

KLAUS HURRELMANN
AND ERIK ALBRECHT

GEN Z

Between Climate Crisis and
Coronavirus Pandemic

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Gen Z

Gen Z is a vital, thought-provoking portrait of an astonishing generation. Drawing on first-hand interviews and empirical evidence, it offers insight into the boom in political activism amongst those born post-2000, exploring its roots and wide implications for the future of our society.

As environmental disaster threatens the fundamental existence and livelihoods of Generation Z, this book considers how the fact that they have taken up the fight is likely to be one of the best things that could have happened to them. Focusing on the school climate change strikes and Greta Thunberg as initiator and icon of the Fridays for Future movement, it reveals the evolving world of Gen Z at school, at work, at home and online. It documents the development of their politicisation, the challenges they and their activism face in light of the global pandemic and considers how the experience of those on the margins can differ from their peers.

Gen Z is a compelling study of how fighting the climate crisis is only the beginning for these young people. It offers insight for all those interested in the study of adolescence and emerging adulthood, as well as teachers, youth workers, civil society activists, policymakers, politicians and parents who want to understand young people's aspirations for the future.

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Between Climate Crisis and Coronavirus Pandemic

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Introduction

“We are young, we are here, we want a future without fear!”¹ – a slogan that brought hundreds of thousands of mostly young people onto the streets in Germany and elsewhere for much of 2019. By that summer, the Fridays for Future movement had already succeeded in putting the climate crisis on the agenda of governments across the world. Only the coronavirus pandemic could bring the wave of public protests to an abrupt halt in March 2020. Nonetheless, the issue – and their protest – remains: The environmental movement Fridays for Future has managed to unite tens of thousands of young people worldwide in the fight against the climate crisis.

Anyone who takes the time to talk to young people today about what is important to them will hear a similar refrain: “I’m afraid of what the earth will look like in 100 years,” says 12-year-old Friedrich at a Berlin middle school. “I think it’s important that we, as the young generation, stand up and say: ‘No, stop, you can’t go on like this! We want a planet, too,’” adds Markus only a few months before graduating from high school in Frankfurt an der Oder, a medium-sized town nestled in the Polish-German border region.

While Generation X, (here defined as those born between 1970 and 1985), and Generation Y, the oft-maligned “millennials” born after 1985, were very much “me” generations, interested more in their own well-being and securing a professional existence than in considering the collective needs of their society, the post-millennials, usually referred to as Generation Z, are different. Currently coming of age, Generation Z – born after the turn of the millennium – is considerably more interested and active in politics than many of the cohorts that preceded it. An unusually large number of them are actively engaged in political life, social change and community activism. The coronavirus pandemic has done little to dampen their motivation and enthusiasm.

In contrast to their elders, Gen Z is also considerably less happy with the state of our societies. Their main concern, according to youth studies: Almost no government in the world has met its obligations under the Paris climate agreement to reduce overall global warming by 1.5 degrees. In this regard, Germany is a striking example: In 2005, Chancellor Angela Merkel began her first of four terms in office as the “climate chancellor” with the ultimate goal of reducing the country’s climate carbon emissions to a sustainable level. 15 years later, she has achieved hardly any of her self-imposed climate objectives.

As a result, young people are losing confidence in both politicians and party politics. The more dedicated among this generation now feel that they must take matters into their own hands, firmly convinced that current politicians are in no position to be setting the course for *their* futures. From their perspective, politics has become lost in the trivialities of daily governance, moving too slowly, too cautiously, and invariably in the interests of large corporations and lobby groups. And now, as the coronavirus pandemic rages, all decisions about the future are treated as secondary to managing the impact of this global health crisis anyway.

The younger generation is no longer willing to tolerate this procrastination. “When you think about ‘the future’ today, you don’t think beyond the year 2050,” according to Greta Thunberg, the Swedish schoolgirl born on 3 January 2003 who initiated the global climate movement Fridays for Future (FFF). “By then, I will, in the best case, not even have lived half of my life.”²

It is this difference in perspective that has always made young people a seismograph for future developments. But never before have so many young people in so many countries taken to the streets at the same time to express their concerns on such a massive scale. Never have so many young people had the feeling that there is no time to waste. Many of them are scared and anxious about the future.

While the traditional political parties and their generally older voters seem to be caught up in the rigid procedures of political life, the younger generation has recognised the sign of the times. In this book, we want to analyse this change in political consciousness from one generation to the next. Why it is that two politically very reluctant generations, X and Y, whose members are now between the ages of 35 and 50 and 20 and 35 respectively, have been succeeded by a younger generation so much better able to speak their minds in a loud and critical fashion? We will show that it was and still is the young Swede, Greta Thunberg, who has influenced this generation with her climate protests, not only in her home country of Sweden, not only in Germany, where she has received a great deal of attention, but also in dozens of other countries around the world.

Only two years in, the restrictions on public life caused by the coronavirus pandemic have deprived the movement of the opportunity to take their struggle to the streets. During the initial lockdown phase beginning in March 2020, demonstrations were severely curtailed and schools shut down for months or allowed to function only under strict restrictions. Politically active adolescents and young adults, however, have not been silenced. They have made sure their voices are still heard across digital platforms, and, step by step, they are gathering again on Fridays to protest. While the coronavirus pandemic will likely recede eventually, the climate crisis is here to stay.

That being said, Generation Z is also a deeply polarised generation. The Fridays for Future movement only represents one part of Generation Z. In Germany, 40 percent of the young people involved in environmental activism come from affluent homes and are in the process of completing a solid education. At the other end of the social spectrum, almost a third of young women and – in particular – young men remain economically and educationally disadvantaged and feel discriminated against, unable to think about the future of the planet while their own future as working citizens is under threat by various forces.

One could say that Generation Z is mostly composed of members of a “Generation Greta,” but this majority is under pressure due to the serious economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. If youth unemployment escalates, the current minority of disadvantaged and discriminated young people could rapidly increase, establishing a downtrodden “Generation Covid.”

A meaningful consideration of the voices of the younger generation is vital for any functioning society – not only in Germany, the country selected as a case study for this book. A careful analysis of the attitudes and opinions of this generation is thus critically important: youth research is invariably a study of the future. Coming social and intellectual developments can be identified in youth studies long before they affect society at large. Young people, who still have so much of their lives ahead of them, are considerably more sensitive to future developments than older people in the middle or later stages of their lives. In addition, young people – most of whom have not (yet) accumulated much in the way of property or privilege to defend – have greater freedom to find creative solutions to longstanding problems. Those who see no chance for themselves will grasp at any straw.

With this book, we want to give a voice to the young generation, based on empirically sound studies and representative interviews. We use research-based youth studies, which use representative samples to trace the values, attitudes, characteristics and behavioural patterns of this

generation. We complement these studies with personal interviews and participatory observation of young people that capture their authentic expressions and lived experiences. This allows us to illustrate how Generation Z lives and is influenced by the interplay between the climate crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, two ongoing issues which will likely deeply affect the rest of their still-young lives.

We would like to thank our research collaborators from the various studies on which this analysis is based as well as the teachers who generously shared their time and their expertise. Above all, we would like to pay tribute to the young people we interviewed, whose words give this book the authentic voice of their generation.

Klaus Hurrelmann
Erik Albrecht

Notes

- 1 Rough translation from the original German slogan: “*Wir sind hier, wir sind laut, weil ihr uns die Zukunft klaut!*”
- 2 Thunberg 2019, p. 25.

The climate crisis is just the beginning

Who are the young protesters and what do they want?

Fridays for Future

“No life on Saturn,” reads the poster Camilla holds up in dreary downtown Dortmund. Underneath: “Save the Earth now.” The 20-something activist stands in front of a franchise of the popular electronics store bearing the same name on the city’s main drag. About two dozen climate activists have donned makeshift costumes for the demonstration: A little glitter on their faces and gold foil from a cut-up thermal blanket on their heads has to suffice to identify them as aliens from another planet. While Dortmund grew rich on coal mining and the steel industry, the deindustrialisation of the second half of the last century has been deeply painful for many here.

While Camilla keeps vigil in front of the Saturn store, the rest of the group goes shopping. The store’s one-man security team can do little to stop the rush of young people coming through the doors. With languid, space-like movements they slowly glide up the escalator to the upper floors and are soon dancing through the narrow aisles between coffee machines and hi-fi systems, calling on buyers and employees alike to go on climate strike. In the end, their call to action is displayed on computer screens throughout the store. In the drugstore next door, Camilla’s fellow activists are ordered from the premises.

Since the summer of 2018, students across the world have demonstrated on nearly every Friday for the climate during the school year. In Germany, the first group met in Bad Segeberg, a small town in northern Germany, to engage in “political truancy”: Instead of going to school, they went to the town hall to demonstrate with handmade posters and banners. A week later, about 300 students gathered in front of the Bundestag (the parliament building) in Germany’s capital Berlin. “They all came without knowing what it would lead to,” recalls Luisa Neubauer, one of the initiators, who was to become one of the most prominent faces of the protest in the

2 The climate crisis is just the beginning

following months. “Either success or just a wasted hour and trouble from parents and teachers.”¹

By 2019, the movement was spreading nationwide. Local groups quickly formed, often organised from within existing student councils at secondary schools. At the end of January 2019, 5,000 students gathered in Berlin for the Friday demonstrations and formed the movement Fridays for Future Germany (FFF). On 1 March 2019, Greta Thunberg took part in a German demonstration for the first time – in Hamburg.

Today, FFFD is one of Germany’s largest social movements, with about 600 local groups. Fridays for Future (FFF) has gained a foothold in almost every European country and has spread to other continents. By spring 2019, the movement had brought more than 1.6 million people onto the streets worldwide, and by autumn of that year, the number had almost doubled. Greta Thunberg, the icon of the movement, spoke in front of the EU Parliament, the World Economic Forum and the United Nations. No youth movement has ever received so much global attention.²

At the climate conference in Madrid in December 2019, FFF was present at every meeting venue. Young people arrived from every continent and loudly demonstrated – “What do we want? Climate justice!” – for speedy international agreements to stem the tide of this crisis. Once again, Greta Thunberg by her presence alone made it impossible for the delegates representing the 197 treaty countries to ignore the movement and its arguments.

In Germany, initial amazement about the new youth movement was quickly followed by a public debate on the question of “Don’t they have to be at school?” The students, however, deliberately chose their form of protest; they are convinced that the government needed a wake-up call to finally take action on climate issues. It is, after all, their entire future that is at stake.

The use of school strikes as a targeted act of civil disobedience garnered overwhelming and unparalleled public attention for the demonstrations. Students copied Greta Thunberg’s idea after she began picketing in front of the Swedish parliament in Stockholm every Friday instead of going to school.

In Germany, school attendance is compulsory until the age of 16, and home-schooling is illegal except in extraordinary circumstances (as the coronavirus pandemic illustrated a year later). When young people fail to attend class, the school administration formally records the absence. This absence does not appear on their report card as long as they submit a written statement from their legal guardians, usually their parents. If there are repeated absences, however, and a student does not

provide a note from their parents, the police are usually called in. Parents can receive a warning or a fine for their children's unexcused absences.

In such a strictly regulated school system, school strikes involved numerous levels of authority: First, the parents, who had to write absence notes for their children, then the teachers, the school administration and the educational authorities. It also attracted the attention of the media, which granted extensive coverage to the strikes. "Skipping school" became a provocative means to an end and, soon enough, allowed the young activists to place their message at the centre of public debate, putting pressure on the government's climate policy.

Germany's energy policy has been up for vociferous debate since the West German anti-nuclear power movement entered the public consciousness in the 1970s. After the subsequent phase-out of nuclear energy, hopes were high that the country would use that momentum to become a global pioneer in the use of renewable energy sources – but these hopes were subsequently dashed.

In early 2019, FFF stepped into the gap between expectations and reality by loudly drawing attention to the government's failures. In its struggle to stop climate change, FFF has joined forces with many other – often more radical – environmental movements to fight against specific issues like the continued mining of lignite coal in the Lausitz region or the construction of new motorways in Hesse. While the Green Party's success in the 2019 European elections showed that it was possible to win elections based on climate and environmental policy, it was Fridays for Future that managed to place the climate crisis at the top of the political agenda. Suddenly, it became all too clear just how hollow, bland and insincere the policies of the two traditional mainstream parties – the reform-oriented Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the pair of conservative sister parties, Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU) – were on the subject of the climate crisis.

Public attention was thus primed when, on 20 September 2019, FFF's climate activists called for a worldwide day of action. In cities across Germany – and across the world – smaller and larger groups came together to protest against government inaction on climate change. In Berlin alone, over 100,000 people of all ages and walks of life marched from the Brandenburg Gate to Alexanderplatz, a huge public square about three kilometres away. FFF estimated that 1.4 million demonstrators participated nationwide.

As people gathered in front of the Brandenburg Gate for the largest climate demonstration Berlin had ever seen, the German government's 'climate cabinet' was heading home for a change of clothes and a snack. Throughout the night, for almost 19 hours straight, they had struggled

to negotiate a government package with measures to combat the climate crisis. In the end, the results were anything but the “great leap” that SPD Finance Minister Olaf Scholz had promised. Even business associations – alongside scientists, environmental associations and members of the opposition – criticised the measures as too feeble. Very few, even among the Fridays for Future activists, had expected the government to meet all of their demands, but the fact that the “climate package” would turn out to be such a small parcel was nonetheless a bitter pill for many.

Since then, it has seemed certain that Germany will not meet the climate targets set by the government for 2030. Nevertheless, since 20 September 2019, there is no longer a viable political path around the issue – which is considerably more than many previous movements have ever achieved. Indeed, a year later, in their attempt to forestall the impending collapse of the economy due to the coronavirus pandemic, the government adopted an economic stimulus package worth a staggering 130 billion euros that did not give in to efforts by lobbyists from the traditional industrial powerhouses to ignore environmental considerations in the face of economic necessity. On the contrary, in addition to a temporary reduction in the value added tax and a one-time bonus payment to parents of minors, programmes were introduced to encourage the improvement of public transport networks, the purchase of electric cars and the expansion of both the hydrogen economy and quantum technologies. The plan is for Germany to exit this crisis greener than it had entered it. Beyond that, another thing stands out: The young FFF activists have always called for quick, decisive action supported by scientific expertise, in contrast to politicians, who often argue that such action is simply too disruptive. In the wake of the pandemic, the government proved its own politicians wrong.

That being said, the shockwave of infections shifted public attention from the climate crisis to health issues overnight, creating a very real danger that the pandemic would blow away the young environmental movement. Large street demonstrations, FFF’s most important trademark and organising strategy, were difficult or impossible to continue due to the lockdown and subsequent restrictions on the right of assembly. In addition, the provocative “school strike” completely lost its effect during the school closures, which lasted for weeks. Nevertheless, it has become clear that a politically active young generation has made an indelible mark on society, and many leading figures have pointed to the close connection between the climate crisis and the pandemic. The movement’s most prominent speaker in Germany, Luisa Neubauer, argued in an interview with National Public Radio in June 2020:

The nature of the coronavirus crisis is completely different from the climate crisis. The climate crisis comes at you with less heft, but it requires more incisive action. [...] We can still learn a lot from the coronavirus crisis: We can take crises seriously. We can listen to science. We can come together internationally...we can make politics intergenerational.³

Throughout the pandemic, the movement has continued to emphasise the absolute priority of combating the climate crisis. In the meantime, it has been forced to get creative, by inventing new digital forms of protest and resuming small-scale rallies on Fridays in strict compliance with all social-distancing rules and hygiene regulations – and by expanding its field of action: It now openly supports other movements with different priorities. Following the murder of George Floyd by the police in Minneapolis (USA) at the end of May 2020, numerous FFF activists participated in the organisation of Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Their fight against climate change has transformed many in this generation into seasoned political actors – with the energy and stamina to stay the course.

Suddenly political?

When the bell rings in the late-nineteenth-century hallways of Sophie Scholl Secondary School in Berlin-Schöneberg, the doors to the classrooms fly open. The voices of more than a thousand students, from seventh to thirteenth grade, reverberate from the corridors' vaulted ceilings, as the building's staircases channel the masses to their next lesson. Everyday school life – on Fridays no less than on any other weekday.

Secondary schools such as Sophie School offer all three school leaving certifications – the basic qualification after nine, the intermediate qualification after ten, and the most advanced pre-university qualification (Abitur) after 12 or 13 years. Only some of the students attend the Fridays for Future protests in Berlin's Invalidenpark on a regular basis. "I'd like to go more often," says Adrian, an eight-grader. "But sometimes it doesn't work out. Last time, we had a test in class."

And yet environmentalism and climate change are ubiquitous in the hallways of the school. While the thick walls of the old building keep out the heat of a Central European summer with record temperatures, the Amazon is burning. Samira, a classmate of Adrian's, is horrified by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's attitude on the issue. "He just can't understand what's going on," Adrian adds. "What is stupid is that he even refused to allow others to come in and help fight it."

Since Fridays for Future took off, Adrian's mother does not buy food in plastic packaging anymore; Adrian insists on it. But he also knows it is not enough. "That's pretty much it," he admits. "There's not much you can do as an individual," explains Adrian. "Politics has to change." In so doing, he is echoing one of the basic demands made by those young people taking to the streets. They know that individual sacrifices will not save the planet, which is why they want to see more regulation of polluting industries from politicians and the state. Whether industry and transportation, consumption and agriculture, building refurbishment or air travel – the message is that climate policy must affect all areas of our lives if we want to stop the climate crisis or at a minimum mitigate its consequences.

Young people are becoming more political again. And while this is true for virtually all highly developed countries, the shift is particularly noticeable in Germany. Whereas at the turn of the millennium, only one in three young people stated that they were interested in politics, today that figure has increased to just under one in two. It is also striking that the percentage of those who are "very" interested is particularly high. The last time young people were more interested in politics than now was in 1991 – the era of German reunification, during which 57 percent of young people were interested in politics. And that is not all: Among the younger generation of 12 to 25-year-olds, politics has become cool again: 35 percent say that it is "in" to become actively involved.⁴

As much as young people's political activism came as a surprise to the wider public, it has been quietly manifesting itself for some time. As early as 2007, studies among primary school children in Germany showed a high level of self-confidence and a great interest in actively shaping their everyday lives at home and at school. The worries and fears of the six to eleven-year-olds interviewed were also striking: Terrorism and war, increasing poverty, and, in particular, increasing environmental pollution.⁵

The younger generation believes that the *Zeitgeist* is shifting and that Germany is being confronted with a radically different world – and they want to be involved in shaping what comes next. This is a substantial change from previous generations. While protecting the environment or encouraging organic farming was also important to Generation Y, millennials, who are now between 20 and 35 years old, never would have taken to the streets on such a massive scale. Wedged between graduate studies, unpaid or under-paid internships and a succession of temporary contract jobs, many millennials declined to actively participate in political struggles, albeit a little shamefacedly, since "it doesn't help anyway." Faced with the near-collapse of the global financial system in 2007 and the economic crisis