vaging [the general crisis debates] from out of the historiographical dustbin."[2]

THE CRISIS THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY From bright new idea to historiographical dustbin in one generation. In a slow-moving discipline like history, this is a singular achievement. But did the crisis concept really die or did it simply migrate to a more hospitable place? As the debate about a "general crisis" in seventeenth-century Europe ebbed, a new debate emerged about a more encompassing general crisis affecting all of Eurasia and giving shape to both the global economy and the functioning of states stretching from England to Japan. This extended crisis debate (about which more later) has been no more conclusive than the original, but it continues to speak to historians concerned with global history and environmental history.

Even historians of Old Europe who dismiss the crisis concept continue to feel its influence, an influence exerted by its very absence. That is, even though historians cannot agree on what it is, there remains a place in the master narrative reserved for it. This point was hinted at early in the crisis debate by Schöffer. He expressed skepticism about the formulations of *general crisis* then available (in 1963) but acknowledged as unsatisfactory the absence of any organizing concept beyond strictly national ones (such as Holland's "Golden Age") for the seventeenth century: "It sometimes seems as if the seventeenth century, wedged between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, has no features of its own. With Renaissance and Reformation on the one side, Enlightenment and Revolution on the other, for the century in between we are left with but vague terms like 'transition' and 'change'. . . . It may be traditionalism, against our better judgment, but we just simply have to give the seventeenth century a place of its own. Our imagination needs it."[3]

The population of Europe *did* decline. Beginning in the second half of the fifteenth century in most areas, population began to recover from the sharp, sudden setback caused by the Black Death. It regained and then exceeded its pre-plague levels until, in the course of the first two-thirds of the seventeenth century, in one region after another, the population leveled off, edged downward, or in some cases fell sharply. Whereas the broad impact of bubonic plague imparted a certain uniformity to the fourteenth-century decline, the seventeenth-century demographic reversal was highly varied. In the Mediterranean region, famines in the 1590s and plague in 1599, from 1629 to 1631, and from 1647 to 1650 joined other factors in reducing the population of Italy between 1600 and 1650 by about 16 percent, and that of Spain by 14 percent (concentrated in Castile). In Central Europe, the Thirty Years' War created a disorder that intensified every manner of hazard to life. Recent estimates show the lands of the Holy Ro-

Demographic Pattern of the 17th Century

Lopez and Miskimin, "The Economic Depression of the Renaissance," *Economic History Review*, XIV (1962), 408–426; Carlo M. Cipolla, "Economic Depression of the Renaissance?" *ibid.*, XVI (1964), 519–524; Miskimin, "Monetary Movements and Market Structure—Forces for Contraction in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century England," *Journal of Economic History* XXIV (1964), 470–490.

17 Le Roy Ladurie, *The Peasants of Languedoc* (Urbana, 1974; orig. pub. 1966), 51.

the unique climatic conditions that prevailed.

With climate, as with so much of the general crisis literature, there is a great deal of suggestive correlation but much less in the way of convincing causation. Between heeding the stricture "not to ignore" climatic anomalies and demonstrating their consequences stands a formidable challenge. The Little Ice Age brought shortened growing seasons and more frequent extreme events that could force farmers to abandon marginal lands, shift to the cultivation of hardier grains, or shift from grain to livestock farming. Indeed, except in peculiar and isolated locations, the impact of climate change (as opposed to the impact of weather on a single harvest) can be difficult to detect among the other variables of a market economy. But climate can have a more direct effect on mortality, one not mediated by food production. The most comprehensive study of the influence of climate change on preindustrial European society to date concluded that these biometeorological effects dominated any direct effect on food supply in influencing mortality rates. Even in this study, the correlations

Vagaries of climate

Was it a general crisis?

remain only suggestive; the causal mechanisms remain to be uncovered.[24]

The histories of prices, population, and production provide economic historians with a framework for the further analysis of economic life. They call special attention to the first half of the seventeenth century, for which the accumulated evidence reveals unmistakably a widespread and often severe setback, the reversal of a long expansionary trend. The reversal took place earlier in the Mediterranean lands than in Northern Europe, but it left few areas unaffected. The reversal was general, but was it a general *crisis?*

To Wallerstein, who set out to write a history of the Europe-centered capitalist world economy, the answer was a firm "no." He opened the second volume of his study, which focused on the seventeenth century, with an introductory section on the crisis concept: "The term *crisis* ought not to be debased into a mere synonym for *cyclical shift*." From his perspective, the genesis of the system under which we continue to live is found in the long sixteenth century. From that point onward, despite periods of expansion (Phase A) and contraction (Phase B), the emphasis should be placed on continuity: competition among countries, the geographical expansion of this world economy, booms and depressions—all of them contributing to the development of a capitalist system already firmly in existence.[25]

But to Wakeman, the crisis was both consequential and global in scope. It was not possible to write a history of the dramatic and destructive events of mid-seventeenth-century China that brought an end to the Ming dynasty and its replacement by the Qing without framing these events within the context of the European trade crisis, the resulting constriction of silver supplies, and the simultaneous deterioration of global climate. Thus, he introduced his two-volume study, mainly devoted to political history, with a forceful invocation of global crisis:

> Although at a considerable remove, the Chinese economy could not fail to be badly affected by the severe depression that struck the

24 The impact of climate change is the burden of de Vries, "Measuring the Impact," 19–50. For applications to marginal farmlands in Britain, see M. L. Parry, "Secular Climatic Change and Marginal Agriculture," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, LXIV (1975), 1–13. Galloway, "Long-Term Fluctuations in Climate and Population in the Preindustrial Era," *Population and Development Review*, I (1986), 20.

25 Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, 3–9.

> worldwide trading system centered on Seville between 1620 and 1660. . . . At the same time, climate and disease took their toll. Unusually severe weather struck China during the period 1626–1640, with extreme droughts being followed by major floods. Frequent famines, accompanied by plagues of locusts and smallpox produced starvation and mass death during this same period. The result was an extraordinary depopulation during the late Ming. . . . There was in any case an unusual demographic dip in China during the years coinciding with the global economic depression.

While historians of early modern Europe cautioned and caviled, those of Asia were prepared to think big.[26]

ECONOMIC CRISIS: WHY IS THE CRISIS IMPORTANT? The notion of an economic crisis originated as a contribution to Marxist interpretation of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In Hobsbawm's 1954 articles, the crisis stands in for the revolutionary situation that allows the contradictions of the prevailing mode of production (feudalism, in this case) to be overcome and then superseded by a new mode of production (capitalism). The dramatic narrative was pure Marx. "Why," Hobsbawm asked, "did the expansion of the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries not lead straight into the epoch of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Industrial Revolution? What, in other words, were the obstacles in the way of capitalist expansion?" His answer was that the capitalist elements of sixteenth-century Europe expanded "within a [feudal] social framework which it was not yet strong enough to burst, and in ways adapted to it rather than to the world of modern capitalism." In this framework, the crisis represents the ultimate success of the new mode of production in sundering the fetters of the feudal social order and refashioning the world according to its own needs. This is not merely a period of economic distress; it is a seminal historical event—the transition to capitalism.[27]

Today, evocations of this sort present a problem. Dewald expressed it with a certain delicacy: "As transition itself has come to seem a more elusive phenomenon, the usefulness of crisis as an ex-

26 Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China* (Berkeley, 1985), I, 3–8. See also *idem*, "China and the Seventeenth-Century World Crisis," *Late Imperial China*, VII (1986), 1–26.

27 Eric Hobsbawm, "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," in Trevor Aston (ed.), *Crisis in Europe 1560–1660* (London, 1965), 15, 28.

And yet, the crisis concept lives.

Many non-Marxists (including myself) have found Hobsbawm's articles illuminating and have sought to contribute to the concept of general crisis, even though they felt no obligation to historical materialism, the dialectic, or reified conceptions of capitalism. The reason for this attraction may well be found in the useful agenda of specific historical problems that Hobsbawm identified. In his conclusion to "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," he claimed to have shown two things: "First, that the seventeenth-century crisis provided its own solution" (in proper dialectical fashion) but, "second, that it did so in indirect and roundabout ways." Thus arises the fruitful historical questions, How could economies of scale be achieved in an economic world of diffuse and weak markets; how could unproductive investment be avoided in the face of the perverse incentive of state and social institutions; and, perhaps most important, how could demand grow on a sustained basis when most of the population earned, and kept, too little income to form a broad market?[30]

THE CRISIS ECONOMY: DECLINE No one doubts that wrenching economic changes came to much of Europe during the first half of the seventeenth century. A logical starting point for the study of these changes is Spain, which long had sustained a growing demand for European manufactured goods, much of it destined for its New World empire and for military supplies needed in several European theaters of war. The Habsburg state's taxation and silver revenues, leveraged by royal borrowing, did much to underwrite this trade, which, in turn, enlivened industries from Italy to the Low Countries. Financing this absorption of resources periodically broke down—hence, the royal "bankruptcies" of 1575, 1577, and 1596 under Philip II—but a much more serious fiscal problem faced Habsburg Spain in the reigns of his successors, Philip III and IV.

A reduction in official silver shipments to Seville beginning after 1610 has long appeared to signal, if not to trigger, a definitive diminution of Spain's fiscal reach. By 1621, Spain's transatlantic trade with the New World was also in full decline, and the renewal of war with the Dutch Republic in that year put further pressure on shrinking public revenue. Another Crown bankruptcy

30 Hobsbawm, "Crisis," 57.

in 1627 led to the demise of Genoa's banking dominance, and the ruin of its international payments system. The following year, Spain was forced to devalue by 50 percent the copper coinage, *vellón*, on which it had come to rely, creating monetary chaos, and months later, Madrid received news that its entire silver fleet, the lifeblood of state finances, had been captured by privateers of the Dutch West India Company. Portuguese bankers replaced the Genoese, but the restoration of the state's creditworthiness proved to be beyond repair.[31]

The decline of Spanish trade with its vast New World empire remains imperfectly understood. The belief that the economies of New Spain (Mexico) and Peru contracted because the Indian population collapsed is now doubted; nor does it appear that overall silver production declined. But a more self-sufficient New World economy, one more resistant to Spanish fiscal exactions, appears to have led to a sharp drop in the volume of trade with Spain (from over 30,000 tons of shipping capacity per year up to the 1610s to 13,000 tons in the 1640s, and even less thereafter) and a similarly sharp drop in Crown revenues in the same period.[32]

The Castilian domestic economy had never been at the commercial and industrial heart of Europe, but its wool exports, textile production, and, most important, its large population, had done much to support the state and the empire. In the face of the aforementioned decline in Spain's population, featuring a true collapse in Castile, the new capital city, Madrid, grew from some 30,000 in 1561 to 130,000 by 1630, thereby drawing resources from a vast region and forcing a sharp, decisive contraction of the traditional

31 Pierre Chaunu and Hugette Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique* (Paris, 1955–1960), 12 v.; Carla Rahn Phillips, "The Growth and Composition of Trade in the Iberian Empires, 1450–1750," in Tracy, (ed.), *The Rise of Merchant Empires* (New York, 1990), 85–90; James Boyajian, *Portuguese Bankers at the Court of Spain, 1626–1650* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1983), 39.

32 On the question of the economy of New Spain, see Israel, "Mexico and the 'General Crisis' of the Seventeenth Century," *Past & Present*, 63 (1974), 33–57, who supports the view that the "general crisis" reached the New World; John J. TePaske and Herbert S. Klein, "The Seventeenth-Century? Crisis in New Spain: Myth or Reality?" *ibid.*, 90 (1981), 116–135, who doubt that New Spain itself suffered economic decline. Another doubter is Ruggiero Romano, *Conjonctures opposes: La crise du XVIIe siècle en Europe et en Amérique ibérique* (Geneva, 1992), 44–45. On trade, and bullion flows between Spain and its empire, see Angel Garcia-Baquero Gonzalez, "Andalusia and the Crisis of the Indies Trade, 1610–1720," in I. A. A. Thompson and Bartolomé Yun Casalilla (eds.), *The Castilian Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: New Perspectives on the Economic and Social History of Seventeenth-Century Spain* (Madrid, 1994), 115–135.

urban network of the Castilian interior. This situation, together with a rising fiscal pressure, undermined agricultural marketing and helped to produce a severe decline of the domestic economy and a disarticulation of Spain's remaining commercial sectors.[33]

Northern and central Italy had long contained much of Europe's industrial activity and commercial leadership. Much of the commercial and banking activity, centered in Genoa, which was closely tied to serving the voracious needs of the Habsburg Empire, suffered with its decline. Industrial production remained important into the first two decades of the seventeenth century, but it suffered immediately and severely from the onset of military activities in Central Europe in 1618 and the renewal of Spain's armed efforts to restore the Netherlands to its obedience in 1621. These events disrupted trade routes both by land and by sea. Nor were markets within the Mediterranean region still dependable outlets for Italian goods. Here, too, demand fell while the sharpened competition for the remaining markets often resulted in victory for new, Northern European (especially English) commercial interlopers.[34]

A succession of catastrophes—harvest failures in the 1590s (which first gave northern traders entrée to the Mediterranean markets) and plague epidemics from 1629 to 1631—intensified a reversal of demographic trends. Overall, Italian population fell by 15 percent, but many cities and regions suffered even larger contractions, especially in the North, where cities of 10,000 and above declined, by an aggregate 32 percent in the first half of the seventeenth century. Between the decline in industrial markets and the decline in the rural populations of long-commercialized agricultural regions, many middle-sized cities suffered severe contractions not only in size but also in institutional power. In Piedmont, Lombardy, and the Veneto—all across northern Italy—a process of "ruralization," sometimes called "refeudalization," took place as urban elites sought more stable investments in agriculture, and industrial production shifted from the high-quality products of ur-

33 John Elliott, *Imperial Spain 1469–1716* (New York, 1963), 294, takes note of the economic consequences of a sudden shortage of labor but places more emphasis on the psychological impact. David Ringrose, *Madrid and the Spanish Economy, 1560–1850* (Berkeley, 1983).

34 Richard Rapp, "The Unmaking of the Mediterranean Trade Hegemony: International Trade Rivalry and the Commercial Revolution," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXV (1975), 499–525; Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (Princeton, 1993), 23–34.

ban guild-organized craftsmen to a more prosaic output for domestic consumption produced by low-cost rural workers. By the 1640s, Italy's exports were primarily agricultural commodities and raw materials, and Italian merchant communities of Venice and Genoa, among others, had given way to foreign merchants trading at the free port of Livorno.

This recitation of the chief features of the collapse of Iberian and Italian economic life is familiar, and often put in the context of a historic shift of economic leadership from the Mediterranean world to Northern Europe. From early medieval times, the economic life of these two broad zones had exhibited distinctive differences that gave rise to specializations geared toward an active north–south trade. What could not have been expected around 1600 was a sharp relative decline of the Mediterranean population, the collapse of its export industries, the demise of its long-distance trade links, the withering of its commercial cities, and its recourse to exporting mainly raw materials and agricultural products. Yet, by the 1640s, these were the accomplished facts.

Yet, the economic crisis of the seventeenth century was not simply a shift of economic leadership from South to North. Beyond the Alps, the financial centers of Lyon and Augsburg also lost their earlier importance, and throughout Upper Germany, in a large zone well seeded with commercial and industrial cities, urban populations declined by 40 to 50 percent in the first half of the seventeenth century.

The vast zone comprising the Holy Roman Empire experienced devastations of biblical proportions beginning in 1618, as the armies of Catholic and Protestant states moved across the landscape sporadically for thirty years. The destruction of battle was amplified by the depredations wrought by disease and disorder—including the calculated, ruthless disorder visited by the armies on civilian populations. So vast was the hardship across both time and space that it raises the historical question of whether the economic crisis was "general" in large part because of a "unique" political and military conflagration. For this reason, historians have devoted considerable attention to whether the economic decline of Central Europe was a result of the Thirty Years' War—a contingent event—or whether economic problems in the region had already taken hold. In this case, the decades of war may have intensified a pre-existing condition, or, indeed, warfare of such scope and duration may actually have been a consequence of the region's peculiar political-economic structures.[35]

Ogilvie argues persuasively for the latter option. The German economies participated in the general expansion of the sixteenth century, but did so in the multilayered political structure of a "composite state." The Holy Roman Emperor, the electoral states, and the territorial princes were all attempting to expand their powers at each other's expense. This struggle caused every level of state authority to increase taxation and involve itself in new sectors of social life, which, in turn, disrupted the balance of power among social groups, many of which were well organized in the corporate bodies that characterized both urban and territorial society. As Ogilvie observes, "These two German peculiarities (corporatism in social structure and the fragmented political framework of Empire) may or may not have been causally related. But they combined to give a special severity to the German crisis." Local protectionism and rent-seeking were consolidated and extended in this period, severely limiting economic integration in the region for generations.[36]

Economic life in France, taken as a whole, was less severely affected than it was in the areas considered thus far. Relative to the multiple strains under which the society had struggled during the sixteenth-century French Wars of Religion, there were distinct signs of stabilization after 1600. But the overwhelmingly dominant agricultural sector proved incapable of sustaining its expansion after 1600. Much of northern French agriculture experienced a sharp crisis of productivity, concentrated in the period from 1625 to 1650, and long thereafter it remained burdened by low agricultural prices, which discouraged investment. The reversal of trend in the decades on either side of 1600 was also the focal point of a major restructuring of rural social structure in northern France. The combined pressures of rising taxes and rents and weakening prices led to an accelerated concentration of farm land in the hands of elite owners and a consolidation of land into larger holdings. "By 1630, most northern French villagers were divided into a

35 Rabb, "The Effects of the Thirty Years' War on the German Economy," *Journal of Modern History*, XXXIV (1962), 40–51; Henry Kaman, "The Economic and Social Consequences of the Thirty Years' War," *Past & Present*, 39 (1968), 44–61.

36 Sheilagh Ogilvie, "Germany and the Seventeenth-Century Crisis," *The Historical Journal*, XXXV (1992), 432–436, 437.

handful of agrarian entrepreneurs, the farmers, and a large majority of agricultural laborers."[37]

France was by far the largest political unit of Europe; it alone could claim approximately one-quarter of the entire population of Europe through most of the early modern era. Unlike Iberia, Italy, and the German lands, France did not suffer a significant decline of population in this period, but neither did it rise above the 20 million that had been reached by 1600. Its size and diversity may have encouraged the keen interest in protectionism that became the hallmark of its economic policy beginning in the seventeenth century. Even before Jean-Baptiste Colbert pursued his well-known mercantilist measures in the 1660s, Henri IV, Maximilien de Béthune—Duc de Sully—and Cardinal Armand-Jean Duplessis—Duc de Richelieu—had acted to shore up the privileges of towns and their guilds (in return for obedience and payments), chartered royal factories, and promulgated sumptuary laws, all with the aim of controlling and taxing that which they protected. This strategy may account for the relative stability of the major French centers of woolen cloth production—in Amiens, Reims, Rouen, and other places—which always remained focused on domestic markets. But it also encouraged a consolidation of urban power and leadership in the hands of judges, *intendants*, and other royal officials. Merchants in all but a very few large trading centers—Marseille, La Rochelle, Nantes, and St. Malo—were a subordinate force in French towns, and were quick to move their accumulated capital to the safe havens of venal office, noble titles, and landownership.[38]

Around 1600, France ran trade surpluses with all of its European neighbors save one: It was a large net importer from Italy. Nonetheless, throughout the sixteenth century, bullion accumulated in France, and its money supply grew rapidly just as the Crown's revenue needs did. But soon after 1600 this pattern ended. The monetary outflows to Italy diminished as the Lyon–

37 Philip Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society: The French Countryside, 1450–1815* (Princeton, 1996), 184–185; Dewald and Liana Vardi, "The Peasantries of France, 1400–1789," in Tom Scott et al. (eds.), *The Peasantries of Europe from the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1998), 46.

38 De Vries, "Population," 13. France's population is compared to that of Europe extending eastward to a line drawn from Konigsberg (Kalinengrad) to Trieste. Robin Briggs, *Early Modern France, 1560–1715* (New York, 1977), 55–56; Gail Bossenga, *The Politics of Privilege: Old Regime and Revolution in Lille* (New York, 1991).

Genoa financial nexus fell into disrepair; the inflow of silver from Spain diminished even more. As the volume of Spanish silver declined after 1600, more and more of it moved directly to the Low Countries. Much of that which entered France "seemed to brush past the Atlantic coast," falling quickly into the hands of Dutch merchants resident in the Atlantic ports. The money supply ceased to grow—indeed, it may have contracted substantially—while tax revenues continued to rise. Between the 1600s and 1640s, public revenue rose threefold in per capita terms, literally sucking monetary resources to the capital. For this reason, Paris alone accounted for 60 percent of all French urban population growth between 1600 and 1650. This development powerfully reinforced the rent-seeking proclivities of a weakly developed merchant class.[39]

The domestic focus that France's textile sector enjoyed was not an option available to most other European centers of fine woolen cloths, many of which found it difficult to maintain their production levels as export markets either withered through lack of demand or were closed by state policy and/or warfare. The Venetian industry contracted by half between 1600–1610 and 1630–1640, while Tuscan exports (primarily textiles) also fell by half between 1619 and 1630. The southern Netherlands, for centuries the preeminent textile center of northern Europe, exported some 300,000 pieces of woolen cloth annually in 1611, two-thirds of it to its western European neighbors. This export level could be maintained, more or less, into the 1650s, but only by reorienting the industry toward the colonial markets of the Spanish Empire. By 1655, only 15 percent of exports found markets within Europe.[40]

Woolen cloth was by far England's major export, accounting for 85 percent of all domestic exports in 1640 and 70 percent in 1700. Entering the seventeenth century, its sale on the Continent

39 Frank Spooner, *The International Economic and Monetary Movements in France, 1493–1725* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 306, 174. Lyon lost its large Italian merchant colony; the fairs of Piacenza ceased to function in 1622. James Collins, *Fiscal Limits of Absolutism* (Berkeley, 1988), 145–165; de Vries, *European Urbanization* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 321 (which provided the data on French cities of at least 10,000 inhabitants used for calculation). Excluding Paris, French urbanization rose only from 4.7% in 1600 to 5.1% in 1650.

40 Domenico Sella, *Crisis and Continuity: The Economy of Spanish Lombardy in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 109–110; Gregory Hanlon, *Early Modern Italy, 1550–1800* (London, 2000), 207; Herman van der Wee, "The Western European Woollen Industries, 1500–1750," in David Jenkins, (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles* (New York, 2003), 444–445.

remained the exclusive privilege of London merchant guilds, each with an exclusive export territory secured by Crown charter. The sales of the most important of them, the Merchant Adventurers, seem to have peaked early in the seventeenth century (about 101,000 pieces to all northern European markets in 1609) before falling to less than half that level by 1640. Brenner argues that the English did not lose market share to their rivals; rather, all producers faced a crisis of demand, the English no less than producers in the southern Netherlands. Both sought new markets for their cloth further afield; the English went into head-to-head competition with Italians for Mediterranean markets.[41]

This brief account of the sharp economic contraction of the first half of the seventeenth century seeks to establish several important points. First, the decline was not simply a cyclical downturn: it exhibited structural features. Second, the contraction was not primarily a Malthusian crisis centered in agriculture, even though harvest failures figure as catalysts in certain places. Third, the decline was not limited to the "exhaustion" of Mediterranean economies, leading to a general shift toward northern Europe. The crises of Spain and Italy were certainly dramatic, but they shared features found north of the Alps and Pyrenees. Across France and Central Europe, population decline, agricultural stagnation, the collapse of urban industry, and the dislocation of financial markets were plainly evident.

CRISIS THEORY REJECTED

THE CRISIS ECONOMY: DECENTERING AND RECENTERING Regarding the third point above, even today, some economists hesitate to speak of *the* European economy, since Europe's constituent nations—their (almost) common currency and common trade policies notwithstanding—are capable of highly divergent economic performance. Perhaps for this reason, Elliott recently felt the need to remind the last remaining historians willing to entertain Europe-wide, comparative historical questions of their hopeless obsolescence: "The days when historians would talk of a 'European' economy are now surely past." After all, even in the crisis debate's early stages, "it was already apparent . . . that one region's depression could well be another region's growth." But advocates of a crisis concept were never content to define it simply as a uni-

41 Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 23–24.

versal economic downturn. Rather, the crisis concept holds that the economic reversals led, ultimately, to a regrouping—to a transformation of basic patterns and possibilities of economic life. The challenge has always been to find a common thread—a credible theory—capable of tying together the disparate events of the time.[42]

One such effort seeks to tie Europe, and more than Europe alone, together as a structured, or layered, zone of commercial interaction, that is, as a world-economy. Wallerstein's world-systems theory proposes that a capitalist, European world-economy took shape during the sixteenth century. The building blocks of this organized complexity are the (proto) national states, and, as already observed, Wallerstein has no use for the crisis concept. He sees this world-economy as having been established earlier, through struggles between the Habsburg Empire and its enemies.

Braudel deployed the world-economy concept differently, arguing that it was held together and organized by a hierarchy of cities rather than by territorial states. From the high Middle Ages onward, he argued, this vast economic space was led by a single city that stood at the apex of its trading and financial life. The lead city, always facing challengers, never held its position forever. Braudel narrated the successive predominance of Venice, followed by Antwerp, followed by Genoa. The changes of leadership were always the consequence of major geopolitical challenges. Braudel called this process "decentering and recentering," and, in his account, the most dramatic, drawn-out, and unforeseen of these episodes was the decentering of the European world economy that led, between 1590 and 1610, to the demise of Genoese primacy and the consolidation of economic leadership in Amsterdam. Once established in Amsterdam, the center of economic life of a European world economy, enlarged to encompass much of the world, would remain in the North Atlantic zone, moving after 1750 to London and, by Braudel's reckoning, in 1929 to New York. "Each time a decentering occurs, a recentering takes place, as if the world-economy cannot live without a center of gravity, without a pole."[43]

This city-focused conceptualization of Europe's economic

42 Elliott, "The General Crisis in Retrospect: A Debate without End," in Philip Benedict and Gutmann (eds.), *Early Modern Europe: From Crisis to Stability* (Newark, Del., 2005), 44

43 Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century. III. The Perspective on the World*

space interprets the changes of the early seventeenth century as primarily a definitive shift of leadership from South to North, but otherwise it leaves an impression of continuity: Leadership passed from one city to another, carrying out the same functions, enjoying the same privileges of dominance. These interpretations are misleading, and understate the significance of the "decentering and recentering" that occurred in—indeed, were an integral part of—the seventeenth-century crisis. The economic decline was not simply an affair of the Mediterranean; it was much broader in scope. Likewise, the urban leadership issue was not a simple matter of passing the torch to a new center; it was more profound, transforming what was still a polynuclear urban system into the first single-centered urban system of an expanding European world economy.[44]

Until the seventeenth century, "the markets and resources of the wider world . . . were subject not to any one but rather to a whole cluster of western empires of commerce and navigation. . . . The merchant elites of a dozen western European emporia shared the commerce of the globe." Genoa and Antwerp certainly loomed large in sixteenth-century commerce, in large part because of their service to the largest empire of the age, but cities such as Seville, Venice, Lyon, Augsburg, London, and Lübeck exercised independent regional functions of broad scope. Political, military and economic events converged to put several of these cities under severe pressure in the later sixteenth century, which, in turn, eroded the financial networks that linked them and their many subordinate centers. The uncertainty, but also the opportunity for new initiative, generated by this state of affairs—the prospect for a profound rather than a routine "recentering"—is critical to the crisis concept.[45]

THE CRISIS ECONOMY: GROWTH There are three questions that must be addressed in assessing the economic expansion of the crisis era: (1) Was it merely the flip side of the coin of the distress and

(New York, 1981), 89–276. For a synoptic view, see *idem*, *Afterthoughts on Capitalism and Material Civilization* (Baltimore, 1977), 80–104 (quotation, 85).

44 De Vries, *European Urbanization*, 158–172.

45 Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade, 1585–1740* (New York, 1989), 4; Van der Wee, "Antwoord op een industriele uitdaging: De Nederlandse steden tijdens de late middeleeuwen en nieuwe tijd," *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis*, C (1987), 169–184.

Table 1 Population Trends in Major European Regions

	1500	1550	1600	1650	1700	1750	1800
NW/Med	0.45	0.49	0.53	0.76	0.70	0.69	0.84
NW/RoE	0.14	0.16	0.16	0.24	0.22	0.22	0.26

NOTES NW/Med represents the total population of "northwestern" Europe as a percentage of the population of "Mediterranean" Europe. NW/RoE represents the total population of "northwestern" Europe as a percentage of the population of Europe excepting the northwest. The Northwest encompasses Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Belgium, England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland; the Mediterranean includes Italy, Spain, and Portugal.

decline chronicled above—an opportunistic exploitation of the weak by the strong? (2) Did this expansion have a novel character (of the sort expected by the theories of Schumpeter and Simiand) that led to a new economy? If so, (3) were the elements of decline and of growth connected—joint products of a single phenomenon that can be called a "general crisis"?

The Urban Network Population growth and urbanization are convenient starting points for the description and mapping of European economic development in the crisis era. Table 1 provides a generalized view of the differential population trends of the entire early modern period. It shows that the long-term course of population change in countries of northwestern Europe did not differ greatly from that of the Mediterranean countries either before 1600 or after 1650. But in the first half of the seventeenth century, a sudden and permanent change took place: Northwestern Europe's population rose from one-half to three-quarters of the Mediterranean population. But the shift in relative size was not confined to this comparison. The same shift took place—in relative terms a somewhat larger shift—in the size of northwestern Europe relative to all of the rest of Europe. Here, too, the only significant change in the entire early modern period was concentrated in the first half of the seventeenth century.

An even more dramatic shift occurred in the distribution of Europe's urban population. Table 2 shows the comparisons for urban population (all cities of at least 10,000 inhabitants). Until 1600, northwestern Europe's urban population did not quite keep pace with that of the Mediterranean, and after 1700, the relationship between the two regions hardly changed. But in the course of the seventeenth century, northwestern Europe's larger cities grew

Theory rejected,
1. Growth of urban network.
2. Growth of cities
3. Growth of Atlantic trade
4. Proto-industrial sector perfected paving way to birth of industrial world.

Table 2 Urban Population in Major European Regions

	1500	1550	1600	1650	1700	1750	1800
NW/Med	0.69	0.63	0.60	0.87	1.12	1.15	1.16
NW/RoE	0.19	0.19	0.20	0.36	0.39	0.38	0.47

SOURCES de Vries, *European Urbanization* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 30–37; *idem*, "Population," in Thomas A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy (eds.), *Handbook of European History, 1400–1600* (Leiden, 1994), 13, which provides updated total population data.

from only 60 percent of the aggregate size of the urban Mediterranean to exceed it, reaching 112 percent of the size of the Mediterranean urban sector. Most of this advance was concentrated in the first half of the seventeenth century. The cities in the northwest did not enjoy relative growth only in comparison with the Mediterranean. Their urban growth was even greater relative to the rest of Europe. Northwestern Europe had an aggregate urban population one-fifth the size of the rest of Europe in 1600; a century later, it had reached two-fifths.

The overall population of northwestern Europe grew while elsewhere in Europe it declined or stagnated; the urban populations in the northwest grew even faster, leading to a distinctly higher urbanization rate in the region. But this fact only begins to describe the divergence observable in the seventeenth century, especially in its first half. Outside of northwestern Europe, urban population growth was highly concentrated in a handful of capital cities. Ten such cities, fed by the growing tax revenues of royal governments, added an aggregate of 355,000 inhabitants from 1600 to 1650 (59 percent of their 1600 population), while all other cities of at least 10,000 inhabitants lost a total of 756,000, or 17 percent of their aggregate 1600 population. These ten cities grew from 12 percent to 21 percent of the total urban population of Europe outside the northwest. The capital cities in northwestern Europe also grew. But they were joined by numerous other growing cities, led by fourteen ports. When the four capitals that were also significant ports are added, northwestern Europe's ports accounted for more than the entire aggregate urban growth of the region, increasing from 50 to 72 percent of the region's total urban population.[46]

46 Expressed as the percentage of total population living in cities of at least 10,000 inhabitants, northwestern Europe was 25 percent more urban than the rest of Europe in 1600; by