all this, "nevertheless!" only such a one has the "vocation" for politics.'³⁷ In Weber's perspective, the decisionist principle lies at the heart of political power: 'enforcing one's own will even against resistance'.³⁸ On the other hand, it is also – for the same reason – precarious, its stability firmly contingent on questions of legitimacy.

That has always been central to the technocratic perspective. The sociological pioneers of technocracy like Thorstein Veblen (when the concept still meant rule by experts rather than machines) were already critical of deficits of political leadership that generated 'friction in the industrial system'.³⁹ The decisionist principle in politics lay at the heart of the problem of interference by laypeople in fields

that actually demand expertise. If a politics beholden to capitalist interests was diametrically opposed to scientific rationality, Veblen wrote, the social system had to be revolutionised by a technically educated elite of engineers.⁴⁰ Although Veblen's technocratic vision was broadly compatible with libertarian syndicalist ideas about social organisation functioning largely without political power,⁴¹ the autonomous organisations he inspired quickly collapsed, and the US-American technocratic movement faded away.⁴²

After the Second World War, French authors like Jacques Ellul and Jean Meynauds put technocracy squarely on the agenda, discussing it as an inevitable consequence of technological development and also raising the issue of the technological management of political legitimacy.⁴³ This debate did not arrive in Germany until the 1960s – but was all the more vigorous when it did. The starting point was in 1961, with Helmut Schelsky's lecture on the place of humankind in the scientific civilisation.⁴⁴ The growing importance of technology, Schelsky argued, would successively diminish the importance of politics. Technical logic and constraints would supplant ideological decision-making. 'Modern technology', Schelsky wrote, therefore had 'no need for legitimacy; it "rules" because it works, for as long as it continues to function.'⁴⁵ Legitimation becomes obsolete, he says, because scientific/technical civilisation is more about competent operation of the machinery than people ruling over people. The use of technological means to solve societal problems, he said, successively transformed democracy into a 'technical state' that needed 'no social or political revolution, no constitutional amendments, no ideological conversion'. All that was needed was the increasing use of 'scientific techniques of all kinds, and the technical state emerges within the existing structure. Yet that obscures how far we have already travelled down the road to a state where political relations among people are mediated by man-made scientific/technical factors.'⁴⁶

Claus Offe points out a flaw in Schelsky's argument that objective necessities would make the question of legitimacy obsolete: 'The political dilemma of technocracy', he writes, consists in the fact that it must continue to motivate the population (its 'system problem') while its own inherent need for structural adjustment generates new

risks that affect its legitimacy.⁴⁷ Because, he continues, the technical state rests on elements located in 'the pre-political sphere of cultural discipline and inherited subjective interests', but is always having to prioritise action in order to ensure balance,⁴⁸ the need for legitimacy actually increases under technocracy. Technocracy, as far as Offe is concerned, sets out to preserve stability but ends up generating its own forms of instability.

Behind this theory lies the assumption that technocratic government cannot supply its own legitimacy because its sole purpose is to stabilise the system (and has nothing to do with meaning or values). It lacks the cultural traditions and subjective norms that would be required to generate broad acceptance as a central source of political legitimacy. A political system

that draws its inspiration exclusively from the sphere of technological necessity and existential imperative ... will undermine itself through the effects of political alienation: a potential for aggression whose forms, targets and class coordinates are relatively unspecific and flexible and is only rationalised as radical political criticism in a handful of socio-culturally privileged instances, is associated with a loss of control of reality and a willingness to create myths. That in turn allows the difficulty of properly grasping political processes to be irrationally bypassed.⁴⁹

Should we take that conclusion as a warning against the kind of irrationality that proliferated during the pandemic? Or is the idea of a disempowering technocracy generating irrationality no longer relevant in the context of the adaptive society. My exploration of perspectives under the primacy of survival certainly speaks for the latter. What we are seeing is a reflexive rejection of the grammar of modernisation, an attitude to power that springs from life rather than seeking to constrain it. What people demand (or at least gladly tolerate) is certainly not the depoliticised rule of capitalist necessity, the neoliberal technocracy of financialisation and austerity. Instead, the desire for a protective technocracy is inherent to the adaptive society. It arises out of the perception of real existential issues and represents a fundamental break with the logic of capital.

If the political system is to create conducive conditions for an adaptive way of life, it will have to embrace the ludic experimentation of adaptive practice. Technocracy, as the essence of these ideas, certainly represents a plausible principle of democratic transformation because it incorporates the cultural traditions and subjective values of the adaptive society. The long-term legitimacy and stability of such a power structure would depend on how closely the existential issues driving it matched public perceptions and the extent to which such a society was capable of making participation in technocratic survival a meaningful point of reference of its ways of life. Not only is that plausible; it appears almost unavoidable in light of climate disruption, deep inequality and desperate circumstances. In that sense, protective technocracy represents the social contract of the adaptive society: the freedom of collective and individual survival supplanting the egotistic and materialistic promises of modernisation. In its positive sense, adaptation means mobilising that freedom.