

**17TH CENTURY CRISIS IN EUROPE-
THE DEBATE**

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A crisis, by definition, is ideally suited to explaining a transition. A crisis must first arise out of some kind of a steady state which is made acute in a moment of critical decision, all of which is followed by a resolution to a new steady state. What is a better term than crisis to describe changes as momentous as those that ushered in the modern world? The language of crisis had appeal to cultural, demographic, economic, intellectual, political, and social historians alike.

The early seventeenth century in Europe has often been regarded as a period during which a single general crisis afflicted the entire continent to some degree, affecting the economy, demography and the political stability of most countries. Certainly there were problems, with revolts breaking out in France, England, the Spanish Empire and elsewhere, and many areas suffering terrible economic difficulties which were in marked contrast to the steady growth of the economy of the sixteenth century, but to classify all of these under the one heading of a general crisis may be more difficult to justify. The extent to which the problems affected the whole of Europe even call into question the validity of terming it a general crisis, while questions could be asked about how novel the situation of the early 1600s was:-

Whether it was a crisis at all or simply a continuation of normality?

Before dealing with the historiography on the nature of the 17th century crisis, we ought to know as to what caused or what

circumstances prevailed in Europe at that time which gradually changed into a period of 'crisis'?

The vast expansion that began in the second half of fifteenth century slowly came to an end in many European regions between 1600 and 1620. Some parts experienced decelerated growth; some stagnated, while the economies of many other regions witnessed a steady decline. During the 16th century, the center of economic activities and bustling of trade first shifted from the Italian city states in the Mediterranean to the Iberian states of Spain and Portugal.

After 1600, many parts of Europe experienced uprisings, major conflicts and wars and breakdown of political orders. Demographic trends suggest downward movement or stagnation in different parts of Europe.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE- The climatic change and its impact on agriculture across Europe are echoed in the population statistics. The general figures show that the sixteenth century saw a rise to a peak European population of 100 million in 1600, followed by stagnation and then decline to a low of around 80 million some 50 years later. Some areas saw a far more disastrous decline than others, Spain, for example, losing around 1/3rd of its population from 1600 to 1650. Others were more fortunate, some, such as England, actually continuing to see population growth, although this was at a much reduced rate. It can therefore be said that although we cannot speak of a uniform population decline across Europe, the demographic growth of every country in Europe was

slowed or retarded in the 17th century when compared to that of the previous hundred years.

CLIMATIC CHANGE- There is a good deal of evidence that one of the main roots of the economic problems which affected Europe in the early 1600s was some kind of climatic change. Deposits of carbon rose enormously during the seventeenth century, a phenomenon closely associated with a cooling climate, and possibly related to the reduction in the occurrences of sunspots which was recorded at the time. The 'Little Ice Age' is generally reckoned to have seen a fall in temperature across Europe of 10°C, the effect of which "restricts the growing season of plants by three or four weeks and reduces the maximum altitude for cultivation by about 500 feet. In a world in which the vast majority of the population depended directly on agriculture in order to make a living, and where the growth of population which took place in the previous century had driven most of Europe to the limits of subsistence, such a change produced a disastrous relative overpopulation, allowing both starvation and disease to take a heavy toll.

COMBINED EFFECT OF DEMOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE- Agriculture, influenced to a large degree by the difficulties of both demography and climate, suffered in many areas of Europe. As the agricultural labor force declined and the weather generally worsened, yield ratios began to stagnate or decline with worsening harvests, notably in Eastern Europe which had been

the major food-producing region of the continent. In spite of lower production though, food prices actually fell, reaching their peak from the inflation of the sixteenth century during the first decades of the seventeenth and remaining low for the remainder of the century. This points to a decline in demand which was faster than the fall in production, a factor partly explained by falling population levels, but also as a result of "the inability of the population to buy food grains and their inability to survive."

INCREASE IN CESSES- One of the main reasons behind this inability to buy food grains was the increasing burden of tax. From the 1580s, Europe moved into an era of greater international hostility, with wars occurring more frequently and becoming increasingly costly to fight. As each country's military capacity increased, others had to follow in order to compete, and a form of arms race developed in which the size of armies rose dramatically. The Spanish army, which in 1550 had stood at 150,000 men rose to 300,000 by the 1630s, the French increased from 50,000 to 150,000, and the English from 20,000 in 1550 to 70,000 in 1650. The only way to pay for all this was through higher taxation: in Spain taxes increased fivefold under Philip II, in France the tax burden quintupled between 1609 and 1648. Since it tested the capacity of both rich and poor to contribute to the unprecedented demands of the state, government taxes became the crucial ingredient of crisis.

The state, and in particular the military, became the major buyer in the market, but was interested in war industries rather than

those which had served domestic demand. This shift of demand seriously de-stabilized national economies, causing unemployment at a time when money was short as a result of a depressed agricultural market and high taxes, and caused a further fall in living standards. All areas suffered some problems, the most severe coming in the traditional Mediterranean centers, but the industry of England and the Netherlands hardly saw any decline at all, England's production actually increasing on the strength of the new draperies. In addition, decline in the urban centers came at the same time as an increased tendency to 'put out' work to rural industry, the increase of which went largely unrecorded.

The overall economy of Europe during the first half of the seventeenth century did see a number of problems which in many areas combined to make up a local crisis. The climatic change, which affected Europe more-or-less evenly, affected demography and to a lesser extent agriculture to varying degrees (although all areas suffered, some were harder-hit than others), also the increased burden of taxes and high rate of unemployment proved to be a catalyst in bringing about the 17th century crisis.

The impact of the 17th century crisis is dealt further in detail at the end of this assignment.

THE DEBATE

Several scholars describe the 17th century as a period of crisis. A debate has been going on among historians on the nature and the scale of the problems that Europe experienced. Though the debate is still alive, the majority of scholars believe that the 17th century was a period of crisis. Further discussions are elaborated below.

The term was coined by English Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm in his pair of 1954 articles entitled "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century" published in *Past and Present*, and cemented by his contemporary, Hugh Trevor-Roper, in a 1959 article entitled "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century" published in the same journal. Hobsbawm discussed an economic crisis in Europe; Trevor-Roper saw a wider crisis, "a crisis in the relations between society and the State"

Trevor-Roper argued that the middle years of the 17th century in Western Europe saw a widespread break-down in politics, economics and society caused by a complex series of demographic, religious, economic and political problems. In this "general crisis", various events such as the English Civil War, the Fronde in France, the climax of the Thirty Years War in Holy Roman Empire and revolts against the Spanish Crown in Portugal, Naples and Catalonia were all manifestations of the same problem. The most important cause of the "general crisis", in Trevor-Roper's opinion, was the conflict between "Court" and "Country"; i.e. between the increasingly powerful centralizing, bureaucratic, sovereign princely states represented by the court, and the traditional, regional, land-based aristocracy and gentry representing the country. In addition, the intellectual and

religious changes introduced by the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation were important secondary causes of the "general crisis".

The "general crisis" thesis generated much controversy between those, such as the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who believed in the "general crisis" thesis but saw the problems of 17th-century Europe as being more social and economic in origin than Trevor-Roper would allow, and those who simply denied there was any "general crisis".

Current historians interested in the General Crisis include Geoffrey Parker, who has authored a book on the subject.

It is generally accepted by historians that there was a crisis' that blanketed all of Europe during the 17th century. A myriad of revolts, uprisings and economic contractions occurred almost simultaneously and had a profound impact on the socio-economics of the entire continent. Eric Hobsbawm's, theory states that the 17th century crisis was the catalyst for the transition from feudal society to capitalism in England and ultimately the genesis of the industrial revolution. Hobsbawm argues that it was the crisis of the 17th century, particularly the Puritan Revolution, which enabled capitalism to escape the confines of feudalism and flourish as the dominant ism' in England. Hobsbawm offers the 17th century crisis as the watershed responsible for the transformation

Hugh Trevor-Roper in his book "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century" instead focused on confrontations that pitted the Renaissance fiscal, political, intellectual, and moral

system (court) against reform-minded opponents (country). This "crisis in the relations between society and the State" eventually spawned the Enlightenment and a range of radical, stabilizing, and indecisive political initiatives.

Both articles inspired searching critiques as well as widespread approval. Early modernists have questioned the generality, severity, and duration of crisis proposed in each hypothesis. The Soviet historian A. D. Lublinskaya contended that the heterogeneity of economic structures and trends across Europe precluded the appearance of general crisis on any level. Like Roger B. Merriman, who's earlier work--*Six Contemporaneous Revolutions*--found that only chronology linked mid-seventeenth-century revolts. Nor did all social groups experience crisis: wage-earners, for example, saw their living standards improve. Immanuel Wallerstein maintains that economic downturn represented only a phase of contraction and consolidation within a capitalist world-system that had already substantially come into existence during the sixteenth century. Many Dutch historians minimize the extent of distress faced by the Dutch Republic during its "Golden Age," and England's economy--as opposed to political problems--have been presented as relatively mild and short-lived.

Capitalism during the 17th century is generally described as a parasite operating under the constraints of a feudal apparatus. Hobsbawm held that if "capitalism is to rise, feudal or agrarian society must be revolutionized". In his paper *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*, he outlined the criteria necessary for capitalism to become dominate. First, there must be enough

accumulated capital to fund capitalistic expansion. Second there must be increase in the division of labor so production can increase to capitalistic levels. A large quantity of wage earners who exchange their monies for goods and service at market is also required. And lastly, the current colonial system must be revolutionized as well.

HISTORICAL VIEWS OF THE 17TH CENTURY CRISIS

ECONOMIC CRISIS

England and Netherlands overcame the crisis and took over the economic leadership of Europe. England crossed the obstacles and became the first industrial capitalist society. In France industrial capitalism was delayed by a century and even further in Poland, Spain, and Italy. Carlo Maria Cipolla has commented on this that 17th century was a black century for Spain, Italy and Germany and at least a grey one for France, but for Holland it was the golden age, and for England if not golden at least silver. This not so colorful explanation is denied many scholars.

Neils Steensgaard believed that there was a fall in the rate of growth of the European economy. While Jan De Vries believed that a type of Malthusian crisis of population pressing upon a fixed ceiling of agricultural prices rose and most classes suffered a drastic reduction of purchasing power.

According to many scholars there was a shift in population from southern Europe towards the channel region. Population decline has been attributed to several factors such as thirty years war, epidemics like bubonic plague, small pox, typhus and influenza. This along with the absence of knowledge of medicine was the other factors. Cipolla believed that a decline in birth rate resulted partly from a change in the moral attitude, a system of conscious family planning, and by way of late marriages (therefore fewer births).

The European trade and industry was hit by depression but at different times. The demographic trends and agricultural prices and production indicate that there was something seriously wrong with the 17th century European economy.

POLITICAL CRISIS

The English Marxist historian Christopher Hill believed that there was an economic and political crisis all over western and central Europe in the 17th century. The crisis of the 17th century was of long duration, although the timing varied in different countries. Reactions to this crisis took very different forms in different countries and were influenced by differing national circumstances, which in turn must be analyzed in relation to social and political structures and to religious institutions and beliefs. It affected countries unequally and while some never recovered, others suffered temporary setbacks.

The non-Marxists historians and among them Hugh Redwald Trevor-Roper has seen the political upheavals of the mid-17th century as a watershed between one age and another, the renaissance and enlightenment, a crisis caused by basic defect in the pre-existing political structure which made it incapable of withstanding the strains imposed upon it. H.R.Trevor Roper interpreted neither the crisis of 17th century as merely a constitutional crisis nor a crisis of economic production, but a crisis in the expansion, and wastefulness of a parasitic state apparatus and in the size and cost of the court.

The more successful societies of Holland, England and France, adjusted to the situation by increasing their economic resources, partially by the application of mercantilist ideas. In England the crisis was the result of a conflict between the Puritan minded opposition, and a parasitical bureaucracy created by the renaissance state. As the central governments grew, the parasitic and overloaded government generated increasing resentment among those left outside the favored circle. They were tolerated as long as prosperity lasted. But in the second quarter of the 17th century, a new puritanism, which was not a religious doctrine, but an ascetic distaste for court extravagances, created a deep chasm between the court and the country.

Roland Mousnier and John Elliot have made amendments to this view. Mousnier stressed that sometimes office holders themselves rose against the state while Eliot believed that Spain's difficulties were due to the struggle between the peripheral regions and the center rather than dislike of an overloaded court. Though Ropers "general crisis" theory can be applied to every

revolt, the revolts were by no means directed against a stagnating parasitism but against a dynamic absolutism, which, its policy of taxation, violated the customary laws and threatened to disrupt the social balance or deprive apart of the population of their livelihood.

Both Elliot and Mousnier have stressed on the pressures of war. In fact, Vicens Vives and F.C.Lane regarded the modern state as primarily a war making machine. According to Vives, the 16th century renaissance state was a product of international warfare and internal disorder, its most striking manifestation being the standing army, often composed of foreign mercenaries. These historians indicated have indicated war, and taxes and its manifestations as contributory causes of the economic difficulties and social conflicts of the 17th century.

But J.H.Elliot firmly believed that with regard to Spain, it was the proportion of revenue devoted to military purpose, rather than the expenses of court and government, which was of significance. The diversion of money away from economically productive fields of investment can be explained if we look at the crippling difficulties that attended the industrial development and commercial expansion in Castile.

ABSOLUTIST PERSPECTIVE

The establishment of absolutism in several European states is generally taken as a direct sign of economic weakness. In his

Peasant Uprisings, Mousnier saw the connection between the taxation pressure and the revolts. According to him, the increased fiscal demand hit all social groups, and so is of decisive importance in the revolt of the peasants in the 17th century France. Mousnier defended the government foreign policy as being a political necessity.

The soviet historian Porshnev believed that the wars were responsible for the subjection of the exploited class. Though Mousnier and Porshnev's viewpoints are contradictory, they both believed that the government is an institution that acts rationally in the interest of either a nation or of a social class.

CAPITALISTIC PERSPECTIVE

The Marxist hypothesis is propounded by Eric Hobsbawm who has seen the problem in primarily in economic terms. The 'abnormal' clustering of revolutions between 1640 and 1660, are regarded as one of the recurrent periods of crisis in the development of modern capitalism between c.1300 and the 18th century. Thus, for Hobsawm the crisis was one of production.

The crisis of production was general in Europe, but it was only in England that the forces of capitalism, owing to their greater development and representation in the parliament, were able to triumph. Consequently while other countries made no immediate advance towards modern capitalism, in England, the old feudal structure was shattered and a new form of economic organization was established.

According to Hobsbawm, the crisis brought about a new concentration of capital and cleared the way for the industrial revolution. The implication is that the troubles of the 17th century somehow set clear what was right with the economy in the previous period, removed obstacles, and allowed a new economic situation to emerge from the earlier crisis. In short, it overcame the difficulties which had stood in the way of capitalism. Moreover, when viewed from a Marxist perspective, this transition is presented as a decisive stage in the progression from feudalism to capitalism.

Another historian, Earl J Hamilton has emphasized the production aspect of the crisis. According to him when prices are high, and cost of production increases, more people are encouraged to invest in production. Therefore the only way the economic growth of the 16th century could have taken place and have sustained itself was by continuing to inject money into the economy of Europe.

Witold Kula, in response to Hamilton's price theory explains that production responds to rising price only under capitalism, when factors of production (land and labor) are freely available as commodities, and can be purchased with money and organized to any specification.

The first impetus behind historiographical revival came from the French journal *Annales*, founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch. The *Annales* school adopted what was regarded as the 'interdisciplinary approach' i.e. study of various disciplines-geography, history and sciences-to arrive at the conclusion that

factors like biological and climatic changes determine the size of the population and sustain it. So when there was a great increase in population, and as the availability of fresh lands ended the fragmentation of farms took place. Exhaustion of soil resulted in declining harvests. Famines and diseases destroyed human life. There was a contraction of economic life.

The second major impetus was centered around the English Journal Past and Present founded in 1952 by the Oxford and the Cambridge Scholars. Crisis in Europe 1560-1600, edited by Trevor Aston, is the first book of essays which discuss the crisis thesis. Christopher Hill has stated in it, that now a basis of agreement may have been reached on some features of the 17th century history.

The problem, according to Hill, lay within the feudal mode of production, the limitation of the feudal market, the unproductive nature of feudal relations of production, and the role of feudal state in maintain these conditions. Summing up the problem was 'the limits to the development of capitalism within the feudal framework'.

IMPACT OF THE CRISIS

The 17th century crisis brought about significant changes in Europe but its impact was far from uniform. On the one hand it created conditions for a new phase of expansion by removing tensions within the productive sectors and restoring balance

between population and food supplies, and on the other hand it fastened feudal grip over a sizeable population of Europe.

DEMOGRAPHIC TERMS

When considering the impact in demographic terms, the crisis resulted in high mortality in several parts of the continent. The impact was greater in urban centers. The demographic losses caused extensive dislocation of trade and industry. Prolonged wars accompanied by natural calamities like plague epidemics and famines, caused extensive dislocation of social life. Most of the battles in the thirty years war were fought in central Europe. the population loses varied from 25% to 40%. It took another half century for Europe to recover from the demographic loses.

ECONOMIC TERMS

Military operations, economic disruptions and population loses caused a severe strain on government resources. It placed heavy strain on already burdened economy of Europe by increasing the burden of taxation on the lower classes. Except for England the crisis led to the extension of power of the rulers over their subjects to extract the maximum from all possible sources.

One of the most important developments in the post-crisis period was the shift away from the continental countries towards the sea powers of the north-west. The gap between the eastern and western regions was further widened during the 17th century.

Another important consequence of the crisis was the displacement of industry to the countryside and the spread of proto-industrialization in some parts of western and central Europe. This marked the first phase of industrialization. Many of the manufacturers and the entrepreneurs moved to the countryside because of the rising labor costs in the urban centers and began to depend on cheaper rural labor. The declining prices further turned them towards mass production to reduce the unit costs by higher output, thereby increasing profits by means of large turnovers. This resulted in the manufacture of inexpensive draperies instead of more expensive cloth. The third means of increasing their profits was to expand the volume of trade with the colonial world to compensate the reduced demand in the domestic markets.

This trend resulted in profound transformation in urban industrial organizations which now faced competition from rural industries and in 18th century the guilds began losing their economic significance.

Scholars suggest that it was the improved technology of England, the Netherlands and the northern France that enabled them to overcome the problem of low prices and make substantial economic progress. Robert Brenner and Pierre Vilar emphasize the role of a strong feudal structure in preventing the progress of capitalism. as labor in lands remained tied up in petty production, heavy feudal exaction and the exploitative role of feudal monarchies played a vital role in prolonging such conditions. This situation led to stagnation of technology and kept the market structure extremely limited.

For capitalism to develop, it was necessary for peasants to turn into landless laborers. This situation developed in England where peasant unity had given way to social differentiation consisting of different layers of peasantry but in other places, the absolute monarchs protected small peasants in order to remain in power.

SOCIAL TERMS

The long and continuous war had created a serious shortage of labor, which was needed to work on demesne lands. The demographic losses had made labor very costly. In such situations, the lords instead of hiring fresh labor to work in their private lands opted to utilize the existing serfs by placing additional responsibilities on them.

Thus, whereas in Western Europe the extension of the demesne was carried out through impetus towards capitalism, in Eastern Europe, because of chronic shortage of manpower, it led to strengthening and consolidation of serfdom. Hence the gap between eastern and western Europe was greatly widened after the 17th century crisis.

CONCLUSION

Numerous empirical and theoretical aspects of the seventeenth-century crisis therefore remain subject to debate. Moreover, neither Hobsbawm's Marxist teleological stage

theory of economic development nor Trevor-Roper's court/country distinction, command much assent today. But the concept widely continues to stimulate new research and new explanations of existing data. As a result, the outlines of a new interpretation are beginning to appear. It emphasizes continuities--for example, the acceleration of previously initiated regional differentiation, agrarian specialization, commercialization, and ruralization of industry. And while contributing to the role it played in changing the path of history or as some scholars suggests being a 'catalyst' in bringing the pre-industrial era it thereby contributes to a more discriminating understanding of both the significance of the seventeenth century and the nature of crisis in the early modern world.