5. Criticality and critique: The avant-gardes of adaptation

Without collaborations, we all die.
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2018)[1]

The new climate movement has generated an *ecological critique*, exploring ways of life centred on survival.[2] This is just the latest in a long line of modernist criticisms of social conditions, whose roots lie in the nineteenth century and are closely associated with the native ideologies of the industrial age.[3] The socialist movement brought forth a *social critique* whose topics still reverberate today: class power, capitalist exploitation and social inequality. Its normative foundations are the value of labour and the desire for economic and social equality. The *artistic critique* is essentially liberal. It objects to mediocrity and uniformity, the alienation and authoritarianism of mass society. Its proposed alternative is personal autonomy, individualism and cultural sophistication. The *conservative critique* took issue with pauperisation and the corrosive effect of modernisation on the moral fabric of society. Instead, it held up the ideal of universal human dignity, the mutual dependency of social classes and the moral responsibility of the powerful.[4]

The social and artistic critiques were not restricted to the personal, but became drivers of social change in collective formations.[5] Their ideas about a different, better world represented a source of inspiration and renewal in the economic sphere, and their criticisms have been integrated into the practices of capitalist institutions in an ongoing, system-stabilising process. The labour movement's social critique formed the starting point for a 'democratic capitalism'[6] with employment rights, social security,

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and health and safety laws, and warded off the threat of real social and economic revolution. The artistic critique that emerged in the 1970s was also successively co-opted by various institutions.[7] Capitalism responded by expanding the supply of individualised goods ostensibly conveying cultural distinction. The 'job for life', which had formed the institutional basis for a broadly uniform lifestyle, has been superseded by a never-ending succession of personal trials and professional tribulations.

Incorporating the praise and criticism – 'recuperating' its creative energy[8] – would, it was argued, initiate innovation by unleashing individual creativity and expanding personal responsibility. The interaction between artistic critique and capitalist institutions created a 'new spirit of capitalism', that served to legitimise the emerging forms of socio-economic organisation.[9] Capitalism once again turned out to be a highly responsive system. The cycles of recuperation sparked by the social and artistic critiques also had certain real liberalising and democratising effects, strengthening social rights and individual liberties.[10]

The ecological critique is a child of the twentieth century. It argues that our current society is 'destroying civilisation' and fundamentally rejects the ideas of progress championed by the social and artistic critiques. Unlike its predecessors, the ecological critique 'appears to have no preference for any particular political model'.[11] Its ideological spectrum runs from economic democratisation to authoritarian transformation. It is, as Chiapello argues, by no means inevitable that the ecological critique will be as amenable to liberalisation as its social and aesthetic predecessors. As such, the ideas and practices of the new climate movement look like an attempt to walk a very narrow line between democratisation and de-democratisation.

Another salient structural difference can be identified here. While the social and artistic critiques emerged out of concrete contemporaneous *experiences* (specifically capitalist exploitation and social repression) the ecological critique is principally *expectation-based* and essentially directed towards preserving the status quo. Of course certain manifestations of the climate crisis can already be observed: wildfires, drought, a slight rise in sea levels. But these

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are trivial in comparison to the magnitude of expected disaster that motivates the new climate movement.

If we are seeking a sociological understanding of the ecological critique and its ideas about the kind of life required by an adaptive society, it is not enough just to speculate. We need to seek empirical pointers. I would suggest that examining real-life practices of adaptation can generate empirically founded hypotheses about the central ideas associated with a radically adaptive way of life. And that brings us straight to the question of where experiences of this kind might be found today, experiences that lend us insights into adaptive mobilisation and the complex practices of survival.

The pandemic as adaptation

We have recent and very concrete experience with a survival-threatening crisis and the associated adaptive (de-)mobilisation. In early 2020, Western societies began to realise that Covid-19 – unlike SARS (2002/2003) or the multiple Ebola outbreaks in West and Central Africa since 2014 – was going to be a global pandemic. This set off a cascade of practices that touched on the two central axes of social adaptation: the hierarchy of cultural values and the perceived legitimacy of societal responses.

When China locked down the city of Wuhan, confining millions of residents to their homes, citizens of the liberal Western democracies reacted with horror. They could not imagine agreeing to such restrictions on their freedom, rigidly enforced without democratic process. Some had more cynical thoughts. Would capitalist societies really place more value on the lives of comparably few (mostly older or sick) people than on keeping the economy running?[12] Did the capitalist state not derive its legitimacy primarily from its function of guaranteeing economic growth? Had decades of neoliberal restructuring not infiltrated that mantra into every last pore of society, into its subjective value system? Whether one identifies bourgeois liberty or the capitalist profit drive as the ultimate value, the first lockdown in March 2020 suspended both for the sake of an initially unconditional orientation on protecting human life.

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Under the pressure of acute crisis, instruments that had previously been regarded as beyond the pale were suddenly deemed opportune. Rules were changed at the drop of a hat, public spending was unleashed on a huge scale, employers' rights were curtailed by rules requiring their staff to work from home,[13] and restrictions were placed on the number of people permitted in shops and offices at any one time. This was essentially a gigantic experiment in adaptive reorientation. National borders, which the privileged citizens of the Global North had become accustomed to passing through with ease, were suddenly closed in an abrupt reversal of globalisation.[14] European states and companies raced to develop digital systems for contact tracing, and the great controversy over digital surveillance was forgotten in an instant. These collective adjustments created huge challenges at the personal level. When the requirement to attend school was suspended, parents were forced to choose between exposing their child to the risk of attendance or pausing their education. Students were kept out of their universities for months. Residents of care homes were prevented from leaving, their friends and relatives forbidden to visit. In other words, all instances of social contact were subjugated to society's new rules, in a context in which it became impossible to distinguish between individual and collective adaptation.

We can conceptualise the pandemic as a dress rehearsal for future crises. It can tell us a great deal about how contemporary societies respond to disaster,[15] and was itself a concrete expression of the social consequences of the environmental emergency.[16] As an incident of global self-harm[17] that focussed absolute attention on survival, it exhibited a number of structural similarities to crises driven by climate change. The origins of both the Covid virus and climate change lie within human society. While both could theoretically have been prevented, it is now too late for that. Now there is no alternative to adaptation.

It is no coincidence that social infrastructures became the epicentre of adaptation.[18] Infrastructures ensure the operation of basic societal functions. Transport and communications networks enable the flow of goods and information, public services provide socialisation and education, while the health service saves lives

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and treats the sick. This is a *critical* sphere for the reproduction of society. These are processes without which society simply cannot function in the longer term, because they are *critical* for its continuing existence. The existence of society is intimately bound up with its infrastructures.[19] Infrastructures are products of societal coordination and expressions of normative priorities. This makes them decisive for absorbing and adapting to the effects of crisis.[20] For example, the availability of digital communication was a crucial precondition for adapting the organisation of labour; the availability of intensive care beds and the roll-out of vaccination infrastructure defined the material possibilities of healthcare responses. So infrastructures define the possibilities and limits of collective adaptation. In the event of crisis, they need to be both robust and flexible. And it is in crisis that they demand the most of their staff, whose contributions form the basis of *societal* adaptation.

It is no coincidence that new social categories emerged to acknowledge the essential nature of certain activities. Social rights and obligations were reconfigured in accordance with their relevance to reproduction (in other words survival). If we are interested in examining adaptation as a question of experience rather than expectation, we are inevitably drawn to the question of the normative positioning of those working in the relevant critical infrastructures. Moreover, their experiences – and criticisms – of adaptation in response to crisis point to ideas about a better society and a better way of life that could emerge from successful handling of survival threats.

The quotes cited in the following originate from a set of interviews conducted at the height of the pandemic.[21] The subjects were key workers, whom we asked about their experiences under those exceptional circumstances and their thoughts about society. My interpretations of the empirical material are inevitably explorative, and any generalisations are therefore tentative in nature. I begin by reviewing the structural conditions that characterise the field, followed by an overview of the topics most commonly raised in the interviews (enormous pressure of work, social division, sense of purpose). Positivity about the work is almost always associated with positive experiences of cooperation. I then sketch out a typology of the social criticisms mentioned in the interviews,

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identifying three main points: a culture that rewards narcissism, an exclusively profit-driven economy, and a state weakened to the point of incapacity. In their place, the interviewees express a desire for greater socio-economic equality, functioning hierarchies and a protective iteration of vertical authority. Those are the pillars of their 'good society'. Finally, I turn to the political perspectives implicit in these criticisms and visions, which exhibit interesting parallels to the ecological critique articulated by the new climate movement.

We are dealing with areas defined as 'critical infrastructure', which is defined in German law as 'ensuring the provision of important and essential goods and services'.[22] These include 'in particular the healthcare sector, utilities and food supply, public administration, transport and IT infrastructure, social work and education, cleaning, hygiene and waste disposal, firefighting … and law and order'.[23] As surveys show, those who work in these areas tend to have low occupational prestige, in no small part on account of their comparatively low pay and other disadvantages.[24] These are often traditionally female-dominated occupations (although not exclusively: the police service skews heavily male) and have always been subject to pressure to cut costs and increase productivity.[25] There is a fair degree of social heterogeneity, however: the term 'health worker' covers everything from hospital cleaner to surgeon.[26]

While these occupations have always been characterised by structural stress and overwork, the pandemic turned the dial up to eleven (and beyond), especially in the areas worst affected, such as the health service, social care and policing. Staff complained of immense overwork and utter exhaustion, especially at the height of the pandemic. Speaking in the summer of 2021, one nurse described the state of emotional collapse she had experienced the previous spring: 'We worked to the point of exhaustion, and we really did go to work every single day, and sometimes I cried before going to work during the pandemic, because I was just at the end of my tether.'

These kinds of experiences were frequently described as a simple worsening of stresses that were in fact already prevalent throughout the health and care systems and the police, stemming in particular from chronic underfunding and understaffing. As one male nurse noted:

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> Most of the nurses at our hospital are very overworked, absolutely. We're noticing it now, it got worse after Covid. […] Sometimes colleagues have to work seven, eight, nine days in a row. And at some point, they're just done, aren't they. Especially if they're on nights or have a string of early shifts. […] People often say that there should be more support for nurses, but they haven't had any real support. The hospitals got help but the nurses didn't.

His experiences working in a hospital reflect the social conditions more generally, which he experienced as divided and inequitable:

> Well the big companies like Amazon certainly made enormous profits and came out winners. The pharmacies did very well for themselves too. Many hospitals were just fine. […] And the losers were the small businesses and people doing casual and part-time work. […] The big firms like Lufthansa, like BMW, well they're very powerful aren't they, and the government just does what they tell it to. I don't think there are really very many politicians who still serve the people.

Many of the interviewed essential workers attributed their structural overwork and stress to a *divided social order* in which the interests of people like them are not politically represented. Those who were lower in the workplace hierarchy were most likely to feel powerless. Whether they were talking about their work, social inequality, economics or politics, they described a society divided between the powerful and the powerless, the elites and the ordinary people. This was rarely associated with a fundamental rejection of hierarchies. Instead, there was a broad acknowledgement of the fundamental functionality of hierarchies, with which they were familiar from their work. But they did articulate a specific *lack of contact* with, even *alienation* from the upper reaches of the hierarchy, both at work and in society at large. The head of a psychiatric ward, for example, noted specific problems in social infrastructure, but also acknowledged the massive burden on the population at large, with whom she felt she shared the same boat. She located the reasons for this – quite typically for our sample of essential workers – in the remoteness of the ruling elites:

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> Of course it was the ordinary people who paid the price again, like they always do. The essential workers. […] And I think working from home must be a nightmare if you have kids at home. […] The winners will be the ones who got into the surgical mask business, or, I don't know, invented some weird kind of disinfectant … […] They'll be laughing all the way to the bank. The workers worked twice as hard, but not the bosses. Maybe they got some kind of bonus to keep them quiet but basically, I think they got hung out to dry, like always. […] Sometimes I just have no idea what the people in charge are up to. They certainly aren't looking out for us. It's very frustrating. […] It's not about us citizens anymore, how to make the best of it for us, that's not how I see it. […] None of the politicians have charisma, none of them actually care about the young people, the children, the school pupils, all the people who are poor or sick.

The pandemic was felt to have exacerbated these trends and widened the gap between ordinary people and those in charge. Few of the interviewees had thought about giving up their job. This was not because they viewed it as an inescapable duty, but because they regarded their work– despite overwork and exploitation – as a social praxis with purpose and meaning. The subjective value of their work was predicated above all on micro-milieus of solidarity and meaningful social interactions. The fact that clear, systematic instructions are vital for their own work explains the absence of a fundamental criticism of social hierarchies. For example, the phrase 'living in the moment'[27] cropped up several times in interviews with police. Normally, the police would expect to be 'ahead of events', in a position of control. Instead, during the pandemic, they shared the same focus on the present that we identified as a characteristic of adaptive praxis. If you are living 'in the moment', you are at least keeping up with events. You are experiencing agency, making a difference.

The interviewed police sometimes used the expression 'living in the moment' to describe the feeling of unity with their role, with their colleagues, and to some extent with a particular section of the population. It is certainly problematic if they feel they are losing this sense of security. For example, one interviewed policeman, who is also a

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local councillor for the conservative CDU, was visibly disappointed by certain experiences, which had alienated him from a milieu that he felt actually belonged on his side:

> It used to be that we mostly got aggro from the extreme left. And in the mainstream at least you could still talk with people normally. […] And now suddenly the mainstream or the respectable right, they also tend to assume that policing will be more by force than consent […]. It used to be that the right, the conservatives would say: 'Break that left-wing demo up, by force if need be, they're just a bunch of troublemakers.' Now it's exactly the other way round. But the police are still the enemy. That's the only thing that's stayed the same. [laughs] I think that's really stressful for a lot of colleagues. […] They [lockdown opponents] think they have the right to demonstrate just how they want, whatever the price. And you know what's mad about that? They used to be the law-and-order fans and now they don't give a damn about law and order.

Like exploitative working conditions and the fatal impact of the profit motive in the provision of public goods, hostility from formerly supportive social milieus was regarded as unfair and disappointing. At the same time, however, these kinds of experiences also strengthened internal cohesion within these groups: the sense that one can depend absolutely on one's colleagues. The autonomy of the teams – the individuals on whose cooperation one must rely – is therefore a central source of job satisfaction. This was expressed by the head of a palliative care unit in Lower Saxony, who regarded his colleagues as 'close partners' with whom he 'shares everything', and also by a young police officer from Frankfurt am Main who stated with pride that he and his colleagues would 'die for each other'.

Internal cohesion does not necessarily require external hostility. It is sustained by the collective accomplishment of challenging tasks. Interventions in the autonomy of the groups – whether by way of their institutional funding, by superiors outside the team or through administrative rules imposed by politicians in response to the pandemic – came in for heavy criticism. The respondents exhibited great confidence in their own competence, and generally also in

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that of their colleagues. This confidence was acquired by those who remained and coped successfully with the structural challenges of the profession. In other words, those who demonstrated exceptional adaptation through their *essential pragmatism*.

Forceful *criticism* of existing conditions extended far beyond the interviewees' own work, although the latter was frequently the explicit starting point for critical reflections on the broader situation. Across all the investigated occupations we found three central, interconnected motifs: a *cultural critique* of a society described as egotistic or narcissistic; an *economic critique* of the profit-driven system; and a *political critique* of a weak and incompetent state.

The interviewed essential workers are social individuals who were generally very aware of their significance for the reproduction of the modern way of life and not afraid to say so. They were highly critical of the trends they observed, identifying the prevalence of egotism throughout society as a central problem. This was frequently ascribed to the economic and social elites, but also seen more generally as a drain on society. One male nurse regarded it as society's greatest bane:

> This very narcissistic way of thinking. This very narcissistic world view. They're all just putting themselves first. They all think they are the best, the strongest. There's less and less cooperation. If they can screw someone over, rob them blind, then they just do it, it just happens. […] Like I already said today, this great divide through society is a huge issue, isn't it. All the strife and disagreement.

The *narcissism* mentioned here alludes above all to egotism and self-interest. It contrasts sharply with the feeling of powerlessness experienced by essential workers – although they also derive a sense of moral satisfaction from their sacrifices and from playing a constructive role in a functional hierarchy. They see the idealisation of radical individualism as a smokescreen for greed and manipulation. One teacher ruminated on social inequality and its power-stabilising function:

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> Well you see Richard Branson flying into space or whatever because he just doesn't know what to do with himself. Yeah, because he's bored or whatever, he starts a race, competing with the other two rich blokes. And on the other side you're sitting at home or whatever and you see all that and you think, brilliant, bread and circuses. That's supposed to keep us quiet.

A psychologist identified values as a central problem and put his finger on contradictions in personal goals:

> The money thing plays a very different role for young people than it does for older folks. I don't know if I'm seeing it wrong. Somehow, they say there are more young millionaires now than ever before or something. [...] So somehow they all want to be individualists, and somehow everyone wants to be the best, the greatest, the perfect one, exactly. And I think that's a really huge problem.

This striving for singularity, which she felt was encouraged by society, was less about personal autonomy than an attempt to live up to a cultural ideal that was – for banal reasons of arithmetic – denied to all but a few. After all, she said, they can't all be 'the best'. Society's cultural incentives, she said, were wrongly configured. They encouraged competition and egotism, but inevitably produced subjective disappointment.

As these quotes suggest, the social critique expressed by the interviewees frequently hinted at an underlying *critique of capitalism* that was often rather vague but occasionally astonishingly precise. It also encompassed criticism of democracy, which was regarded as a system that is incapable of taming the egotism of the elites. When asked what lessons should be drawn from the pandemic, one junior doctor responded without hesitation: 'That capitalism just doesn't work!' She laughed out loud and continued:

> I think we saw that very clearly. That our school system is pretty unfair. That, altogether, health is not a commodity to be sold for profit, but something everybody should have a right to, whether they are rich or poor. [...] If it weren't for those capitalist mechanisms, you wouldn't have all that pressure for the hospitals to

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> operate economically. You wouldn't have that pressure to rush patients through and send them off home as fast as possible. And you wouldn't have all that pressure in the ordinary GPs' surgeries either. Without the pressures of capitalism, you could make sure that people had a pleasant working environment. You could simply say 'Well we're not going to do 120 percent now; 100 percent will be just fine.' […] That would be quite an improvement.

While this may sound like a radical critique of the system, it transpires on closer examination to represent above all a defence of her own expertise, which is too important to exploit for capitalist profit. Our interviewees rarely expressed fundamental criticism of the capitalist economic system quite so clearly and directly. But they did generally exhibit a strong sense of fairness, with a sharp awareness of discrimination and exploitation and the negative impact of both on social justice and cohesion.

The cult of individualism was sometimes criticised as avaricious and manipulative, sometimes excused as ignorance. It was contrasted with an ethic of the modest, honest and authentic – contrasting the interviewees' own principles with the perceived egotism of society. The *cultural critique* generally weighs more heavily here than more materialist critiques of capitalism. The desire for self-realisation is understood as an essential part of a majority culture that is based on a false and hollow life model, which the others have 'somehow' been unable to escape. As a policewoman from Bavaria put it:

> Somehow nobody is willing to do without or make a sacrifice. There's your egotistical society again. Everybody wants to travel and fly, all the time and wherever they want, to be free. Well I can understand it too really, somehow. […] I think there are other ways to be happy though, but somehow a lot of people don't manage to, they aren't able to think any differently.

The others' supposed superficiality casts the respondents' own sacrifices in a positive light, counterposing their own meaningful way of life (characterised by frugality, solidarity and collective values) with

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the shallowness of the self-seeking.[28] For instance, another policewoman related how the experiences of the pandemic had confirmed her fundamental sense that the culture industry and the obsession with personal growth were distracting attention from the truly important questions of life. Moreover, she felt that society's emphasis on cultural singularisation created 'immature' subjects who lacked basic human abilities. She felt that the reduction in cultural distractions during the pandemic had enabled people to rediscover buried or forgotten aspects of authentic meaning, which often contained a ludic element:

> For me it just confirmed that, y'know, a lot of people just stress themselves out too much, they're much too dependent on materialistic things, y'know, and so many people aren't really able to keep themselves occupied and they have become so immature. You know, the things you did as a kid, just thinking something up, something you could play, just doing it. As a child you just climbed up a tree and had fun there. I think a lot of people are lacking that. They've become dependent on things like bars, cafés, discos, and of course that's fun, isn't it, now and then, but they've become completely addicted, in my opinion. And maybe they could all learn that you can pass the time differently […], and maybe give those basic values another chance. What is truly important?

This passage reveals a specific, modest concept of freedom, which was expressed in very similar terms by many of the essential workers: simple, unassuming, quietly confident. 'Mature' attributes that enable a person to assume responsibility for self and others. This was not merely a normative orientation, but described the central tenets of their own praxis. Here, situations of freedom were generally associated with moments of control over time and an absence of stress: as a child in a tree, looking out across your own garden, in the gym with your best friend, or interacting with your children. That's what is 'truly important'.

Such practices were not the respondents' lived reality; they possessed no realm of private happiness untouched by the problems of broader society. In fact, experiences of that type of freedom

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were extremely rare, especially during the pandemic. And above all, their desired way of life was threatened by social conditions in which positive experiences were overshadowed by exhaustion, exploitation and hostility. To the essential workers, the culturally dominant egotism of the majority society provided a comprehensive explanation of their own powerlessness and lack of political representation. Under this perspective, a good life is, almost by definition, only possible in conducive micro-milieus – principally work and family. Competence, authenticity and simplicity form the pillars of the adaptive life.

It is worth noting that this stance tends to uphold the conditions it criticises. Explaining one's own powerlessness as an effect of an egotism that is inherent to the culture means that it is almost impossible to imagine a society that does anything different, still less that one might be able to influence this. Instead, ideas about the future are dominated by dark visions of more of the same. A psychological counsellor said she thought that negative individualisation trends would only get worse. She associated this with the enforcement of capitalist imperatives, which she regarded as the current society's cultural base:

> I think it's just going to get worse and worse. Most of all, the capitalist thing will get worse. The egocentric, the egotistical is just getting bigger and bigger, um, and that increasingly becomes the feeling of being something special, doesn't it? 'I've got to be better', that's growing and growing. This trend for perfectionism. [...] And then nobody will be interested in anybody else. I think it's more, like, that everybody [will be] in sub-communities, but I think if you take a step back everyone will just be, like, how can I get the best possible out of myself, whatever the price? And you see that ruthlessness. How can I get one over? Who gives a shit? Um, well, this egotistical thing, it's just going to get bigger, bigger and bigger, and I don't want to say that the human race, that all the people are becoming narcissists or whatever. But [...] they must always be thinking: How can I get more and more out of myself?

The criticism of compulsive perfectionism (progress!) expressed in these passages suggests an expectation of social decline. Many of our

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essential workers had much more drastic expectations and fears. In their eyes, egotism would ultimately lead to the downfall of the society they work so hard to protect. In real crises, a policeman and former soldier said, highly individualised societies are incapable of organising collective forms of survival. Alluding to the supply chain disruption and temporary shortages of the pandemic, he employed the analogy of war:

> If the food supply breaks down here … Well, if you just take a look at the reports from the Yugoslav wars and so on. How did one of them describe it? First of all, the weak died. And then the others fought over what was left. Hunger is one of the biggest motivators for us humans. And if the food supply really had broken down, […] well, you just have to wonder whether there wouldn't have been something like civil war.

From the policeman's perspective, the only conceivable way forward is to pursue universal collective goals: 'Today, the individual is valued more highly than the community. We need to teach people that the community is more important, that it's not just the law of the jungle.'

Steering society towards objectives more important than individual freedom – as another dominant motif expressed by interviewees from various essential services – is the task of the state. But the state no longer does this. It fails to represent those who ensure that society continues to function. Instead, the state is dominated by individualistic egotism, as one nurse noted in relation to the payments pocketed by certain German politicians for their role in procuring personal protective equipment during the early phase of the pandemic:

> For example, it would've been nice if a crisis like that had taught us that there are more important things than money. But that deep urge to enrich yourself as soon as the opportunity arises, that still seems to apply. That's not the state's intention I think, it's not deliberate, but it seems that's just how people tick […].

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Apart from attributing specific problems to the personal greed of individual functionaries, the critiques of the state vary in their radicalism and are not argued exclusively in terms of cultural influences. But they do concur on one central point: the inability to generate *legitimacy* – in the sense of popular outcomes – through effective action, which the essential workers regard as the entire point of politics.[29] A psychiatric nurse in Lower Saxony spoke for many when she criticised the state's responses as too slow and inefficient – which became glaringly obvious during the pandemic:

> To my mind, the government was kind of asleep at the wheel, and then they were chopping and changing all the time. And now each federal state just does as it pleases. That's not how I'd do it. That applies to the pandemic of course, but also the schools in general. Well, it was a poor show. […] The politicians should've done things very differently. Should've been clearer for a start and perhaps responded more quickly. And also avoiding, avoiding the fragmentation everywhere. Yeah, [the incidence rate] was a good deal higher in some regions than others, but sometimes I would have wished … because sometimes you just didn't know what's what anymore. It was different everywhere. I didn't like that. I'm normally not at all the type for 'one size fits all' and […] everyone doing the same. Not my thing at all otherwise. But I think in this case it would have been called for.

Here, the inadequacy of the state's response is attributed directly to the regional differentiation of political powers and pandemic-related measures. The decentralisation of power is rejected, its concentration supported. The possibility of holding an independent position is ignored (subpolitics!). There is absolutely no expectation of efficiency gains for the state through an expansion of democratic participation. And absolutely no element of personal political activism, nor any conspicuous desire for democratic discussion and decision-making. Instead, good – meaning centralised – government is seen as the way to master the complexity of the crisis. Having the same rules for everybody can be interpreted as a wish for greater clarity and simplicity, and also a desire for fairness in a situation where there is a strong sense of being exploited.

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As practitioners of adaptation, the essential workers feel they are living *the right life under the wrong conditions*. Although they feel powerless in a dichotomous social order that reifies self-interest and individualism and is administered – for better or worse – by a disinterested state that is unwilling or unable to govern, they experience successful subjectification in their immediate social circle and their confidence in their own abilities (although these are not acknowledged politically). They tackle the problems of survival and in fact create society's spaces for self-realisation. But the social realities make a mockery of their efforts.

The rot goes much deeper than pay and conditions, even if those virtually always got first mention. Looking beyond such fundamentally resolvable problems, the respondents laid out scenarios in which society implodes after neglecting the conditions of its own reproduction (and specifically the people who deal with its daily maintenance). As the pillars of stability crumble, society struggles to adapt to crisis. It survives only by radicalising the inequalities that characterise it under normal conditions. The essential worker sees no reason to make common cause with this order, in which they feel left to fend for themselves. They counterpose the ethic of a 'right life' that tends towards specific imaginings of a 'good order'.

Our interviewees emphasised four elements that make up the *concept of a good* society. Firstly, they contrasted the existing polarisation of society with ideals of greater equality, often with notable openness to diversity. One junior doctor articulated this vision especially eloquently:

> A society where people are considerate towards each other, where people are not divided into winners on one side, losers on the other. We need to find a balance with most people living at a similar – let's say – level of comfort. Not just a few living the high life and a few right at the bottom of the heap. Well, now there are *many* at the bottom of the heap, and if we put them all more in the middle, maybe a few people would have a bit less luxury then, but very many people would be better off. Then somehow altogether you know that things like gender, skin colour, where

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> someone comes from, all that doesn't matter, simply doesn't play a role. Also sexual orientation, that's irrelevant, [...] instead you should just be treated as a human being, [...] Yes, I think that would be a good society.

This quote expresses the wish for a society with less social distance between its members. One can interpret this as a solution to the problems of alienation that are associated with power asymmetries. At the same time, hardly any of the interviewees suggested a real material equalisation. The quoted doctor expresses a desire not for a society of absolute equals, but for the elimination of disadvantage and an altogether more compact social body. In other words, positional fairness to counteract centrifugal forces.

What they do not articulate is a fundamental critique of power as the integrating force in society, and, in fact, the idea appears not to play any significant role at all. Quite the opposite. Essential workers know from experience that hierarchies of knowledge and authority are vital at all levels of society. Problems occur when those in charge exceed their powers, for example, when political/administrative rules interfere with functioning work processes. This brings us to the second element of a good society: functioning hierarchies and clear leadership to address the perceived dysfunctionalities of social coordination. As one care manager noted:

> The health minister [...] is also responsible for our working conditions. But we decide how they are implemented on the ground. That's me and my colleagues. [...] [H]ow I feel at work and how we feel as a team, that's our own responsibility, not the health minister's.

While politics defines the framework, he says, it is down to the actors on the ground to deal with each concrete situation. Crises demand exceptional leadership, above all to protect those operating at the sharp end. His personal lesson from the pandemic is:

> Things just run more smoothly in crises and emergencies if everyone is following a single leader. The person giving the orders might

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> occasionally get it wrong or whatever, maybe make a mistake or something. There's no point challenging it, is there, you just have to do what the person in charge says. If everyone just does it their own way, then things get completely out of hand. That's the principle I tried to follow.

Approval of *hierarchies of knowledge and responsibility* – resulting from personal experience at work – is, as the above passages convey, directly connected with a broad acceptance of (and frequently an explicit wish for) *vertical authority* to enforce rules against the individual egotisms of the culture. This is the third central element of the good society. One interviewed childcare worker described her work as rule-oriented communication of the skills required to live in a free society. She saw great potential for aggression in members of society who fail to obey the rules. More generally – and absolutely in line with the criticism of egotism that characterises this field – she regarded rule-breaking as characteristic of the current society. She described the pandemic as a revelation. When face masks were made compulsory on public transport, she expected the rule to be widely ignored by many and was thrilled to find that the crisis had in fact motivated people to obey the rules. In her eyes, society had found its true nature in and through the pandemic. She was sceptical about the easing of restrictions, on the other hand, and would like to have seen harsher punishments for transgressions:

> I thought it wasn't good that they eased the lockdown rules again very quickly, they were very quick to do that, because I also said, if they let go now, then we'll have even higher incidence rates in one or two months at the latest. And that's exactly what happened then. And it was crap that it wasn't enforced properly. What I thought was, okay, if someone really flaunts the rules, for example, if I see two teenagers meeting up, then they shouldn't just get a warning. If you ask me, they should each be fined two hundred euros. That kind of thing is just anti-social and egotistic.

This wish for rigorous vertical authority to counter the egotism of the individual was widespread, and addressed in particular to the state. The government's impotence was noted with incredulity. One

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policeman said it seemed to him that the state was failing to do its duty:

> The point of politics and politicians is to change things. That's what they're elected to do, that's what they're paid to do. That's their goddamn job, so that ordinary people don't have to do it, because we have other fish to fry. That's their job. And they're paid very very well to do it.

Where state paralysis was discussed in more complex terms, the accounts often drifted (consciously or unconsciously) from complaints about the state to a relatively fundamental *critique of democracy* itself. One young policewoman for example saw the short-termism promoted by comparatively short electoral terms as a central problem. She argued that making parliament a little less answerable to the electorate would be 'progressive':

> Oh God, now we're getting really progressive aren't we. My feeling is that we need longer between elections, because I just don't think it's attractive to do climate policy, because it won't have any visible effects within the next few years, before the next elections come round. Instead you just spend and spend and maybe there's no visible result, or not one that Joe Public can see. So I think you could make things work better if you had more time to implement them.

Two things are apparent in this quote. Firstly, the desired society, which is socio-structurally compact, functionally hierarchical and vertically governed, grants its members – and this is the fourth element of the good society – more time. This not only allows a more playful relationship with the world (like the policewoman quoted on page 79). It is also a precondition for restoring rational decision-making. In the quote here, it is the political decision-makers who would benefit from greater temporal autonomy. If they felt less pressure to justify themselves to the electorate, they would be able to make necessary but unpopular decisions. Creative adaptation requires time and is not amenable to demands for rapid results. Here, the respondent's own working and living situation is reflected

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very clearly in her perception of political paralysis. Interviewees also wanted more time to do things *properly* in the context of a less exhausting life. They yearned to relax.

All in all, the respondents' ideas can be interpreted as reactions to stress and overwork. Reducing social distance in a more compact society would prevent exploitation by remote elites; knowledge-based hierarchisation would allow necessary and meaningful tasks to be accomplished without interference; and the enforcement of vertical authority would create stability. The potential gain for such a society is free time.

The above quote also points to specific ideas about 'progressive' politics. Many of the narratives related by essential workers were characterised by a certain creativity, which in some cases verged on naivety, but also exhibited an interestingly ludic or experimental perspective on the political sphere. The young policewoman wanted to reduce the pressure on democratic representatives by extending the legislative cycle. Another colleague pointed to the deficits of democratic representation – which gelled with his dichotomous perception of society – and the associated alienation of the political elites from the people they govern:

> Recently I took a look at the composition of the Bundestag. There was this comparison, I think it was between 2019 and sometime in the 1960s. Back then there were bakers and bricklayers in the Bundestag. Well I can see that would be tricky today. But I can understand why the idea's been raised, because it implies that the people up there are so far removed that they don't understand our problems at all. But if you reflect on things and, politically, just avoid putting your foot in it so often, […] then you can restore a closer connection. You know, a representative of the people can only represent the people if he meets them occasionally.

He identifies a representation deficit, but is not interested in rectifying it. Given the complexity of modern government, he believes that having bakers and bricklayers in parliament would be 'tricky'. He feels competent in his own field – as the baker and the bricklayer do in theirs – but does not see himself or others like him stepping

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into the shoes of the corrupt elites. Instead, he would like – as he states elsewhere – to see a more effective form of politics in which politicians maintain closer contact with their electorate.

This idea of liberating politics from the need to justify every decision while keeping it responsive to the people's legitimate concerns (and even tolerating irrational contradiction) cropped up repeatedly in the interviews. One childcare worker suggested internships for politicians, who she thought would make better laws if they acquired hands-on experience in relevant fields. She saw herself – in common with most of the interviewees – as a person with strong expertise in her own field, and could imagine advising decision-makers. That kind of collaboration, she believed, could produce the kind of sensible rules she would like to see introduced and enforced. One interviewed psychologist also felt that the pandemic had shown the need for rule by experts and speculated about legislation to realise this:

> At the beginning of the pandemic it seemed like they weren't listening to the people who knew best about that kind of thing, I mean the virologists. They didn't listen to the experts who know all about stuff like that, they weren't relying on the experts. My sense is that they were only brought in at quite a late stage, […] and I have sometimes wondered how it would be if there were a few rules that set it all down legally. But even then, I think there would still be these protests and everything, like if you banned prostitution for example.

She was well aware of the democratic costs of effective, evidence-based government. Protests would be inevitable because rational decisions – including in her eyes a ban on sex work – would still be contested.

Democratisation in the sense of expanding deliberative participation or subpolitical activism is not where this group is looking. Expertise and agency lie at the heart of their ideas for restructuring politics. The complexity of the political system is regarded as a problem, as exemplified by the statements of the teacher quoted below. He points to the influence of economic interests, and above all

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the division of powers and the need for political compromises. His perspective on the division of powers is tangibly affected by his experience of the pandemic when the courts, he argued, obstructed necessary action:

> Well even the people who make the laws can't just do as they please. You can really see how the government is under so many different influences. They aren't just under the influence of lobbyists or whatever, but also the courts and so on, which then overturn the new laws or whatever. It all has to be one hundred percent watertight if anything is going to get through and make a difference, because too many compromises have to be made. [...] And then there's Europe on top of all that, which doesn't make any of this any easier, then you know it all has to comply with European law and then in Europe, yeah, there's also some people in power, aren't there, where you think it would be better if they weren't.

Seen in isolation, the quotes presented in this chapter merely illustrate individual personal positions. Taken together, they illuminate central aspects that are characteristic of the sample. To float a tentative generalisation, the typical wishes and criticisms expressed by essential workers adapting to crisis ultimately converge (like parts of the ecological critique) in technocratic perspectives. They would like to see the alienation that typifies their situation, the narcissistic culture that exhausts them, and the associated crisis of political agency tackled through state action based on real expertise (unhampered by deliberative or representational processes) and enforced through rational rules and sanctions. The attraction of the technocratic constellation is based not primarily on expectations of future crisis (as is typical of the ecological critique) but on very concrete experiences in the here and now. Nevertheless, here too, depoliticisation rather than democratisation is the ultimate destination.

The *adaptive critique* among essential workers is characterised by a ludic/experimental element with which many of them are familiar from their work. The reproduction and survival of society, which they secure through hierarchically structured cooperation, depends

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systematically on elastic and proactive agency. Adaptation shapes the everyday experience of crisis and offers its own perspective of freedom, which promises concrete relief, the ascendency of competence and ultimately the emergence of a new civilisation. The policeman who dreams of a good society while expecting civil war put his finger on the utopian heart of this idea: a flourishing civilisation based on reason, free of social conflict. His ideal society would be 'Star Trek–style communism, where everybody just works for the benefit of society' and all the basic problems are solved by technology. That wish points to a practice in which the depoliticisation of survival opens up spaces for ludic experimentation. It is the wish to live the right life under the right conditions.

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