

Work and Vulnerability in Times of Polycrises

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Abstract: The article is an introduction to thematic issue and as such explores the intersections of work and vulnerability in times of polycrises. It examines how market transformations, migration, war, and the COVID-19 pandemic jointly reshape contemporary labor and workers' lived experiences. Drawing on the framework of social vulnerability, the issue links individual precarity to structural inequalities and welfare retrenchment, emphasizing the state's role in protection and inclusion through the European Pillar of Social Rights. The concept of a polycrisis highlights how multiple disruptions – pandemic, war, and economic instability – mutually reinforce each other, leading to a crisis of social reproduction. The collected articles analyse diverse cases: the professional redefinition and social boundaries of care-related occupations, marketization, precarious employment, and biographical experiences of inequality. Collectively, they show that crises have become enduring contexts structuring work, identity, and social belonging, offering a deeper sociological understanding of vulnerability in the contemporary world of labor.



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Introduction

The rationale behind this thematic issue focused on the interrelated subjects of work and vulnerability in times of overlapping social crises was to demonstrate the intricacies of the contemporary labor force, which is subject to mounting pressures from both market-related conditions (particularly the precarization of the labor market) and non-market-related (or indirectly market-related) social phenomena, including the evolving migration patterns, the intensification of armed conflicts (with particular emphasis on the full-scale war in Ukraine), and the onset of the most significant public health crisis in history: the COVID-19 pandemic. In the introduction to this issue, the socioeconomic context of the considerations presented in the collected articles is addressed briefly, namely the theme of a polycrisis, the challenges of social reproduction, and the importance of research on vulnerability to a polycrisis among workers.

The organizational context for this issue was the latest edition of the international conference ‘Social Boundaries of Work’ (Wrocław, 16–18 October 2024), organized under the topic “Critical Labor Studies at Times of Polycrisis”. An invitation to join the publication was extended to authors whose research was related to the conference topic, but which could also be linked to the theme of vulnerability to experiencing different types of crises (including chronic crisis of public services, profession-oriented issues, the precarization of labor (Kalleberg, 2009) or, more general, biographical crises experienced at the individual level). As editors, we hope that all of the articles in the collection will broaden the knowledge and understanding of challenges faced by contemporary workers, eventually adding significant value to the ongoing debates on the meaning of work and vulnerability.

The challenges of vulnerability

The discussion on the socioeconomic context of the reflection presented in this issue will start with the topic of social vulnerability. The term itself has a long history, particularly in studies concerning natural disasters such as floods, cyclones, earthquakes, and droughts. Early conceptualizations treated vulnerability as a technocratic problem resolvable through improved scientific forecasting, engineering preparedness, and the administrative management of hazards. This initial paradigm explicitly linked vulnerability to mere exposure to natural risks, hazards, and catastrophic events (Misztal, 2011: 15–16, 29).

A critical shift in the literature occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, moving toward understanding vulnerability as a function of social determinants (Misztal, 2011). This new perspective highlights that social factors place populations in vulnerable areas, mediate the impact of exposure, and significantly influence people's ability to respond and adapt. This much broader conceptualization defines vulnerability as a combination of inherent characteristics of individuals or groups, expressed through the determinants of concern for individuals, families, and communities. Consequently, this view provides an opportunity to analyze disasters within the context of everyday life and its associated risks.

While the older perspective focuses on enquiry relating to risk exposure, the new perspective reveals interest in invulnerability as a function of three components: exposure, sensitivity, and resilience (Misztal, 2011: 18) in response to risks. These risks can be encapsulated in the term 'social vulnerability', meaning vulnerability experienced by people and their social, economic, and political systems (Misztal, 2011: 20), aiming at employment issues in, for example, discriminatory or precarious ways. Here, the definition of vulnerability is enriched by exposure to stress conditions and the difficulty of coping with them, making it external and internal, and in both cases involving loss (Misztal, 2011). Furthermore, it is associated with social exclusion and poverty (Misztal, 2011: 23–25). Social exclusion is understood as a process of economic instability and social isolation together with the shrinking task of the welfare state, which should protect against unemployment, inequality, and the poverty of the global economy. The term 'social exclusion' is central when it comes to studies of deprivation, poverty, and vulnerability (Misztal, 2011: 26).

Thus, the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) becomes crucial; it is a set of documents containing principles and rights pertaining to building fairer Europe, labor markets, and welfare systems accepted by the European Union in 2017. The EPSR has principles which are split into three dimensions: equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion (Simões, Carmo, Alturas, 2025: 2). Protection and prevention concerning vulnerability and crisis necessitate adherence to foundational legislation that ensures the preservation of national law and social systems. The dimension of social protection and inclusion in the EPSR underscores the state's fundamental role in mitigating inequality and securing a decent standard of living for all citizens (Simões, Carmo, Alturas, 2025: 3). These elements make the concept of vulnerability bring the academic discussion into the area of social inequalities and their dynamics. The utility and complexity of the vulnerability concept lie in

its capacity to serve as a framework for analyzing disadvantaged groups. In particular, it emphasizes the significance of social inequalities by focusing on the distinct group and individual manifestations of injustice, including how these experiences are shaped by underlying structures, processes, and relational contexts (see Andrejuk, Nowicka, 2025). In turn, a polycrisis functions as an accelerant and amplifier, exposing, deepening, and compounding pre-existing structural vulnerabilities within systems and populations – phenomena that will be discussed in the following part of the introduction.

The socioeconomic context of polycrisis

In recent years, the term ‘polycrisis’ has become increasingly prevalent in the literature. The term’s original usage (Morin, Kern, 1999) pertained to the threat of a planetary catastrophe that would impact all of humanity. However, it was not until 2020 that the term gained widespread popularity. This was due to the intertwining and mutual exacerbation of crises in public health, the economy, politics, migration, and the environment. A proponent of the concept of a polycrisis, as espoused primarily within the domain of journalistic discourse, is Adam Tooze. He observed that in a polycrisis scenario, diverse shocks “interact in such a way that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of its parts” (Tooze, 2022). In the political discourse of the European Union, the concept of a polycrisis was introduced by Jean-Claude Juncker, who identified security, migration, and political issues (Brexit) as factors that could potentially lead to destabilisation in Europe.

In analyses of a polycrisis, two approaches can be identified, whose classification refers to the aforementioned distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of crises. On the one hand, there is the subjective dimension of a polycrisis and the fears associated with it, commonly expressed as a feeling of living in a turbulent world full of accumulating and uncontrollable problems. The polycrisis is characterized by its relevance to contemporary efforts to exercise control over the world, a concept that has been explored by Hartmut Rosa (2020). It is also relevant to the ongoing discussion on the social construction of global risk (Beck, 2002). At the level of individual experiences, it has been described in terms of “unsettling events” (Kilkey, Ryan, 2021; Pustułka et al., 2023).

The role of both the media and political decisions in the social construction of any social crises is of particular significance. Consequently, certain phenomena are designated as ‘serious crises’ requiring state intervention, while others, which are sometimes equally severe, are marginalized and downplayed as ‘non-crises’ and thus not requiring urgent intervention (Strolovitch, 2023). Similarly, the discourse underscores the objective dimensions of the polycrisis, its genesis being attributed to the characteristics inherent in the prevailing social and economic order. This, in turn, precipitates a sudden and ungovernable escalation and the materialization of ‘systemic risk’.

The most prevalent crises worldwide since 2020 encompass not solely the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, the energy crisis, and the crisis related to the rising cost of living. The latter two crises are, at least in part, a consequence and a contributing

factor to the first two crises. Furthermore, the ongoing struggles of reforming public services, which have been in progress for more than two decades in Poland, have not only failed to enhance the quality of services, but have also contributed to a deterioration of working conditions (Kozek, 2011). The combination of macro crises (pandemic, war, inflation) has therefore ‘overlapped’ with this chronic crisis, which can be associated with the crisis of reproduction (Federici, 2021; Mezzadri, 2022). At the individual level, a polycrisis can be discussed in terms described by biographical sociology using the concept of a “biographical trajectory of suffering”. This is expressed in the systematic loss of control over one’s own life, caused by the accumulation of circumstances over which the individual has a sense of limited influence (Schütze, Riemann, 2012).

The crisis of social reproduction – common ground for deliberation on work and vulnerability at times of a polycrisis

The core issue that unifies the discourse on the polycrisis, work, and vulnerability is that of the mechanisms of social reproduction. The latter is confronted with a predicament arising from the convergence of persistent challenges in the public service sector and the increasing precariousness of the labor market, compounded by sudden exogenous shocks that impact the socioeconomic landscape. It is evident that workers across diverse sectors and professions encounter various challenges in their day-to-day activities. These difficulties are further exacerbated when the external conditions that govern their operations undergo significant alterations, often as a consequence of a pandemic or war.

The mechanisms by which a polycrisis becomes a crisis of social reproduction include the precarization of work (the expansion of employment that is precarious, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of employees), the commodification of care and personal services (increasing inequalities in access to them), and the biopolitical management by the state of the growing ‘surplus population’. The polycrisis, understood as a crisis of social reproduction, can also be interpreted using the category of ‘chronicity’ as defined by Henrik Vigh (2008). From the perspective of groups that are permanently marginalized and socially excluded, the crisis should be examined as a context rather than an event, a rule rather than an exception, and a norm rather than a temporary deviation from it.

Conclusion

The combination of polycrisis, its disruptive impact on mechanisms of social reproduction, and the consequent importance of social vulnerability all construct the socioeconomic context of considerations comprising this issue. We have collated articles that seek to address the question of the experiences of employees in various industries, whilst also addressing the topic of describing phenomena that influence the shape of these experiences in an era of growing socioeconomic crises. In their article, Wiktor Sokół and Bartosz Mika discuss the changes in the physiotherapy profession in the context of institutionalization and legislative changes aimed at redefining the social boundaries of the

profession. In contrast, Justyna Zielińska explores the experiences of psychotherapists and the dimensions of work quality in an industry subject to the pressures of marketization and privatization. The issue concludes with an article by Stefan Bieńkowski, who addresses the subject of tensions related to the performance of work under specific conditions, with particular emphasis on the form of the contract. In this article, Bieńkowski analyzes the impact of the form of the employment relationship on the issue of precariousness and motivation to work among employees¹.

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1 Not included into this issue, but as a continuation of our reflection in next editions of "Qualitative Sociology Review", more articles in this area will be published. Ksawery Olczyk's text, which examines the experiences of young precarious workers in the catering industry, can be placed in a similar field. The author also addresses the ambivalence of the precarious work experience. Kamila Albin, the author of another article, examines the biographical experiences of women with disabilities who combine paid work with activism. And article of Katarzyna Waniek, who focuses on the significance of macro-crises (namely the pandemic and the war in Ukraine) for the ways in which people narrate the stories of their lives in autobiographical narrative interviews.

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Cytowanie

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Praca i wulnerabilność w czasach polikryzysu

Streszczenie: Tekst jest wprowadzeniem do numeru tematycznego skoncentrowanego na powiązaniach między pracą a wulnerabilnością w czasach polikryzysu. Analizuje, w jaki sposób przemiany rynkowe, migracja, wojna i pandemia COVID-19 przekształcają współczesny rynek pracy i wpływają na doświadczenia życiowe pracowników. Opierając się na koncepcji społecznej wulnerabilności, numer łączy namysł nad mechanizmami prekaryzacji z kwestią nierówności i wątkiem świadczeń socjalnych, podkreślając rolę państwa w zakresie ochrony i integracji społecznej (m.in. poprzez wprowadzenie *European Pillar of Social Rights* – EPSR). Koncepcja polikryzysu wskazuje, w jaki sposób liczne społeczne załamania – pandemia, wojna i kłopoty gospodarcze (inflacja) – wzajemnie się wzmacniają, prowadząc do kluczowego kryzysu reprodukcji społecznej. Zebrane w numerze artykuły wskazują, że kondycja polikryzysowa stała się trwałym kontekstem kształtującym pracę, tożsamość i przynależność społeczną we współczesnym świecie.

Słowa kluczowe: praca, wulnerabilność, polikryzys, reprodukcja społeczna