

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Review Essay 66

**Helen Thompson, *Disorder: Hard Times in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.**

Reviewed by **Gregory Brew**, Yale University

12 January 2023 | PDF: <http://issforum.org/to/RE66> | Website: [rjissf.org](http://rjissf.org)

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

---

The first twenty years of the twenty-first century have witnessed a seemingly never-ending sequence of global calamities. From 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-2009 and Great Recession, the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, Brexit, the 2016 election of Donald Trump, and the 2020 COVID pandemic—to say nothing of the looming cataclysm of climate change—global society lies enmeshed in what historian Adam Tooze has dubbed “polycrisis.”<sup>1</sup>

Helen Thompson’s *Disorder: Hard Times in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* unpacks some of the knottier aspects of the polycrisis, focusing on the overlapping challenges of energy geopolitics, global finance, and democracy. She argues that structural changes in the global order, particularly those that came in the wake of the 1970s oil shocks, explain how the apparently stable post-Cold War period fractured in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Key to her interpretation are fossil fuels, specifically oil and natural gas. The best way to explain the disordered decades of the 2000s is as “a set of structurally driven shocks” (5), each building on previous breaks while setting the foundations for future upheavals. Locked within those structures is the inherent conflict built within fossil fuel-dependent capitalist society. In this way, Thompson builds on scholarship by Matthew Huber and Amitav Ghosh, who situate accelerated fossil fuel consumption as a defining future of late-twentieth century capitalism as well as a source of instability, both political and epistemological.<sup>2</sup> “Using stored ancient sunlight as an energy source effectively reset economic and ecological time,” she argues, forcing a constant push for innovation to unlock new sources of energy. Thus “the attempt to establish and maintain political order necessarily produces the seeds of future disorder” (11).

Thompson divides her book into three parts. The first explains the role of energy in forming the Atlantic alliance while simultaneously establishing contradictory interests among the United States and its European partners. Following competition over the oil of the Middle East in the pre-war period, the United States guaranteed European access to Middle East oil fields in the postwar period—a contract historians have

---

<sup>1</sup> Annie Lowrey, “A Crisis Historian Has Some Bad News For Us,” *The Atlantic*, Published online July 5, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/adam-tooze-chartbook-substack-newsletter-inflation-crisis/661467/>.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew T. Huber, *Lifblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), and Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

dubbed the postwar petroleum order.<sup>3</sup> But this contract was riven with contradictions. The United States had no military presence in the Persian Gulf, instead relying on weaker proxies such as Great Britain or the Shah of Iran. The basic instability of this arrangement “produced a profound geopolitical crisis whose monumental consequences still reverberate” (43).

Disruptions like the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the oil shock of 1973 and 1979 convinced European leaders that the US guarantee was an impossible one, driving a search for energy security that eventually tied European economies to flows of Soviet—and later Russian—energy between the 1960s and 1990s. By the early 2000s, Europe had become dependent on Russian energy, while Germany’s role as the EU’s financial back-stop rested on access to cheap Russian natural gas.

The United States, meanwhile, forged a muddled path through the Middle East, one that ended in failure and irrelevance, Thompson argues, thanks to the shale revolution and the boom in domestic US oil production after 2010. But while surging American oil production made a US commitment to the Middle East hard to sustain, it placed the US and Russia in direct competition with one another over access to Europe’s energy market, while also heightening the distinctions between the United States—newly energy rich—and China, the world’s largest energy importer. “The geopolitics of climate change,” note Thompson, “now also intersect with Sino-American rivalry and its consequences for Europe” (88-89). The layers of energy crisis are bewildering in their density and complexity.

The same is equally true for the overlapping structural crises laid out in the second and third parts of Thompson’s book, which focus on global finance and democracy, respectively. President Richard Nixon’s decision to exit Bretton-Woods in 1971 and the explosion in trading of dollars through the so-called “Eurodollar” markets in the aftermath of the decade’s oil shocks left the dollar as the world’s de facto reserve currency and greatly strengthened the US position as ‘lender of last resort’ through the liquidity tools of the Federal Reserve.

The stability of the US-led financial system during the so-called “Great Moderation” described by future Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke in 2004 belied structural vulnerabilities. China’s consumption of dollars, matched by US consumption of Chinese-made goods, rested on expectations of continued Chinese growth and perpetual cheap oil prices. When the price of oil spiked in 2008, the Fed responded by increasing interest rates—not realizing that, by doing so, it accelerated the disintegration of the sub-prime mortgage market in the United States, thereby facilitating the outbreak of financial contagion and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008-2009.

The post-GFC financial order was preserved by the Fed through zero interest rates, while the US shale boom allowed for cheap energy. But this set the stage for future instability, as Thompson notes; “the slightest move in Fed interest rates [sends] ripples through the global economy,” raising the US central bank to unforeseen heights and fashioning the new global order as “the world the Fed made” (140, 143). Greater American financial power thus made the world a more unsteady, uncertain place, replacing the faux confidence of the Great Moderation with cheap credit and looming volatility.

Part three examines the crises of liberal democracy in the United States and Europe, owing to the economic challenges facing nation-states in the postwar world. The key problem is the lack of a way to incorporate mass politics into a world defined by debt, taxation, immigration, and nationalism. “As economic nationhood hollowed out,” Thompson explains, “democracies were left with the particular notion of ‘the people’ that were acquired during their earlier historical experiences” (223), but which were increasingly difficult to sustain

---

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Free Press, 2009): 391-412.

as the free flow of capital and labor, as well as transnational experiments in governance such as the European Union, blurred the borders of postwar nation-states.

This crisis gave rise to Brexit and the election of President Donald Trump in 2020. Trump drew on the legacy of “restrictive American nationhood” (256), deploying the potent issues of migration and the border to cement support of White American nationalists. The divisions that appeared within the American political system mirrored those that ripped through the UK in the wake of Brexit, reflecting a general trend in the weakening of “losers’ consent” (9, 258), or the willingness of political coalitions to accept an election loss, that Thompson sees as a product of disintegrating economic nationhood.

The conclusion, as Thompson sees it, is a global order where the US exercises overweening power. “Both American energy and financial power increased after 2008” (140), belying recent Cassandra-esque handwringing over relative US decline.<sup>4</sup> Yet a US-dominated world order is not an inherently more stable one, throwing into doubt the arguments promoted by advocates of liberal internationalism, who reflexively look to the 1990s “Unipolar Moment” for inspiration regarding a future path that can sustain US primacy.<sup>5</sup> For Thompson, that primacy is both more real and less stable than its supporters would suppose.

Adding further complications is the existential threat of climate change. Far from transforming the global order, Thompson imagines the energy transition as reaffirming existing geopolitical uncertainties. “The dysfunctional dynamics generated by the geographical and financial conditions around oil production,” she warns, “cannot be undone,” especially as the purported energy revolution around decarbonization remains “entirely reliant on the fossil fuel energy inputs it seeks to replace” (276). There are few signs of this postwar petroleum disorder dissolving any time soon.

Thompson combines a deft command of detail with a broad and occasionally overwhelming range of themes from history, economics, political theory, and political economy. The book’s focus on structural forces occasionally lends a certain deterministic bent to the analysis: for instance, rising US energy production in the 2000s become a point of tension in Europe, as US energy presumably competes with Russian imports, though Thompson does not note that most US liquified natural gas (LNG) before 2022 sold to customers in East Asia and Latin America, rather than Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Her characterization of energy politics in Europe as one marked by US-Russia competition is compelling with the benefit of hindsight, however, as Russia’s war in Ukraine encouraged Europe to end its dependence on cheap Russian imports, with US LNG as the substitute.

The book includes one error of definition. Thompson treats the “oil shale” that was frequently referenced by President Jimmy Carter and other 1970s US lawmakers as the same “shale oil” that unlocked US energy production in the 2000s. They are in fact are two separate geological formations, the first hard rock deposits in the American West holding trace amounts of oil, the other “tight oil” and natural gas accessed through hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling.<sup>7</sup>

Even so, as a work of analytical synthesis, *Disorder* is both timely and provocative. The late twentieth century witnessed the creation of a deceptively stable global order, built upon a foundation of sand. Thompson’s

---

<sup>4</sup> Gideon Rose, “What’s Inside: Can America Ever Lead Again?” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2022), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/issue-packages/2021-02-16/decline-and-fall>.

<sup>5</sup> “Why is Today’s World So Dangerous? A Conversation with Richard Haass,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/podcasts/why-today-world-so-dangerous-richard-haass>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), U.S. Natural Gas Exports and Re-Exports by Country, Accessed November 1, 2022, [https://www.eia.gov/dnav/ng/ng\\_move\\_expc\\_s1\\_a.htm](https://www.eia.gov/dnav/ng/ng_move_expc_s1_a.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas C. Chidney, Jr., “Oil Shale vs. Shale Oil: What’s the Difference?” Utah Geological Survey, <https://geology.utah.gov/map-pub/survey-notes/oil-shale-vs-shale-oil-whats-the-difference/>.

book adds to our understanding of the origins of the polycrisis, even if solutions to the problems inherent to the moment seem frustratingly out of reach.

**Gregory Brew** is a post-doctoral fellow at the Jackson School of Global Affairs at Yale University. His books include *Petroleum and Progress in Iran: Oil, Development, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) and *The Struggle for Iran: Oil, Autocracy, and the Cold War, 1951-1954* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2023)

## About the Jervis Forum

The Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum is a joint project of H-Diplo, an H-Net network, and the Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University. It is named in memory of Robert Jervis (1940-2021), the founder and founding executive editor of the forum. Jervis was the Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University.