

"Polycrisis era": how will the 2020s be remembered in history?

People in 1914 did not call their war the First World War. The name arrived afterwards, and so will ours

Pavel Gurov · ORCID [0009-0001-0152-8056](https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0152-8056)

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The word "polycrisis" means that crises are not merely simultaneous, they are structurally interconnected and amplify each other.

The term was introduced by the French sociologist Edgar Morin in 1993¹, but it gained mass popularity in the early 2020s thanks to the historian Adam Tooze of Columbia University, who described the shift from a world of separate shocks to a world of interacting failures.

*In the polycrisis the shocks are disparate, but they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts.*²



Adam Tooze

Historian, Columbia University

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The term "polycrisis" was first introduced in the book by Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern, *Terre-Patrie* (Seuil, 1993; English translation *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium*, 1999), where it denoted this:

This complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet.



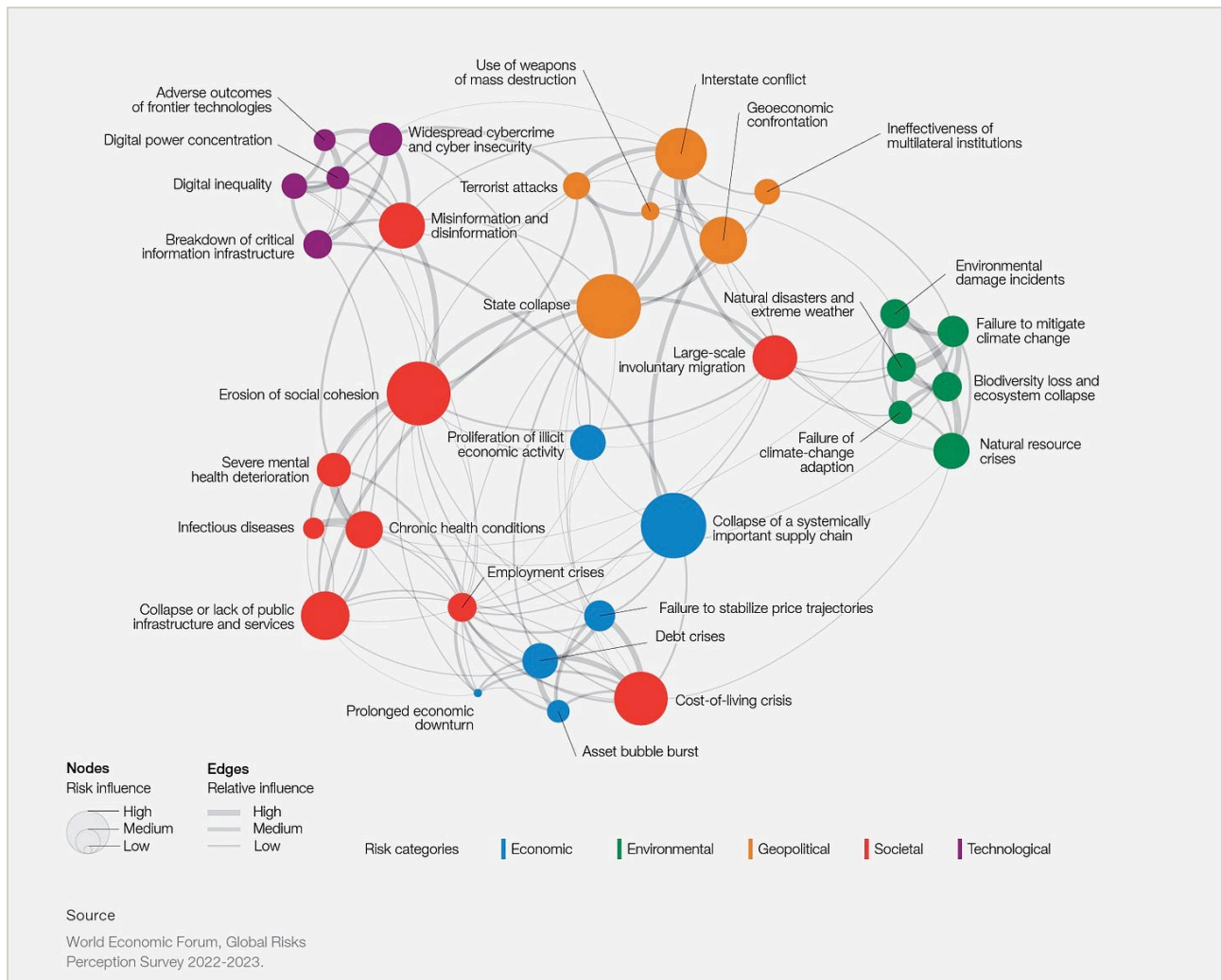
Edgar Morin

Sociologist, who coined polycrisis

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The popularity of the term rose sharply in 2022³, culminating in its prominence at Davos in 2023⁴.

A more specific definition of polycrisis comes from the Cascade Institute⁵: any combination of three or more interacting systemic risks capable of causing a cascading, uncontrolled failure in the Earth's natural and social systems that irreversibly and catastrophically degrades humanity's prospects.



The World Economic Forum's map of how global risks interact, from the Global Risks Report 2023. World Economic Forum, Global Risks Perception Survey 2022-2023, Global Risks Report 2023. [weforum.org](https://www.weforum.org). Quoted under §51 UrhG.

We are living at a moment when several megatrends have overlapped simultaneously for the first time in history: the climate crisis, the AI revolution, deglobalisation, the erosion of democratic institutions, Russia's war against Ukraine, and the military conflict in the Middle East.

Most likely, "Polycrisis" will not stick as the main one.

The First World War (1914-1918)

At the time, nobody knew there would be a "Second", so the numeral "I" was not used.

- **The Great War:** the most widespread name in the English- and French-speaking world. It emphasised the unprecedented scale of destruction.
- **The war that will end all wars:** an optimistic (and, unfortunately, mistaken) slogan launched by the writer H. G. Wells.
- **Interesting fact:** the term "First World War" was first used in the diary of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Repington as early as 1918⁶. He sadly predicted that this conflict would not be the last, and proposed calling it the "First" in order to distinguish it from the ones that would follow.

The Second World War (1939-1945)

Here the situation is more interesting: the name "Second World War" began appearing in the press almost immediately, but it did not become official everywhere. But there were others as well:

- **The Big War:** frequently found in the personal diaries and letters of the time.
- **War for Survival:** one of the names US President Franklin Roosevelt proposed as the official one, but it did not take hold as firmly as "Second World War".

Eras are named by their outcome

The era of the 2020s will probably be named after its main outcome, not after the feelings of those who lived through it. The options depend on how it ends:

- **Third World War**
- **Deglobalization**
- **Pre-Singularity**
- **The Great Unraveling** - a term already used by ecologists, but one that describes well the simultaneous disintegration of institutions, alliances, climate stability and informational consensus.

REFERENCES

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3*Economic Globalization's Polycrisis*, International Studies Quarterly 68(2), sqae024 (2024) - <https://academic.oup.com/isq/article/68/2/sqae024/7634048>↗

4World Economic Forum, *Global Risks Report 2023* - the polycrisis risk-interaction map - <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2023/>↗

5Lawrence, M., Homer-Dixon, T., et al., *Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement*, Cascade Institute - <https://cascadeinstitute.org/technical-paper/global-polycrisis/>↗

6Repington, C. à C., *The First World War 1914-1918* (Constable, 1920) - the earliest widely cited use of the ordinal↗

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