# Polycrisis: A Breviary

Today's world is beset by several overlapping crises. Movements on the frontline are mapping out strategies for survival.

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# The Terrain of Polycrisis

"Intersectional" is a clumsy word made necessary by old sociology. Against a past in which battles were sometimes defined around single issues of race or class or gender, intersectionality forced a recognition that these social categories were always intertwined, experienced simultaneously. That is an analogy for this. It may once have been possible to imagine conflict, hunger, meteorological disaster, pandemic disease, militarism or class war as self-contained phenomena. Approaching the third decade of the millennium, however, it is dangerous to be so monothematic.

If one wants, for example, to diagnose the 2022 worldwide protests around food prices, you would need to read them simultaneously as a rebellion against local government, against the US-led international trade regime, against the impossibility of growing crops reliably under climate change and evolving agricultural disease, against the shrinking of state-sponsored social benefits, against the violence of the police, against the experience of Covid-19 and against the erosion of income wrought by inflation. In other words, the experience of living through late capitalism is increasingly an experience of living several crises simultaneously.

There is a word for that, and it is unlovely: "polycrisis". It first cropped up in France in 1993 as a subheading in *Terre-Patrie* by Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern. [1] "*La Polycrise*" was, to use the 1999 English translation: "no single vital problem, but many vital problems, and it is this complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem".

It would be tempting to read into the inception of "polycrisis" — as historian Gary Gerstle does — a reaction to global uncertainty after the fall of the Soviet Union. While the public record of Kern's political background is less available, Morin is prolific, though he remains less known in the anglosphere

than his contemporaries. He had held deep commitments to the French Communist Party, and would hardly have been thrilled with the fall of the Iron Curtain. But he had broken with the party decades before and, more to the point, had been incubating ideas about crisis since his engagement with the French student protests in 1968 and the environmental movement soon after. The first of six volumes of his meditations on complexity, crisis and nature, *La Methode*, was published in 1977, and the full set runs to 2500 pages.

In other words, the thinking that spawned "polycrisis" owes more to the post-1968 ecological era of resistance than to the fall of the Soviet Union. This matters because it may be that a deep reading of "polycrisis" helps to get not only to why it is all happening at the same time, but what might come afterwards. To see that, though, would mean going beyond the more vernacular uses of the term, and its circulation in the north Atlantic.

Polycrisis' ngram score was given a boost when it was picked up by European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker. In May 2016 he began an address to the 99th Congress of French Mayors, by recalling the November 2015 shootings in Paris. "Terrorism", he continued, "is one of the multiple simultaneous crises we face. And in this Europe, which is truly in a state of polycrisis in this most unstable world, European solidarity has never been more necessary for each of our countries and each of our peoples". When he used the term again, a couple of months later in English, the link he perceived between security and economy became clearer still:

> This European Union has faced its worst economic, financial and social crisis since World War II. And it is still struggling with the consequences. I have often used the Greek word 'polycrisis' to describe the current situation. Our various challenges — from the security threats in our neighbourhood and at home, to the refugee crisis, and to the UK referendum — have not only arrived at the same time. They also feed each other, creating a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the minds of our people.

Juncker was troubled more by law, order and border than by the ecological catastrophe central to the inception of "polycrisis" but the greatest populariser of the term, the economic historian Adam Tooze, made the

connection most forcefully. He began a 2022 op-ed in the *Financial Times* entitled "Welcome to the Polycrisis" with ecological doom: "Pandemic, drought, floods, mega storms and wildfires, threats of a Third World War — how rapidly we have become inured to the list of shocks".

He even offered an argument for the utility of the term: "[i]n the polycrisis the shocks are disparate, but they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts". The crises are multiplicative.

If that is all there is to the term — that when bad things happen together, it is worse than the sum of their parts — then perhaps it is unsurprising that in September 2025, Tooze had second thoughts about whether "polycrisis" made much sense anymore. If everything is indeed going to hell, he asked, why have the markets remained "eerily calm?" Where, in other words, is the crisis?

Tooze does not ignore the obvious madness in the world, but argues that "one reason that crisis seems less apt a term in the current moment is that the disruptions are so intentional. If Israel's intent is to flatten Gaza or if Trump wants to subvert the Federal Reserve, those aren't processes akin to a pandemic or a financial crisis. They are deliberate acts of aggression. If someone stabs you in the heart with a knife, that isn't a crisis. It is murder".

True, but every murder has means, motive and opportunity: the current conjuncture provides all three. That markets are, on average, calm can be attributed to the simple arithmetic of the bottom falling out of the rest of the economy balanced by the three trillion-dollar AI bubble. The term "bubble" is one that both Sam Altman, founder of OpenAI, and Jerome Powell, chair of the Federal Reserve, use to talk not so much about the vast sums invested in the datacentre infrastructure so much as the valuations of the large language models that run on it.

In unpicking "polycrisis", the idea of "conjuncture" matters. It is a word that Marx and Engels used to describe a specific state of affairs, but the twentieth century Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, built upon it to create a framework for analysing how such moments are formed and how they can be strategically navigated. He set this out in his *Prison Notebooks*:

> A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves

> (reached maturity), and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts (since no social formation will ever admit that it has been superseded) form the terrain of the "conjunctural", and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise. [2]

I have offered a longer discussion of what Gramsci might mean elsewhere but it helps to think of the conjuncture as the answer to the question "what time is it on the clock of the world?". [3] That metaphor was coined by James and Grace Lee Boggs in their 1974 work *Revolution and Evolution in the 20th Century*, where they imagined a clock racing towards inevitable revolution in America. The clock metaphor works not just as a countdown to midnight, but as a series of cycles. It is this reading of long crisis and oppositional forces — as periodic but cyclical and structured — that helps clarify where "polycrisis' might be useful.

Sociologist Giovanni Arrighi was one of the greatest timekeepers of the clock of the world. In *The Long Twentieth Century*, he observed that the way empires rise and fall under capitalism has a cadence. Over the Genoese, Dutch, British and American periods of international hegemony, there have been common economic features. Beginning with a productive cycle, in which large parts of the economy are concerned with the transformation of money into commodities, the leading bloc in a national bourgeoisie comes from that fraction of capitalists who make *things*. Whether merchants, traders, imperial corporations, manufacturers or industrialists, from the East India Companies to General Motors, these capitalists thrive and then founder because of the contradictions internal to their strategies for accumulation. In a "signal crisis", marked by social turbulence and upheaval, these manufacturers cede leadership of the nation to those who take goods and turn them into *money*. Thus, financiers and bankers come to lead a national hegemonic bloc.

There is a recovery, but it is never permanent. As Wall Street runs out of world to transform into an income stream, conditions tilt into a terminal crisis and decline. It is a militarised, debt-ridden, disease-addled and ruinous time. Sometimes, it is an outing for all four of the horsemen of the apocalypse: the moment of terminal decline is accelerated by war. After which there is always a moment when, in Gramsci's words, "the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, the most varied morbid phenomena occur". [4] In this

interregnum, the bourgeoisie lose their capacity to manage the crisis, but the working class has yet to govern, and the left is in trouble.

This, at last, helps bring the idea of polycrisis into focus. The clock of the world has seen hegemons come and go a few times. The 1960s and 1970s might be the US' signal crisis, and we are now in what might reasonably be understood as the terminal crisis. This may have begun in 2008, and stretch through to today. But capitalism has since Columbus been burning through the planet. US hegemony has only been an accelerant of this destruction. To quote the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem services (IPBES), since the signal crisis, "the rate of global change in nature during the past 50 years is unprecedented in human history". The ecological systems that have been turned into money over capitalism's long cycle have been broken by this latest round of accumulation, particularly since the US signal crisis in the 1970s. Which means that the terminal crisis this time coincides with a planetary one. It is not an accident that it is all happening at the same time. Today's individual crises are cumulations of a larger one.

The polycrisis, then, is not merely a temporary convergence of disparate shocks. It is the structural expression of this simultaneous exhaustion — economic, social and ecological. This leads to an interregnum of unusual consequence. Amid the rise of post-neoliberal authoritarian politics, it is on this terrain that alternatives are being forged.

## The Polycrisis Is Just Like the Future

You know who knows all about the polycrisis? Working class communities, particularly in the Global South. William Gibson's apothegm about the future — that it is already here, but unevenly distributed — is also true about the polycrisis. Impoverished and marginalised communities have been living on the frontlines of climate crisis, debt, militarisation, epidemic disease and authoritarianism for decades. Certainly, the mayhem now cannot be ignored by the North Atlantic bourgeoisie — migration driven by conflict, catastrophic climate change, fascism, all are much harder to ignore than in the past. But those who have lived at the frontiers of polycrisis have had years to perform and iterate the most important experiments to survive it.

What makes social movements particularly well-positioned to navigate this conjuncture? As Gramsci recognised, genuine counter-hegemony requires not just critique but experimentation. Movements emerging from communities historically consigned to the margins have long sustained alternative relations to land, care and collectivity. For them, dealing with climate extremes, state violence and crises of social reproduction has been the cause around which they have organised in the first place.

Consider the case of West Street Recovery (WSR) in Houston. Formed during Hurricane Harvey, WSR's mutual aid work in historically black and brown neighbourhoods directly confronts what David Harvey termed (and Ruth Wilson Gilmore popularised as) organised abandonment. [5] They experimented to address the consequences of climate catastrophe and structural racism. Their approach, rooted in what former Black Panther and WSR co-founder Doris Brown calls "care as the cornerstone of organizing", recast care as both necessity and insurgency, demonstrating how disaster can catalyse forms of communal reproduction that stand outside market logics.

In Brazil, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (the Landless Workers Movement or MST) responded to the catastrophic 2024 floods in Rio Grande do Sul by mobilising horizontal solidarity networks, including transforming settlements into solidarity kitchens. This praxis is informed by a clear analysis, articulated by a displaced MST rice grower: "This disaster has a name; it is the greed of agribusiness". The MST's response demonstrated how counter-hegemonic movements can transform polycrisis moments into laboratories for post-capitalist futures, particularly through an evolving internal politics that now sees "the act of caring as a revolutionary act".

In South Africa, Abahlali baseMjondolo (Zulu for "shack-dweller")'s occupations and communes, such as eKhenana, also demonstrate how counter-hegemonic alternatives emerge within geographies of organised abandonment. Inspired by the MST, the commune's practice of food sovereignty and political education embodies what the movement calls "living politics". eKhenana is Zulu for "Canaan", and with its agroecological farm, Frantz Fanon Political School and Communal Kitchen, it was a place to build power for a whole community. This was a form of power too uncomfortable for local ANC bosses, who preferred that shack settlements remain quiescent and docile vote banks. One of the ANC youth wing's leaders is already behind bars for their part in the wave of assassinations of eKhenana's organisers. Yet the ideas from the

settlement — of dignity, food sovereignty and education — continue to spread throughout the movement of over 180,000 members.

The movements above are not presented here comparatively, but as incorporated. They have exchanged ideas and strategies for surviving the polycrisis. When they came together in a 2024 meeting in Bangkok they recognised their common struggle was over land and the logic of its use. Landgrabbing — dispossessing land in order to turn it into money — is intensifying at the same pace as the polycrisis: exponentially. This fight is now compounded by "green grabbing", whereby environmental imperatives are used to license dispossession.

If the polycrisis is multiplicatively bad, the commons is an experimental polysolution. While the far right is proffering higher walls, more police and a fantasy of racially pure patriarchy, many movements on the frontlines of polycrisis are adopting both resistance and care as methods to survive, and thrive, in the polycrisis. This is the promise that emerges from the science that movements have engaged in for years. It offers some light for those whose initial response to the polycrisis is despair. Not every generation has a chance to change the world. However this particular generation is one that, come what may, already has.

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1. Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern, *Terre-Patrie*, Editions du Seuil, 1993.
2. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and ed. Quintin Hoare, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, pp. 177-178.
3. Raj Patel, "Counter-Hegemony and Polycrisis I: How to Eat and How to Think", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2025, pp. 1–32.
4. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp.177-178.
5. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, University of California Press, 2007.