INTERVENTIONS: PROVOCATION

Polycrisis or crises of capitalist social reproduction

Kanishka Jayasuriya, k.jayasuriya@murdoch.edu.au
Murdoch University, Australia

The term polycrisis has recently gained much interest in academia and policy-making circles as a perspective to understand the nature of ‘overlapping emergencies’ – geopolitical, ecological, pandemics and economic – that are disrupting policy and politics in the Global North and South. How do we understand the nature of these new forms of crisis? This provocation argues that polycrisis, while a good descriptive term for the overlapping emergencies that characterise the current conjecture, should be analysed in terms of the larger crisis of capitalist social reproduction. The polycrisis needs to be understood as a political crisis that arises from a contradiction between social reproduction and the crisis of capital accumulation. It leads to increasing authoritarian statist forms as well as the growing resistance and dissent that is a feature of the broken politics of time and distinguishes the multiple intersecting crises of the 21st century.

Key words polycrisis • social reproduction • crisis • authoritarian statism

Key messages
• The polycrisis needs to be understood as a crisis of social reproduction that takes on a political form.
• The political management (and resistance) to the crisis of social reproduction leads to a form of authoritarian statism.
• The crisis leads to increasing resistance that is unable to be managed within existing formal political institutions.
• The state is increasingly the site of political contestation over social reproduction.

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Polycrisis or capitalist crisis?

In 2022, the Sri Lankan economy was in a parlous condition. There was no fuel. Rising costs of living led to an unprecedented political crisis that brought tens of thousands to the streets of the capital, leading to the resignation of the president. He was replaced by a former opponent who has shielded the former ruling family and is, at the time of writing, repressing political activists and trade unionists. The economic crisis was precipitated in the short term by high levels of private and public...
debt, the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 crisis, a ban on fertiliser imports that led to devastating losses for farmers, and continuing ecological shocks including flooding and military represssion in the north of Sri Lanka where a civil war had raged for over three decades (for an overview see Srinivasan, 2023). Sri Lanka’s ongoing neoliberal programme, often implemented by authoritarian and repressive means since the 1980s, limited the capacity to respond to these shocks. In Pakistan, a devastating flood has led to the loss of life and income, and displaced population in the context of – as in Sri Lanka – an ongoing fiscal crisis of debt alongside a sovereign debt crisis unfolding in the context of deepening geopolitical rivalries between the US and Pakistan (Sahay and Mackenzie, 2023).

Such multiple and overlapping crises are symptomatic of increasing disruption to established neoliberal political and economic order across the Global North and South. Neoliberalism is understood here as a set of economic and political processes situated across markets, states and households that have reorganised class and social relations in ways that have disciplined and marginalised labour and other groups in favour of the owners and controllers of capital. We are living in a period not just of ongoing crises, but one where the usual tools of crisis management seem to hold no longer. A crisis of crisis management. Overlapping geopolitical, ecological and economic crises marks this contemporary period. It is more than a simple economic or cyclical crisis, but a more permanent condition of constant crisis. Evidently, at the beginning of the 21st century, the form of the social and political crisis, and our capacity to respond to these crises has been fundamentally transformed.

How do we understand the nature of this global political and economic disruption? The term polycrisis has recently gained much interest in academia and policy-making circles to understand the nature of ‘overlapping emergencies’ (geopolitical, ecological, pandemics and economic): reshaped policy and political environments. The term, coined and popularised by the prolific scholar and public intellectual Adam Tooze (2022), has gained rapid currency in the media and among policy makers. It has also garnered some strong criticism from various academics (Harvey, 2023). This short provocation interrogates the uses and limits of this term. In essence, I argue that the question that needs to be answered is this: what is distinctive about polycrisis as a new form of political management of the crisis of social reproduction in the 21st century? As Farwa Sial notes in her excellent critical examination of the term, we need to think critically of the term; otherwise, as she notes, ‘it risks becoming yet another neoliberal policy buzzword’ (Sial, 2023).

From this critical vantage, the polycrisis is crystallised in the amplification of contradictions, or even the disassociation, between regimes of capital accumulation and social reproduction – or the conditions of life – on which accumulation depends. Here Nancy Fraser, one of the most prominent and insightful social reproduction theorists, argues that ‘social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies’ (Fraser, 2016: 100). There have been some innovative and perceptive works on social reproduction, particularly from feminist scholars such as Bhattacharya (2015; 2017) and Fraser (2016) as well as an earlier generation of scholars such as Vogel (1995) and Giménez (2019), albeit with important differences, suggest that social reproduction – the production of life – is central to the accumulation of capital. In particular, Giménez and Bhattacharya point to the political contradictions between social reproduction and the
Polycrisis or crises of capitalist social reproduction

accumulation of capital central as central to social conflict. In my view, this contradiction, and its political manifestation, is central to understanding the nature of the polycrisis.

This is at odds with the view of the polycrisis as identified by overlapping and interdependent systemic crises in various spheres, ranging from the ecological to the geopolitical. For Tooze, in this polycrisis, ‘the shocks are disparate, but they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of its parts’ (Tooze, 2022). Such a perspective has echoes in the technocratic view of polycrisis that bemoans the absence of sophisticated statecraft to navigate these multiple crises. It is consequently the sapping of the capacity of multilateral and national institutions to deal with this deep-seated combination of systematic crises that is one of the defining elements of the current conjuncture. Tooze is adamant that no reductive economic explanation for these crises can exist. We need to see it in its multiple dimensions.

Hence for proponents of the polycrisis perspective, there can be no simplistic reduction of these overlapping emergencies to a set of economic contradictions. There is something persuasive about this understanding of new forms of crisis and their multidimensional nature. However, as I argue later on, this perspective obscures how such a polycrisis is manifested in the form of a crisis of capitalist social reproduction. Such a crisis of social reproduction is the specific form through which these different crises – and their different times – emerge in the current conjuncture. It is a new form of capitalist crisis.

Here the work of Bensaïd (2002) on the multiple temporalities of crisis is a useful way to analyse the nature of this crisis. He emphasised that polycrisis stands at the conjunction of different crises, each with its own temporality such as economic, geopolitical or ecological. The polycrisis lies in the political discordance of these conjunctions within the present. Bensaïd argues that:

Far from being effaced in its wake, the past continues to haunt the present. Politics is precisely where these discordant times intersect. In Freudian archaeology, we re-encounter these active survivals and interwoven times, in which nothing that has once been formed disappears and where anything that has been preserved can reappear. (Bensaïd, 2002: 22)

Bensaïd goes on to note that this is the discordance of ‘spheres and times. Times punctuated by alternation and intermittence. The broken time of politics and strategy’ (Bensaïd, 2002: 23). These words, first published in 1995 (in French), are prophetic of our current condition of discordance of time and politics.

Hence, rather than a separate dimension, it probes into the way such overlapping emergencies are manifested in the broken political time of the present. For example, the care crisis – work, affordability, migration and management of patients – has intersected with the COVID-19 crisis in both the Global North and the Global South. It is an illustration of what Bensaïd calls the ‘discordance of times’ (2002: 52). It is at the intersection of the pandemic, the demographic transition, the privatisation of the care industry, and the often precarious and migrant labour force employed in the care industry. I argue that these multiple crises are interwoven in the political crisis of capitalist social reproduction.

Such a perspective is at the centre of Fraser’s (2016) work on the contradictions of care and social reproduction, where she analyses how the system of financialised capitalism was at the core of the crisis of the care sector. The crisis of care is not just confined
to the Global North. It is a global issue – with care, workers increasingly drawn from the Global South. The Chinese government is now faced with a crisis of care driven by demographic change, deindustrialisation in parts of the country and a funding crisis fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, it is a polycrisis. However, this crisis finds expression in a crisis of capitalist social reproduction where it is ‘clear that its unequal and inadequate system of social reproduction is a major factor in China’s population decline; and, within this, the system has produced uneven consequences among different social groups, intersectionally defined by class, gender and urban/rural citizenship, and has thus exacerbated existing inequalities’ (Dong, 2021: 14).

Or take as examples the crises in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, one facet of which is the decline of remittances from workers in the Gulf. These remittances were crucial in export income and the subsistence of workers and their families. COVID-19 – among other things – reduced these remittances, thereby compounding the pandemic and economic crisis. For example, the response to climate change is through the commodification of carbon emissions and the rise of carbon offsets. Carbon offsets cover ‘activities including appropriating community land to create forest plantations for carbon credits, depleting water tables to irrigate lines of tree shoots, or abrogating traditional land tenure rights to enclose vast stretches as ecological preserves and carbon banks’ (Iskander and Lowe, 2020: 116). Here the political management of these ecological crises becomes a focus of political conflict over social reproduction.

Therefore, it is not so much the discordance of time that is crucial but the way it leads to the broken time of politics (Bensaïd, 2002). More concretely, it is the unravelling of the political-institutional frameworks that have facilitated the management of multiple crises within various forms of neoliberalism across the globe (Jayasuriya, 2023). The ‘broken time’ of politics is manifested in the failure to manage the tensions between social reproduction and capital accumulation. Here the question is not so much whether this is managed, but the political forms through which these contradictions are managed, accommodated or resisted. In consequence, how the state management – or failure to manage – the crisis of social reproduction is central to the political fusing of these intersecting crises.

The multiple crises identified in the polycrisis literature – including ecological and geopolitical – crystallise in the intensifying political crisis of the tension between social reproduction and accumulation. The political accommodation, resistance, and management of this contradiction between social reproduction and accumulation lie at the political heart of the polycrisis. In this context, Giménez’s (2019) insightful work on the politics of what she terms capitalist social production makes the point that the process of social reproduction is inherently contradictory and conflict-ridden, noting that reproduction is ‘not a purely economic process; it is the outcome of political processes, changes in capital accumulation, and location of investments, which are themselves influenced by the state of class struggle, capitalist contradictions and the historical characteristics of social formations’ (Giménez, 2019: 299). So, the question is not so much ‘is this a capitalist crisis’ but why has it taken this form of crisis of capitalist social reproduction?

The crisis of social reproduction, authoritarian statism and the radical right

There are three key ways in which the polycrisis takes the form of a crisis of social reproduction. First, is the growing importance of precarious labour (Hewison,
foregrounding issues of social reproduction. The literature on the rise of precarious work identifies these changes and degradations as factors linked with political, social and economic changes that began in the 1970s and are associated with the neoliberal policies of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation that brought profound transformations to regulatory regimes (Hewison, 2016: 432). In this context, the rise of informal work contributes to precarious work. The second is the commodification of social reproduction so that the contradiction between social reproduction and accumulation is internalised within institutions of social reproduction such as care and personal services (Fraser, 2016). It is simply not ‘care work’ that is at stake in this commodification. The marketisation of utilities and services, such as electricity, has been at the forefront of conflict over social reproduction. Moreover, as megacities have grown in the Global South, issues of gentrification and associated displacement, housing and, more fundamentally, the rights to the city have become prominent political issues (Lees et al, 2015; Davis, 2016). Finally, the management of the growing ‘surplus population’, in part produced by ecological and other crises (Davis, 2016; Mezzadri, 2022), becomes a pivotal dimension of the crisis of social reproduction. The management of this ‘surplus population’ is often gendered and racialised. Indeed, the management of the ‘surplus population’ is central to each of these dimensions of the crisis, not least through processes of migration from the Global South (Soederberg, 2021).

One of the key features of the differential political management of the crises of social reproduction is that it occurs in the context of a broader process that I have described as political disincorporation (Jayasuriya, 2018; 2023). Political disincorporation is the hollowing out of intermediary institutions such as parties and unions, that mediate in class and other social movements. Political disincorporation, rather than the more usual idea of the crisis of representation, captures the variety of intermediation in the global semi-periphery. In the context of Brazil, Braga points out that, with the decline in collective mobilisation such as trade unions, new identities forged by the neo-Pentecostal movement have emerged in a context shaped by what he calls the family domain (Braga, 2019). As Braga notes, this emphasis on the family domain provides potential social foundations for the far right.

This political disincorporation means that the tension between social reproduction and accumulation cannot be contained within the normal routines of neoliberal crisis management. From this vantage point, the contradictions and their management are central to understanding political forms, including new forms of authoritarianism and new forms of contention. And these new authoritarian statist forms (Poulantzas, 1978; Chacko, 2018) are most advanced in the Global South, in countries such as India, China and Turkey.

In earlier work (Jayasuriya, 2018; 2023), following the work of Poulantzas (1978) on authoritarian statism, I noted how new forms of authoritarianism are emerging worldwide as a response to the political challenges of neoliberalism. Even though its political institutions remain formally liberal, authoritarianism is characterised by increasing executive intervention, the decline of representative democratic institutions, illiberal policies, particularly with respect to the family, and the increasing use of police powers (Jayasuriya, 2018). The broader point here is that existing democratic institutional responses to crisis management are no longer viable in many states, and this is reflected in the emergence of new forms of authoritarianism.
Social policy – whether through workfare or cash grants – is proving pivotal to how the state responds to the mounting crisis of capitalist social reproduction (Jayasuriya, 2006; Chacko, 2018). This is evident in Chacko’s (2018; 2019) highly innovative work on the far right in India, which has shown how the radical right-wing politics of the BJP (the ruling party at the time of writing) in India has been shaped by what she calls the politics of:

virtuous market citizenship. Here the role of the state is to act as a facilitator for market citizenship in ‘a way that promotes a Hindu majoritarian ethos and advances the Hindu nation.’ (Chacko, 2019: 402)

Similarly, Shields, writing on radical right-wing politics in Poland, noted the crucial role of policies directed at social reproduction in cementing the ideological dominance of the radical right. He notes that in this political management, radical right-wing social policy moves ‘the crisis of care and the crisis of neoliberalism into the household. For Poland, this means the configuration of a set of norms about gender and its relationship to the household division of labour to valorise a certain conceptualisation of the subject’ (Shields, 2019: 13). The use of social policy has been crucial to the political management of the crisis of capitalist social reproduction and in consolidating radical right-wing regimes in Hungary and Turkey.

Political protests

The other side of the coin – if you like, the weakness of the state – is the rising tide of political protest around issues of social reproduction. Poulantzas (1978) on authoritarian statism emphasises that authoritarianism was both a response to and an effect of amplifying crises. He perceptively noted – as did Stuart Hall (1985) – the strengthening and weakening of the state in response to political crises. For example, the attempt to manage rising protests about climate change in the UK through a range of restrictive measures illustrates how the growing ecological crises are managed through restrictive measures on political dissent (Castle, 2022). That is:

authoritarian statism is articulated to the political crisis and the crisis of the state. It is also a response to the elements of the crisis, including those of its own crisis. Thus, such statism does not designate univocal strengthening of the state but constitutes the effect of a tendency to strengthening and weakening of the state. (Poulantzas, 1978: 205)

This point is well demonstrated in Moore’s (2023) very insightful article on political unrest in Ireland following the global financial crisis, which demonstrates how the contradictions of neoliberal growth regimes created the political conditions which she aptly describes as ‘reproductive unrest’ (Moore, 2023: 113), and notes, with reference to Poulantzas, how there was a ‘weakening and strengthening’ of the Irish state. She notes that:

the hollowing out of democratic institutions seems also to bring with it increasing resistance and political fragility - there is a strengthening-weakening of the state. What this case also shows is the way that such
tendencies are mediated through the sphere of social reproduction and the growing reproductive unrest that has emerged in response. To return to the question asked at the start of this article, neoliberalism intensifies underlying social crisis tendencies because of the specific – if increasingly uneasy – articulation of the state, social reproduction and dominant accumulation regimes. (Moore, 2023: 121)

Indeed, much of what Moore identifies in Ireland is replicated in places like Lebanon and Sri Lanka.

We see this clearly in the case of the Sri Lankan crisis noted earlier. Since the brutal end of the civil war, Sri Lanka has been characterised by a form of authoritarian populism centred around an ethnonationalist strategy. Yet, the very foundations of this regime were rocked by multiple protests directed at the rising cost of living and the collapse of public services. The movement known as Aragalya (the struggle) drew from multiple class forces and was broadly knitted together in opposition to the incumbent presidential regime. Apart from its heterogeneous class composition, one of the features of the movement was the fact that it emerged outside formal institutional and even mainstream movements (Uyangoda, 2022). To be clear, the movement now confronts intense repression, but it is symptomatic of new state and oppositional politics forms that are emerging in response to the intersection of multiple crises that the polycrisis describes so well.

There have been other such movements, particularly – though not exclusively as Moore’s (2023) work shows – in the Global South. In Lebanon, the economic crisis together with the broader crisis of political governance was starkly reflected in the 2020 Beirut port explosion which led to increasing political protests by heterogeneous groups. Again, these movements have taken place outside existing political institutions and movements – indeed often directed at these institutions. (Daher, 2021). In Chile, a wave of student protests over student debt issues (Pavlic, 2018) led to movements for constitutional change.

Conclusion

This provocation poses a new set of questions on the nature and form of the multiple crises that have shaken the globe in the early part of this century. The polycrisis literature makes an important contribution to this debate by identifying its multiple dimensions. However, we need a more analytical frame that analyses how the various temporalities of crises coincide with new modes of political management and resistance to the contradiction between social reproduction and the crisis of capital accumulation – a crisis of capitalist social reproduction.

It might, however, be better to formulate this as the increasing disassociation between the logic of accumulation and social reproduction which is reflected in the rise of the ‘surplus population’ whose management cannot be managed or contained within existing political frameworks. To use Bensaïd’s (2002) resonant phrase, the broken politics of time distinguishes the multiple intersecting crises of the 21st century. The Global South – particularly in China, India and Brazil – may well be at the centre of the emergence of new authoritarian political forms of management as well as resistance to the crisis of capitalist social reproduction.
This opens an exciting research agenda on what could be the new social question of the 21st century.

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