

Permacrisis: what it means and why it's word of the year for 2022

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The Collins Dictionary's word of the year for 2022 is "[permacrisis](#)." As accolades go, the managing director of Collins Learning, Alex Beecroft,

[has said](#) that this one "sums up quite succinctly how truly awful 2022 has been for so many people."

The word, most widely understood as a portmanteau of "permanent" and "[crisis](#)," has been in use for a little longer. In April 2021, policy analysts in Europe [saw it](#) as defining the era in which we live. Some in Britain inevitably ascribe the genesis of that era to [Brexit](#). Others point to the [pandemic](#). For others still, it was [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#) that made the word indispensable. As the writer David Shariatmadari [has put it](#):

"Permacrisis" is a term that perfectly embodies the dizzying sense of lurching from one unprecedented event to another, as we wonder bleakly what new horrors might be around the corner.

This represents a shift from the way the notion of crisis has been defined until now. However, digging into the philosophical roots of the word reveals that a crisis is not necessarily awful, but may, in the long term, prove a necessary and beneficial corrective.

Crisis as necessary to progress

Philosophers have long defined a crisis as a situation that forces an individual or group to a moment of thoughtful [critique](#)—to a point where a new path is mapped out in relation to some issue of pressing concern. This definition stems from the ancient Greek term κρίσις or *krisis*, which describes a medical or political moment of opportunity that bifurcates into life or death, victory or defeat.

However, as philosopher of history Reinhart Koselleck [has shown](#), in modern philosophy, that ancient Greek notion of crisis undergoes a semantic shift. Its meaning changes radically, to refer to a contradiction between opposing forces that accelerates the transition of past into future.

This can be seen in [Karl Marx](#)'s description of capitalism as a crisis-ridden [economic system](#). In struggling to tame its forces of production, labour and machinery, Marx contends, this system causes crises of overproduction: an excess of supply that cannot be met with an equivalent demand. These crises in turn foster opportunities for cultural, social and political innovation, the best 20th-century example of which is the creation of the welfare state.

"Crisis" is similarly defined in American philosopher Thomas Kuhn's [approach](#) to the history of science. Kuhn views progress in modern research as driven by crises within existing scientific paradigms. The progressive shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian paradigms in 20th-century physics most neatly illustrates his thinking.

In both cases, "crisis" is linked to the idea—the ideal, even—of progress. Marx believed that, because the rate of profit has a tendency to fall, capitalism would meet a final crisis and that this would lead to the emergence of communism: an entirely new and, crucially, better socio-political situation.

"Permacrisis" represents the contemporary inversion of this conception. It is similar to Marx's idea that [human history](#) will lead to a final crisis, only it precludes any idea of further progress. Instead of leading to something better, it denotes a static and permanently difficult situation.

A new realism

This concept of permacrisis has its roots in contemporary systems theory, which claims that a crisis can become so complicated that we can't predict its outcome. In this regard, in his 2008 book, [On Complexity](#), French philosopher Edgar Morin argues that humanity now resides within a network of interlocking systems and any crisis in one of those systems will engender a crisis in all the others.

Morin uses the word "polycrisis" to describe this situation. It is an idea that is also used in historian Adam Tooze's work on crisis and disaster. As Tooze [recently put it](#), when considering the sheer accumulation of problems the world currently faces—from conflict and the climate crisis to the pandemic and rising inflation—"the whole is even more dangerous than the sum of the parts." Interconnected microsystems, because of ever-shortening positive feedback loops, can very quickly trigger crisis, even catastrophe, in the wider macrosystem.

Taking this one step further, the shift from "polycrisis" to "permacrisis" implies that we now see our crises as situations that can only be managed, not resolved. Indeed, "permacrisis" suggests that every decision to accelerate a difficult situation in order to come out on the other side of it risks something far worse.

Take the recent demise, in the UK, of the Truss administration. The decision to resolve an economic crisis only heightened a self-defeating political crisis—which then very rapidly further compounded the original economic crisis.

Permacrisis signals not only a loss of faith in progress, but also a new realism in relation to what people can cope with and achieve. Our crises have become so complex and deep-seated that they can transcend our capacity to understand them. Any decision to tackle them risks only making things worse. We are thus faced with a troubling conclusion. Our crises are no longer a problem. They are a stubborn fact.

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