

Jan de Vries

The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: The Little Ice Age and the Mystery of the “Great Divergence”

Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century. By Geoffrey Parker (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013) 871 pp. \$40.00

Parker has written an epic history of the general crisis of the seventeenth century. From the defenestration of Prague in 1618 until the Glorious Revolution in London in 1688, the world was wracked by war and rebellion. By Parker's count, some fifty rebellions against constituted authority rocked the political landscape of Eurasia from Ireland to Japan, and even though most of these events did not result in enduring change by themselves, the sum of their effects was profound: The world would never be the same again.

In many respects, Parker's argument is not a new one. Merriam identified the “contemporaneous revolutions” in 1938, although they have now multiplied from his six to Parker's fifty.¹ Wakeman, Atwell, and Steensgaard pioneered the extension of the crisis conception from Europe to Asia in the 1980s, although Parker endeavors to fit Persia and South Asia, and even the continents beyond Eurasia, into the story.² Nor is Parker's basic definition of the “general crisis” as a historical conception altogether novel. He sees it much as did Trevor-Roper in his pioneering arti-

Jan de Vries is Ehrman Professor of History, University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Demand and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008); *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600–1750* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1976).

© 2013 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Inc., doi:10.1162/JINH_a_00576

1 Roger B. Merriman, *Six Contemporaneous Revolutions* (Oxford, 1938).

2 Frederic C. Wakeman, Jr., *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China* (Berkeley, 1985); William S. Atwell, “A Seventeenth-Century ‘General Crisis’ in East Asia?” *Modern Asian Studies*, XXIV (1990), 661–682; Niels Steensgaard, “The Seventeenth-Century Crisis and the Unity of Eurasian History,” *Modern Asian Studies*, XXIV (1990), 683–697.

cle of 1959.³ The crisis was a fundamentally political phenomenon: European (now, Eurasian) polities invited rebellion because of the combination of their overreaching assertiveness and a newly acquired vulnerability. The very horror of the resulting, often protracted, struggles led to a new era of calm (in Trevor-Roper's vivid language, as a thunderstorm acts to clear the air and change the temperature). But Parker's book develops in much greater detail an argument that Trevor-Roper could sketch only evocatively in 1959, leading toward insights about the specific mechanisms of state breakdown and reconstitution that go well beyond anything proposed before it.

Global Crisis is the fullest statement of the seventeenth-century crisis conception to date. It is an epic history with a cast of hundreds. To be sure, the monarchs of the Eurasian polities are all present—from Charles I and II; Louis XIII and XIV; Philip IV; and Emperor Ferdinand II to Tsar Michael; Sultans Murad IV and Mehmet IV; Shah Jahan; the Chongzhen (Ming), Dorgon, and Kangxi (Qing) emperors; and many others. But Parker's attention is more often riveted on the kings' ministers, generals, and clerical advisors—Gaspar de Guzmán, Count of Olivares; Armand Jean du Plessis, Cardinal-duc de Richelieu; Cardinal Jules Mazarin; Archbishop William Laud; Albrecht von Wallenstein; Johann Tserclaes, Count of Tilly; Axel Oxenstierna; and Kara Mustafa and Kopulu Fazil Ahmed (Ottoman grand viziers)—as well as their counterparties—the usurpers, adventurers, and rebels who drive the stories forward, such as Oliver Cromwell; Louis de Bourbon, Prince of Condé; Henry Duke of Guise; Giovanni Battista Rinuccini; Li Zicheng; and Zeng Chengong. To these personages we must add the numerous collectivities of schemers, rebels, and rioters that crowd the stage of the Global Crisis. It is a testimony to Parker's vast reading and mastery of historical narration that these many figures are rendered distinguishable and comprehensible to readers whose historical breadth is less globe-girding than his.

The endeavors of these actors, and the state institutions with which they grappled, claim most of this book's 700-page text, but they are only half, the lesser half, of Parker's story. They share the historical stage with another agent of change—the Little Ice Age.

3 Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," *Past and Present*, 16 (1959), 8–42.

A central premise of *Global Crisis* is that the synchronicity of the many disorders of mid-seventeenth century Eurasia was no accident. These events were provoked by material pressures caused by a shift of climate, which, in turn, led to violent responses that, through a “fatal synergy” intensifying the always-fearful effects of warfare, brought misery to multitudes and death to many millions. A demographic collapse bearing comparison with the Black Death (Parker often speaks of an overall loss of one-third of the pre-crisis population through most of Eurasia) disordered economies, destabilized states, and transformed cultures.

The Little Ice Age is the glue that holds together the myriad events related in this book and produces a coherent crisis of global scope. Parker associates this “fatal synergy” with two other explanatory forces that seem less global and more specifically European in their salience—military organization and state structure. By the seventeenth century, European states possessed a capacity to mobilize and sustain large armies. Parker, who knows this subject like no other modern historian, describes in persuasive detail how state after state escalated its military operations beyond fiscal, material, and demographic sustainability. These military pressures, in turn, exposed the political vulnerability of the “composite monarchies” of the Stuarts, Bourbons, and Habsburgs. The efforts of these states to achieve fiscal and religious rationalization led to resistance, which led to further escalation of pressures from the center, which led, in turn, to multiple revolts.

Trevor-Roper held that the seventeenth-century polities were particularly vulnerable to the propagation of rebellion in this way, and Parker shares his view. His accounts of the English Civil War, the Fronde, and the crisis of the Spanish monarchy under Philip IV are particularly notable for his deft handling of the interactions between the multiple centers of rebellion, his insights into the logistical nightmares facing those attempting to pull the levers of power, and his alertness to the role of contingency in the unfolding events.

Composite monarchy could propagate rebellion regionally, but only the Little Ice Age could spread disorder across the globe. The concept of *little ice age* is not well defined; climatologists often invoke it to refer to an epoch of cooler average temperature prevailing generally from the end of “medieval warming” to the beginning of our contemporary era of global warming. Parker does not engage this debate; he simply appropriates the term to refer

to climatic conditions between the 1610s and the great winter of 1708/9. In this period, he argues, three natural forces combined to generate generally cooler temperatures and greater climatic variability—reduced solar energy reaching the earth (the result of an interruption in the normal course of sunspot cycles); increased volcanic activity, which periodically intensified this cooling process; and a greater frequency of the El Niño–Southern Oscillation, which disrupted Asian monsoons as well as North American rainfall and, perhaps, intensified volcanic activity. As a result, almost every decade experienced a “blocked climate” of two or more years of extremely cold winters and either excessive rain or severe drought. These climatic insults generated the episodes of distress that stand at the heart of this book.

Parker describes the climatic trouble that afflicted Eurasia primarily through the eyes of contemporaries, who left ample records of lament and astonishment. His vast, compilation of such observations convincingly reveals that people throughout Eurasia faced periods of great hardship, usually in the form of harvest failure, and that the best laid plans of kings and generals were often foiled by foul weather. But, even if one takes his accounts of the destruction and disruption wrought by these climate events at face value, a nagging question remains: What makes these particular anomalies so different from weather extremes, say, a century earlier or a century later? Parker asserts that “the seventeenth century experienced extremes of weather seldom witnessed before and never (so far) since” (112). But this claim requires comparative and quantitative evidence. It also requires a more rigorous distinction than Parker makes between the long-run, cumulative effects of climate change and the short-term effects of climate variability.

To Parker, the little ice age, generally understood as a descriptor of long-term climate, is worthy of its titular elevation into Little Ice Age, possessing a decisive agency in his narrative and revealing itself in specific, “striking” weather events that intervened in the historical process, influenced the outcome of battles, frustrated state policies, and set in motion more complex chains of events, destroying empires and altering human behavior. What appears to be missing in Parker’s account, however, because of his reliance on contemporary commentary on weather events, is a sustained investigation of any actual long-term cooling and its cumulative effects.

The problem at issue is best revealed by considering one of Parker's chief claims—that the Little Ice Age caused famines that led to the starvation of millions, and, via the “fatal synergy” of famine interacting with war and rebellion, resulted in a reduction of Eurasia's population by one-third. Notwithstanding what we do not know about population size in this era, especially outside Europe, there is a broad consensus that the sustained population growth of the long sixteenth century came to an end in the early seventeenth century, and that certain societies—especially China and the Holy Roman Empire—suffered losses of one-third or more of their population. In other areas, such as the entire Mediterranean basin, the losses were smaller, but the recovery was long-delayed. In yet others—much of northern and western Europe—losses were more localized, and recovery was both forceful and immediate. Overall, Europe's mid-seventeenth-century population appears to have been 5 percent below that of 1600, and by 1700, it was 5 to 10 percent higher than in 1600. In Asia, China's population crisis appears to have been unique in its severity. The upshot is that the global Little Ice Age was associated with a highly differentiated demographic performance among states and regions.

One might question whether climate change was the primary agent of seventeenth-century demographic change. Indeed, historians have proposed alternatives. Goldstone, in the most recent sustained contribution to the crisis theme, argued that shifts in the level of mortality, driven by largely autonomous patterns of epidemic disease, drove population growth and decline in the early modern world. For him, population dynamics function as the independent agent of change that Parker finds in the Little Ice Age.⁴ Another approach focuses on regional and national differences in the resilience of agricultural production and distribution in the face of population pressure, exogenous shocks, and environmental change. This matter is hardly settled. Since Parker does not expose his favored theory to the alternatives, objections and questions are sure to come.

Parker does distinguish between societies that suffered grievously (most of them) and those that survived with more limited damage (South Asia and most of the New World), but he seems to attribute this difference primarily to special initial (pre-crisis) con-

4 Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley, 1991).

ditions of low population or natural abundance. Japan is the great exception. It had suffered earlier disasters, and the consolidation of Tokugawa rule on the eve of the General Crisis appears to have been guided by the motto, “Don’t let a crisis go to waste.” In Parker’s estimation, the ironhanded, draconian rule of the Shoguns managed to steer Japan successfully through the crisis era via a policy of domestic suppression and the avoidance of foreign entanglements. These measures secured domestic peace, which, coupled with fiscal and legal incentives for peasant industriousness, led to more than a century of population growth. Parker’s data show, however, that this seventeenth-century population growth far outpaced the growth of food production (per capita output fell by one-third during the seventeenth century) (484), but this evidence does not lead him to alter his story of beneficent Shogunal rule. Japan’s exceptional seventeenth-century experience is certainly noteworthy though, arguably, not exemplary. It did not lead to a resolution of the larger, general crisis.

Another nation that enjoyed population growth through the crisis era, as well as rising per capita output, enjoys no place of importance in Parker’s account even though it appears prominently in the crisis literature. The Dutch Republic experienced what is now called its “golden age” during the crisis; many other countries understood their seventeenth-century difficulties to emanate much more from the Dutch challenge than from the Little Ice Age.⁵ Although Parker knows this history well, he finds no place for it, and does not justify its omission.

The absence of the Netherlands in Parker’s global crisis may well be closely related to a second, larger missing element—economic history. His approach to the crisis is unmistakably founded squarely on material conditions and tangible, physical events. Climate is at the center, followed by armies and the money, supplies, and human fodder needed to maintain them. All of these forces affected the harvests, which, in turn, led to higher mortality rates (directly through famine and indirectly through disease). On this matrix of material conditions, states and subjects acted, and interacted, to defend and advance their interests, leading usually to

5 See, for example, Jacob Soll, “Accounting for Government: Holland and the Rise of Political Economy in Seventeenth-Century Europe,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XL (2009), 215–238 (part of a special issue entitled “The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Interdisciplinary Perspectives”).

Parker's "fatal synergy," which turned the hardship inflicted by the Little Ice Age into something worse, a Global Crisis.

This approach reduces the economy to little more than a direct physical relationship between weather and harvest results, but seventeenth-century economies in most of Eurasia were not so simple. Technology, markets, and institutions could, and did, buffer the effects of climate on food production and distribution. Moreover, the economic crisis was not only a crisis of food production. A broad international contraction of markets and trade volumes put pressure on commercial centers and on their relationships to sovereign authority. The fact that few states supported institutions and policies that could offer competitive advantage in this atmosphere of heightened competition points to the open Dutch Republic as more relevant than was closed Japan in how the crisis took shape.

That Parker does not invoke the term *capitalism*, let alone *transition to capitalism*, in his book is, perhaps, all to the good. But he does embrace Pomeranz's more recent concept of the *great divergence*, claiming, contrary to Pomeranz's vision, that its origins are to be found not in England's Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century but in the resolution to the crisis after the mid-seventeenth century (638).⁶ He argues that the survivors of the Global Crisis lived in a more benign economic environment, since a smaller population now pressed upon the fruits of nature. Thus, the economic crisis ended even though the Little Ice Age lingered.

To account for the divergence between Parker's unit, "England and its [unspecified] neighbors," and the rest of Eurasia in their response to this Global Crisis, Parker focuses on intellectual developments. Because Europe's political leaders defanged the confessional conflicts that had heavily contributed to deepening the crisis, the crisis survivors enjoyed a "phoenix effect." Not only were they better equipped to cope with the shocks that had destabilized their societies (590); they also had public-health measures to control contagions, insurance schemes to manage risk, and, most significantly, the novel claims of modern science to sustain progress. These new resources may have been common to all of the crisis survivors, but everywhere except "England and its neighbors" they

6 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, 2000).

were yoked to an urgent desire to stabilize economic life via regulation, monopoly, and state control—to prevent potentially disruptive change (638). According to Parker, freedom from such control made northwestern Europe uniquely capable of utilizing the intellectual shifts just described to secure economic growth; elsewhere, the new mentality that embraced enlightenment and rationalism also held fast to antique economic thinking. How can this distinction be explained? Historians of economic life, beginning with Hobsbawm in his 1954 essay introducing the conception of a general crisis, have ventured several theories, but Parker neither invokes them nor proposes any alternatives.⁷

Parker's discussion of the "escape" from the crisis, like his account of the crisis itself, discloses numerous fresh details drawn from contemporary observation and identifies intriguing cross-Eurasian similarities. Yet, something important is missing—namely, a credible explanation of how the crisis "worked" in historical time to bring about a comprehensive resolution, and why that resolution took a different and fateful form in one region of Eurasia and none of the others. *Global Crisis* makes three big claims: (1) that the Little Ice Age was the catalyst of the crisis; (2) that a vast, Eurasian demographic collapse ("a third of the world has died") was the embodiment of this crisis (77); and (3) that the "great divergence" that has shaped world history since the seventeenth century finds its origins within this crisis (667). The first two claims are, in principle, testable; the available data would appear to cast some doubt on them. The third claim remains mysterious. If I understand it correctly, it requires a different definition of *crisis* from the one that Parker provides.

The problem with Parker's approach revolves around how we view the task of historical explanation. The seventeenth-century general crisis, more than most historical conceptions, is based on theory. Its various theorists all supposed that something was guiding and challenging the actors that few if any of them could fully understand. Thus, the crisis does not emerge directly from the testimony of contemporaries. It is the historian's task to cast the evidence into a theoretical framework. *Global Crisis* certainly relies on abstractions unknown to contemporaries, most notably the Little

7 Eric Hobsbawm, "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," *Past and Present*, 5 (1954), 33–53; *idem, ibid.*, 6 (1954), 44–65.

Ice Age. But by converting this notion into a historical actor, Parker sidesteps the challenge of measurement and testing in favor of an evocative narration of catastrophe and survival. He has converted the crisis of specialists into a thumping good read with a contemporary moral. This strategy will revive interest in the crisis framework in a way that no specialist work could, for which all of us who study the early modern world should be grateful. The task of explanation, however, remains.

