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Reviews

# Toward a Socialist Approach to Crisis

- Reviews section -

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**Ståle Holgersen is a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at Stockholm University and a member of the ecosocialist Zetkin Collective. His new book makes essential contributions to socialist strategy in our crisis times and, more broadly, to theorizing crisis. He develops a fresh understanding of the ecological crisis as one expression of capitalist crisis tendencies and persuasively argues against the left shibboleth that capitalist crises are good for radicals. “Crises are the enemy,” writes Holgersen, in his characteristically clear, captivating voice. The book will advance thinking among socialists familiar with crisis debates and active in movement struggles. It will also be an excellent resource for people becoming politicized who are newer to radical ideas. I recommend the book both to your radical reading group, and to instructors teaching critical sociology classes at undergraduate and grad levels.**

It goes without saying that crisis is a contested term. Crisis for whom? Over what period? What's the nature of the threat? I analyze the political consequences of the term's varied usages in my book on crisis-talk ([In Crisis, On Crisis: Essays in Troubled Times, Wolsak & Wynn, June 2025](#)). What's remarkable is the fact that leading theorists of crisis in the social sciences and humanities are so fixated on the contested nature of the term that they effectively dismiss its use as a descriptor of events in the real world. For example, Janet Roitman's *Anti-Crisis* urges us to conceive of crisis as “a blind spot that enables the production of knowledge.” In the same vein, Andrew Simon Gilbert's *The Crisis Paradigm* argues that there is no such thing as a crisis in and of itself; rather, crisis is a way of framing the world that can be considered meaningful or not on the grounds of whether others adopt your way of applying the frame. A system-wide decline in profitability throwing millions out of work? Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza? Average global temperatures on track to rise four degrees by 2100? Leading theorists of crisis have little to say about *actually existing crises*. Either these theorists are not interested, or they've talked themselves out of the value of the very concept needed to grasp the extremity and urgency of the situation.

Holgersen's conceptual clarity about what a crisis is, how we know, and why it matters, is the dose of historical materialism needed in so much academic writing about crisis. For Holgersen, crises are events that arise suddenly, while being “embedded in underlying structures and processes,” that harm people or nature (Introduction). As such, crises “require some kind of awareness of and usually response to the situation.”

The thing is, Holgersen argues, that under capitalism, dominant responses to crises – economic, ecological, political, whatever – will always serve the logic of capital; that is, crisis resolutions will ultimately be geared toward protecting or restarting processes of profit accumulation. From one perspective, the crisis-prone character of capitalism makes the system look fragile. However, as Holgersen states pithily in Chapter 1, and develops brilliantly across the book: “*capitalism produces crises and crisis reproduces capitalism.*” Look to the historical record (the focus of Chapters 5 and 6): every capitalist crisis, in the final instance, has been resolved on capital's terms, sometimes through relatively minor changes within “regimes of accumulation,” and sometimes through more radical transformations. This might be more or less damaging for the working class, and more or less favourable for the ruling class, but ultimately, the hegemonic settlement resolving the crisis reproduces capitalism.

This may be obvious in the case of economic crisis, where creative destruction or public bailouts are common tactics of crisis resolution. It's less obvious in the case of ecological crisis, which Holgersen theorizes as a form of capitalist crisis (Chapter 2). The eco-crisis is different than a crisis of profitability because its resolution will require going beyond capitalism, smashing an economic order dependent on exponential growth. Within capitalism, however, the eco-crisis can only deepen because the available responses must be, by definition, consistent with the law of value. The etymological roots of “crisis” are in the ancient Greek verb *krino*, meaning to choose, judge, decide. For the Greeks, crisis was the point at which the gravely ill patient either began to recover or died. Holgersen writes: “it is

very difficult to stop global warming precisely because it is a capitalist crisis.” These are truly do-or-die times.

Understanding the capital-rescuing, human-destroying “class character of crisis” (Chapter 4) is an important corrective against the tendency among many radicals, myself included, to too often focus too narrowly on opportunities that crises create for democratic movements from below. We cheer what is revealed when private corporations beg for public dollars to keep them afloat, when speculative bubbles burst, when market mechanisms collapse. The crisis itself exposes that another world is possible! (I made just such an argument in [Spring Magazine](#) there-is-an-alternative at the height of the coronavirus pandemic.)

The problem, as Holgersen shows in cases including the coronavirus pandemic, the ecological crisis, and a string of economic crises from 1857 to 2008 (Chapter 5), is that “crises discipline. [...] The ruling class rules by creating crises in its image.” Exposing the hypocrisies and cruelty of the ruling classes in moments of crisis does not bring the ruling class to its knees. Consciously or not, left ideas and organizing often appear to conceive of crises as moments ripe for progressive advances. Holgersen argues that a socialist approach to crises in our time must engage more rigorously with “the general tendency throughout the history of capitalism [...] that crises do not tend to benefit workers and the poor.”

Yet the fact that crises are the enemy, not inherently moments of hope, and that we live in a moment of interlocking crises that “converge, interact and create a common and more serious situation than the individual parts could have done alone” (Chapter 6) does not lead Holgersen to despair. The book concludes with an excellent discussion of concrete socialist policies for our crisis times that go beyond the Keynesianism socialists typically end up backing when, unprepared, the next crisis erupts (Epilogue).

On the one hand, this discussion is invigorating for its clarity, boldness, and practicality. It articulates the basis for developing an eco-socialist transitional programme; promotes the creative destruction of fossil capital infrastructure (“there is no escaping the fact that power and oppression must be used to move the world in a socialist direction”); develops economic measures that prioritize use-value over exchange value; calls for acting within and against the state (Holgersen’s argument for mobilizing “beyond niche intellectual circles” to provide “concrete, place-specific answers” is especially welcome); for placing anti-racism and anti-fascism at the centre of the class struggle for ecological justice.

On the other hand, while appreciating the audacity and expansiveness of the programme, reading it can’t help but remind us of how distant left forces currently are from wielding such a programme in public spaces and political institutions. Where I write, from within the Canadian state, though the same is true in the U.S. and many other places, there is no party, coalition, or network with anything like the social weight necessary to advance Holgersen’s socialist policies for responding to crisis.

I’m inclined to resolve my concern by reminding myself of Holgersen’s research on how suddenly and drastically things can change during crises. I think of Bensaïd channeling Lenin: Leaps, leaps, leaps! With the liberal centre in freefall, there is a real possibility that masses of people, resisting the pull of the far-right, could rather swiftly find their way into eco-socialist movements, which could become mass forces, with parliamentary wings, fighting for hegemony, including state power. After reading Holgersen, however, this vision can feel like an evasion, a misguided retreat back into “the-worse-the-better” crisis-as-opportunity thinking.

Then again, it’s not as though Holgersen is against using the crisis to win. On the contrary, while the book urges us to see clearly the barriers crises throw in our path, and to recognize that left advances through crisis are the exception, ultimately, the book’s central purpose is to help activists falsify Holgersen’s theses. The book contributes to a socialist approach to crisis because “we must start winning against the crises of capitalism.”

Tuesday 11 March 2025

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