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Interdisciplinary conference, 22-24 May 2025, UCD Humanities Institute

From Modern Crisis to Permacrisis and Polycrisis: Epistemological Perspectives and Interventions

This interdisciplinary conference analyzes the profound shift from the modern idea of crisis as an exceptional state requiring urgent crisis management towards permacrisis and polycrisis as the ontological condition of a world at risk in the 21st century. To be sure: the evidence of a world entangled in poly- and permacrisis is overwhelming: soaring energy and food prices; the erosion of democracy and the rise of the far right; the uncontrolled advancement of AI and cyber insecurity; the climate crisis; large-scale involuntary migration in response to warfare and the climate crisis; biodiversity loss, the increase in natural disasters and extreme weather events – these are just some examples of cascading, connected and overwhelming crises.

Originally coined in the 1970s, the word polycrisis has gained currency for crises that ‘interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts’ (Tooze 2022). In today’s world crisis no longer designates a single problem that develops into an accelerating crisis, mobilizing urgent crisis management. Polycrisis designates complex and interacting processes with planetary consequences. In 2022 Collins Dictionary selected ‘permacrisis’ as word of the year. As 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.*”

Despite the growing awareness that we live in an age of perma- and polycrisis, to date most research has focused on the modern notion of crisis that emerged in Western Europe in the 18th century in the context of the temporalization of history (Koselleck 2006). The modern meaning of crisis as a tipping point that requires active crisis management emerged rather late in the history of the term. In ancient Greek, the verb ‘κρίνειν’ (krínein) means a) to separate and divide between two things or people or among a group of things or people, b) to enquire, investigate in a judicial sense, and c) the selection of the best through competition. The noun ‘crisis’ derives from Greek ‘krino’ and means a decision, however, not in the modern sense.

After the French Revolution crisis became a criterion for what counts as history: without crises there is no discernible history and no historical narration. However, the episteme “crisis” is paradoxical: as the engine of a progressively developing modern history, crises testify, on the one hand, to the history making power of humankind and, on the other, to its limits because modern history is contingent. Crises therefore simultaneously mobilize and challenge human agency; they represent historical contingency and its mastery; they embody both normality and epochal change; they are predictable and unpredictable at the same time. Furthermore, because of the temporal urgency of crises, crisis discourse often delegitimizes criticism, even though both terms are intrinsically linked. As Janet Roitman argues in her book *Anti-Crisis*, crisis is a blind spot in the production of knowledge:

Crisis is claimed, but it remains a latency; it is never itself explained because it is necessarily further reduced to other elements, such as capitalism, economy, neoliberalism, finance, politics, culture, subjectivity. In that sense, crisis is not a condition to be observed (loss of meaning, alienation, faulty knowledge); it is an observation that produces meaning. More precisely, it is a distinction that secures a „world“ for observation. (Anti-Crisis, p. 39)

Faced with the epistemological legacy of western crisis discourse, our conference aims to debate the shift from the modern understanding of crisis to perma- and polycrisis. We will ask: how does the age of perma/poly crisis reconfigure modern historical time? How does it relate to deep geological and other, non-European temporal modes? How does the idea of perma/polycrisis transform the risk assessment strategies that are part and parcel of reflexive modernity (U. Beck)? Is it possible to imagine liveable futures which eschew the dystopian perspective of end-time scenarios as well as techno-optimism? To what extent does the idea of permacrisis displace the anthropocentric worldview which is a major cause of crisis in the Anthropocene? How and to what extent do perma/poly crises make room for modes of entanglement that include more-than-human life forms and environments? What are the alternatives to the established crisis practice that turns the challenges of the Anthropocene into controllable phenomena that can be identified, managed, and ultimately eliminated? How does the idea of perma/poly crisis affect civil society and democratic participation? How can we reconceive and promote the idea of the self not as a sovereign rational entity facing the world as Other but as a relational and interdependent being? How can we maintain and foster critical optimism in the age of perma/poly crisis? What kinds of affective relations can be engendered in relation to perma/polycrisis?

In order to address these and other issues we suggest a keywords approach to cover some of the following aspects. These are suggestions – please add your own keywords:

Perma/poly crisis and:

- geological deep time/historical time/entangled temporalities/ pasts, presents and futures
- places/localities/spaces
- displacement/belonging/arrival
- transit/movement/flight
- risk/security/exposure
- affect/exhaustion/fear/
- (cruel) optimism/ happiness/possibility
- subjectivity/selfhood/agency
- beginnings/middles/endings
- gender/non-binary identities
- non-human animals/things
- capitalism/finance
- ethnicity/race/migration
- civil society/participation in democracy/activism
- technologies/AI/robotics

Presentation formats:

- **10 min flash-talks /20 min papers**
- Roundtables on a theme related to the keywords

Please send a proposal with a brief abstract, indicating the chosen format (150 words) to Prof Anne Fuchs and Marek Tamm by 21 March 2025.

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