**Headline:** Navigating the Polycrisis—Life in Turbulent Times

By Michael Lerner

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**[Article Body:]**

How can we explain the explosive emergence of global awareness of the polycrisis over the past year, 2022-2023? Three years ago, almost no one had heard of the polycrisis.

What happened?

**What Is the Polycrisis?**

First, let’s roughly define the polycrisis. Some claim it is nothing new. We believe the polycrisis is new. We believe a confluence of environmental, social, technological, financial-economic, natural and other forces are interacting with ever increasing unpredictability, rapidity and power. We believe these unpredictable interactions are causing future shocks of ever greater frequency and amplitude.

Because the polycrisis looks different, feels different, and is explained differently everywhere, there won’t be any single understanding of it. Think of the polycrisis as a global weather system. Weather everywhere is deeply interrelated, but local weather looks different in each place.

The polycrisis has many names—cascading crises, the metacrisis, the permacrisis, the great unraveling, the great simplification, “the end of the world as we know it” [TEOTWAWKI], and more. In Latin America it’s called “eco-social collapse.” The French call it “collapsologie.” Or one can simply call it turbulent times or a rapidly changing world.

It doesn’t matter much what we call the polycrisis. What matters is whether we recognize that it is real, that we are living in it, and that it is changing our lives. If we accept that much, we will recognize that we have to navigate it—and that good maps are essential to skillful navigation.

**Navigating the Great Unraveling**

Our friends Asher Miller and Richard Heinberg at the Post Carbon Institute and Resilience.org use this powerful phrase for the task ahead for all of us: “Navigating the great unraveling.” Resilience.org is focused on energy, economy, environment, food and water, and society. Its tagline is “insight and inspiration in turbulent times.” In my judgment, [Post Carbon Institute](https://www.postcarbon.org/) and [Resilience.org](https://www.resilience.org/) are among the best and most accessible polycrisis resources in the United States.

At every level, we must learn to navigate the polycrisis. We have no choice. The only choice is whether we prepare to navigate it consciously—or just let it unfold and respond as it does.

“The future is already here,” the great science fiction writer William Gibson has said. “It’s just not very evenly distributed.” We know that all over the world millions of people have lived under polycrisis conditions for a very long time. The polycrisis is not new to them. It’s just now coming home to roost everywhere.

**What Are the Best Maps and Charts of the Polycrisis?**

Let’s look at how some experts are seeking to understand and map the polycrisis. I will be using three overlapping terms to describe these maps. The first is world view maps. The second is systems analysis maps. And the third is narrative maps. These are very crude concepts since all the maps tend to include all these elements in different ways.

The comprehensive worldview maps include orientations like techno-optimism, neo-Marxism, critiques of colonialism and imperialism, religious or spiritual understandings, and many more. It matters whether you believe in an enlightened spiritual future or a future that belongs to the powerful. It matters whether you think we will be governed by humans or trans-humans or algorithms. It matters whether you see the future as hopeful or tragic or perhaps both.

Then there are the systems analysis maps. Unlike worldview maps, systems analysis maps seek to be analytically neutral—albeit there are often deeply embedded biases.

The concerned capitalists of the world and their powerful friends gather annually at the World Economic Forum in Davos to opine on the state of the world. Their [Global Risks Report 2023](https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-risks-report-2023/digest) is extensive and their prognosis dire. They offer a top 10 list of global risks for the next two years and the next ten years, along with a global risks landscape map. An additional [Global Risks map](https://intelligence.weforum.org/topics/a1Gb0000000pTDXEA2?tab=publications.) puts global risks at the center surrounded by natural ecosystems, security, human health, economic stability, and digital rights. The outer circle then lists perhaps one hundred specific issues.

Kate Raworth’s “Donut Economics” is a highly influential systems map. “Humanity’s 21st century challenge is to meet the needs of all within the means of the planet. In other words, to ensure that no one falls short on life’s essentials (from food and housing to healthcare and political voice), while ensuring that collectively we do not overshoot our pressure on Earth’s life-supporting systems, on which we fundamentally depend—such as a stable climate, fertile soils, and a protective ozone layer. The Doughnut of social and planetary boundaries is a playfully serious approach to framing that challenge, and it acts as a compass for human progress this century.”

The elegant [donut diagram](https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/) has an outer circle of an ecological ceiling for nine sectors (climate change, ocean acidification, chemical pollution and the like.) It has an inner circle of social foundation that lists human needs by sector (food, water, health, education and the like). The map elegantly allows her to show where we have already exceeded the ecological ceiling and where we have undercut the social foundation of human needs.

A third systems analysis comes from Thomas Homer-Dixon and his colleagues at the [Cascade Institute](https://cascadeinstitute.org/earths-polycrisis-is-no-mere-illusion/) in British Columbia. Homer-Dixon is among the foremost analysts of the polycrisis. In books like “The Upside of Down” and “Command Hope,” he has explored the polycrisis in depth. His thinking is deeply influential in Canada and internationally. I can’t point to a single map because Cascade Institute has produced multiple maps. In my judgment Homer-Dixon shows what sophisticated scholarly study of the polycrisis looks like—and why governments and others around the world should invest in it.

A fourth systems map comes from the [Fan Initiative](https://www.faninitiative.net/understand/) which also has a strong team of scientific experts behind it. The Fan has an influential categorization of twelve “blades” of the fan that interact. They include toxification, soils, population, oceans, health, governance, freshwater, energy, economy, climate, biodiversity and behavior.

There are academic centers focused on variants of the polycrisis like the [Center for the Study of Existential Risk](https://www.cser.ac.uk/research/science-global-risk/) at the University of Cambridge. Their research interests include biotechnology, artificial intelligence, technology risks more generally, environmental risks, and justice risks. Unlike the other projects above, they are less comprehensive on the polycrisis and more focused on explicitly existential risks to human survival.

Another outstanding contributor to polycrisis understanding is Nate Hagens’ The Great Simplification and his podcasts, [Frankly](https://natehagens.substack.com/p/a-bigger-boat-frankly-26). His tagline is “people, society and earth’s systems midway through the carbon pulse.” Here’s an example of his thinking: “How do the catalysts triggering the SVB collapse compare to the 2008 financial crisis? What might world financial market reactions indicate as we move closer to The Great Simplification?.. One thing I’m pretty confident of: world governments and central banks are gonna need bigger boats as more and more entities require bailouts and guarantees. Eventually that ‘boat’ may become so large that it will be ‘Too Big to Save.’”

A major recent development in the field is the United Nation (UN) Foundation’s [Accelerator for Systemic Risk Assessment](https://unfoundation.org/media/new-accelerator-for-systemic-risk-assessment-launches-ruth-richardson-named-executive-director/). “The UN Foundation announced today the new Accelerator for Systemic Risk Assessment (ASRA), to be led by Ruth Richardson as its inaugural Executive Director. The three-year initiative is designed to contribute to the emerging field of systemic risk analysis with particular attention to helping leaders and practitioners—especially those in the public sector—better understand, assess, and incorporate sensitivity to systemic risks into their decision-making. It will work closely with practitioners, multilaterals, academics, the public and private sectors, as well as other partners across institutions, sectors, and geographies.”

Historically, one of the most influential of all systems analyses of the polycrisis came from Donella Meadows and her colleagues in their report to the Club of Rome, “[Limits to Growth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Limits_to_Growth)” in 1972. What is remarkable about their model is that it has proven highly accurate for fifty years.

These are simply examples. What they have in common is their effort to understand the underlying drivers of the polycrisis and their interactions in some systematic way.

**Narrative Maps**

There is another way of thinking about the polycrisis that we might call narrative maps. We are taking this approach in our Omega Resilience Awards project, which focuses on exploring polycrisis maps with younger leaders in the Global South.

This approach focuses on exploring different narratives of the polycrisis as they are understood in different places and different situations. These are not necessarily systematic maps. This is story telling or meaning-making in a vast variety of forms.

Many contemporary commentators offer us narrative maps—though these maps are also often systematic. The Columbia historian [Adam Tooze](https://substack.com/profile/2779232-adam-tooze), the *New York Times* contributor [Ezra Klein](https://www.nytimes.com/column/ezra-klein-podcast) and the *Financial Times* Chief Economics Commentator [Martin Wolff](https://www.ft.com/martin-wolf) are analysts whose ongoing analyses of different dimensions of the polycrisis are widely respected.

Science fiction—or speculative fiction—offers another influential example of a narrative approach. “[The Ministry for the Future](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ministry_for_the_Future)” by Kim Stanley Robinson is a brilliant example of the genre of speculative utopian fiction that examines in detail how the climate crisis could actually be resolved.

Poets, novelists, film-makers, artists, and video game producers are among the many creative people who are telling stories and making narrative maps of the polycrisis.

**A Map of Ten Top Polycrisis Drivers**

What I offer below is a phenomenological map focused on issues as they emerge in the informed public media. This map is designed to change as the global polycrisis “weather system” changes. It is a kind of “polycrisis weather report.” My map is a mix of a worldview, systems and narrative map.

My starting point is the question I posed at the start. Why did the polycrisis explode into global awareness this year? I suggest that the polycrisis emerged as three principle drivers accelerated in sequence—climate, COVID, and the Ukraine war.

First, public attention was focused on the climate emergency. Then COVID turned the world upside down. Then a completely unexpected land war erupted in the middle of Europe. That war forced a great power confrontation, scrambled alliances around the world, and accelerated the last phase of the breakdown of American global hegemony. These three developments unfolding in sequence are, I believe, what brought the polycrisis to global attention.

Once the polycrisis was firmly established in the informed media and public mind, new developments kept confirming the increasing pace of global change and the reality of the polycrisis.

The new United States-China cold war is a classic example of the inevitable conflict between a rising power and a declining hegemon. The United States—unwisely from a geopolitical perspective—undertook to confront both Russia and China at the same time, hence driving these two great powers into alliance.

The new breakout developments in artificial intelligence (AI) are again transforming the world. Bill Gates has likened this new technology to the development of the computer in terms of its significance.

Almost every few months, a new salient polycrisis driver seems to emerge. You can’t fully grasp this process with abstract systems maps alone. You need a “changing global weather systems” map that tracks the phenomenological developments in the public media and public mind.

**The Polycrisis Pop Charts**

What I attempt here is a phenomenological map of what informed Western media are throwing up the “Polycrisis Pop Charts.” I borrow the “pop charts” analogy from popular music where the pop charts track the popularity of different songs. Polycrisis drivers are like pop songs that move up and down the polycrisis pop charts of public attention. Some stay at or near the top for long periods of time. Others enjoy only a brief stay.

Here are seven diverse candidates to add to a potential high level public awareness threat matrix for a “Polycrisis Top 10.” (climate, COVID, and conflicts without end are already on the Top Ten list.)

* **The end of American hegemony.** The multi-centric geopolitical realignment of the world is taking place rapidly. Russia, China, Iran and other countries have aligned against Western domination. India, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Brazil, and other countries are asserting their own independent interests, often playing both sides off against each other. The end of American hegemony is coinciding with the end of 500 years of Western domination of the world. It also coincides with the end of Western colonialism and imperialism. While these interlinked forms of dominance have been eroding for decades, the rapidity of developments now is astonishing.
* **The resurgence of autocratic regimes.** The western democratic model of free markets and representative democracy has never worked everywhere. (One can argue it never worked anywhere, but that is a different conversation.) Newly empowered by technologies of mass surveillance, a growing number of autocratic leaders of “illiberal democracies” and more totalitarian regimes are asserting themselves. They are far less constrained today by eroding democratic norms. They are far less concerned about American or Western disapproval. They regard the Western democracies as weak and decadent. They are more assertive of shared cross-ideological interests. In many places, the autocrats have strong, or at least majoritarian, support from their home populations. It may be true that the impulse toward freedom is universal. But that aspiration must be measured against other goods provided by regimes that meet essential human needs—for food, energy, shelter, economic progress, health, education, safety and the like. China is an excellent example. In a polycrisis world, it is an open question as to what forms of governance will actually work best in the interests of the people of different nations.
* **The explosion of AI technologies.** Brought to public awareness by GP-Chatbox, Microsoft, Meta, Google, and others, the developers of AI technologies have abandoned caution—even as [hundreds of scientists signed a letter](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/mar/31/ai-research-pause-elon-musk-chatgpt) urging a moratorium based on potentially catastrophic risks. A survey of AI scientists found them estimating a 10% chance that AI could ultimately wipe out human life on earth. AI is not alone. Biotech, nanotech, and robotics are what Bill Joy famously called the three “technologies of mass destruction.” The difference between these technologies of mass destruction and weapons of mass destruction, Joy said, was that the weapons required a large industrial base while the technologies could be cooked up by someone working out of their bedroom and posted to the Internet. This category is actually a stand-in for all the explosive technological developments transforming our world literally beyond understanding.
* **Global financial system chaos.** Economic researchers warn that the global debt overhang may soon be “too big to avoid failure.” The likelihood of a global recession, or worse, is believed to be increasing. The fight to control inflation without ending growth puts central banks in a quandary. On the other hand, ending conventional growth as we know it is essential to a better future. The dollar as the dominant global currency may well be coming to an end. It is overdue in historical terms.
* **The migration crisis.** Over 100 million forcibly displaced people are desperately seeking refuge as barriers to safe havens go up everywhere. The number will continue to grow exponentially. The migration crisis is among the greatest human tragedies of the polycrisis. No one has compassionate solutions that are politically acceptable in the West—or elsewhere for that matter. But mitigation strategies are profoundly important—curbing climate change, improving food production, reducing conflict, making home countries safer, aiding those caught at frontiers, and much more.
* **The risk of a nuclear accident or tactical nuclear arms use.** The focus is Ukraine, but the risk is global. So is the risk of the use of dirty bombs or the deliberate targeting of nuclear plants by terrorists or a nuclear meltdown caused by an electric grid going down from a terrorist attack or other causes.
* **World food, water, work and safety deficits.** Billions of people around the world are at increasing risk for the basics of life. This is more an outcome measure than a primary driver, except that this outcome drives all kinds of other feedback loops.

This list is, as I said, highly arbitrary. My list is heavy on the end of American hegemony, the rise of new autocracies, financial chaos, the migration crisis, nuclear risk, and the global food, water, and safety deficits. I add these seven to the list that set off polycrisis awareness—climate, COVID, and conflict without end.

What seems incontrovertible is that the number of polycrisis drivers keeps increasing and their interactions are every more rapid, unpredictable, and powerful.

**Disaster Capitalism and Other Opportunities**

The other side of any global threat matrix list consists of the global opportunities for advantage that countries, corporations, communities, and non-state actors are exploring on all sides. Whether it is disaster capitalism, opportunities for criminal gangs, cybercrimes, or legitimate new markets, the opportunists are enlivened everywhere. Likewise there are truly hopeful developments. We have to keep in mind breakout developments on the upside. Whatever the future brings, there will be winners and losers—even if the winners inhabit a devastated planet of universal scarcities.

**The Thucydides Trap–the Prospect for U.S.-China War**

The Chinese-mediated detente between Iran and Saudi Arabia has underscored China’s new role as a global power broker.

French President Macron was criticized by allies for his China visit and his explicit push for European geopolitical and economic autonomy. But many other European Union leaders think along Macron’s lines. Europe has no intention of giving up trade with China. Volkswagen and the chemical giant BSF are planning major expansions in China to offset the high cost of operating in Europe. The better European environmental regulations, the more attractive markets and manufacturing bases like China become.

Both Europe and China have lasting strategic reasons to build economic and political ties that lessen the threat to both an unreliable and fading global hegemon. Both China and Europe are caught for now balancing their conflicts over the Ukraine and Taiwan against their long-term interests in economic ties and strategic autonomy. But in the longer run, both know the Ukraine war will end, the Taiwan conflict will resolve, and they need each other in the new multi-polar world.

The Biden administration’s call for a global alliance of democracies against authoritarians rings increasingly hollow to people around the world. There is too long a history of what 500 years of Western hegemony has wrought. There is too much awareness of America’s classic hegemonic descent. The U.S. has wasted blood and treasure in foreign wars, devastated counties in the name of defending democracy, overturned democratic governments that threatened U.S. interests, and moved from soft power supporting shared interests to hard power for increasingly nationalistic goals. This is the well known trajectory of fading hegemons.

The U.S.-China confrontation is also the classic “[Thucydides Trap](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/).” In 12 of 16 past cases, the confrontation between a ruling power and a rising power led to war. The world has a great deal at stake in avoiding it.

**A Multi-Centric Sci-fi Future?**

The world simply isn’t buying the American narrative any longer. There are too many persuasive counter-narratives emerging from the Global South, from neo-Marxism, from post-colonial writers, and indeed from the internal critiques within the Global North and within America—to say nothing of counter-narratives from right wing nationalist parties, which appeal to very large numbers of people in countries around the world.

Yet, in a multi-centric world, it’s hard to see how the narrative we need—for new global governance structures that bring us together in the urgent global cause—will attract sufficient support.

It looks more and more to this observer as if the future will be a multi-centric world of ever-shifting alliances in which hybrid warfare and lower level conflicts among state, corporate, and non-state actors will launch us into an entirely unpredictable sci-fi future. That’s only one scenario, but in my mind it is the most likely one.

**Archipelagos – Linking Islands of Coherence in a Sea of Chaos**

There are hopeful trends. Many of the global stressors have substantial upsides. Systems theory makes it clear that we can create virtuous cascades as well as endure negative ones. This is a central thesis of Homer-Dixon’s work at the Cascade Institute.

At a recent Commonweal conference with leaders of our Omega Resilience Awards hubs in India, Nigeria and Argentina, Mark Valentine mentioned Ilya Priogene’s observation on the power of “[**islands of coherence**](https://islandsofcoherence.net/research/)” in a complex system in chaos. Here’s the quote:

“Ilya Priogene demonstrated scientifically that when complex systems are far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence can **shift the entire system to a higher order**.”

We liked this concept of focusing on creating “linked islands of coherence” at the grassroots level and at every possible level. It’s doable, achievable, and hopeful. Many of the Nordic countries are engaged in conscious efforts to create societal resilience in the polycrisis. So is Switzerland, so is New Zealand. They may become islands of coherence that offer hope and models for others.

Local communities, grassroots social movements, service organizations, and local governments are slowly coming to grips with the reality of the polycrisis. And they are crafting solutions. New economy theorists and practitioners are imagining ways to strengthen resilient local economies based on self-help, local currencies, and more.

**Polycrisis Thinking as a Lens for Exploring Resilience**

We believe the polycrisis cannot generate a single strategic agenda. Unlike the climate emergency, or the fight against hunger, the polycrisis doesn’t lend itself to universal shared objectives and solutions.

Rather, polycrisis awareness is a lens through which we can assess the most effective strategies for whatever we are working on. As one colleague put it, “if you don’t factor in the polycrisis, your strategies are far more likely to fail.”

For example, imagine that the power grid goes down whether from a cyberattack or other causes. Or imagine that the food system breaks down leaving people dependent on local food resources. Or imagine a financial collapse takes place and we enter a new global depression. Who would be prepared to respond—and how?

One of the lessons from past disasters is how rapidly the structures that sustain life can collapse. Most people don’t have the bandwidth to think about these questions. Their survival needs or personal concerns are too urgent. But it helps if in every community or organization at least some people think this way.

**Cultivating a “Polycrisis Eye”**

It is entirely possible to cultivate a “polycrisis eye” that enables you to watch developments across many spheres and witness the unfolding of the polycrisis in all its complexity and unpredictability. When I read the news I am constantly tracking these intersections.

If Russian gas is cut back in the EU, Norway becomes the bloc’s primary supplier despite cries of anguish from its environmental community. Likewise Biden breaks a pledge and allows new oil development in the Alaskan wildlife refuge. Germany closes its last three nuclear plants which makes it more dependent on fossil fuels and renewables. The constant eruption of new developments continuously reconfigures whatever sector they appear in and those changes flow out to other sectors as well.

So it’s not just the polycrisis world view maps, the polycrisis systems maps, and the polycrisis narrative maps that help us navigate. It’s cultivating a “polycrisis eye” with which to watch as this accelerating global weather system evolves, changing local weather conditions everywhere. A “polycrisis eye” refines our ability to use a “polycrisis lens” to understand and navigate this turbulent time.

**A Caveat**

Though I have continuously referenced polycrisis analyses emanating from the Global South and the emerging multicentric world, this essay has drawn primarily from Global North examples of polycrisis maps and thinking. The principal reason is that while the Global South and the multi-centric world have experienced by far the greatest burden of the polycrisis,the polycrisis analysis has developed primarily in Europe (where the term first emerged) and the United States. That said, one of our principle goals at Omega and the Omega Resilience Awards is to support polycrisis analyses and narratives emerging in Africa, India and Latin America. Those analyses will be the subject of later essays.

**A Crown of Feminine Design**

We can hold the ultimate hope—the real hope—that we will emerge from this time of chaos and peril to build a better world. It might ideally be, as Randy Hayes, the founder of Rainforest Action Network proposes, a world of continental networks of bio-regional economies.

The critical question for global governance is whether a new set of global institutions can emerge to replace the Bretton Woods institutions from World War II. There may be a remote possibility that this will happen—as it does in “Ministry for the Future.” But in a polycentric world of widely diverse interests, it will be hard to achieve.

At the community level, most disaster preparedness has common themes. Communities need to be able to meet basic human needs for food, water, clothing, shelter, energy, safety, communications, and the spirit and tools to rebuild a better way of life. Building this capacity builds resilient communities—islands of coherence that could shift the whole chaotic system toward a higher level of functioning.

We know what local and regional self-reliance and resilience look like. Less than a century ago, community self-reliance was a way of life all around the world. It is still practiced in many communities today. If we can remember those lessons we’ll have a better chance, come what may. This is what Nate Hagens envisions as “the great simplification.”

All around the world people are coming together in the face of all the challenges to create communities of hope and resilience. They work with the skills and tools available to them. The fight for a better world is never won. It goes on forever. We’ll do that best if we are clear-eyed about what we are facing.

Whatever happens, our consciousness will have a powerful impact on how we face whatever is coming. Like all great life crises, the polycrisis has the potential to awaken us to what really matters in our lives. Perhaps the polycrisis could even stimulate a great global awakening of what we all need to do together to create a more liveable world. It’s possible.

I close with this line from the great Indian saint Sri Aurobindo, “the future, if there is to be a future, must wear a crown of feminine design.” The structures of wealth and power that we have built in this world are mostly of masculine design. We might amend Aurobindo and say that the future, if it is to be a compassionate one, must honor Mother Earth and evoke the feminine in us all.

That’s a thought worth holding.