
AHR Forum
**The General Crisis of the
Seventeenth Century Revisited**

Introduction

Few historical controversies have been as prolonged, wide-ranging, and fruitful as the debate over “the crisis of the seventeenth century.” Initiated by Eric Hobsbawm in a pair of articles appearing in consecutive issues of *Past and Present* in 1954, the theme was picked up by Hugh Trevor-Roper in his rejoinder in the same journal in 1959, and then became the focus of a series of articles by several other historians, again in *Past and Present*, in 1960. But the debate soon transcended the confines of that esteemed journal. Indeed, for the next two decades and more, the seventeenth-century crisis was a staple of research, publishing, and debate among historians across the Western world, and virtually dominated the reading lists of several generations of graduate students in European history. The appeal of this debate was both in the capaciousness of its themes and in the way it managed to touch on so many profound issues, not only in early modern European history but in history *tout court*. The emergence of capitalism, the development of the modern state, the history of revolts and rebellions, population growth, price history, the question of unequal development—these are just some of the subjects that fell within its purview. In addition, the crisis debate drew upon and stimulated some of the best and most interesting new developments in historical methodology, coming from such disparate quarters as British Marxism, historical sociology, the Annales school, the new social history of the 1960s, modernization theory, historical demography, and world systems studies. No wonder the discussion attracted the attention not only of virtually all students of European history but of those across the historical profession as well.

This *AHR* Forum takes a look back at the crisis debate and offers several perspectives on its history, its import, and its contemporary relevance. In the introductory essay, “Crisis, Chronology, and the Shape of European Social History,” Jonathan Dewald surveys its roots and development, taking us from well before the crisis debate proper emerged, to the subsequent fragmentation that undermined its conceptual unity, to more recent attempts to expand and update the notion of a crisis of transition in a globally expanding Europe. He emphasizes both the variety of approaches and the historiographical perspectives that structured the debate, but he also reminds us of the core terms of modernity and economic development that guided the discussion. In “Crisis and Catastrophe: The Global Crisis of the Seventeenth Century Reconsidered,” Geoffrey Parker, who was one of the participants in the crisis debate, adds a global dimension to the discussion, arguing that climate

change supplies the necessary condition for understanding the crisis conditions in many parts of the world. He ends his article with some suggestive comments on the lessons that might be learned today from how people in the seventeenth century reacted to climatic hardship. In the first of two comments, "Locating Linkages or Painting Bull's-Eyes around Bullet Holes? An East Asian Perspective on the Seventeenth-Century Crisis," Michael Marmé both raises questions about the comparative and analytical aspects of the crisis literature and offers empirical evidence regarding the particular experiences of Japan and China in the period. Finally, J. B. Shank takes issue with the concept of "crisis" itself. His critique, "Crisis: A Useful Category of Post-Social Scientific Historical Analysis?" raises fundamental questions about how historians have, often unthinkingly, deployed the term and suggests how it might be understood in more properly historical ways.