

# INTRODUCTION: CRISIS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY?

**Figure 1:** “The Old Exchange at Amsterdam,” by Adriaensz Job Berckheyde, an artist from Haarlem. This scene was described thus in 1747 by Charles Louis Pollnitz:

I went to see the square where the merchants assemble about the affairs of their trade from noon till half past one o'clock. This square, which is longer than it is broad, is surrounded by a large open gallery or corridor, supported by stone pillars, which serves as shelter in case of rain. This place is called the Exchange, and here are to be seen merchants of all nations, the diversity of whose clothes and language is no less pleasing than the beauty of the place. Above all, nothing is more interesting than to witness the hurrying of those who are called brokers, who are the men employed by the great merchants to traffic for the bills of exchange, or to transact their other affairs to see them scurrying from one part to another all over this square, anyone would think that they were mad.

The work of historians of European price trends between the two world wars<sup>1</sup> along with the theory of secular economic cycles (trends that go up and down over approximately 250 years) with its two phases (A and B), elaborated by François Simiand<sup>2</sup> have bequeathed us a generalization about early modern European history that still seems largely accepted: There was expansion in the sixteenth century (phase A) and contraction, depression, or “crisis” in the seventeenth (phase B). The dates that demark these phases, the nature of the changes that occurred (even if we limit the discussion to economic matters), the regional variations, and above all, the consequences and causes of the flows are matters of much debate; but the generalization remains.

In 1953, Roland Mousnier wrote a large tome on these two centuries (which has since seen four revised editions), and he opened the part on the seventeenth century, defined as the period between 1598 and 1715, in a dramatically tremolent tone:

The seventeenth century is the epoch of a crisis that affected man in his entirety, in all his activities—economic, social, political, religious, scientific, artistic—and in all his being, at the deepest level of his vital powers, his feelings, and his will. The crisis may be said to be continuous, but with violent ups and downs.<sup>3</sup>

A year after this was written, E. J. Hobsbawm published an article in *Past and Present* that launched an important scholarly debate. The thesis was that “the European economy passed through a ‘general crisis’ during the seventeenth century, the last phase of the general transition from a feudal to a capitalist economy.”<sup>4</sup>

The same theme is found in the major surveys of European agriculture by Wilhelm Abel and B. H. Slicher van Bath. For Abel, “the dominant tendency of prices in Europe, during the second half of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries, was downward.”<sup>5</sup> To be sure, Slicher van Bath hesitates at using the word *crisis*, asserting that the period between 1650 and 1750 was “more truly an unusually prolonged depression”;<sup>6</sup> but is that so much less? In any case, he does not disagree with Abel’s assertion that the period represented a “reversal of the secular trend.”<sup>7</sup> We could enlarge the scholarly consensus further if we used still

<sup>1</sup> See the bibliography accompanying the article by Braudel and Spooner (1967, 605–615).

<sup>2</sup> See Simiand (1932b).

<sup>3</sup> Mousnier (1967, 161).

<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawm (1965, 5).

<sup>5</sup> Abel (1973, 221). The first German edition of Abel’s survey appeared in 1935 and the second, revised and augmented, in 1966. Abel says that the “general framework was kept” but that “the depressions of the fourteenth-fifteenth and of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries are interpreted as periods of slowdown, and subdivided as much as

possible” (1973, 6). Presumably, Abel believes there was an upturn between the two depressions.

<sup>6</sup> Slicher van Bath (1963a, 206). Two more recent surveys (Cipolla, 1974, 12; Davis, 1973b, 108) are equally reluctant to use the word *crisis*, although, as Cipolla adds: “At the bottom of every simplification there is always a grain of truth.”

<sup>7</sup> This wording appears in the title of Part II, ch. V (Abel, 1973, 206). Pierre Chaunu uses a similar phrase, “the reversal of the principal tendency of prices and activities,” in the title of an article on the seventeenth century (1962b).

more cautious language. Pierre Vilar speaks of "the relative retreat (*recul*) of the seventeenth century";<sup>8</sup> and Pierre Chaunu defines the difference between periods A and B not as "growth [versus] decline (*décroissance*)" but rather as "growth [versus] less growth."<sup>9</sup> René Baehrel is the most reluctant to see any crisis at all; but even he accepts the concept for the very limited period between 1690 and 1730.<sup>10</sup> As the terms get weaker and the time shorter, we may wonder if much is left. Ivo Schöffer begins his article on this period on a note of doubt:

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."<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps this is only because, as Jean Meuvret argued in 1944, "we have much less information" about the period between the two moments of clear price rise.<sup>12</sup> Shall we then refuse to characterize this period and allow it to slip away in the complexities of blurred and sometimes confusing data? Or shall we say, with Schöffer: "It may be traditionalism, against our better judgment, but we simply have to give the seventeenth century a place of its own. Our imagination needs it."<sup>13</sup>

We could leave such a decision to the whims of literary fashion were it not for the important theoretical issues behind the fuss about nomenclature. There is, first of all, the question of whether such things as "secular trends" of the economy exist at all,<sup>14</sup> and if so, how they relate to politics and culture. If there are secular trends, does each successive pair of phases (from the Middle Ages to the present) reflect a different kind of economy,

<sup>8</sup> Vilar (1974, 46), who defines his period as starting between 1598 and 1630 and ending between 1680 and 1725.

<sup>9</sup> Chaunu (1962b, 224). This comes close to Simiand's original description of phase B: "not the inverse of what occurred in phase A, but . . . an attenuated increase or a stabilization, and no longer a continuation of the rise" (1932b, 649).

<sup>10</sup> Baehrel (1961, 29), who, like Chaunu, notes that phase B is not necessarily a decline and can simply be a lower rate of growth (1961, 51). Others agree that this period is particularly severe. Le Roy Ladurie specifies "the two or three last decades of the [seventeenth] century" (1973, 431). Jacquot dates it from 1680 to 1710 (1978a, 385). Morineau, however, finds "a large number of signs that are positive (*de bon allant*)" between 1660 and 1700 (1978f, 523).

<sup>11</sup> Schöffer (1966, 82). Vague terms can always be rejected as the historian's dramatic flourish. "It is a telling comment on the historian's attachment to change that almost every historical period has, at one time or another, been categorized as 'a time of transition'" (Supple, 1959, 135).

<sup>12</sup> Meuvret (1944, 110). See the similar complaint that opens Murdo MacLeod's book on Spanish Central America: "The seventeenth century was characterized some time ago as 'Latin America's forgotten century'" (1973, xi)—a reference to the article by Leslie Boyd Simpson entitled "Mexico's Forgotten Century" (1953). J. V. Polišínský, in the same vein, observes that "historians of the social, economic and Marxist schools have been concerned primarily with the 'more revolutionary' sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and have cast little light on the seventeenth" (1971, 2). William Bouwsma calls the seventeenth century "in an historiographical sense . . . an underdeveloped borderland between two overdeveloped areas" (1970, 1).

<sup>13</sup> Schöffer (1966, 83).

<sup>14</sup> François Crouzet referred in 1971 to "obsolete concepts like Simiand's A and B phases" (1971, 147). A similar attack, this time from the left, was made by Gilles Postel-Vinay: "A and B phases . . . have proved to be a sure way of ignoring the real problems posed by the analysis of ground rent" (1974, 78).

as Gaston Imbert argues?<sup>15</sup> or are they all part of one long period of “indirect agricultural consumption” running from about 1150 to about 1850, as Slicher van Bath argues?<sup>16</sup> or is there a crucial rupture somewhere in the middle? If there is a crucial rupture, we are faced with the additional question of when it occurs.

There are several familiar positions on this last question. One is that the fundamental break, the significant rupture, occurs with the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century. To Carlo Cipolla both this “event” and the Agricultural Revolution of the eighth millennium B.C. represent “deep breaches in the continuity of the historical process.”<sup>17</sup> D. C. Coleman makes the same point in a different way and says there is more continuity than change in European economic development from 1500 to 1750: “Where light breaks through, the technology of 1500–1750 is revealed to be, on the whole, more static than mobile.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly a whole school of Marxist thought arrives at the same conclusion regarding the timing of any rupture, insisting, as does Balibar, that period between 1500 and 1750 is the period of the “transition to capitalism” and that after 1750 is the period of capitalism proper.<sup>19</sup> In the same spirit as Balibar is G. N. Clark’s distinction

<sup>15</sup> G. Imbert, in his book on long waves (1959), distinguishes four secular trends, each corresponding to a form of economy:

1250—medieval economy  
1507/1510—mercantilist economy  
1733/1743—capitalist economy  
1896—planned economy

<sup>16</sup> Slicher van Bath (1963a, Pt. III).

<sup>17</sup> Cipolla (1964, 31).

<sup>18</sup> Coleman (1959, 506). This is an article reviewing the third volume of *History of Technology*, which Coleman offers as evidence for his proposition. See also Le Roy Ladurie (1977) on “motionless history” between 1300–1320 and 1720–1730.

<sup>19</sup> Many Marxists assume this periodization. But Etienne Balibar self-consciously makes the theoretical distinction between a “period of transition” and one in which a mode of production prevails or is “dominant” (1968, 217–226).

An intra-Marxist debate that discussed this question of periodization with clarity appeared in *Labour Monthly* in 1940–1941. The debate revolved around one of Christopher Hill’s earliest writings on the English revolution. Peter Field criticizes Hill’s assessment of pre-1640 England as “still essentially feudal.” For Field, Marx had said quite clearly that sixteenth-century England was “definitely bourgeois, that is capitalist,” and “Marx is right: the sixteenth-century society is a bourgeois society.” Indeed Queen Elizabeth “was the most prominent capitalist in capitalist bourgeois society—comparable to Leopold of Belgium” (Field, 1940a, 558). Douglas Garman replies that Field “mistakes

the egg for the chicken” and that if the bourgeois revolution had already occurred before 1640, “one can only ask, When?” (Garman, 1940, 652). Field responds that Mr. Garman “forgets that conception and birth are not identical” and that “beginning with the War of the Roses—the mass-suicide of the feudalists which the bourgeoisie utilised to implant its roots firmly—[and] proceeding by way of peasant revolts, the confiscation of the Church lands, the Pilgrimage of Grace, [and] the rising of the northern earls, bourgeois society came into being” (Field, 1940b, 654–655).

Thereupon, Dona Torr takes up the cudgels with a very explicit theorization of stages. Field’s error, she says, is to assume that society goes straight from feudalism to capitalism, thus “ignoring the intermediate stages of small commodity production, essential to capitalist development.” She says that the “final form of capitalist society” exists only with the Industrial Revolution, 400 years after the “breaking down” of English manorial economy in the fourteenth century (Torr, 1941, 90).

Maurice Dobb, writing on the same issue as Dona Torr, takes an intermediate position. On the one hand, he does not agree with Torr on dating capitalism as of the Industrial Revolution. If one did this, he says, “how could the seventeenth-century struggle be treated as a bourgeois-democratic revolution when it came a century and a half before the rise of capitalist production?” Furthermore, he says, to argue that “Tudor and Stuart England was an epoch of ‘merchant capitalism’ by contrast with later ‘industrial capitalism’ is to evade

between the “early capitalism” of the later Middle Ages and the “fully developed capitalism” of the nineteenth century, the limits of the first stage being clearly demarked “from Machiavelli to Burke, from Columbus to Warren Hastings, from the Fuggers to the decline of Amsterdam, from Giotto to Tiepolo. It stops short of Adam Smith, James Watt, the Rothschilds, Napoleon, Robert Owen.”<sup>20</sup>

To another school of thought, the rupture involves not the Industrial Revolution, but the expansion of Europe, the creation of a world market, and the emergence of capitalism—occurring more or less in the long sixteenth century. Simiand, for example, marks the sixteenth century as the beginning of the period of long waves.<sup>21</sup> Paul Sweezy attacks the Marxist tradition represented by Balibar and argues that for Marx “the period of manufacture proper” (from about 1500 to 1750) and “the period of modern industry” were not “two different social systems but rather two phases of capitalism.”<sup>22</sup> The rupture thus comes in the sixteenth century. Fernand Braudel makes essentially the same point, although spreading the period over more time:

It is clear, in fact, that from an economic point of view, the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries constitute more or less a period of European and world history which effectively challenges [*met en cause*] a kind of economic *Ancien Régime*.<sup>23</sup>

A third group offers a point of rupture between the period marked by the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, on the one hand, and that marked by the long sixteenth century, on the other. They suggest the mid-seventeenth century as the turning point of modernity. Hobsbawm seems to be in this camp, and Pierre Chaunu makes this position virtually the theme of his synthesis regarding “classical Europe.” In the introduction to his book, he specifically rejects the points of view of scholars who fail to see that the “intellectual origins of the French Revolution” are to be found in Spinoza and who forget that the “quantitative and spatial expansion” of

the issue.” Dobb’s solution is to argue that at this time, “the *relations* of production [may be said to have changed] even if the *productive forces* retained their medieval shape.” Ergo it would be correct to characterize sixteenth-century England as one whose “mode of production was *already in process of transformation* into a capitalist one” (Dobb, 1941, 92). While Dobb’s formulation avoids the crude trap into which Dona Torr’s formulation readily leads, it is ultimately not really different from her idea, as Dobb’s own subsequent work reveals.

Hill published an article several years later on Marx and Engels’s views on the English Revolution; he argues that the “Marxist concept of bourgeois revolution” is one wherein “the feudal state is overthrown by the middle class that was grown up inside it, and a new state created as the instrument of

bourgeois rule.” Hill lists as examples, both successful and unsuccessful, the German reformation (“first onslaught of the bourgeois spirit on the old order”); the Netherlands Revolt (“first successful bourgeois revolution on a national scale”); the English Revolution of 1640; the French Revolution of 1789; the abortive German Revolution of 1848; and the Russian revolutions of 1905 and February 1917 (1948, 135). This article concentrates on political manifestations and power, skirting direct description of the economy. It thus fails to come to grips with the position put forward by Field.

<sup>20</sup> G. N. Clark (1960, 10–11).

<sup>21</sup> Simiand (1932a, 3).

<sup>22</sup> Sweezy (1972a, 129).

<sup>23</sup> Braudel (1974, 6).

the sixteenth century was not a truly profound change but merely the “end result of a revolution begun in the twelfth century.” For Chaunu, “the most important qualitative changes occurred in the seventeenth century,” the first among them being the “mathematization of the world.”<sup>24</sup> As proof that one can find Marxists on every side of every question, one advocate of this third possible rupture point is Academician E. M. Zhukov of the USSR, who asserted to assembled world historians in Stockholm in 1960:

The conventional and terminal boundary of the medieval era, in the opinion of Soviet historical Science, is the middle of the seventeenth century. This is because feudalism began outliving itself economically by that time and was already a handicap to the development of productive forces.<sup>25</sup>

Three dates, then, for a rupture: around 1500, 1650, and 1800; three (or more) theories of history: 1800, with an emphasis on industrialism as the crucial change; 1650, with an emphasis either on the moment when the first “capitalist” states (Britain and the Netherlands) emerge or on the emergence of the presumably key “modern” ideas of Descartes, Leibnitz, Spinoza, Newton, and Locke; and 1500, with an emphasis on the creation of a capitalist *world-system*, as distinct from other forms of economies. It follows that the answer one gives to the query, “crisis of the seventeenth century?”, is a function of one’s presuppositions about the modern world. The term *crisis* ought not to be debased into a mere synonym for *cyclical shift*. It should be reserved for times of dramatic tension that are more than a conjuncture and that indicate a turning point in structures of *longue durée*.

Crisis would then describe those infrequent historical moments in which the usual mechanisms of compensation within a social system prove so ineffective from the point of view of so many important social actors that a major restructuring of the economy begins to occur (not a mere redistribution of advantage within the system), which is later seen in retrospect as having been inevitable. Of course a given crisis was not truly inevitable; but the alternative was a collapse of the old system such that many (most?) social actors considered this even more traumatic or disagreeable than the structural revolution which did take place. If this is what we mean by crisis, then “crisis of the seventeenth century?” becomes a significant intellectual question. It really means, from this perspective: When and how did the world-historic “transition from feudalism to capitalism” occur? The answer requires a definition of capitalism as a social system, as a mode of production, and, indeed, as a civilization as well. As we choose our dates, so we choose our scale of similarities and differences.

The argument of this work is that the modern world-system took the form of a capitalist world-economy that had its genesis in Europe in the long

<sup>24</sup> Chaunu (1966a, 20–21).

as the turning point and says that the Russians do not agree.

<sup>25</sup> Zhukov (1960, 85). Zhukov specifically takes note that some Marxists fix the French Revolution

sixteenth century and that involved the *transformation* of a particular redistributive or tributary mode of production, that of feudal Europe (Braudel's "economic *Ancien Régime*") into a qualitatively different social system. Since that time, the capitalist world-economy has (a) geographically expanded to cover the entire globe; (b) manifested a cyclical pattern of expansion and contraction (Simiand's phases A and B) and shifting geographical locations of economic roles (the rise and fall of hegemonies, the movements up and down of particular core, peripheral, and semiperipheral zones); and (c) undergone a process of secular transformation, including technological advance, industrialization, proletarianization, and the emergence of structured political resistance to the system itself—a transformation that is still going on today.

In such a perspective, the seventeenth century, taken to cover a period running approximately from 1600 to 1750, is primarily an example of the cyclical pattern of expansion and contraction. In terms of the overall geography of the world-system, the boundaries created circa 1500 did not significantly change until after 1750. As for the ongoing secular processes of change, no marked qualitative leap is observable in the period from 1600 to 1750. We are arguing, therefore, for the essential *continuity* between the long sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, with the one great difference of expansion (a) and contraction (B), of growth and less growth. How shall we provide evidence for this way of summarizing reality? At one level the answer is quite simple. We shall try to identify the empirical differences between expansion and contraction, to suggest why this cyclical pattern occurs, and to outline the consequences in terms of class-formation, political struggles, and cultural perceptions of the turn in economic fortune. From this empirical description, we shall try to specify more clearly the theory of capitalist development as part of a larger theory of sociohistorical change.

We are arguing that although the boundaries of the world-economy remained largely the same in the period from 1500 to 1750, there was a difference between the periods of 1450 (or 1500) to 1650 and 1600 to 1750 (the overlap in dates is deliberate) regarding allocation of resources, economic roles, and wealth and poverty and location of wage employment and industrial enterprise. To demonstrate this assertion is not easy; a convincing proof requires the construction of several entirely new series of economic indicators, which would be intrinsically difficult and extrinsically perhaps impossible. We might want a series of successive synchronic maps at intervals of 25 years that would show the volume, value, and direction of trade in both luxuries and essentials and "cumulative" maps for 1500–1650 and 1600–1750. Presumably, if our guesses are correct, such maps should show that European trade involving primarily essentials rather than luxuries was carried on within boundaries that lay between eastern Europe, on the one side, and Russia and the Turkish Balkans on the other, and between the

Christian and the Moslem Mediterraneans; and these boundaries would include the Americas but exclude Africa and Asia.

Above all, the maps should show no significant differences of pattern between the period of 1500 to 1650 and that of 1600 to 1750 with regard to external boundaries, except for the inclusion of the Caribbean, as we shall see. On the other hand, we should find certain significant changes with regard to economic, political, and cultural patterns *within* the boundaries of the European world-economy between the two periods. The location and concentration of industries should be different (or at least in the process of changing), as should the terms of trade between industry and agriculture, the percentages of wage employment in the various zones, and the real wages of wage earners. Different state-machineries should be getting stronger and weaker, and the rates of increase in agricultural, industrial, and demographic production should shift. The areas that were core, semiperipheral, and peripheral should change somewhat, and most importantly, the relative degree of world surplus appropriated by each of the regions should shift.

Even before specifying the anticipated directions of change, given our theory of capitalist development, it should be clear to the reader that quantitative data of the kind required are scarce—at best, partial and sporadic. Particularly lacking are *overall* data on the world-economy that would permit testing *relational* statements. If one dreams of making firm statements regarding variables of the social structure, the situation is even worse. We ought to find shifting patterns of class-formation and changes in the definition of ethno-national boundaries between the two periods of 1500 to 1650 and 1600 to 1750, especially within the world-economy as a whole rather than within the boundaries of particular states, and here our data are even thinner. At this point, all we can do is analyze scattered data, sketch out what seems more and less solid, review explanatory models that encompass the data, suggest a theoretical view, and arrive at some notion of our empirical lacunae and theoretical conundrums. It is in this spirit that we look at what the historical literature has meant by the “crisis,” the “relative retreat,” or the “lesser growth” of the seventeenth century.