The Next Crisis

What We Think about the Future

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VERSO
London • New York

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1

Crisis

Welcome to the age of the polycrisis.

World Economic Forum, 2023[1]

It's not unusual to feel that we are living through a crisis, a time of intense difficulty or great danger. But this sentiment is a luxury. Only those of us who do not live by navigating a seemingly perpetual stream of daily adversities have the luxury of entertaining the idea of the wider crisis. To be able to afford the time to worry about what the next crisis might be is almost entirely an indulgence of those who, most of the time, are free from both great danger and substantial difficulty.

Consider how often the word *crisis* now appears in English-language publications. It was uncommon throughout the nineteenth century and up to the early 1930s, but in the mid-1930s its use began to surge (Figure 1.1). That surge appeared to abate in the late 1940s, but this lull was short-lived. Use of the term accelerated throughout the 1960s, and the word has become more and more common ever since. People may shout 'fire' more often, but it does not necessarily mean there are more fires than before. In the case of *crisis*, it might mean that a great number of us have more time to worry.

When considering Figure 1.1, the first thing to note is that while we clearly have mentioned crisis more often in recent times, this is not an indication that we have entered an age of cascading crises. Perhaps, counter-intuitively, we spoke of crisis, and often by

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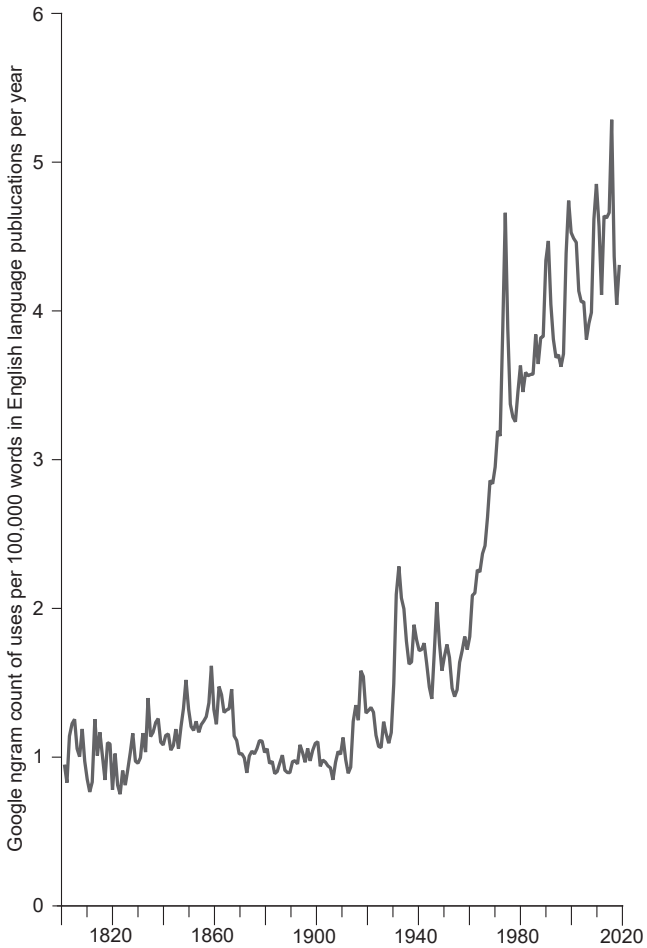
Figure 1.1: Frequency of the use of the term 'crisis' in the English language, 1800–2019



Source: Google Ngram – note that the last data point is 2019, so when Google update their viewer, mentions of the word 'crisis' will be seen to have risen again, because of the coronavirus pandemic which began then.

implication the next crisis, precisely because we were experiencing an increased capacity to sit back and think about the future. The period before the 1960s was one of almost constant wars, epidemics and pandemics occurring worldwide. Before the 1960s, there was so much infectious disease, so many famines and such frequent bad harvests, that we could have been forgiven for continually crying out, 'Crisis!' Yet we were restrained in our language.

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The second fact worth noting from Figure 1.1 is that since the late 1960s there has been no let-up in our collective sense of crisis, at least not based on the frequency of use of that word in all the printed media surveyed. The word *crisis* was used twice as often in 1960, and four times as often since 1980, as it was in 1900.

So, was the rising frequency of the appearance of the word *crisis* just an increase in hyperbole, a tendency towards exaggeration? Did a new trend begin, led by some writers of the 1960s trying to gain readers' attention? Were more books being written by people who had the luxury to speculate on wider issues? There were more writers by then, and more people were able to read and to buy books than ever before. Perhaps it was just this social trend which stoked up the rhetoric? My point here is that, imagined or real, we have been living in an age of crisis for some time.[2]

Returning to the present, what are the major crises of our time and what do people, worldwide, concern their thoughts with? One way to try to answer this question is not to concentrate on what is written – since what writers are always at least partly motivated by is gaining attention. Instead, we can concentrate on what people themselves say most concerns them, and then look into each of those issues. You may be wondering why this matters, however. Why are other people's opinions of interest?

Why should anyone care what the rest of the world's population thinks, especially when they don't think the same way we do? I don't underestimate how difficult it is going to be to look at things this way – to try to take seriously distant others' collective worries. It is easier to dismiss the rest of the world than to admit that you might have a privileged view. You might question the surveys I draw on in this book. You might think that the masses are being led astray by pollsters and their weasel words. But before you decide that others' views on what matters most are less valid than your own, are you not curious to know more about them?

This book was originally going to be titled 'The Next Crisis: How We Think About the Future, and What We Get Wrong'. But my very thoughtful editor deleted the last five words and changed

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the 'how' to 'what'. The fourteen-word version was, admittedly, a little verbose. But I suspect he also worried that people are not that interested in hearing that they – we, all of us – might often be wrong. Of course, we *are* all wrong, often, about many things. But we do not necessarily want to pay to be told about it.

I have studied and written about crises before, but discretely, usually one at a time. In 1995, I published *A New Social Atlas of Britain*, about the various travails of my home country. Five years later, I wrote a book with my colleagues, *Inequalities in Life and Death: What If Britain Were More Equal?* It concerned the crisis of inequality, poverty, and unemployment, and how they and much else impacted on health. Not having work, not being needed, could be deadly too. Again, in 2005, I wrote with colleagues *The Great Divide: An Analysis of Housing Inequality*. By 2010, I thought I might have learned enough to make some more general suggestions, and I called the resulting book *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists*. That book was updated in 2015, and retitled *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists*. Crises can deepen and worsen. In 2020, I wrote a book with the longest title I have ever used: *Slowdown: The End of the Great Acceleration – and Why It's Good for the Planet, the Economy, and Our Lives*. I list these publications so you have a sense of my biases.

With help from many others, I wrote more books in between those listed above, as well as some academic papers, and an increasing number of commentaries written more for general readers than my university colleagues. I discovered that other academics are far more likely to read and debate their colleagues' ideas if they appear in a popular book. I learnt from being critiqued, from listening, and from new data. With colleagues, I wrote about other countries, mapped the continent of Europe, produced a world atlas, and became immersed in issues of health and demography, politics and voting, cartography and censuses.

I am a human geographer. We geographers are permitted to travel far and wide in our studies, to range across subjects and disciplinary approaches. A dozen years ago I moved back to the

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city where I spent my childhood and joined a large School of Geography and the Environment. I mixed with a great many climate change scientists in my new role, and began to understand much more about what most preoccupied them. This contributed to my decision that perhaps I could now – as much as ever – try to write something useful about what we often worry about most, when we are not just worrying about ourselves. I did this because I had begun to notice just how varied different people's greatest concerns were.

In my new academic home, in the university within Oxford (England), what clearly mattered most was climate change. Almost everything else seemed to be less important – after all, the folk I was working with were life's winners – climate change was the greatest threat to them. They had managed to secure a job in an elite institution and were able to afford a home nearby. There were no vacant shops in Oxford when I returned. The economy was booming. There was more work than there were people to work. During term time, the streets were full of beautiful people, often in ballgowns or dinner jackets. Having just arrived from Sheffield, I felt a little like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* when she tells her dog, 'Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.'

But it is important *not* to look at the very particular landscape around oneself and believe it is at all representative of the world. There is variability in the quality of information available across the globe, as well as in peoples' lives and fears. The University of Oxford has over one hundred separate libraries. As a boy growing up in the city, I was not allowed to use any of them; today, increasing numbers of Oxford students do not use them either, because most of what is in them that is of most use is also now available to almost everyone, anywhere, via the web. There are firewalls and paywalls, but none are as effective as the old stone walls used to be.

Different people receive different information depending on who they are and where they are placed. You will doubtless know that online advertisements target specific groups of people. But the older adverts in newspapers and on the sides of buildings were

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also targeted, if more crudely. People living and growing up in different counties always receive differing information, which also varies depending on their station in life, although in more equitable countries everyone is a little more likely to be told the same story.[3] So what is the aggregate story? What do most people fear the most, and why? And are they right or wrong? That is what I plan to try to answer here.

This book is structured in a simple way, but the outcome is counter-intuitive. Instead of ordering our fears by what we are *told* to worry about most, I have ordered them by what we *actually* worry about most. You might ask, as you ponder whether to read on: What do we learn as a result of this reordering? What can we do differently as a result of seeing the world in this way? I believe that considering the views of others can help reorder our own priorities. It could help make them fairer and more universal. When we realise we are not alone in our fears, they can seem more surmountable. And it points us towards what could indeed be the next crisis on a far surer footing than relying on our individual imaginations and our reading of a few opinion formers who have often been caught up in a group-thinking mind game.

Fearmongering

What are the biggest fears we have about the future? It is not a trivial question to try to answer. What are our greatest collective nightmares, and what dreams do we harbour about averting the worst of the next crisis?

The most fortunate of us, those who we might imagine have the most to lose, are often those who fear the unknowability of tomorrow more than the struggles of today.

Unsurprisingly, people in similar situations tend to share the same fears, which leads to a collective anxiety – visions of decline, or even despair – that can become powerful and sometimes overpowering. Those with the most resources of all usually have very different fears from the rest of us. Apart from anything else, they

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are often afraid of *us*. What if we wanted more of a slice of what they have?

Those with the least resources, who make up the large majority of humanity, almost always have very different fears than people who are comparatively or somewhat affluent. So, in truth, it is not just the worries of the elite that differ from our more mundane concerns. We who can afford to buy books are affluent too, even if we claim we are not. What of the people who have much less money than we might assume is normal? One person's impending crisis may already be the daily reality of countless others around the world.

So many different fears are possible, in an age when we are beginning to appreciate the finite resources of the world. One fear might be that those who already have the largest proportion of these resources will come after the rest of what we have collectively – the rare metals, the fossil fuels, the water in the aqueducts, our homes, our state health and education services – and they will try to privatise everything that is not already in their hands. Or they might behave in a way that will threaten us and our ability to thrive in an uncertain future. There are plenty of reasons to fear that the rich are out to get us. Ironically, these are fears mostly held by people only slightly less rich, who often see themselves as deprived in comparison: the kinds of people who gave us phrases such as 'the 99 per cent' and 'inequality and the 1 per cent'.[4]

In addition, while we may be good at diagnosing many of the maladies that afflict us, we are not so good at administering potential cures. We tend to seek short-term solutions: we try to be kind to the poor, but not to end poverty. We try to be aware of inequality and to curtail its worst effects, but not to ask what it is that we would have to do to lower it forever. We try to manage crises; but by doing so, we often perpetuate them. We frequently appear to have lost the ability to think about prevention, especially regarding war and greed. Meanwhile, the cures we prescribe appear to be becoming less and less effective.

It may seem that we are heading towards an age of compound crises: what might be called a polycrisis. And within this turbulence

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it becomes increasingly difficult to tell the difference between the flashing red rights, the alarm bells, the sirens, and that which is concerning but not immediately important. With so many crises preoccupying us, which emergency should the first responders attend next? To what should we be applying our energy?

In this book I cannot pretend to foretell the future, but I have some interesting data to show you, and here it is considered in ways I don't think have been prioritised enough before; and I share stories told by others that might help us get to the heart of this polycrisis. I'm inviting you to spend some time looking closely at what people around the world are most concerned about, rather than dismissing their fears as unfounded or misguided. Instead, I'm suggesting that you reassess your own assumptions, and question what they are based on. Taking seriously what we collectively think about our human future is one way to better understand the global present.

Risk management

How does one discover what people are thinking about? It's usually done by using prompts. We are so often told that certain things are a crisis – the climate crisis, the housing crisis, the financial crisis. However, using the word *crisis* in a survey question invariably steers people towards a particular answer and towards issues that others have already decided are crises.

In September 2022, the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Perception Survey asked over 1,200 experts across academia, business, government, the international community, and civil society what they considered to be the greatest potential crises of the coming year. The experts ranked the following as 'the top risks for 2023':

- the energy supply crisis;
- the cost-of-living crisis (rising inflation);
- the food supply crisis;
- cyberattacks on critical infrastructure.[5]

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Looking back at 2023, energy was indeed very expensive and almost all other prices rose too, with food in particular costing more. But there was no great cyberattack to speak of that brought down critical infrastructure. Ironically, it was a bug in software designed to prevent cyberattack which caused the most harm to computers worldwide in 2024.[6] Absent from the list above were wars: unforeseen, ongoing, and long foreseen as likely, in the case of the Middle East. Unforeseen was the growing international outrage over the starvation of the people of Gaza, and the denial of their access to water. This was exacerbated by the apparent inability of the US to preclude, through better longer-term diplomacy and action, the ongoing killing of many tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza, many thousands in Lebanon, and the deaths of over a thousand people in Israel. The failure of international diplomacy in the continuing conflict in Ukraine has been staggering; as have the potential results of attacks within Russia, which were also unexpected. Other conflicts, often assumed to have no wider implications, were almost totally ignored, including those in Ethiopia, Sudan, Yemen, and across the Sahel.

We cannot know what is happening in the world, and what to worry about, simply by watching the news. Different news channels tell different stories. Most stories – even those concerning events that have led to many deaths and enormous suffering – never even make it onto the news agenda. Broadcasters' attention, and ours, moves quickly from item to item. Overall, the media we absorb steers our thinking.

One constant is that what we think is most likely to be the next crisis is typically what we are worrying about at the time we are asked. Our fears about future crises are usually extrapolations from what we are currently most concerned about. *Who* is asking and *how* they ask both have a great influence on the answers we give.

Looking again at the result of the World Economic Forum Global Risks Perception survey described above, it is important to note that the respondents were a very particular cohort. Where crisis interferes with the economy, it is often called 'risk',

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and in recent decades a whole risk-management industry has evolved, with a hierarchy of risk officers, directors, and even company vice-presidents, all of whom who have *risk* as part of their remit.

To judge from their professional online community group, the job of chief risk officers is to seek 'ways in which organizations can be better prepared to anticipate, manage and rebound faster from global shocks and their spillover effects, minimizing the impact of the next potential global shocks on markets and livelihoods'.[7] A crisis, especially the *next* crisis, is also an opportunity for them. Professional crisis managers have different priorities to most people. Their key concern is maximising the outcomes for their organisation, primarily their employers and shareholders, while minimising the threats to their business and themselves personally.

For those who responded to the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Perception Survey, the smooth operation of international markets was a top priority, and they apparently believe that most people's livelihoods and well-being depend on these markets. These experts are obliged to see market capitalism as the ultimate good in order to secure and keep their employment. But their blinkers need not limit our thinking.

Instead, let's look at a different survey, aimed at a different audience of respondents – aimed at you, and people like you, and many people very unlike you too. Because none of us are that similar to most people on this very unequal planet.

Which three of these alphabetically listed topics do you find most worrying?

Access to credit; climate change; coronavirus (COVID-19); crime and violence; education; financial/political corruption; health care; immigration control; inflation; maintaining social programmes; military conflict between nations; moral decline; poverty and social inequality; rise of extremism; taxes; terrorism; threats against the environment; unemployment.

Is your greatest worry a personal one? Or a general worry about what might affect just your family or those close to you? Is it a worry for the wider society you live in? Or for the whole world?

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Once you've picked one, you may find the next choice is easier. What is your second greatest worry? What was the one you were dithering about possibly putting first? If you thought about it for long, it is probably one that should also be in your top three. Now all you have to do is pick a third and final one.

Figure 1.2 (shown a few pages ahead so as not to bias your answers) provides a snapshot of what most worried people around the world over the period from July 2022 to July 2024 (the average number of times people placed any one concern in their top three). It is ordered by the ranking in January of 2023 to give you an idea of how our concerns slowly change over time.

When we ask these questions has a great effect. Coronavirus was the tenth most concerning crisis in January 2023, but as you can see from the chart in Figure 1.2, it would rank lower in importance over this time period as a whole. It is not just timing that matters. You might be wondering about the effect of wording and how the question is framed. Perhaps more people might have put climate change among their top three concerns had the question ended 'for humanity as a whole', rather than 'for your country'. Perhaps if the word 'concerning', or 'frightening', had been used instead of 'worrying', the ordering might have been a little different too. It would have been, but probably not by much.

In the chapters that follow I'll try to persuade or at least argue with you that we are right to be worried about the future, and that we should learn to take more seriously the things that most other people around the world are most worried about, and I will try to demonstrate that it is possible to both enumerate and understand those wider concerns. I'll also offer reasons to worry less about some crises and more about others. In addition, I want to convince you that it would be better for us all if more of us believed that almost all these crises can diminish in the near future – in just a few human lifetimes. That so many of us rank the same few things so highly is a boon, not a problem. We come slowly to concentrate collectively on what matters most – too slowly for the liking of many, and not everyone will be in

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agreement on these priorities. But we get our concerns on the agenda collectively, and the only way we have ever solved crises in the past has been collectively.

Elite projection

What some people think of as being the most important issues in the future of the world are often of greatest concern to only a small minority of us. But if those people are affluent and powerful, the issues they care about are the ones that come to be called *the* crisis of the moment, and thus the subject of many high-profile books, news stories, and TV documentaries. A list of these could include cyberattacks, artificial intelligence, oil price hikes, and events preventing the shipment of goods; or, if you have an active imagination, artificial intelligence creating cyber-attacks and digital viruses that infect our online life and take control – from diverting goods shipments to altering our desires and fears themselves. In contrast, the things that actually concern the majority of people worldwide are often dismissed as local issues of lesser importance, or even as simply how the world is. But if we came to see crises more clearly and how unevenly their impacts fall on people around the world, it might not have to be that way.

The concerns of the majority of people worldwide really are the most pressing issues we face, both now and in the near future. The risk-management professionals and other such experts do not know it all; they mostly work all too clearly in the interests of those whose views they reflect. They appear to come to incorporate those views in their own worldview, which they then impose upon the rest of us. This is what the public-transit (think buses) consultant Jarrett Walker calls 'elite projection'.[8]

Elite projection has profound consequences when it results in elites making decisions for the rest of the world, and it can be blamed for largely determining the fate of those with limited access to resources. But elite projection covers a wide spectrum, from the far-right zealotry of a few billionaire narcissists (the kind

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who dislike people who use buses), to well-meaning environmentalists working for international bodies with democratic funding, and of course university professors who write books such as this. Anyone can pick and choose which members of the elite to listen to, if any. I prefer those people who argue that, in a truly civilised society, the rich use public transport.[9] We all have our favoured sources, and we all present them as being the most reasonable.

The key report on how the world is really faring, especially for most poorer people, is the United Nations' (annual) Human Development Report. Achim Steiner, administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, who presented the Report for 2022, wrote:

> Climate and ecological disasters threaten the world daily. Layers of uncertainty are stacking up and interacting to unsettle our lives in unprecedented ways. People have faced diseases, wars and environmental disruptions before. But the confluence of destabilizing planetary pressures with growing inequalities, sweeping societal transformations to ease those pressures and widespread polarization present new, complex, interacting sources of uncertainty for the world and everyone in it. People around the world are now telling us that they feel ever more insecure. Is it any wonder, then, that many nations are creaking under the strain of polarization, political extremism and demagoguery—all supercharged by social media, artificial intelligence and other powerful technologies?[10]

It is worth questioning whether people around the world actually *are* telling us that they now feel ever more insecure. If you look at the measures of anxiety levels, that is not necessarily what you see. As one global polling company put it at the end of 2023: 'Unlike the previous few years, 2023 has been slightly less "unprecedented": there have been no pandemic restrictions, no record-breaking heatwaves, no energy supply shocks.'[11] So, belatedly (having prevented you from being influenced by the results by not showing them until now), here is Figure 1.2.

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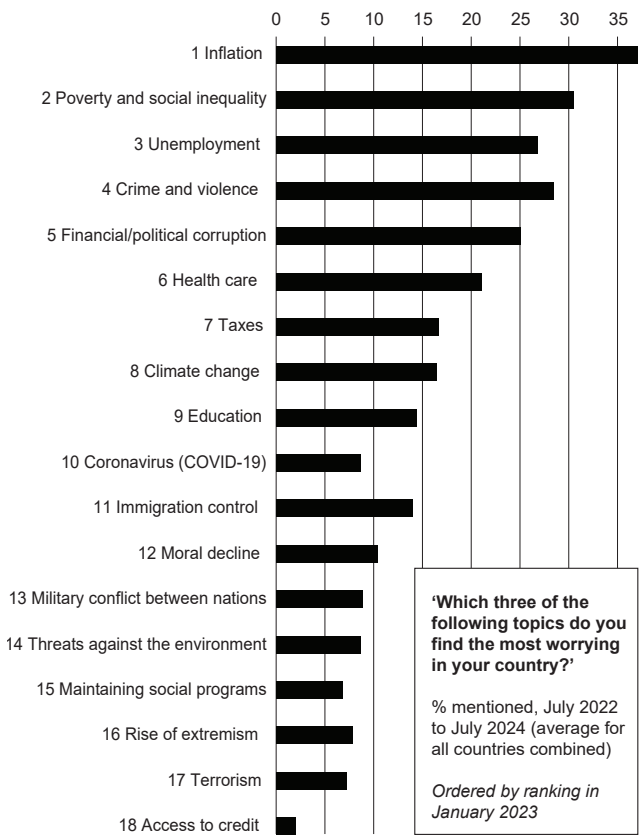
Figure 1.2: What the rest of the world is most concerned about, 2022–24



Source: What Worries the World, Ipsos, surveys of January and July in this time period, averaged.

Figure 1.2 shows what most people are currently anxious about. Over the relevant period, July 2022 to July 2024, anxieties shifted for many people. In July 2022, 14 per cent of people listed COVID-19 (coronavirus) as being among their top three concerns; by July 2024 that was just 4 per cent, a fall of ten percentage points. Of course, other fears were rising. Concerns about health in general (as opposed to COVID-19/coronavirus) rose by four percentage points, from being a top-three priority for 19 per cent in July 2022, to 23 per cent in July 2024. Immigration-control worries rose by a fraction more, from 12 per cent to

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17 per cent. We are a very adaptable species when it comes to anxiety.

Could a rising sense of anxiety actually disguise a rarely acknowledged equilibrium? Things overall may not be getting any better, but nor are they getting much worse. Much is concerning, sometimes increasingly concerning; but for most people in the world, life expectancy is rising, infant mortality is falling, and hunger is abating by comparison with the experience of their parents' generation. Meanwhile, shelter, education, and health care are improving; and more people can read and write, and access information, than ever before in our history as a species – by a long chalk.[12]

We have never before been as connected as we are now. We can partly see this in our converging fears over the future, our relatively cohesive thinking on crises. Some newspaper columnists noted that, as the global population passed the eight-billion mark, our fears, particularly regarding human proliferation, were coalescing. We have only reached such huge numbers in very recent years, in just a matter of two or three generations. So much change came so quickly in our parents' and grandparents' lives that it is hardly surprising that we are still catching up on what it might mean.

Now that the world's human population growth is slowing almost as quickly as it was previously rising, this brings its own worries. How will we maintain our health services? How many immigrants will arrive? Will they be enough? In rich countries, the slowdown of population growth is feeding into a growing understanding that we will have to get better at sharing what we have with the rest of the world, which comprises far more people than in our parents' and grandparents' time. The geographical centre of the human world has shifted (south and eastwards), and it still has further to move. We now have a good idea of how our numbers are set to slow down in the very near future, and populations in many different places – almost everywhere worldwide – are now set to fall in the course of this century.

It is important that we get our futures in order: that we realise that much of what most concerns the rich, the elites of the West,

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are not the first priorities of the rest of the world. We must listen more and identify the data that will help bring these alternative perspectives into the light, so that we can all collectively make better decisions about what to do next. Perhaps the first thing to do is to return to that original list of eighteen crises above, the ones numbered in Figure 1.2, and group them in a way that actually reflects the views of the world as a whole, and then work out our route from there. This book aims not to stop you thinking about the future as concerning, but instead to consider how to turn crises into shared challenges – even opportunities. Because too much fear and despair can result in apathy and fatalism.

What worries?

Many high-profile pundits' preoccupations about the future are not covered in detail or at all here, because those subjects simply do not feature in most people's greatest concerns and are unlikely to do so any time soon. A space race and worries over whether it will be governed by the anarchy of the commons, or the collusion of China and the US in establishing their leaders' rule-based duopoly of power over other planets, are not at the forefront of anyone's thoughts, other than a few very atypical men. Similarly, the concerns that far-right pundits keep trying to force up the agenda are largely ignored in this book because they are not the overriding concerns of any significant majority of people. These include issues such as multiculturalism, liberal universities, and political correctness. Instead, this book focuses on what most people worry about when they think about the future. Current concerns are all, in fact, concerns about the future. Unless the aim is to try to distract, we have enough to worry about in the world without inventing new fears.

The chapters that follow are organised thematically by the issues identified in 'What Worries the World', a large, ongoing global survey of people's greatest concerns and the source of Figure 1.2.[13] The polling organisation, Ipsos, began its monthly survey in 2011, and by 2022 over 30,000 adults were being

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interviewed each month. The survey includes India but not China. A very similar survey has been taken in China every two years since 2006 by the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and its findings (up to 2021) have been used here to inform the order of the content that follows, and the emphasis given to each subject. These series of polls are combined in Figure 1.2 to ensure that the issues covered are each given a weight that does not reflect only one particular recent month and year.[14] In the pages that follow, we will consider which issues are slowly rising and falling in importance, and why. Our concerns change, and I would suggest that perhaps it is these changes that can offer us the most useful hints about what is likely to be the largest crisis in the coming years.

The concerns highlighted are those of the majority of people surveyed worldwide and are highly influenced by views from India and China, the world's two most populous nations. It should be noted, however, that a middle-income, middle-class bias persists because not all of the poorest countries of the world are included in the Ipsos surveys used to structure this book, although South Africa, Malaysia, and Brazil are included, and the coverage is as widespread as it is currently possible to be. It is also significant that the poorest people in the countries covered by the surveys are much less likely to have taken part (including in the survey by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences).

Many of the global concerns covered in the following pages are themes that our recent ancestors had little reason to worry about, or even to be aware of. The newest in terms of our awareness include climate change and biodiversity loss. Others are ancient, such as the questions of who it's OK to exploit, who is currently being most exploited, who you should defend, and what happens when exploitation is normalised. Many remedies are old; but some are very new and only just emerging.

Each chapter that follows focuses on a different current crisis. Although these are sometimes described as worries or preoccupations, to those suffering from them most, they are all crises. Chapters are arranged according to what people around the

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world were most worried about from July 2022 through to July 2024. This was when we were emerging from the worst of the pandemic. What preoccupies us personally, at any one time, tends to fade as we age, and occasionally fades very quickly. The greatest fears caused by the emergence of COVID-19 are now mostly memories, but a general concern about our health remains. At the same time, we were beginning to worry more about inflation, about a new war in Ukraine, and then a much deadlier war on Gaza and in that wider region.

Although certain events may feel unique and some dominate temporarily, the average ranking of issues in this twenty-four-month period is very close to that of similar surveys for the longer time period of 2017 to 2022. I have chosen the year 2017 as a start date because by then most climate scepticism had abated, and so climate issues were not underrepresented as they might have been if surveys from a longer time period were used. Nevertheless, as is revealed by the order of the chapters in this book, which reflects what these surveys show, when it comes to the things that concern us most, climate is far from the top of our collective current and likely immediate future fears.

The organising principle here is thematic because the greatest misconception in what we think about the future is about the relative importance of each of these issues. Furthermore, the aggregate concerns of most people – those with the luxury of having wider concerns beyond simply food and shelter – produce an order that we should take seriously. This ranking forces us to consider our priorities in relation to what is currently affecting people badly and what is most likely to continue harming more people, unless these issues are better addressed.

Many of these top concerns have tended to be seen as ones of only local importance: as second-order issues that each country's government should attempt to address internally; or they are seen as inevitable, as an everyday reality rather than a crisis. But they are in fact far nearer to universal worries than others often suggested, to such an extent that we should recognise them as key global issues.

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The thematic arrangement of the material also opens up a space to discuss the way that demography affects attitudes: how our changing numbers and projected population changes are likely to affect each of our current more serious concerns. Half a century ago, well over a third of all people on the planet were children, and now they comprise less than a quarter. Soon fewer than a billion people will be older than me, born in 1968, and seven in eight will be younger, despite the great slowdown in births. A great baby boom – almost certainly the final great baby boom – lies just beneath my cohort.

Each chapter that follows tells the story of who says a particular issue matters the most and, tellingly, why many better-off people are oblivious to it. This encourages us to think about what people do *not* think about, as much as what they do. For example, some issues are little addressed (or even little discussed) because most of the political class believes that other issues are more significant.

The pages that follow suggest that many of those in power around the world today are hampered by a highly skewed set of views about which issues are most important, and perspectives that are increasingly partisan and unimaginative. Perhaps the findings revealed here can help in a small way to counter the inaccurate reports and distorted attitudes on poverty, war, crime, climate change, and inflation that are driving the current consensus among those whose views carry the most weight.

If you do not think we are currently on the wrong track, then why do the Ipsos surveys indicate that nearly two-thirds of the world's people think we are heading in the wrong direction? What is the connection between sharing resources, uncertainty, and work? Why is it the young and wealthy who are most concerned about climate change? Why has the population of China been most worried about health care for many years, despite having one of the best health-improvement records of any large country?

Everything can appear to be, and is, connected. The subjects of every chapter in this book are all far from unrelated, even if they may appear to be separate issues. The cost-of-living crisis is

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connected to our ability (and inability) to share the planet with each other and other species. This in turn influences the extent of crime and war, the cost and difficulty of affording a home, issues of health care and the adaptations we must make to being an ageing society, and wider concerns over both education and politics. So, too, we can see the intimate connections between concerns about climate crisis, future access to food and water, energy, travel, human effects on biodiversity and how we in turn might be affected by that.

Perhaps surprisingly, when you look at them together, most of our greatest concerns are day-to-day ones. In the spring of 2022, the primary concern in the world was inflation, with 32 per cent of people in Ipsos's 'What Worries the World' (as the pool of data is sometimes called) suggesting it was the biggest worry facing them and their country. By the summer of 2023, inflation and the rising cost of living was the highest concern of 27 per cent of all people surveyed, but was falling slightly as other worries began to rise.[15] By then it had been the top global concern for seventeen months running, peaking in June 2023, when it appeared in the top three concerns of 40 per cent of all people worldwide. Whether that will be the highest peak it reaches in our lifetimes, we do not know. Runaway prices caused by global hyperinflation could become the next crisis if certain goods and resources are soon much scarcer. By June 2024, inflation was up again as a great global concern, included in 33 per cent of people's top three, and pessimism was again on the rise in most countries.[16]

The second-largest issue in the spring of 2022, at just a single percentage point lower, was poverty and social inequality, a key concern of 31 per cent of people worldwide. It was at exactly the same level of concern in the summer of 2023, and had dropped by only two percentage points, to 29 per cent, by June 2024. The next three significant concerns, according to people around the world averaged over a few years, were not far behind: unemployment (29 per cent, dropping to 27 per cent by 2023, where it remained in 2024); crime and violence (25 per cent, rising to 30 per cent by 2023 and staying there in 2024); and financial and political

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corruption (24 per cent, up to 27 per cent in 2023 and down to 25 per cent in 2024).[17] The sequence of Chapters 3–5, as you can see from the percentages given in parentheses, is therefore in some ways a little arbitrary. Each of these three sets of issues are of near equal importance when averaged over time. However, as we shall see, their importance across space is highly variable.

Inflation is a worry, both regarding prices now and what will happen if they continue to rise higher than wages; it is a concern about something that has recently changed and about a change to come. Concerns about poverty and inequality also reflect disquiet about what the world is becoming, as much as what it is. The idea of unfairness increasing is far more abhorrent to us than the inequality that we have become used to.

We worry about what our children will inherit and what chances they will have as much as we worry about ourselves, and much more than we worry about ourselves in very old age. Fear over unemployment is mostly about what might happen, rather than what is happening now: most people who worry about unemployment are employed. Similarly, the majority of people do *not* often personally experience crime or violence in any one year, but they worry about what might happen to them in the future. Concerns about financial and political corruption are arguably as much about the future and what might happen as about the present. If our politicians became less corrupt, we think, our future would be more certain and less precarious.

In that same 2022 survey, a large majority of people worldwide (63 per cent) thought that the country they lived in was headed in the wrong direction in terms of the issues that most concerned them. By 2023 that majority had risen to 64 per cent, a change that was probably not statistically significant; neither was the fall to 62 per cent by early 2024. What really matters, however, is not the fluctuation, but how high those numbers are. In the UK, the proportion rose to 65 per cent in early 2024, and to 72 per cent by July 2024. This was despite people in the UK being offered a general election that month so that in theory they would get to choose the direction!

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Worldwide, by April 2022, the coronavirus pandemic had dropped out of the top five greatest global concerns for the second month running (to the eighth greatest, with 18 per cent of all those surveyed putting it in their top three worries). By June 2024 only 4 per cent of people worldwide put the pandemic in their top three concerns. There were other issues that worried people less than the coronavirus, but which were nevertheless of great importance. Military conflict between nations was a major concern for only 14 per cent of people worldwide, despite the war in Ukraine that began in 2022. As an issue, war ranked eleventh out of the top eighteen, between climate change and immigration control – subjects that were similarly not at the top of most people's minds. It was still in eleventh place by June 2024. In December 2023, concern about terrorism and military conflict fell across most of the world, having risen abruptly the month before as Israel's armed forces killed thousands of women and children, and a smaller group of men, in Gaza. People can very quickly become used to the most terrible of events – although of course the Ipsos survey did not ask the views of people living in what was left of Palestine.

The six key themes based upon the January 2023 data inform the way that I have structured the six main chapters in this book:

2. Those Costs of Living: inflation, and poverty and inequality, all combined (worries 1 and 2);
3. Sharing the Work: unemployment and issues of immigration control (worries 3 and 11);
4. War and a Home: crime and violence, corruption, and conflict[18] (worries 4, 5, 12, 13, 16, and 17);
5. Cradle to Grave: health care, taxes, education, and social costs[19] (worries 6, 7, 9, 10, 15, and 18);
6. Climate Crisis: climate change (worry 8);
7. Biodiversity: threats against the environment (worry 14).

These worries could be combined in different ways, but over the last decade that the Ipsos survey has been run, the groupings above tend, in combination, to rank in this order. You may

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wonder at this point why I have not combined climate change with threats against the environment, instead of presenting them as two separate chapters: Climate Crisis and Biodiversity. That is one of my indulgences, and a concession to those who are likely to be my most sceptical of readers, because they believe these issues should be tackled first. I would reply that at least I have given them a chapter each, rather than just one; but that is a bias of mine. For most people worldwide, they are issues of less importance.

People appear to consider crises as being of different orders of importance depending on their distance from them in time or space. The cost of living is near to an everyday crisis for the majority of people. Poverty, inequality and their repercussions may feel a little further away, for most. Often further away again is the imminent threat of unemployment. War is usually an even more distant crisis. But crime is frequently felt to be nearer to home. Confusingly, our cradle-to-grave crises are immediate for some, memories for others, or purely hypothetical for a privileged few. Distant injustices are things to worry about only when the family are fed and safe.

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