

## Refuting the hollow notion of the polycrisis

*Why capitalism's structural crisis is all-encompassing*

### The Editors of Monthly Review

It is a commonplace that the world in the first quarter of the twenty-first century is facing multiple, multifaceted crises, threatening all world civilisation and the future of humanity itself. So omnipresent is the contemporary world disorder that received ideology has settled on a single word to describe it: “polycrisis.” The origin of this concept is credited to French social theorist Edgar Morin (together with Anne Brigitte Kern) in 1999, and it has been strongly promoted in recent years by Columbia University historian Adam Tooze. In 2023–2025, international organisations such as the World Economic Forum, the World Bank, and the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) issued reports referring to polycrisis as the principal challenge of our times.

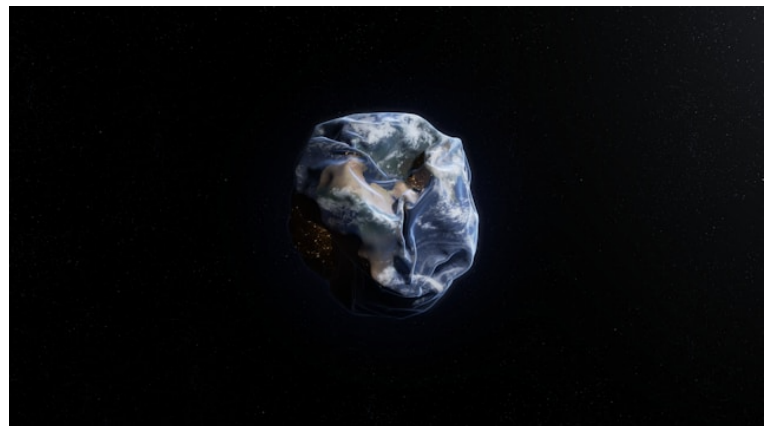


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However, anyone who wants to know what polycrisis is and where it comes from—beyond representing intersecting and accelerated crises, each with their own separate causes, but today interlocking—inevitably runs up against a blank wall.

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This is equally the case when the question of concrete solutions to this overarching polycrisis is raised: no solutions are offered. In fact, the vacuousness of the concept of polycrisis is not accidental, but, intentional, to which the concept owes its primary importance in received ideology. In Morin and Kern’s book, *Homeland Earth*, polycrisis was introduced as a category designed to negate the notion that it was possible “to single out a number one problem to which all others would be subordinated,” or even to construct a hierarchy of critical problems in the world. Rather, the numerous crises that make up the polycrisis are seen as coming at us from all directions, while none of these individual crises is more important than any other. **Capitalism is largely absent in Morin’s reactionary Cold War/post-Cold War frame.** If there is a singular problem in his perspective, it is “technoscience,” which, however, is conceived so broadly that it defines all of modern civilisation and every aspect of our existence so that there is no escape (except into the realm of the “spirit,” which he refers to as the “first resistance”) (Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte

Kern, *Homeland Earth* [Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1999], 73–75; Edgar Morin, “Faced with the Polycrisis Humanity Is Going Through, the First Resistance Is that of the Spirit,” *Le Monde*, January 24, 2024).

Tooze, the principal proponent of the polycrisis concept today, currently occupies an endowed chair at Columbia, and has written several articles for *New Left Review*. He is a columnist for the prominent New Cold War organ *Foreign Policy*, and has “contributed” to the U.S. National Intelligence Council, part of the U.S. national security apparatus. To highlight the concept of polycrisis, Tooze explains, is to reject the Marxist notion that we can explain the present age of catastrophe as stemming from capitalism (“Adam Tooze,” *Wilson Center*, [wilsoncenter.org](http://wilsoncenter.org)).

In this vein, Tooze writes:

*To the frustration of its many critics, the concept of polycrisis lacks the respectable intellectual genealogy and analytical guts that a good critical theorist would expect. To me, that is precisely why it seems right for our moment. In its lack of specification, the polycrisis concept serves as a reminder of the indeterminacy and uncertainty and complexity that we have lost among the bold new certainty of the “capitalocene”.... Polycrisis is underspecified. It is a weak theory. But those who criticise that in the name of greater clarity or stronger theory underestimate the scale of the mess that we are in. (Adam Tooze, “[Polycrisis and the Critique of Capitalocentrism](#),” *Chartbook 343, Substack*, January 6, 2025, [adamtooze.substack.com](http://adamtooze.substack.com))*

Hence, Tooze insists that the advantage of the polycrisis notion is that it constitutes a “weak theory.” Indeed, due to what

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he calls its “lack of specification,” it can hardly be called a theory at all. The advantage of such a concept, then, for those seeking to reify the system so as to prevent all understanding, is that it diverts attention away from any consideration of the fundamental social relations (namely, the class-based

system of capital accumulation) at the root of the world disorder. Tooze delights in creating flow charts of polycrises consisting of numerous free-floating signifiers of crisis with arrows pointing in each and every direction, lacking any center, thus presenting a perfect prescription for paralysis (Adam Tooze, “*Defining Polycrisis—From Crisis Pictures to the Crisis Matrix*,” *Chartbook 130*, June 24, 2022).

If we turn to the World Economic Forum, the World Bank, and the OECD, we see the polycrisis concept presented in the same vacuous way, referring to an assemblage of crises devoid of all determinacy, structure, and agency. Drawing on the World Economic Forum’s *Global Risks Report 2023*, senior writer Simon Torkington divides the various crises potentially engendering the polycrisis into five categories: economic, environmental, geopolitical, societal, and technological crises. Of these, only the last four sources of crises are said to have contributed to the polycrisis present over the last decade. The world economic system itself (standing for capitalism) is not seen as a source of polycrisis. Indeed, while the global risk landscape is governed by a polycrisis consisting of “multiple crises that are happening at the same time,” the notion of capitalism, the principal theoretical category for conceptualising the world economy, does not appear in the *Global Risks Report* (Simon Torkington, “[We’re on the Brink of a ‘Polycrisis’—How Worried Should We Be?](#),” *World Economic Forum*, January 13, 2023, [weforum.org](http://weforum.org)).

The World Bank’s *Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report for 2024* is given the title *Pathways Out of the Polycrisis*. Despite the fact that the entire framework of the report is organised around the concept of polycrisis, readers will not find

anything but the vaguest definition of it, and no “pathways out.” We are told that a “polycrisis” stems from “slow growth prospects and high levels of debt to increased uncertainty, fragility, and polarisation.” At another point in the report, “climate risks” are added. In the most concrete definition offered for this amorphous concept, “polycrisis refers to multiple and interconnected crises occurring simultaneously, where their interactions amplify the overall impact.” On one page, we are told that the reality of polycrisis requires that priorities be addressed, such as world poverty through economic development. Otherwise, one looks for positive programs in vain. There is no reference to capitalism or to capital as a governing social relation in the World Bank’s polycrisis report (World Bank, Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024: Pathways Out of the Polycrisis, xxiii–xxvi, 4, 190).

The OECD discusses polycrisis in its 2025 report on States of Fragility. There we are told that “the increasing prevalence of polycrises—a confluence of global challenges—disproportionately impacts conflict-affected countries, already grappling with significant vulnerabilities” and bearing “the brunt of cascading crises.” This, we are told, requires a “paradigm shift” in which analysis focuses not on fragility versus stability, but on locating places within a dynamic “fragility spectrum” and promoting relative “resilience” in response. What is missing here is any sign of actual social theory and social analysis. Capitalism in general is not mentioned or seen as related to such polycrises, although “authoritarian capitalism” and “crony capitalism” are considered problems (OECD, States of Fragility 2025, 29, 172, 177).

In contrast, fundamental explanations of the overarching economic, social, and ecological crises are present within contemporary Marxist analysis. Marxist philosopher István Mészáros first raised the issue of “the global structural crisis of capital,” encompassing the world economy, the planetary environment, and the liberal democratic state in the third edition of his Marx’s Theory of Alienation in 1971 (and in his Isaac Deutscher Memorial Lecture, “The Necessity of Social Control,” that same year). This analysis was carried forward in his monumental [Beyond Capital](#) in 1995. The relation between the structural crisis of capital and the planetary environmental emergency was theorised by John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York in [The Ecological Rift](#) in 2010.

It is to such analyses of the structural crisis of capital, explored in every issue of MR over the last sixty years or more, and not to empty notions such as polycrisis, that we must look today if humanity is to carry out the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large that is an absolute necessity in the twenty-first century (István Mészáros, [Marx’s Theory of Alienation](#) [London: Merlin Press, 1971]; István Mészáros, [The Necessity of Social Control](#) [London: Merlin Press, 1971]; István Mészáros, [Beyond Capital](#) [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995]; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, [The Ecological Rift](#) [New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010]).

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❖ **About the authors: Editors of Monthly Review Magazine:** John Bellamy Foster is the editor of MR and a professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. He has written extensively on political economy, ecology, and Marxism. Brett Clark is the associate editor of MR and a professor of sociology at the University of Utah.

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