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*AHR Forum*  
Crisis, Chronology, and the Shape of  
European Social History

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IT REQUIRES NO SPECIAL HISTORICAL THEORY to view the seventeenth century—with its wars, assassinations, plagues, and rebellions—as an age of plural crises. But it is another story to speak of these multiple events as somehow linked, manifestations of a single European or even global crisis. Locating such linkages and defining their nature have been the central issues in debate over “the general crisis of the seventeenth century,” a discussion that began some seventy years ago and remains lively today. Astonishingly lively, in fact: a recent bibliography lists ninety-nine works on the topic, the earliest from 1954, and twenty-four of them have appeared since 1990.<sup>1</sup>

Why this startling longevity? One approach to that question is to examine how ideas about a seventeenth-century crisis have functioned within two historiographical traditions: on the one hand, that deriving from Anglo-American social science, Marxist and non-Marxist alike; on the other, that associated with the French *Annales* school. Of course, these are only two of the numerous forms that historical thought has taken over the last century, but each has had a disproportionately powerful influence on historical practices worldwide, suggesting research topics and methods that historians in a variety of other circumstances have taken up. The idea of a general crisis played an important role in the development of each tradition; and in each it has resisted disappearing “into the limbo of forgotten historiography” (H. G. Koenigsberger’s prediction for it in 1984) because it raises basic issues about the history of Europe and of the wider world. At the center of the debate are questions about preconditions for Europe’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century successes, notably its industrialization and imperial expansion. What happened in earlier years, the participants have been asking, to position Europe for the global domination it would enjoy into the mid-twentieth century? The concept of a seventeenth-century crisis has endured, in short, less because of what it says about specific events in the early modern period than as an effort to understand European modernity, economic, po-

This essay has benefited immensely from the careful reading and thoughtful suggestions of André Burguière, Paul Monod, Michel Nassiet, Geoffrey Parker, and the anonymous reviewers for the *AHR*. An earlier version was presented at the Maison des Sciences Humaines of the University of Angers.

<sup>1</sup> Philip Benedict and Myron P. Gutmann, eds., *Early Modern Europe: From Crisis to Stability* (Newark, Del., 2005), 25–30. A list of all the works relevant to the question of crisis would of course be far longer. For a thorough and insightful analysis of the debate from 1954 to about 1970, despite the authors’ Marxist terminology, see Miroslav Hroch and Josef Petrán, *Das 17. Jahrhundert—Krise der Feudalgesellschaft?* trans. Eliska and Ralph Melville (Hamburg, 1981), 11–61.

litical, and cultural. Partly for that reason, the debate constituted an early and forceful stimulus for Europeanists to think in global terms and to compare Europe's experiences with those of other regions.<sup>2</sup>

THE IDEA ITSELF EMERGED HESITANTLY in the 1930s, a moment when historians could well be expected to interest themselves in past crises. In 1932, the Frenchman Paul Hazard—a specialist in comparative literature—spoke of a seventeenth-century “crisis of the European mind”; he meant primarily a crisis among intellectuals, although he saw its effects extending beyond them. In 1938, the American historian Roger Merriman devoted a book to the political revolutions of the century's middle years, and he referred explicitly to the topic's contemporary implications. “Is the ‘world revolution,’ of which we hear so much, an imminent probability?” he asked, in light of the comparative data that he had assembled. He thought not, and his book stressed differences among the revolutions that he considered rather than their similarities.<sup>3</sup>

But these were essentially harbingers, and real debate began only in the more settled conditions that followed World War II. In 1954, the historian Roland Mousnier, soon to be an important influence at the Sorbonne, made crisis a central theme in his general history of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Having reviewed the combination of political, social, and cultural upheavals that marked the period, Mousnier concluded that “the century was mere trouble, agitation, chaos. Europe's societies seemed to be headed toward anarchy, dissolution, the abyss.” Mousnier's crisis was thus essentially negative, a breakdown of social and political order, from which the continent was rescued by the strong governments that emerged after 1650.<sup>4</sup>

Far more influential, partly because they offered a more complex view of societal disruption and its consequences, were two articles from the same year by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm, in the fifth and sixth issues of the fledgling journal *Past and Present*. These extended the discussion to economic and social history, arguing that the seventeenth century's apparent chaos should be understood as a single, transformative social crisis, a crisis that crossed national boundaries and touched varied domains of life. Writing partly in response, five years later Hugh Trevor-Roper focused mainly on politics, but he too suggested the underlying unities of the century's chaotic events, and hence the suitability of labeling them a “general crisis.” With Trevor-Roper's article, debate over the general crisis was officially launched. In the following year, *Past and Present* invited several other distinguished specialists to discuss whether such a crisis existed and what its nature might be; and over the following decades, further commentary and research accumulated. Why the mid-

<sup>2</sup> H. G. Koenigsberger, “The Crisis of the 17th Century: A Farewell?” in Koenigsberger, *Politicians and Virtuosi: Essays in Early Modern History* (London, 1986), 149–168, 149.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne (1680–1715)*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1935); Hazard had published what he termed “various fragments” of the work in two literary reviews, in 1932 and 1933 (*ibid.*, 1: 6 n. 1). Roger Merriman, *Six Contemporaneous Revolutions* (Oxford, 1938), 209. Geoffrey Parker has pointed to earlier intimations of crisis, starting in the seventeenth century itself.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Mousnier, *Les XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: Les progrès de la civilisation européenne et le déclin de l'orient (1492–1715)* (Paris, 1954), 207, 208.

1950s and early 1960s proved to be such “unusually crisis-conscious” years is a question that will require consideration at a later point.<sup>5</sup>

What can such discussions matter to twenty-first-century readers? An important recent work suggests that there are still real issues at stake, and that these concern Europe’s contributions to global modernity. Jonathan Israel’s recent reinterpretation of the Enlightenment argues that this period in fact represented a key turning point in human history. Despite the upheavals of the sixteenth century, he writes, the Renaissance and Reformation constituted “really only adjustments, modifications to what was essentially still a theologically conceived and ordered regional society, based on hierarchy and ecclesiastical authority, not universality and equality.” European thinking was transformed only by what he describes as “the unprecedented turmoil which commenced in the mid-seventeenth century.” Ultimately, he suggests, that period produced “one of the most important shifts in the history of man.” Nor were these changes limited to intellectual life; Israel pursues them into the domains of politics, social interactions, and gender relations. In its unabashedly teleological framing, Israel’s argument points to an essential element underlying many discussions of the seventeenth century. As he describes it, the mid-seventeenth century witnessed the birth of global modernity—the crisis was truly general, and truly a turning point on Europe’s path to the present.<sup>6</sup>

Although his specific subject matter was different, in his 1954 articles Hobsbawm expressed a teleology akin to Israel’s. He too sought to understand the emergence of European practices that eventually would dominate the world, and he too saw their origins in the mid-seventeenth century. It was then, he wrote, that “the fundamental obstacles in the way of capitalist development disappeared.” His real concern, he added five years later in response to Trevor-Roper, was with Europe’s long-term development, rather than with the seventeenth century. “If there is any revolution with which my articles were concerned, it is the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century, on whose genesis I wished them to throw some light.” His answers stressed the role of English capitalism. “We both agree,” he added—“it is scarcely possible not to—that what happened in England was crucial for the subsequent development of an industrialised world economy. Britain was, after all, the basis from which the world was subsequently revolutionized, and the changes it underwent in the seventeenth century were far more profound than those which took place among its rivals.” The seventeenth century was the key moment in this history, Hobsbawm argued, because England then became the world’s first bourgeois society. Earlier, it had resembled other European countries. Thereafter it was unique, and

<sup>5</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, “The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century,” *Past and Present* 5 (May 1954): 33–53; Hobsbawm, “The Crisis of the 17th Century—II,” *ibid.* 6 (November 1954): 44–65; H. R. Trevor-Roper, “The General Crisis of the 17th Century,” *ibid.* 16 (November 1959): 31–64. The phrase quoted is J. H. Elliott’s, looking back fifteen years after the controversy began: “Revolution and Continuity in Early Modern Europe,” in Elliott, *Spain and Its World, 1500–1700* (New Haven, Conn., 1989), 92–113, 92. For Elliott’s more recent reflections on the debate, see his “The General Crisis in Retrospect: A Debate without End,” in Benedict and Gutmann, *Early Modern Europe*, 31–51. Most of the articles from the first generation of debate are conveniently available in Trevor Aston, ed., *Crisis in Europe, 1560–1660* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967).

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001), quotations from 17, 14, vi. In 1975, Theodore Rabb pointed out the value of using the term “crisis” in this specific way, as referring not just to hard times, but to a genuine turning point; see Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1975).

important consequences followed from that uniqueness. With bourgeois values firmly in place, it could provide a suitable environment for capitalism and an eventual technological breakthrough.<sup>7</sup>

Although his main concern was social change, Hobsbawm did not neglect political events. The string of rebellions that marked the mid-seventeenth century allowed him to define the crisis as a precise historical moment, but they also confirmed his belief that societal transformation could be detected by its political manifestations. Creating a bourgeois society, he suggested, was bound up with conflict, for new societal formations emerged at the expense of older ones. The process produced winners, losers, and conflicts over resources.

Hobsbawm wrote as an enthusiastic Marxist, and in later years he would emphasize the close connections between his scholarly and political commitments. These help to explain an irony that attended 1950s discussions of the seventeenth century: a debate that significantly shaped the emerging field of early modern studies was initiated by a modernist, who had little interest in the seventeenth century for its own sake. In fact, having launched the debate, Hobsbawm withdrew from it almost completely. He has devoted the remainder of a prolific career to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, producing a series of important books that cover world history up to the present, without ever returning to the early modern period. His recently published memoirs recount as well his close attention to political movements around the world and his interest in twentieth-century popular music, but make no mention of his contribution to early modern history.<sup>8</sup>

Their Marxist language and antecedents already gave Hobsbawm's arguments a dated quality in the mid-1960s, as the crisis debate turned increasingly toward questions of politics and culture, and so also did the muted Anglo-centrism that survived in his argument, despite his efforts to widen the profession's vision. Pushed partly by the events of 1956, partly by changes within the profession itself, historians had already begun questioning the frameworks within which Hobsbawm worked. With the events of 1989 and the rightward drift over the last generation of European academic culture, his commitments seem still more distant, as he himself has noted. But it is also important to recognize the resemblances between Hobsbawm's claims and those of other social science traditions; despite the political tensions of the early 1950s, an era of vigorous anti-communism in both Britain and the United States, Marxists and non-Marxists shared important assumptions and methods. As Hobsbawm put it, years later, "in spite of patent ideological differences and Cold War polarization, the various schools of historiographic modernizers were going the same way and fighting the same adversaries—and they knew it."<sup>9</sup>

As a first point of resemblance, Hobsbawm's belief in linkages between social change and political crisis was shared by almost all branches of Western social science. From the outset, this mode of thought displayed, as Bjorn Wittrock puts it, "a

<sup>7</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," in Aston, *Crisis in Europe*, 31; Hobsbawm, "Trevor-Roper's 'General Crisis,'" *Past and Present* 18 (November 1960): 12.

<sup>8</sup> Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (New York, 2002). Hobsbawm's thinking about these issues was heavily influenced by the Marxist economist Maurice Dobb, with whom he associated closely during his time at Cambridge University; as examples of Dobb's thinking, see his *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London, 1946), 14, 12, 185, 186.

<sup>9</sup> Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 127, 288.

continuous sense of crisis,” a by-product of the circumstances of its birth in the early nineteenth century. Its founders had watched revolution around them, and took for granted its presence in the modernization process. The same was true of their mid-twentieth-century intellectual heirs. In 1968, developing his “theory of modernization,” for instance, the influential liberal American sociologist Neil Smelser took as obvious that “traditional standards are among the most intransigent obstacles to modernization; and when they are threatened, serious dissatisfaction and opposition to the threatening agents arise.” As a result, there was a high “probability that periods of early modernization will erupt into explosive outburst,” often involving political rebellions. In the mid-twentieth century, Marxists were not alone in thinking that significant social change required violence, or that the benefits of long-term economic development would outweigh the costs paid in political disruption.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, Hobsbawm shared with liberal contemporary social scientists a vision of modernization as a fundamentally unitary process. Different societies, it was understood, might experience this process in specific ways, but all of them were expected to undergo parallel change in a variety of domains, extending from intimate personal relations to politics and economic organization. As Smelser put it, “as a society develops, its social structure becomes more complex . . . This principle is clear enough in the case of the economic division of labor. But . . . rapid social development involves the same increasing complexity of structure in other institutions as well—in education, religion, politics, the family, and so on.” This essentially structural vision of societal change found its way even into scholarship that resisted modernization theory. In 1963, for instance, Clifford Geertz explained “agricultural involution” in Indonesia as involving an “increasing tenacity of basic pattern,” which “increasingly pervaded the whole rural economy.” The system’s pervasiveness ensured that “the transition to modernism, never a painless process,” would be especially difficult. Modernization, social structure, and crisis supplied mid-twentieth-century social thought with its basic conceptual apparatus.<sup>11</sup>

Given these widely shared views about how societies hold together and how they change, it is not surprising that the idea of social crisis reappeared in a variety of non-Marxist historical writing on the seventeenth century. Lawrence Stone’s *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641*, from 1965, offered a modernization narrative much like what Smelser proposed. “It is between 1560 and 1640, and more precisely between 1580 and 1620, that the real watershed between medieval and modern England must be placed,” he wrote, adding a long list of the specific changes that this transition brought to English politics, economics, psychologies, and knowledge. Also like Smelser, Stone linked societal transition to violence. As it reconfigured its tools of social control, the English nobility found itself unable to respond to challenges

<sup>10</sup> Bjorn Wittrock, “Early Modernities: Varieties and Transitions,” *Daedalus* 127, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 19–40; Neil Smelser, *Essays in Sociological Explanation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), 140, 145. For an excellent overview of the modernization idea and its cultural context, see Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, Md., 2003). The best-known example of this mode of thought was Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, 1960), which attracted an enormous readership both within the university and outside it.

<sup>11</sup> Smelser, *Essays*, 78–79; Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involvement: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley, Calif., 1963), 82.

from other social groups. The result was civil war and a long aftermath of political instability before the modern order came to prevail late in the century.<sup>12</sup>

A decade later, in *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600–1750*, Jan de Vries likewise made crisis the organizing concept for a long stretch of European economic history, and he defined it in terms that Hobsbawm could easily have endorsed. Although industrialization came only later, the “age of crisis” was necessary to change the rules of European economic life. Increasing the supply of Europe’s productive resources “could not be accomplished without altering the very structure of the society, for they were hidden in an economy of households, villages, and economically autonomous market towns and small administrative cities. Primarily labor, but also foodstuffs, raw materials, and capital had to be liberated from this bound, localized economy to be marshaled for use in the larger-scale regional and international economies.” The seventeenth century’s harsh conditions—its wars, soaring taxation, bankruptcies, and famines—did the job. The eighteenth century could advance in fundamentally new directions, with market-driven labor and large agrarian enterprises, sufficiently capitalized to supply the needs of a growing non-agricultural population. Liberal economic history here taught the same empirical lessons as its Marxist rival, although the moral implications were perhaps rather different.<sup>13</sup>

LIKE THEIR BRITISH COUNTERPARTS, French scholars in the postwar period inherited complicated ideas about the seventeenth century. Until well into the twentieth century, most French historians viewed the period in mainly positive terms. Voltaire had described it as one of the great ages of human history, and many nineteenth-century scholars agreed. The socialist professor Jean Jaurès and Lucien Febvre, co-founder of the journal *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*, both believed that only the advent of seventeenth-century rationalism, starting with Descartes, had ended the intellectual chaos that darkened previous eras; these Cartesian tools allowed European society to move on to the conquest of nature. More traditionally minded historians, of course, celebrated as well the grandeur of Louis XIII and Louis XIV, which they saw as having laid the foundations for contemporary France. The journal *XVIIe Siècle*, newly founded in 1949, expressed these ideas in its governmental charter; it proclaimed “that the seventeenth century was not only one of the summits of French civilization and, because of its influence, of world civilization, but also offers contemporary society still-precious and constantly renewed lessons.”<sup>14</sup>

But during the first decades of the twentieth century, the historical sociologist and economist François Simiand laid out a very different way of thinking about the period. Simiand came to have enormous influence on those scholars who were seeking to establish a new social history in France, partly because he was an early critic of historical study as practiced in the French universities. Already in 1898 he had at-

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford, 1965), 15–17. For Stone’s somewhat later overview of the crisis literature, see his “The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century,” in Stone, *The Past and the Present* (Boston, 1981), 133–144.

<sup>13</sup> Jan de Vries, *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600–1750* (Cambridge, 1976), 3.

<sup>14</sup> I discuss these modes of thought in *Lost Worlds: The Emergence of French Social History, 1815–1970* (University Park, Pa., 2006) (the title of Febvre’s journal, of course, would evolve over the following decades, to the current *Annales, histoire, sciences sociales*); *XVIIe Siècle* 1, no. 1 (1949): inside cover.

tacked conventional narrative history, calling for a history that would address questions raised by social science and thus contribute to illuminating contemporary social phenomena. Views such as these made Simiand especially influential among the *Annales* group of historians, who from the 1920s on likewise pushed for the development of social history. Eventually he and Febvre taught together at the Collège de France; he was also close to Maurice Halbwachs, another *Annales* collaborator.<sup>15</sup>

From 1930 to 1932, in a series of courses, Simiand offered what would prove to be an immensely influential reading of early modern economic history. He began by reviewing the data that historians had assembled on prices across western Europe from the sixteenth century forward. From these, he concluded that prices moved in accord throughout the region, despite differences in political and social organization. Second, he detected a broad pattern within these coherent price data: he saw long periods—lasting about a century—of rising prices, followed by equal periods of stable or declining prices. These “phases,” as he termed them, brought qualitative as well as quantitative changes to the European economies. During times of rising prices (phase A), producers profited. Consumers were eager to buy their goods, knowing that these would only become more expensive in the future. The opposite conditions prevailed in phase B, when prices turned downward, but by this point economic actors had accustomed themselves to a certain level of prosperity, and they fought to preserve it. Hence phases of declining prices brought organizational and technological innovation, for producers could defend their situations only by selling more, at lower prices. Those times “required the diffusion of better utilization of human labor, of raw materials . . . Even if some improved productivity was achieved, or might have been achieved, in earlier periods, only in this period did [new techniques] of necessity become generalized.” Both phases played important roles in Europe’s economic development. Phases of rising prices generated profits and expectations; the ensuing phases of decline enforced efficiency and innovation.<sup>16</sup>

Simiand located the first turning point from a phase A to a phase B in European history precisely in the mid-seventeenth century, and he found there just the sorts of structural changes that his theory predicted. From 1650 on, he argued, governments across the continent found themselves suddenly unable to raise sufficient revenues for their international ambitions; new attention was given to economic issues, as contemporaries sought to make sense of their new circumstances; in the countryside, a dramatic consolidation of properties took place, with the wealthy buying out working peasants; in the manufacturing sector, there took place both a concentration of firms and a diffusion of new techniques, as long-familiar methods suddenly acquired economic pertinence. Simiand did not use the term “crisis” to describe this collection of changes. Indeed, although he wrote during the depression of the 1930s, he tended to view moments such as the mid-seventeenth century as

<sup>15</sup> François Simiand, *Le salaire, l'évolution sociale et la monnaie: Essai de théorie expérimentale du salaire, introduction et étude globale*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1932), 1: xi; Simiand, *Méthode historique et sciences sociales*, ed. Marina Cedronio (Montreux, 1987), 99–265, provides a selection of his most important comments on history, including his critique of the historical manual published by Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos, a favored target also of *Annales* historians. Simiand dedicated his most famous work to Halbwachs, who in turn served on the first editorial board of the *Annales*; Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, *Correspondance*, ed. Bertrand Müller, 3 vols. (Paris, 1994–2003), 1: xix, xxvii.

<sup>16</sup> François Simiand, *Recherches anciennes et nouvelles sur le mouvement général des prix du XVIe au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1932), 550.

essentially positive, necessary steps in what he termed “the general consolidated advance of economic results.”<sup>17</sup>

What, then, caused so fundamental a change? Strikingly, given his own socialist sympathies, Simiand attached almost no importance to class conflicts, and he described technological change as a secondary phenomenon, the result of changing prices rather than their cause. For Simiand, the cycle of long-term price change itself constituted the unmoved mover of the economic system; and that cycle was governed by exogenous, even accidental, forces, which brought either rapid or slow growth to Europe’s money supply. The arrival of American silver in the sixteenth century supplied the motive force for the long sixteenth century’s monetary expansion. The fall-off of silver imports in the seventeenth century reversed that effect, before new monetary events intervened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>18</sup>

Simiand thus offered French social historians an array of powerful ideas about the chronology of Europe’s development, about causation in history, and about the nature of historical research itself. These ideas, moreover, came in the form of apparently pure social science, without visible ideological baggage. Themselves proponents of lofty ideas of scientific history, Febvre and his colleague Marc Bloch—the other co-founder of the *Annales*—listened closely. In the late 1920s and 1930s, as they finally succeeded in establishing their journal, Febvre and Bloch repeatedly sought Simiand’s collaboration; and stimulated by his example, even before the journal’s first issue they planned their own collective inquiry into the history of prices. Bloch also wrote a lengthy review of Simiand’s major work on the history of French salaries. The review emphasized the book’s significance for early modern studies, drawing attention to 1650 as a turning point and underlining the changes that it brought: Simiand’s phases, wrote Bloch, “rise to the dignity of periods in economic life,” and the phases of stagnant prices were especially important, for they constituted the “periods of vigorous mutation.” “One can no longer be tempted to doubt, I believe, that a rhythm of alternating long waves dominated French—even European—economic evolution from the end of the fifteenth century onward . . . Henceforth anyone studying a fragment of that history— . . . in particular, the vicissitudes of rural society—will have to hold fast to the guiding thread that M. Simiand has provided us.”<sup>19</sup>

In France, as in England, Bloch’s comments show, ideas about a seventeenth-century crisis grew up in close connection with the idea of social history itself. The conjunction was especially visible in the development of the primary journal of French social history, the *Annales*, just as discussions of the seventeenth century were to figure in the development of the British *Past and Present*. This early association meant that already before World War II, French social historians viewed 1650 as a turning point—not merely as an economic downturn, but rather as a moment of

<sup>17</sup> Simiand, *Le salaire*, xvii.

<sup>18</sup> On Simiand’s politics, see Marina Cedronio, “Présentation,” in Simiand, *Méthode historique et sciences sociales*, 3–37, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Bloch and Febvre, *Correspondance*, 1: 82; Bloch, “Le salaire et les fluctuations économiques à longue période,” *Revue historique* 173 (January–June 1934): 1–31, 17, 18, 30. It should be noted that Simiand’s treatment of rural economic change rested almost entirely on Bloch’s own scholarship; conversely, it should also be noted that Bloch’s overview included important critical queries, especially concerning Simiand’s insistence that the money supply was an autonomous historical force rather than a response to the economy’s changing need for monetary instruments.

structural change, whose effects remained visible in their own times. Simiand's example and the enthusiasm for it of Febvre and Bloch also suggested research programs that would fill in the details in his chronological sketch.

As a result, the history of money and prices assumed startling importance in postwar French historical research, and so also did a broad approach to the seventeenth century. The first great *Annales* school work to appear after the war, Fernand Braudel's 1949 study of the Mediterranean, framed its questions in the terms that Simiand had established. Of the seventeenth century's economic history, he asked, "is it—as I have repeatedly asked in this investigation—that the whole world, Mediterranean included, was falling headlong into that astonishing backward movement that the seventeenth century was to bring? Can François Simiand have possibly been correct?" In keeping with this awareness of Simiand's schemas, Braudel included in his study a long investigation of money and prices. But his conclusions differed from Simiand's in one important respect. Whereas Simiand had stressed the creative results of seventeenth-century deflation, Braudel instead saw "chasms" opening up between rich and poor across Europe; "the seventeenth century would show in the full light of day the incurable wounds" that this social differentiation had created.<sup>20</sup>

In the mid-1950s, Pierre and Huguette Chaunu's investigation of Spanish commerce with the Americas, in the *Annales*-sponsored publication series "Money, Prices, and Conjuncture," likewise demonstrated Simiand's powerful influence. The Chaunus found a drop in the importation of precious metals from New Spain roughly where Simiand had predicted; like him, they viewed precious metals as an autonomous variable, whose diminishing quantities brought stagnant prices to seventeenth-century Europe. Reflecting on this work twenty years after its appearance, Pierre Chaunu noted that under Simiand's influence, "we all were narrowly monetarist, even bullionist, back then." Yet if the engine of change was monetary, for the Chaunus its effects touched all elements of human life. Their ambition, they wrote, was to show the extent to which "prices, merchandise . . . , business, interactions of groups with one another and with the State . . . , more or less everything human obeyed the obscure rhythms of the economic cycle." In developing this argument, furthermore, the Chaunus explicitly emphasized an idea that for the most part had remained implicit in Simiand: European history could not be understood in merely European terms. Instead, they sought to show, what happened in Europe derived directly from social processes taking place in the Americas.<sup>21</sup>

Given this background, French social historians were prepared to welcome Hobsbawm's vision of a turning point coming in the mid-seventeenth century, and indeed Frédéric Mauro praised Hobsbawm's efforts in a long review in the *Annales*. On the other hand, Mauro also noted that there were "not enough numbers" in

<sup>20</sup> Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949), 660. Braudel retained these formulations in the second edition of his book, which appeared in 1966. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2 vols. (New York, 1972), 2: 756.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Chaunu, *Séville et l'Amérique aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Paris, 1977), 11; Pierre and Huguette Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique (1504–1650)*, 8 vols. (Paris, 1955–1959), 1: 22–23. For an especially helpful overview of the Chaunus' work, see J. H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492–1650* (Cambridge, 1970), 68–70.

Hobsbawm's discussion, and that Hobsbawm had failed to pay attention to "the role of money and credit . . . Let us not forget that the asphyxiation of the seventeenth century was due above all" to monetary forces. If Mauro's comments demonstrated French receptiveness to Hobsbawm's arguments, they also showed the force of a specifically French vision of the seventeenth century, a vision that emphasized monetary patterns and questioned the significance of class differences and conflicts. Despite much goodwill on each side, these remained alien historical cultures.<sup>22</sup>

But French historical culture would undergo a significant redirection in the very next year, with the appearance of Pierre Goubert's *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis*. The work almost immediately came to dominate French historical thinking about the seventeenth century, and indeed Goubert opened it by proclaiming that "it is the seventeenth century itself that is the subject matter, the heart of the inquiry." Very much in keeping with the problematic that Simiand had established, Goubert devoted much of his book to tracing commodity prices from the early seventeenth to the early eighteenth centuries. He too found a shift, which he dated to the 1630s, from a long period of rising prices to one of decline; and he made explicit his debt to Simiand, speaking of "those great human respirations that are phase A and phase B." In its main contours, Goubert's seventeenth century still resembled Simiand's.<sup>23</sup>

But Goubert gave this picture a specific coloration, which significantly changed its meaning. First, he dropped altogether the stress on economic innovation that marked Simiand's account. For Goubert, the broad decline in prices that began in the mid-seventeenth century constituted only a sign of economic trouble, characteristic of "an economy that was barely advancing or actually declining, production that was dropping, revenues that were dropping, stagnation, malaise." No economic advances emerged in response to these circumstances; this was a purely "tragic seventeenth century," in Goubert's phrase. Second, and closely related, Goubert gave particular emphasis to shorter-term ups and downs that interrupted Simiand's century-long phases. Indeed, dramatic short-term movements seemed to form a fundamental structure of seventeenth-century life. Their "enormous presence, immediate consequences, long-term implications, and terrible threat," he wrote, "constituted fundamental facts" in the region's history. Their presence added further weight to Goubert's pessimistic reading of the period, and he also found that they became dramatically more frequent after the mid-seventeenth century. Finally, Goubert explored the social impact of the seventeenth century's price history, and in this respect, too, his conclusions differed from Simiand's. Whereas Simiand had seen wage earners successfully defending their position during times of declining prices, Goubert instead saw a widening separation between seventeenth-century haves and have-nots. Short-term crises actually benefited the former, since they had goods to sell, but often pushed the poor to outright starvation, producing unnecessary deaths "because of the price of bread."<sup>24</sup>

Like Simiand, Goubert faced problems of explanation—how to account for the

<sup>22</sup> Frédéric Mauro, "Sur la 'crise' du XVIIe siècle," *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 14, no. 1 (January–March 1959): 181–185, quotations from 182, 184.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Goubert, *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730: Contribution à l'histoire sociale du XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1960), vii, 576. Elsewhere in the work, he spoke of "une 'phase B' démographique," lasting from the 1650s through the 1720s (616).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 504, 77–81.

generally downward drift of seventeenth-century prices, and how to account for shorter-term movements as well. His explanations ignored monetary forces almost entirely. Instead he turned to causes of an altogether different order, to climate on the one side, demography on the other. Seventeenth-century economic conditions, he argued, reflected “a kind of periodic disequilibrium between an irregular food supply and a prolific population, subject to fitful and uncontrolled increase.” Changing weather was more mysterious but equally important in an economy dominated by agriculture, and Goubert raised the possibility of thirty-year climate cycles, which might explain the periodicity of harvest failures. Whereas Simiand had proposed a primarily sociological explanation for seventeenth-century experiences, Goubert looked to nature, in the forms of weather and human reproduction.<sup>25</sup>

These contrasts suggest the extent of the historiographical revolution that Goubert proposed. His data roughly conformed to Simiand’s vision of the seventeenth century, but Goubert largely dismissed the economic creativity that Simiand had seen in the period, as in all phases of declining prices. At a more fundamental level, the two scholars explained seventeenth-century phenomena in different ways. Simiand believed that essentially the same forces governed the seventeenth century and the twentieth—the market and the monetary interactions that took place there. Goubert instead viewed seventeenth-century France as fundamentally different from twentieth-century France. It was a backward society, shaped mainly by natural forces. No other economic domain approached agriculture in importance, and when it failed, all others failed as well; manufacturers lost their markets as higher percentages of incomes went to buying food, and manufacturing workers found themselves unemployed just as food prices were highest.<sup>26</sup>

Every element in this historiographical shift received reinforcement from a second great *Annales* historian of the 1960s, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. His *Les paysans de Languedoc* appeared in 1966, followed a year later by a long-term study of climate change; over the following decade, he published a series of additional empirical studies and theoretical reflections that built on these works. Like Goubert, Le Roy Ladurie viewed the seventeenth century as a time of economic crisis, and he too occasionally used Simiand’s terminology, speaking, for instance, of “la phase B colbertienne.” Like them, he viewed the history of prices as a useful way to get at the century’s economic evolution. But also like Goubert, he simply ignored Simiand’s claim that economic innovation derived from sagging prices; and even more firmly than Goubert, he argued against understanding seventeenth-century troubles in terms of markets, prices, and money supplies. Instead he directed attention to the natural forces with which seventeenth-century men and women contended. For Le Roy Ladurie, the real forces governing the century’s social history were weather and sex, the former determining agricultural success and failure, the latter determining

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 511; Pierre Goubert, “The French Peasantry of the Seventeenth Century: A Regional Example,” in Aston, *Crisis in Europe*, 150–176, 169.

<sup>26</sup> Goubert borrowed these formulations from his thesis director, the eighteenth-century specialist C.-E. Labrousse, whose analysis is carefully summarized by Bernard Lepetit, “L’expérience historique: À propos de C.-E. Labrousse,” in Lepetit, *Carnet de croquis: Sur la connaissance historique* (Paris, 1999), 45–79; see also an important discussion by Pierre Vilar, “Réflexions sur la ‘crise de l’ancien type,’ ‘inégalité des récoltes’ et ‘sous-développement,’” in Vilar, *Une histoire en construction: Approche marxiste et problématiques conjoncturelles* (Paris, 1982), 191–216. Goubert dedicated *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis* to Labrousse.

how many mouths agriculture would have to feed. Le Roy Ladurie argued that a long span of cold weather reduced seventeenth-century harvests, accounting for the period's limited food supply. Families, meanwhile, reproduced to the extent of their resources, straining food supplies and, as population rose to meet the limits set by agricultural technology, encountering episodic subsistence crises. In his writings, then, a vigorous neo-Malthusian theory became the key to understanding early modern society. Nature rather than man-made markets and monetary exchanges played the key roles.<sup>27</sup>

In a 1968 overview, Denis Richet underlined the tendency among his contemporaries to model early modern economic development in terms of contrasting zones of backwardness and progress. In the seventeenth-century French countryside, he wrote, there prevailed "a cyclical rhythm, where advances were mere recuperation, where limits were of a cruel rigidity, periods of decline heartbreaking . . . A world of inexorable constraints. On the other hand, in the folds of traditional society, there developed the activities of labor and long-distance trade . . . [where] from the end of the fifteenth to the end of the eighteenth century, the overall movement was upward. There, achievements were definitive. Bit by bit the city irrigated the countryside, and it is within its walls that we must no doubt seek the secrets of that 'primitive accumulation' that Marx believed he found in the expropriation of the peasants." In this vision of a dual society, divided between modern and traditional sectors, Richet expressed what had become a consensus among French historians—a consensus with contemporary implications, to which Richet himself drew attention: "we live in a world where the underdevelopment of an enormous sector of the universe, the rapid development of the 'have' nations, requires us to look closely at the conditions, the stages, the discontinuities of economic growth." Le Roy Ladurie likewise spoke of "that traditional, ethnological, neurosis of traditional societies, which today is disappearing from the more advanced societies." Their research concerned sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France, but (so such comments indicated) it had implications for understanding "traditional society" in the present as well.<sup>28</sup>

BY THE 1970s, THEN, TWO VERSIONS of seventeenth-century social crisis had emerged. British and French historians agreed on the fact and timing of crisis, as manifested in stagnating prices and populations, and in political upheavals as well. They also shared an attentiveness to commonalities that cut across the continent's political boundaries, suggesting that a truly European history of the period could—and should—be written. Beyond these agreements, they differed significantly in orientation, with British historians emphasizing the period's structural changes and in-

<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc*, abridged ed. (Paris, 1969), 259 and passim. In 1968, Denis Richet noted the lack of attention to commerce in his contemporaries' idea of a tragic or crisis-ridden seventeenth century: "Croissances et blocages en France du XVe au XVIIe siècle," *Annales ESC* 23, no. 4 (July–August 1968): 759–787, 781; Le Roy Ladurie, "L'aménorrhée de famine (XVIIe–XXe siècle)," in Le Roy Ladurie, *Le territoire de l'historien*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1973–1978), 1: 331–348. Geoffrey Parker discusses questions of climate change in detail elsewhere in this forum and argues for building on Le Roy Ladurie's findings.

<sup>28</sup> Richet, "Croissances et blocages," 787, 759; Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc*, 359, 360. For a related example from a rather different perspective, see Vilar, "Réflexions."

novations, the French its traditionalism and “blockages.” But there was enough overlap to encourage close reading of one another’s work. Pierre Goubert, for instance, published a substantial summary of his findings in the tenth issue of *Past and Present*, and the editors chose to include it in their collective volume on the crisis, published in 1965. Together these views informed most writing on the seventeenth century, and on the early modern period more generally. In 1970, a German historian described the crisis concept as “at the center of scientific discussions . . . , a central problem, whose explication interests historians of the entire world, of the most varied approaches.”<sup>29</sup>

To some extent, this powerful influence reflected the state of the profession itself. The idea of crisis was almost coeval with extensive scholarly interest in early modern social history, and in stressing structural parallels between disparate national histories, it for the first time brought coherence to what Theodore Rabb termed “a splintered specialty.” Among Anglo-Saxon historians, even the term “early modern” was new, and the situation was similar in France. The fact that two non-specialists—Hobsbawm in England, Simiand in France—supplied the field with some of its most influential interpretive schemas confirms these observations.<sup>30</sup>

But the impact of the crisis idea also reflected contemporary beliefs about the place of historical study in the wider world. British and French historians alike stressed parallels between seventeenth-century conditions and those of developing regions in the twentieth century. Early modern Europe offered a model for understanding both the preconditions for development and the strains that it would likely bring—for, as sociologists such as Smelser made clear, crisis was assumed to be part of the “modernization” process in the twentieth century as it had been in the seventeenth. This attentiveness to contemporary life helps explain a feature common to the different versions of the crisis idea, a stress on the sharp division between pre-industrial and modern societies. British and French historians alike emphasized the fundamental nature of the changes needed to move from one to the other, and both groups suggested the fundamental similarity of all pre-industrial societies.

Awareness of contemporary relevance also ensured that discussions of the seventeenth century, however scholarly they might be, would carry political overtones, most of them tending toward the left. Hobsbawm’s Marxism supplied the visible theoretical framework for his interpretation. Goubert and Le Roy Ladurie offered their work as in some sense an alternative to Marxism, but their focus on ordinary people’s suffering also tended to undercut received ideas about French culture and the French state. Grand moments of French history, their work suggested, rested on the terrible sacrifices of millions; and a real history of the nation would need to tell

<sup>29</sup> Goubert, “The French Peasantry of the Seventeenth Century”; Stephan Skalweit, “Frankreich und der englische Verfassungskonflikt im 17. Jahrhundert,” in *Congrès international des sciences historiques, XIII Kongress der historischen Wissenschaften, Moskau* (Moscow, 1970), 1. Hroch and Petrán likewise stress this conceptual domination of the field, as shown by the attention devoted to it at the 1970 International Congress of Historical Sciences in Moscow (*Das 17. Jahrhundert*, 32–35, 39–42).

<sup>30</sup> Elliott, “Revolution and Continuity in Early Modern Europe,” 93; Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability*, 7–11; Randolph Starn, “The Early Modern Muddle,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 6, no. 3 (2002): 297–298. In the introductory issue of the French journal *XVIIe Siècle*, Roland Mousnier spoke of “nos connaissances si minces sur le XVIIe siècle”: *XVIIe Siècle* 1, no. 1 (1949): 23 (“La vie de la société”).

these previously hidden stories—a point suggested in Goubert's title for his synthetic study of the period, *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen*. Yet while these visions of crisis confirmed a certain political radicalism, they fitted as well with liberal social science, and even with the conservatism of historians such as Pierre Chaunu. Consensus around the idea of crisis was strong enough to blur important political differences.<sup>31</sup>

Since about 1970, however, consensus has tended to fragment, partly because of the development of the early modern field itself. The “splintered specialty” of the early 1950s has grown dramatically, and in the two generations since Hobsbawm wrote, an immense quantity of detailed research on the period has emerged. In the process, once confidently held generalizations have been tested against archival realities, and many have been replaced by a growing array of nuances, exceptions, and microhistories. But revisions of the crisis idea have also resulted from deeper changes in how historians understand their own tasks and the world around them. Just as the idea's initial emergence responded to contemporary assumptions about modernization and its traumas, as well as to scholarly discoveries, so also revisions to it express historians' growing skepticism about concepts such as modernity and tradition, in past and present alike.

A first source of change has been a retreat—among historians as among other intellectuals—from what might be termed structuralist thinking. For some scholars in the 1950s and 1960s, structuralism was a label explicitly assumed, whether in the form of Hobsbawm's Marxism or Smelser's “structural functionalism,” the dominant sociological model in 1950s America. Others used the idea more loosely, partly because they took its pertinence so much for granted. Both Braudel and Goubert began their major works with long sections on “structures,” without worrying about defining the term. Stone's *Crisis of the Aristocracy* used the idea more loosely still, simply arguing that changes at every level of aristocratic life advanced together. Despite important differences among them, all of these historians shared the idea that overarching systems gave form to societies' multiple parts. Since about 1970, however, historians have moved into a poststructuralist age, some of them influenced by theoretical reflections from neighboring disciplines, many more responding to broader cultural changes around them. They have become readier to see the elements of past societies functioning in relative autonomy from one another; and they have become skeptical about linkages among politics, culture, social relations, and economic practices.

The retreat from structuralism has shown itself with particular vivacity in historians' treatment of politics. Hobsbawm and his contemporaries shared the belief that political turmoil expressed deep social trouble. More recently, however, revisionist scholars in a variety of fields have reemphasized the autonomy of political forces, questioning the importance of social causes in bringing on such events as the English and French revolutions. Politics, they have argued, follows its own logic, even

<sup>31</sup> A point suggested by the title of one of Le Roy Ladurie's articles, “En Haute Normandie: Malthus ou Marx?” reprinted in Le Roy Ladurie, *Le territoire de l'historien*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1973–1978), 2: 398–413; Pierre Goubert, *Louis XIV et vingt millions de français* (Paris, 1970). For Chaunu's political outlook, see Steven Lawrence Kaplan, *Farewell Revolution: The Historians' Feud, France, 1789/1989* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995), 25–49.

in extreme moments such as these. Among early modernists, this theme emerged already in 1959, when Trevor-Roper responded to Hobsbawm by suggesting that the real crisis of the seventeenth century was a struggle among social elites for political power, unrelated to changes in social or economic structure. A decade later, J. H. Elliott took a further step in this direction. He stressed that widespread political violence was no specialty of the seventeenth century—similar groupings of rebellions could be found in the sixteenth, and presumably (Elliott did not pursue this implication of his argument) earlier as well. In 1986, H. G. Koenigsberger pushed the argument farther still, suggesting that political violence was in fact the normal condition of early modern life. Models imported from the social sciences, he suggested, had misled historians into imagining a baseline equilibrium against which the seventeenth-century rebellions exploded. In fact there was no such equilibrium. Instead, he suggested, the chaos and competition of early modern life ensured that some form of rebellion could be found throughout the period.<sup>32</sup>

This rereading of early modern politics parallels a second change, a new understanding of the place of elites in early modern Europe and of how events of the period affected them. The evolution in such ideas can be seen by comparing two works by Lawrence Stone. Stone's 1965 *Crisis of the Aristocracy* exemplified the crisis interpretation; it presented seventeenth-century England as undergoing a crisis of modernization, a difficult, ultimately successful transition in how power was exercised, whose by-products included the English Revolution. Two decades later, he revisited the history of the English landed elite, and came to a different conclusion. "Between 1590 and 1880," he wrote in 1984, "the English landed elite were remarkably successful in maintaining continuity in family names, estates, and seats." The "crisis of the aristocracy" remained an incident in this history of continuity, but it was now only one of several upheavals that the elite passed through in these years, and it had far less impact on them than the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The seventeenth century had ceased to be the watershed between the medieval and modern periods. Comparable changes have reshaped discussion of elites elsewhere in early modern Europe. Scholars have noted the ferocity of their competition, but they have increasingly seen these as struggles among individuals and clans, not whole classes; and they have underlined the social values and loyalties that these competitors shared.<sup>33</sup>

A third change in historians' interpretive practices has pointed in the same direction. For French scholars writing in the 1950s and 1960s, the crisis of the seventeenth century was most visible in the period's demographic statistics. Slowing population growth and high mortality constituted surface manifestations of deeper

<sup>32</sup> Key figures in this process include Conrad Russell, Alfred Cobban, and François Furet, writing on the English and French revolutions; see Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford, 1990); Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1964); Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, 1981). On these ideas as manifested in the crisis discussion, see Elliott, "Revolution and Continuity in Early Modern Europe"; Koenigsberger, "The Crisis of the 17th Century." Elliott forcefully restates this position in "The General Crisis in Retrospect."

<sup>33</sup> Lawrence Stone and Jeanne Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England, 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1984), 400; William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge, 1985); James Collins, *Classes, Estates and Order in Early Modern Brittany* (Cambridge, 1994). For an overview of recent nobiliar studies, see Jonathan Dewald, *The European Nobility, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, 1996).

social crisis, and these were most marked in the mid-seventeenth century. Only in the eighteenth century would population again begin growing, demonstrating the renewed vitality and new economic resources that European society enjoyed. Demographic research since 1970, however, has shown the oversimplifications in this neo-Malthusian model and has cast doubt on apparently self-evident linkages between malnutrition and disease. In fact, through the mid-nineteenth century, disease was an independent variable in world history, “as far back as records will take us,” in the words of one authority. Changing mortality, conclude E. A. Wrigley and his collaborators, “is properly attributable to factors which were not primarily economic or social,” and this fact “underlines the potential importance of biological or epidemiological history and the limitations of the treatment of such topics using conventional historical categories.”<sup>34</sup>

Seventeenth-century plagues and other mortality crises were thus not the by-products of overpopulation and inelastic food supplies—not, that is, manifestations of deep social processes and problems—but rather an autonomous biological force. Even the meteorological components of the model have attracted skeptical criticism. It is not as clear as Goubert and Le Roy Ladurie supposed that Europe became colder during the seventeenth century, or that cold weather threatened its agriculture or its health. Such findings do not call into question the severity of seventeenth-century demographic crises, nor do they mean that economic conditions had no impact on Europe’s population history. But the evidence does suggest that, in demography as in politics, a vision of general crisis has to be replaced with multiple crises, governed by highly specific logics.<sup>35</sup>

THE MOST IMPORTANT CHANGES HAVE COME in historians’ approaches to the concepts at the very center of the crisis idea, those of capitalism and modernity. Like many of his contemporaries, Hobsbawm believed that an interlocking set of differences divided modern from premodern societies. Modernity showed itself most clearly in industrialization, in this view, but industrialization required a whole range of preconditions—the practices and organizations of bourgeois society, which first became visible in the seventeenth century. Today, some historians still view modernity as a clear-cut phenomenon of this kind, whose onset can be dated with confidence. But even the most confident historians now find it more difficult to define the elements that constitute modernity, and positing relations among these elements has become almost impossible. In this respect, historians have participated in a much larger shift

<sup>34</sup> There is an excellent summary in Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991), 27–31 (quotation from R. Lee, 29); E. A. Wrigley et al., *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837* (Cambridge, 1997), 553. Wrigley and his collaborators, it should be emphasized, continue to rely on Malthusian explanations of nuptiality, which they offer as the main linkage between social structure and population movements. For a somewhat more muted but essentially similar conclusion by French specialists, see Jacques Dupâquier, ed., *Histoire de la population française*, vol. 2: *De la Renaissance à 1789* (Paris, 1988), 3–6.

<sup>35</sup> Jan de Vries, “Histoire du climat et économie: Des faits nouveaux, une interprétation différente,” *Annales ESC* 32, no. 2 (March–April 1977): 198–226. For a different view, see Parker’s detailed discussion in this forum. For a nuanced overview of the interplay between economics and demography, see David R. Weir, “Life under Pressure: France and England, 1670–1870,” *Journal of Economic History* 44, no. 1 (March 1984): 27–47, suggesting the limits of Malthusian interpretations.

of sensibilities among the full range of social scientists. Already by the 1970s, it has recently been noted, “even its proponents knew that modernization theory had lost its way.” The crisis idea offered historians of the 1950s and 1960s a powerful tool for understanding Europe’s transition to modernity. As transition itself has come to seem a more elusive phenomenon, the usefulness of crisis as an explanation for it has tended to evaporate.<sup>36</sup>

This shift has manifested itself in a variety of ways, starting with the most fundamental of early modern economic pursuits: agriculture. The seventeenth century’s hard times, it was once thought, brought structural change to the countryside and thereby opened the way to agrarian capitalism. By loosening peasants’ hold on the land and encouraging farm consolidation, this process brought higher productivity to the countryside; wealthier and better-educated farmers could introduce new techniques, allowing Europe’s farms to support a higher percentage of industrial workers. With varying nuances, this was a view shared by François Simiand, Marc Bloch, and Jan de Vries. It still has adherents today, but the consensus has shifted. It now seems unlikely that large farms were more productive than small, or that changing rural social relations contributed to European industrialization.<sup>37</sup>

More important still, historians have become less certain about placing British industrialization at the center of European modernity. Just as even the least theoretically inclined historians have become poststructuralists, they have also become members of post-industrial societies, whose economic achievements often come from small workshops and in non-industrial forms. With such examples before us, the modernities of pre-industrial capitalism have become more visible. The strongest statement of this position has come from the economic historians Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, who have explored the ways in which the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic should be viewed as “the first modern economy.” Although the Dutch Republic lacked factories and steam engines, they show, it developed a stream of new production processes, with rising outputs per worker; it invested heavily in human capital, encouraging new ways of doing things and making far better use of its population than its rivals; and it continued to grow despite what once seemed to be obvious ceilings on pre-industrial economic performance. In short, they argue that industrialization was not the centerpiece of modernity, but only one aspect of it; societies could be modern in other ways. The prosperity of mid-seventeenth-century Holland has always presented a problem for crisis interpretations, but de Vries and van der Woude offer the Dutch case as something more important, a challenge to conventional ideas about the nature of economic modernity.<sup>38</sup>

As they note, this awareness of the diversity of modern social forms has allied with a third historiographical change, a reconceptualization of the British Industrial Revolution. Historians have come to view this transformation as a much slower process than was once believed, and some have rejected the term “revolution” altogether, as inappropriate for so gradual an event. Western Europe, it has been shown,

<sup>36</sup> The example of Jonathan Israel is discussed above; Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 223.

<sup>37</sup> Philip T. Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society: The French Countryside, 1450–1815* (Princeton, N.J., 1996), 12–20, 151–170; for the contrary view, see Jean-Marc Moriceau, *Terres mouvantes: Les campagnes françaises du féodalisme à la mondialisation, XIIe–XIXe siècle* (Paris, 2002), 270.

<sup>38</sup> Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500–1815* (Cambridge, 1997).

had already achieved a high level of economic sophistication by 1700, and conversely its real industrialization came only in the early nineteenth century. Even then, the industrial sector remained just one part of a large and diverse economy. Faced with such evidence, even defenders of a revolutionary view of industrialization have had to redefine their terms. E. A. Wrigley, for instance, has proposed distinguishing between an organic economy, dependent for its energy and raw materials on what the land could grow, and a “mineral-based energy economy,” centering initially on coal and iron. Because productive land is in limited supply, only a shift to the latter system can allow a society economic growth “without knocking against the ceiling present in the earlier system. Real income per head . . . could, for the first time in human history, rise substantially and progressively in all classes of society.”<sup>39</sup>

Wrigley thus stresses the technologies of coal, steam, and metallurgy as the crucial facts in England’s transformation and the subsequent transformation of the rest of the world. But such a focus on narrow slices of the British economy implicitly raises questions about the role of larger social structures as preconditions for economic transformation. Wrigley himself has not raised these questions, emphasizing instead England’s early economic lead over other Eurasian societies, which allowed it in the eighteenth century to make the transition to a mineral-based economy. Others, however, have drawn out the full implications of his argument: if specific technologies and mineral resources underlay England’s transition to a new order of economic life, perhaps changes in societal organization had only minimal importance in dividing traditional from modern society. Perhaps natural endowments, accidental discoveries, and inventions mattered more than changing social relations, values, property rights, state structures, and the like.

Specialists in Asian studies have given the most serious attention to this line of thought, as part of an effort to compare Asian and European societies during the early modern period. Albeit with different emphases, they have converged in arguing for parallels between European and Asian experiences, which they have sought to understand as part of a common Eurasian history. Jack A. Goldstone offers an especially forceful statement of this view. He argues that “the states of early modern Eurasia . . . were not greatly different from each other,” nor were their economies; despite nuances, these were all agrarian empires, facing similar constraints and undergoing similar processes of change, including long periods of dramatic economic growth. In the century after 1680, according to Goldstone, China’s economy grew as fast as those of Holland and Britain, the two most dynamic societies of pre-industrial Europe. In all three, productivity far outpaced population growth, making for substantial improvement in ordinary lives.<sup>40</sup>

Goldstone’s view thus does not require treating pre-industrial societies as static, as *Annales* historians tended to do. On the contrary, he emphasizes the possibilities

<sup>39</sup> For a brief but very clear summary, *ibid.*, 716–717; for extended analysis, see Joel Mokyr, “Editor’s Introduction: The New Economic History and the Industrial Revolution,” in Mokyr, ed., *The British Industrial Revolution: An Economic Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1999), 1–127; E. A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge, 1988), 32.

<sup>40</sup> Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*, 4; Jack A. Goldstone, “Efflorescences and Economic Growth in World History: Rethinking the ‘Rise of the West’ and the Industrial Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 13, no. 2 (2002): 323–390, an argument repeated in his “Neither Late Imperial nor Early Modern: Efflorescences and the Qing Formation in World History,” in Lynn A. Struve, ed., *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 242–302.

for what he terms “efflorescence”—genuine economic growth within a fixed technological system—in early modern economies, and indeed in pre-industrial economies at other times as well. But eventually such growth encountered the ceiling predicted by Wrigley’s model of organic societies, and came to an end. However impressive, then, the economic “efflorescences” of the early modern period had nothing to do with an eventual breakthrough to “‘modern’ economic growth”; this would appear only in the mid-nineteenth century, with the advent of railways and the widespread use of fossil fuels. From this broad perspective, Goldstone sees the crisis of the seventeenth century as illustrating his essentially Malthusian understanding of pre-industrial society. He draws attention to the wave of political rebellions that touched the whole of Eurasia around 1650, and he explains them in terms of a tight fit between food supplies and population. While arguing for the dynamism of pre-industrial societies, then, Goldstone describes the seventeenth-century crisis in terms familiar from Goubert and Le Roy Ladurie. Political turmoil marked the limits of “organic” society, rather than a turning point in the history of modernity; and these limits prevailed throughout Eurasia, in England and Holland as well as in less favored regions.<sup>41</sup>

R. Bin Wong and Kenneth Pomeranz have developed similar arguments, with greater attention to the details of Chinese economic development and less concern for events in the seventeenth century. Like Goldstone, they follow Wrigley in contrasting the “organic economies” of the pre-industrial era with the “mineral economies” that emerged in the nineteenth century. Coal power and the vastly expanded availability of metals created a qualitatively new form of economic life, and this breakthrough happened in England. But this was a “contingent linkage,” in Wong’s phrase, the result of very specific circumstances, and not a product of England’s capitalist economy or bourgeois social structure. Until that point, which they see as having come only after 1800, European and Chinese economies functioned at basically similar levels. China’s economic system differed substantially from Europe’s, in that it accorded less freedom to economic actors, but it was at least as effective, in the eighteenth century as earlier. Pomeranz argues that until well after 1800, China and Japan in fact may have had higher standards of living than western Europe; and per capita cotton production may have been higher in China than in Britain a full generation after the beginnings of industrialization.<sup>42</sup>

Arguments such as these have not gone unchallenged, but even critics have had to acknowledge one of their implications: these views undermine what has been a central theme in Western social theory, that of explaining divergence between Europe and the rest of the world in terms of essential qualities internal to each. Divergence may have come only late in Europe’s story, and it may have resulted from exogenous forces, rather than from the continent’s culture or social organization. From this vantage point, the crisis of the seventeenth century loses most of its significance as a social historical event. For Goldstone, the crisis made manifest the structures that all seventeenth-century Eurasian polities shared and the common

<sup>41</sup> Goldstone, “Efflorescences and Economic Growth,” 366.

<sup>42</sup> R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997), esp. 50–53; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), 49, 333–334.

forces that shaped Europe and Asia alike, one stage in the cycle through which pre-industrial societies inevitably passed. More firmly still, Wong and Pomeranz reduce the seventeenth century to a phase in pre-industrial society, without special relevance to nineteenth-century industrialization.<sup>43</sup>

IN A BRILLIANT FORMULATION, GOVIND SREENIVASAN has recently noted that “the specter of transition” haunts historical writing on early modern Europe. He means that early modernists today are both baffled by the phenomenon of Europe’s modernization and unable to dispense with the concept. At some point between 1650 and 1850, Europe gained a decisive economic and political lead over the rest of the world, yet the growing literature on pre-industrial Europe has problematized most conventional explanations for that success.<sup>44</sup>

Discussion of the crisis of the seventeenth century ultimately concerned this problem of transition; hence the concept’s central role in the development of early modern studies since World War II. It could scarcely have been otherwise, for in the 1950s and 1960s, social scientists of all descriptions viewed the problem of modernization as one of their most pressing concerns. Surrounded by interest in the development of once-colonized regions, postwar early modernists could offer their subject matter as a valuable guide to contemporary practice, a claim to relevance that usually remained implicit but occasionally surfaced in explicit comparisons to twentieth-century conditions. These preoccupations help to explain an important shift in the structure of the field. Until World War II, Europeanists had focused on the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment, great moments of cultural change, but in the decolonizing world that followed 1945, they increasingly spoke of “early modern Europe,” terminology that accorded centrality to the problem of modernity itself and encouraged attention to changes in social structure.<sup>45</sup>

Within that broad framework, the idea of social crisis in the seventeenth century acquired two core meanings. For Hobsbawm and his successors, the seventeenth century represented a crucial moment in the larger transition from feudalism to capitalism. New social structures then emerged that allowed England and, to a lesser extent, other countries their eventual economic take-off. For most *Annales* historians, in contrast, the seventeenth-century crisis was a revelatory moment within the history of traditional Europe, which demonstrated the enduring limits of pre-industrial society. The crisis of the seventeenth century was thus not a unitary concept, but rather a range of interpretive possibilities, which individual scholars might

<sup>43</sup> Philip C. C. Huang, “Development or Involution in Eighteenth-Century Britain and China? A Review of Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 2 (May 2002): 501–538, followed by responses from Pomeranz and others. See also Luo Xu, “Reconstructing World History in the People’s Republic of China since the 1980s,” *Journal of World History* 18, no. 3 (2007): 325–350, for thoughtful discussion of Chinese responses to these ideas. My colleague Roger Desforges has provided me with very helpful guidance on these issues.

<sup>44</sup> Govind P. Sreenivasan, *The Peasants of Ottobeuren, 1487–1726: A Rural Society in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2004), 1.

<sup>45</sup> See Starn, “The Early Modern Muddle.” For thoughtful discussion of the term’s implications, see Lynn A. Struve, “Introduction,” in Struve, *The Qing Formation*, 1–54.

mix in different ways. They could do so because, despite their divergences, these alternative interpretations shared important assumptions. Both took for granted the fundamental differences between traditional and modern societies, and both assumed that societies could modernize only by undergoing dramatic, usually painful changes.<sup>46</sup>

Today, most historians find these assumptions less plausible. An accumulating body of scholarship has complicated ideas about most of the topics that traditionally have interested early modernists, among them the British Industrial Revolution, demographic crises, and the social roots of political turmoil. More important, historians' understanding of the world itself has changed. Historical research has given increasing attention to regions beyond Europe, casting doubt on the very concepts of traditional society and modernization, and demonstrating the variousness and creativity of pre-industrial societies. Our daily experiences in an increasingly interconnected world have instilled the same lessons.

This awareness of complexity has come at a price, however. There has been a re-splintering of the field that the crisis idea once helped to unify, and a loss of the faith that early modern Europe can contribute to understanding problems of economic and societal development elsewhere. Are early modernists then to return to a plural view of seventeenth-century crises, treating them as a mere collection of unrelated events, without significant meaning for the future? Many historians have happily done so, and the exceptions have come mainly from the fields of intellectual and cultural history. As noted above, Jonathan Israel has described mid-seventeenth-century culture as providing the foundations of global modernity; even so resolute a critic of European exceptionalism as Goldstone has turned to seventeenth-century culture as an explanation for industrialization, for he sees seventeenth-century European science making the exploitation of fossil fuels possible.<sup>47</sup>

However, the new global history suggests more forceful alternatives to such a decline into scholarly particularism, while at the same time avoiding the teleological language of modernization. This new history places imperial exploitation at the center of the process by which Europe went its separate way. Pomeranz, for instance, argues that colonialism probably "did more to differentiate western Europe from other Old World cores than any of the supposed advantages over these other regions generated by the operation of markets, family systems, or other institutions within Europe." Like so many other generalizations about the early modern past, such claims are open to debate. But whatever their profitability, Europe's colonies sharply distinguished it from other regions of the globe, and reflections on its peculiar trajectory need to take imperialism into account, as a phenomenon that was at once cultural, political, social, and economic. Such considerations return us directly to the seventeenth-century crisis, for its historians have repeatedly linked it to Europe's imperial adventures. "The major achievement of the seventeenth-century crisis," wrote Hobsbawm in 1954, "is the creation of a new form of colonialism," that is, the plantation economies. These territories, he wrote, gave Europe "several precious decades of dizzy economic expansion from which they drew inestimable benefits."

<sup>46</sup> For a somewhat different account of the diversity of meanings that historians have given the crisis idea, see Hroch and Petrán, *Das 17. Jahrhundert*, 49–53.

<sup>47</sup> Goldstone, "Efflorescences and Economic Growth," 367–368.

An unfinished task of the crisis literature, it would seem, is reopening the dossier on Europe's global aggressiveness, and asking how crisis at home linked up with expansion elsewhere.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 279, 283. Cf., for instance, Patrick O'Brien, "European Economic Development: The Contribution of the Periphery," *Economic History Review*, n.s., 35, no. 1 (February 1982): 1–18; from a more limited perspective, de Vries, *The Economy of Europe*, 128–146, likewise questions the profitability of some of Europe's colonial trade; Hobsbawm, "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," 53 (my emphasis), 56.

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