

II THE GENERAL CRISIS DEBATE

17th Century General Crisis

Lively debate has surrounded the seventeenth-century crisis since the 1950s. One current has argued that the crisis was economic in origin. A second has focused on politics, particularly the mid-century revolts and rebellions. A third current has adopted a sceptical stance towards the very concept of a general crisis.

The economic strand of the debate, in turn, falls into three broad classes: Marxist theories, theories stemming from price historians, and theories that locate the cause of the crisis in long-term ecological or demographic movements.

The Marxist historians of the general crisis saw it as a critical juncture in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. E.Hobsbawm opened the debate in 1954

along these lines,⁵ followed by B. Porshnev, who saw two separate stages of class struggle. The mid-century revolts were a 'lower form of class struggle' between peasants and feudal nobility, which the nobility won by developing the central state. A 'higher' class struggle for control of that new entity then followed, between bourgeoisie and feudal aristocracy.⁶ Variants on these themes followed: M. Hroch and J. Petrán argued that an exogenous contraction in demand triggered the crisis, issuing in rebellions in the west and feudalization in the east.⁷ Class struggle, in other versions, is less important than changes in the forces and relations of production.⁸

All Marxist theories shared two basic elements: the revolts were class conflicts, and the crisis was one of production, part of the transition from feudalism to capitalism.⁹ But there was wide disagreement. Was the primary cause of the crisis changes in production, or in the balance of class power? Which classes were in conflict? Was this the first crisis of rising capitalism or the last crisis of declining feudalism?¹⁰

Another group of economic historians, less theoretically motivated than the Marxists, concentrated on the evidence of price trends, diagnosing the seventeenth century as a period of instability following the sixteenth-century 'price revolution'. P. Chaunu focused on the evidence of Spanish-American trade, whose final two Kondratieff cycles (the violent fluctuations of 1600–20, and the general decline of 1620–50) he identified with the general crisis, possibly as its cause.¹¹ R. Romano broadened the focus to the whole European economy, and to agriculture rather than trade as that economy's largest sector. While underlying structural factors such as the reimposition of serfdom play a role in Romano's theory, a Keynesian demand slump is viewed as the trigger, associated with the monetary upheavals of northern and central Europe in 1619–22.¹²

Finally, a third group of economic theories of the crisis focused on ecological and demographic trends. J. A. Eddy argued that the 'Maunder minimum', the period of low sunspot activity in the seventeenth century, caused lower temperatures and higher precipitation, poorer and later harvests, and a pan-European (even world-wide) subsistence crisis.¹³ E. Le Roy Ladurie argued that the cycles of expansion and contraction in the European economy were caused by an inescapable Malthusian dynamic. When populations hit their production ceilings, they limited their numbers by the 'positive checks' of famine, pestilence and war and the 'preventive checks' of late marriage and low fertility.¹⁴ According to Le Roy Ladurie, Europe reached such a Malthusian ceiling in the seventeenth century, resulting in a protracted crisis of subsistence.¹⁵

The political theories of the crisis have as a rule been less sophisticated and less general than those put forward by economic historians. While even contemporaries were aware of the revolts throughout Europe in the mid-seventeenth century,¹⁶ it took until the mid-twentieth century for historians to overcome their nationalist isolation and tell Europe-wide stories about the remarkable cataract of disorder.¹⁷ Some valuable insights were gained, notably by the first attempt at a political explanation, by H. R. Trevor-Roper, who argued

in 1959 (against Hobsbawm) that the mid-century revolts were not a class struggle, but political conflict between a court faction (which benefited from the growing strength of the Renaissance state) and a country faction (which suffered the consequences).¹⁸ This idea was disputed by historians of other countries, who were quick to point out Trevor-Roper's Anglocentricity, and to substitute the peculiar political conflicts of their own countries as the driving force of the crisis. R.Mousnier argued that the crisis resulted from conflict between nobility and crown over taxes, as in France during the Fronde, while J.Polišenský argued that it was an international crisis confronting absolutism and parliamentarism, as in Central Europe during the Thirty Years' War.¹⁹

These divisions were exploited by the sceptics, who argued that the midseventeenth-century crisis was not unique in early modern Europe, but just another cluster of disorders, no different from similar clusters in previous years. P.Clark, J.H.Elliott, I.Schöffler, and J.Topolski separately pointed out spates of popular revolt and political rebellion at periods other than the 1640s: e.g., in the 1560s and 1590s. The economic decline, also, began at different times in different parts of Europe: in northern Italy in the 1580s, Germany and Austria in the 1620s, France and the Baltic in the 1650s, and Castile in the late seventeenth century. England was only slightly affected, and the Netherlands hardly at all. Topolski argued that the seventeenth century saw not a general economic crisis, but 'consolidation' and the beginning of regional differentiation. Others contended that the evidence is flawed, and too regionally various to support the notion of any simultaneous or widespread economic breakdown.²⁰

Of most interest in the present context are two theories of the crisis, put forward by R.Brenner and N.Steensgaard, that draw together some or all of the strands in the debate surveyed above. Brenner's 1976 article pulled together the three currents of economic theories of the crisis—the Marxist, the price-cyclical, and the ecological-demographic.²¹ Brenner agreed with Romano's emphasis on agriculture, and with Le Roy Ladurie's focus on the relationship between population and resources, but he argued that trade and population cycles did not determine the course of the crisis. Why did the same cycles give rise to different outcomes in different parts of Europe: refeudalization in eastern Europe, peasant farming in France, large commercial estates in England? For Brenner, social structure was the answer: the seventeenth-century crisis was caused by class conflict between lord and peasant, and the differing paths of the crisis were caused by the different relative strengths of these classes in different European societies.

The avenues opened by this analysis were never explored. Historians within national traditions took—sometimes justified—exception to Brenner's delineation of specific national social structures.²² The ensuing debate obscured Brenner's perception that divergent patterns of economic crisis in seventeenth-century Europe may be explained by differences in social structure. The further challenge, of using social structure to explain the divergent patterns of *political*

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crisis (revolt and rebellion), was not taken up. Brenner's approach to the economic crisis was not carried over into the political sphere.

Where Brenner had tried to integrate the different economic theories of the crisis, Steensgaard tried to integrate the political with the economic. He argued that the crisis was caused by changes at the interface of politics and economics, changes in distribution, and redistribution. On the one hand, he saw a redistribution *among* states, with growing North Atlantic trade displacing the declining Spanish American and Mediterranean trade. On the other hand, and most centrally, he saw a redistribution *within* states:

Behind the conflict we find the same thing everywhere, the State's demand for higher revenues... In every case it was the governments that acted in a revolutionary manner: the tax demands disrupted the social balance. They did not create a revolutionary situation: they were in themselves a revolution.²³

Steensgaard deployed evidence of the huge growth in the resources extracted by the early modern European state, and the military, bureaucratic and fiscal pressure necessary to achieve this. But the avenues opened by this approach (as with Brenner's) were never explored.