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HISTORIANS AND “CRISIS” *

“The question is”, said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things”.

“The question is”, said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master — that’s all”.

THAT THIS IS AN “AGE OF CRISIS” SEEMS THE LEAST CONTROVERSIAL OF statements. Old enemies, theology and science, Right and Left, swear by it; all the evidence is said to prove it. It is hardly surprising that crises have become a favourite theme of historians, too, over the past twenty-odd years. Equally understandable is the fact that many historians have a rather vague and certainly varied sense of what “crisis” really means, for, on examination, the simple impact of the word begins to dissolve in ambiguity. One historian’s crisis lasts moments, another’s decades, even eras; political, social, economic, mental, or moral crises are blurred by one historian’s insistence on treating them discretely while another lumps them together under the confusing rubric “general crisis”. Dictionary definitions are not very helpful in themselves, but to ask, in more speculative definitions or theories of crisis, what crisis in history is may lead to taking a word for a thing. What may be asked is what the term “crisis” has become for historians. This may clarify the aims of those who use it; it might even illuminate the relationships between history and the larger world surrounding and replenishing it over time. Instead of leaping into the fray over definitions or over a specific historical crisis, I propose to look at the origins of the term in historical writing, trace its development, and try to bring its possibilities and its limits into perspective. Little more than a rough sketch can be attempted here, but it may suffice to suggest the outlines of a much fuller picture.

Like most new arrivals in historical discourse, “crisis” actually has a long, self-defining history in history. The word itself comes from the Greek *kpt̄sis* (> *kpt̄nein*: to sift, to decide), meaning discrimination or decision. This was how Thucydides received it. Brought to

* A colloquium of the Department of History at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, patiently discussed my first remarks on this theme, and I am grateful. I also wish to thank Professors G. A. Brucker and W. J. Bouwsma for reading a first draft of the present essay.

history from the public assemblies and the courts, it appeared in the *Peloponnesian War* six times with the judicial variant of the basic meaning.¹ It also applied to war when the historian referred to the battles on land and sea which had “rendered the crisis” in the great conflict between the Persians and the Greeks.² The most important and most interesting extension of the word derived from the Greek physicians. “The crisis”, according to the Hippocratic treatise *On Affections*, “occurs in diseases whenever the diseases increase in intensity or go away or change into another disease or end altogether”.³ Hippocrates himself could not have used this clinical framework more effectively than Thucydides in the famous description of the plague of Athens, where the terrible disease moved inexorably towards the crisis of the seventh or ninth days.⁴ More than simply acquainted with Hippocratic method, however, Thucydides may have adopted it as a model of historical explanation, as a rationale for establishing the facts of a case and ordering them into patterns of development. Herodotean myth and gossip would not do. Like the physician, the historian had to get his facts straight and place them in relation to decisive turning-points, their antecedents and consequences, observed and plotted as on a fever chart. But the “Father of Scientific History” left more room for the tragedian than some of his interpreters, for such a framework could lend itself to drama as well as science. However scientific, Thucydides’ treatment of change also functioned to stage events with that tragic irony he shared with Aeschylus and Sophocles. The pressure of dramatic tension, narrative pace, and the great speeches at the apogee galvanized the work of the analyst; both faces of history, science and rhetoric, met. As much as key points in processes of change, crisis situations became moments of truth where the significance of men and events was brought to light.⁵

“Crisis” was thus as permissive as Clio herself. The historian could use it with technical meanings or casually; he could use it in the

¹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, i. 31. 2, 34. 2, 77. 1; ii. 53. 4; vi. 60. 4, 61. 4 (Loeb Classical Library edn.). I am indebted to Mr. R. J. Hoffman for helpful suggestions on Thucydides.

² *Ibid.*, i. 23. 1.

³ Quoted in Hippocrates, i, lii-liii (Loeb Classical Library edn.); see also H. G. Liddell *et al.*, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1940 edn.), *s.v. k̄p̄sis*.

⁴ Thucydides, ii. 49-52.

⁵ On Thucydides’s adaptation of Hippocrates, see C. N. Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (Oxford, 1929); the most obvious support of this thesis is Thucydides’s analysis (iii. 82-4) of the Corcyraean revolution. Cf., in general, J. H. Finley, *Thucydides* (Cambridge, Mass., 1942); Jacqueline de Romilly, *Time in Greek Tragedy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968).

context of an organic scheme of change to analytic and dramatic effect. This put "crisis" in a different class from those conceptions — the idea of "eternal return" or the myth of a golden age, for instance — imposed on history by philosophical or poetic *force majeure* in the classical world. Rather than in essences, philosophically divined, crisis situations were registered in phenomena observed and judged. Insofar as those phenomena had to be recorded and evaluated for crises to be located in time, the notion implied what we regard as the historian's stance to his material. It would be just as adaptable to the irregularities that differentiate historians' time, and actual historical experience, from the regularities of calendar-time and clock-time, for if there were crises, then intervals of time were unequal in value and effect. Unlike such organic analogies as the cycle of birth, maturity and death, a crisis pattern could be open-ended, unpredictable, dynamic rather than static. Philosophical rigour or uniformity would be unnecessary. Crises could be imagined in cyclical schemes as transitional between one phase of a cycle and another; they could fit into "horizontal" history equally well. In either case one historian could exercise his right to dispute another's interpretation just as one physician might dispute his colleague's.

This already hints at a great future for "crisis" in historical writing in times as conscious of history as the nineteenth century, or our own. The most determined historian, however, is unlikely to find a direct link between the historiographical beginnings of the term and its use more than two millennia later. Chronicles and history by divine plan or by bluff did without such a clinical, this-worldly approach to time and events. To my knowledge, "crisis" did not appear significantly in Roman, medieval or Renaissance historians but seems to have led a sheltered, technical existence long after Thucydides. Repeated by Galen, the medical definition eventually prevailed to give the term to Latin and, with the revival of ancient medicine in the sixteenth century, to the vernaculars.⁶ Finally, in the seventeenth century, analogies began to be drawn from the medical base. Spiritual crises were noted in reformed and counter-reformed souls; men spoke of political crises in what recent historians call "the general crisis of the

⁶ Seneca, *Epistolae*, 83. 4 ("[Pharius] says that we are both at the crisis [*nos eandem chrisin habere*] since we are both losing our teeth"); Cael. Aurel., 2.18. 120 ("to withstand the conflicts of nature, which the Greeks call 'crises'"): *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, iv (Leipzig, 1906-1909), s.v. "crisis". The French physician Ambrose Paré was one of the important sixteenth-century disseminators of the word: Walter von Wartburg, *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Basel, 1946), s.v. "crise".

seventeenth century".⁷ Other analogies followed once the old technical isolation was broken. In the eighteenth century we hear of "crises in Church and State" and from the Marquis d'Argenson, who, as minister of Louis XV, had good reason to ponder such matters, of economic crisis.⁸ By the nineteenth century crises political, economic, and moral could be turned up by everyone from theorists to literati and journalists.

An Italian lexicographer who complained of gross abuse to the medical term in the 1860s apparently remained a minority of one.⁹ Although it was used in self-conscious quotation marks or with a word of explanation until well into the nineteenth century, "crisis" had been rapidly extended to cover virtually any time of trouble or tension. Often such usage was, and still is, quite specific — ministerial crisis, financial or commercial crisis, *crise de conscience*. But it also became a vehicle for the consciousness of the great political and economic upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, in this sense, for the incursion of organic upon mechanistic conceptions of politics and society. Where there was a disposition to see societies as living wholes in which abrupt shifts were necessary or, in the age of democratic and industrial revolutions, actual, the crisis metaphor could be elevated into a concept about the working of things. "We are approaching the crisis-state and the century of revolutions", cried Rousseau's *Émile*.¹⁰ Citizen Tom Paine, in *The American Crisis*, was as certain as he was about most things that crises or "panics" were the whip and the reward of revolutions:

[They] produce as much good as hurt. Their duration is always short; the mind soon grows through them, and acquires a firmer habit than before. But their peculiar advantage is, that they are touchstones of sincerity and bring things and men to light which might otherwise have lain forever undiscovered . . . They sift out the hidden thoughts of men, and hold them up in public to the world.¹¹

⁷ E.g., the Jesuit writer Daniello Bartoli (1606-1685) ("Afterwards he had a salutary crisis [*una salutevole crisi*] which drew from his heart all the worldliness it contained"); Cardinal Guido Bentivoglio (1577-1644), diplomat, historian, and memorialist ("I have much occasion to read the pulse of things, and to know the crises of these movements"): *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* (Turin, 1960-), iii, s.v. "crisi"; Sir B. Bayard ("This is the Chrysis of Parliaments; we shall know by this if Parliaments live or die" [1659]): *New English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1888-1928), ii, s.v. "crisis".

⁸ "Great Crises in Church and State" (1715): *New English Dictionary*, loc. cit. D'Argenson, in 1738, first wrote of economic crisis according to Wartburg, *Franz. Etymol. Wörterbuch*, s.v. "crise".

⁹ N. Tommaseo, *Dizionario della lingua italiana* (Turin, 1865), i, s.v. "crisi". Cf. the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century examples in the dictionaries cited in nn. 7-8, 10, 12.

¹⁰ *Émile*, iii, quoted by E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (Paris, 1873), i, s.v. "crise".

¹¹ *The Complete Works of Thomas Paine*, ed. P. S. Foner (New York, 1945), i, 50-1.

Perhaps it was only a matter of time until "crisis" came into its own in written history. Yet it was not so much a case of historians awaiting the word as of the word awaiting the general preoccupation of the nineteenth century with history. Where Rousseau and Paine had seen crises as liberating solvents of the old order, to the post-revolutionary conservatives they were symptoms of the inability of men to transcend history, reactions against the poisons of democracy, centralization and secularization. Bonald compared the French Revolution "to a terrible and salutary crisis by means of which nature roots out from the social body those vicious principles which the weakness of authority had allowed to creep in . . .". The term did not appear, however, in Hegel's lectures on world history; Goethe — "All transitions are crises; and is a crisis not a sickness?" — merely played with it as a historical insight.¹² Only after mid-century, the cumulative experience of sweeping historical changes, the growth of a sense of history, and the organization of a historical profession did "crisis" regain historiographical importance. When it did, it was developed by the most profound spokesmen of a historical outlook in a history-minded age.

Karl Marx's theory of crisis was vast even in the vastness of *Das Kapital*.¹³ Starting from the depressions which had periodically disrupted European economy since 1825, he finished by thinking crisis into a historically inevitable and ultimately fatal mechanism of capitalism. It was a characteristic Marxian transvaluation. The concepts of surplus value squeezed by the capitalist from labour as profit, centralization of capital with the blind multiplication of techniques and machines, over-production even as the capitalist cut wages to compete — these fundamental principles of Marxian economics were made to serve a crisis theory which served them in turn. In essence, crisis was over-production; specifically the grave disturbance in the equilibrium between production and consumption which Marx insisted must exist in a smoothly functioning economy, only to show that such a blessed state was impossible under capitalism. Each crisis would be more severe than the last, its symptoms the glutting of empty market-places, the collapse of those least able to survive, and, haltingly, the beginning of a new cycle as equilibrium was regained. Then would come the General Crisis when the expropriated would

¹² Bonald quoted in *Catholic Political Thought, 1789-1848*, ed. B. Mencer (London, 1952), p. 81. Goethe quoted in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, v. 2 (Leipzig, 1865), s.v. "Krise".

¹³ K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, trans. W. Glazier (London, 1920), ii, chaps. 7-9, 13-21; iii (2), ch. 30.

rise against the expropriators at last to usher in the new age of socialism. This theory gave history the life of an ongoing process while allowing for decisive leaps of change. Under its auspices Marx combined evolution and revolution, the poles of his thinking as of much of the historical thought of the nineteenth century. It was a far cry from Thucydides; then again, perhaps not so far removed from the inherent potential of the Greek idea of crisis. The possibilities for an organic conception of historical change and a systematic framework of analysis were there from the beginning; in historico-economic terms Marx developed them to an extreme.

But there was another side to the term, as Jacob Burckhardt saw in his lectures on world history. Coloured by the heady dialectics of German historical philosophy and the spectre of war and revolution, politics and culture were the starting point of a central lecture on "The Crises of History". Historical crises have exhibited recurrent patterns, Burckhardt suggested: first, the "negative, accusing aspect as the accumulated protest against the past, mingled with dark forebodings of still greater, unknown oppression"; then, the positive side, when "even in the masses the protest against the past is blended with a radiant vision of the future"; finally, the reactions and restorations, in which something of the original impetus "probably triumphs for good", though the permanent results remain "astonishingly meagre in comparison with the great efforts and passions which rise to the surface during the crisis".¹⁴ These distinctions, seeming to replay the French Revolution and 1848 in semi-philosophical guise, were clear enough. But Burckhardt was neither clear nor systematic; the neat categories dissolved in a rush of historical examples, sybilline pronouncements, and tense ambiguities which the lecture-note format alone does not explain. While crisis signified a "terrifying acceleration" of historical processes for the patrician conservative, the passionate enemy of his bourgeois age, whose greatest pupil was Nietzsche, exulted in the spectacle:

In praise of crisis, we might first say that passion is the mother of great things

The crisis itself is an expedient of nature, like a fever, and the fanaticisms are signs that there still exist for men things they prize more than life and property

All spiritual growth takes place by leaps and bounds, both in the individual and . . . in the community. The crisis is to be regarded as a new nexus of growth.

Crises clear the ground, firstly of a host of institutions from which life has long since departed and which, given their historical privilege, could not

¹⁴ J. Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History*, ed. J. H. Nichols (Boston, 1964), pp. 269, 271, 281.

have been swept away in any other fashion. Further, of those pseudo-organisms which ought never to have existed, but which had nevertheless, in the course of time, gained a firm foothold in the rest of life, and were, indeed, mainly to blame for the preference for mediocrity and the hatred of excellence.¹⁵

Here and elsewhere in the lectures "crisis" was the Burckhardtian hieroglyph for "the impulse to great periodical changes . . . rooted in human nature" which no single level of experience or theory could contain.¹⁶ In the end Burckhardt's theory of crisis is not a theory at all but an affirmation of the mysterious vitality, variety, and challenging discontinuities of history. It is as if he had set out to recover the easy, historicizing flexibility and the sense of uncertain outcome which Marx had suppressed.

As long as academic history and socio-economic analysis kept a wary distance, the crisis conceptions in Marx and Burckhardt remained more or less distinct. The Burckhardtian strain flourished first in the rise of professional history within the ideal and reality of the nation-state. Many of the great national histories of the nineteenth century — those of Ranke, Sybel, Michelet, Thiers and Taine, for example — were "crisis histories" in the sense that they focused on critical moments when national character and institutions were thought to have been decisively shaped and tested. Monumental researches into national pasts, if they had not constituted historical truth once and for all, as some practitioners liked to hope, had taught that discontinuities and continuities were both a part of history. Philosophers had idealized similar conclusions early in the century, transforming history into an arena where obscure forces and principles contended darkly. And, in a world of self-conscious national entities, visions of great national crises suffered but survived and gave convenient myths of heroic origins to a decidedly unheroic bourgeoisie.¹⁷ Such history had little use for the dismal science of economics, especially from Marx. Economic materialism was an insult to its idealism, reductionist dialectic an affront to its historicism. Marx himself seemed to have set limits on importing his concept of crisis into history in any case. Linked to over-production in capitalist economies, Marxian crises were difficult to imagine before the arrival of capitalism. Pre-capitalism Marx left in a vaguely defined no man's land of lords and serfs and the obscure towns from which,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 289-90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹⁷ Cf. Felix Gilbert, "European and American Historiography", in *History*, ed. John Higham (Princeton, 1965), esp. pp. 332-5.

somehow, the new age was to arise. Crisis was a matter of relatively recent experience and — to the good socialist — of the future.¹⁸

To be extended, conceptions of economic crisis required a general shift in attitudes as well as the internal elaboration of economic history as a field of study. The First World War and its aftermath provided that. Consciousness of crisis thrust itself into the present and threatened the future; war, revolution and depression hurried the long erosion of assumptions of progress and the finality of the nation-state to which academic history was so closely bound. In an atmosphere of doubt and pressing need for reconstruction, intellectual as much as physical, the social sciences came to the fore, none more than the economics of crisis.¹⁹ In the twenties the French economist François Simiand was teaching the younger generation of French economic historians to regard crisis as a dividing line between stages A of growth and stages B of contraction in economic development. The statistical demonstration was difficult, but Simiand's scheme was compellingly simple, and, vulnerable as it seems now, his use of historical price-data made it immediately relevant to historians. Factors of conjunctural analysis could be made to intersect in crisis situations; "crisis" carried the cachet of a scientific-seeming organicism with an invitation to a sense of historical drama; it was a way of connecting quantity and quality.²⁰

The new economic historians were ready to enlarge upon these possibilities. Founded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in the year of the "Great Crisis", the *Annales* were soon publishing articles on economic crises in history.²¹ In the thirties Ernest Labrousse was investigating "crises du type ancien" in eighteenth-century France. Bad harvests driving up the prices of cereals, decline in agricultural income as the fall in volume outran the rise in price, slackening markets for manufactures and an industrial slump, recovery with good harvests and the consequent lowering of grain prices — this, for Labrousse, emerged as the dominant economic pattern in

¹⁸ Cf. Julian Borchardt, "The Theory of Crises", in Karl Marx, *Capital, The Communist Manifesto, and Other Writings*, ed. Max Eastman (New York, 1932), pp. 302-14; the long debate between 1950 and 1953 on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the Marxist periodical *Science and Society*.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Gilbert, in *History*, ed. Higham, pp. 370 ff.; T. C. Cochran, *The Inner Revolution: Essays on the Social Sciences in History* (New York, 1964), pp. 1-18.

²⁰ Jean Glénisson, "L'Historiographie Française Contemporaine: Tendances et Réalisations", in *La Recherche Historique en France de 1940 à 1965* (Paris, 1965), p. xxi. Cf., in general, J. A. Schumpeter, *Business Cycles*, 2 vols. (New York, 1939); B. V. Damalás, *L'Oeuvre Scientifique de F. Simiand* (Paris, 1947).

²¹ "Les crises", in *Vingt Années d'Histoire Économique et Sociale: Table Analytique des "Annales"*, ed. M. A. Arnould (Paris, 1953).

eighteenth-century France and, by implication, in the predominantly agricultural economies of pre-industrial Europe.²² About the same time Wilhelm Abel was constructing a crisis framework for the agrarian history of Central Europe characterized by the reappearance of a "price scissors" of relatively low grain prices and relatively high prices for manufactured goods from the thirteenth into the nineteenth century.²³ These lines of interpretation called attention to the interplay of long- and short-term fluctuations which rivalled the model of economic progress by stages of development; even their exaggerations were a fruitful stimulus to further refinement. It hardly needs saying that their influence has been very great.²⁴

How completely "crisis" had been taken over by the economists and economic historians, and how far they had moved beyond Marx, is apparent in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* of 1937. Crisis was defined as a "grave and sudden disturbance upsetting the complex equilibrium between the supply and demand of goods, services, and capital". At the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century "scientific research . . . established that the crisis occurs at the point of transition from a period of expansion to a period of contraction". Crises have occurred in all periods of history, "but whereas in antiquity and even as late as the eighteenth century the type of crisis most prevalent and most dreaded was that due to a shortage of goods brought about by natural and extra-economic factors . . . , for the last century and a half crises have been fundamentally due to superabundance or overproduction caused by factors which seem to inhere in modern economic organization". Of any other meanings there is not the slightest hint.²⁵

This economic definition had the virtues of tidy but narrow syntheses, and all of their limitations. Virtually the moment it was made it was too restrictive, for "crisis" was too volatile, too obliging, and, by then, too commonplace a term to be reduced to one dimension. This was soon abundantly clear in the self-styled crisis literature that grew up around the Second World War. A strange alliance of

²² C. E. Labrousse, *Esquisse du Mouvement des Prix et des Revenues en France au XVIII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1933), and *La Crise Économique de l'Économie Française à la Fin de l'Ancien Régime et au Début de la Révolution*, i (Paris, 1944). Cf. D. S. Landes, "Statistical Measurement of French Economic Crises", *Jl. of Economic History*, x (1950), pp. 195-211.

²³ W. Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur in Mitteleuropa vom 13. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1935; new edn., Hamburg, 1966).

²⁴ Fernand Braudel and F. Spooner, "Prices in Europe from 1450 to 1750", *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, iv (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 430-42.

²⁵ Jean Lescure, in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1937), ii, s.v. "crisis".

philosophers, moralists, social scientists, and historians asked whether a "crisis of western civilization" had produced fascism and a war to "unconditional surrender".²⁶ Inherited outlooks were reconsidered, new perspectives opened; twenty-five years after the war we still seem to be digesting the results, even as profoundly new exigencies arise. In this process "crisis" took on new intensities and significance.

One thinks, for instance, of the wave of philosophical interpretations of history which has only recently, and doubtless temporarily, subsided. The speculative machines of neo-Augustinian theology, the evolutionary theodicy of a Teilhard de Chardin, the "new" Marxism in France, or the cyclism of an Arnold Toynbee have been, of course, as different as their spokesmen and the traditions they represent. But at least one observer has ventured to speak of an "uneasy consensus". These systems, suggests Frank Manuel, all entail a vigilant, spiritualizing hope in some drastic leap into a future beyond the annihilation all fear.²⁷ This enviable confidence, if it is that, has rested in turn on a fundamental belief in the possibility of sudden turning-points and discontinuities sometimes expressed in terms of crisis. Neo-orthodox Protestant theology has conceived of itself as a theology explicitly for and of crisis, a Christianity to confront the heresy of earthly progress with the radical disruptions which the sinful condition of man interjects into history.²⁸ For the new Darwinians evolution, rather than infinitesimally slow and gradual change, may connote mutation to new forms of existence and being. Nature, they proclaim, *does* work by leaps; because we are witnessing "the birth pangs of a new man" ours is an "age of crisis".²⁹ Similarly, the new Marx rediscovered beneath the old patriarch (with bourgeois assistance from Hegel, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche) has been acutely sensitive "to the dialectical quality of the historical process, the discontinuous character of its movement, a sense of the tragic in history".³⁰ And, instead of the heavy wheels of necessity in ancient cyclist philosophies of history, we have the anti-deterministic challenge-and-response, *yin* and *yang*, of Arnold Toynbee.³¹

²⁶ Leonard Krieger, "European History in America", in *History*, ed. Higham, p. 289, cites in this connection works by Pitrim Sorokin, Sigmund Neumann, Hans Cohn, Franz Alexander, and Karl Polyani. See also Gilbert, *ibid.*, p. 383.

²⁷ F. E. Manuel, *Shapes of Philosophical History* (Stanford, 1965), pp. 136-62.

²⁸ Gustav Krüger, "The 'Theology of Crisis,'" in *European Intellectual History Since Darwin and Marx*, ed. W. W. Wagar (New York, 1967), pp. 135-58.

²⁹ Manuel, p. 148.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 155; O. J. Hammen, "The Young Marx, Reconsidered", *Jl. of the History of Ideas*, xxxi (1970), pp. 159-70.

³¹ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, ii (London, 1937).

At the same time, not only economists, but also political scientists, psychologists, and demographers have been developing crisis conceptions. They prescribe a hard scholastic discipline. The new *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, long on definition, short on memory, explains: "Crisis is a lay term in search of a scholarly meaning" which "will become a useful concept when it plays a part in theoretical formulations".³² Surely it is not for lack of effort that the word is imprecise. Strategist Herman Kahn and associates have distinguished single-handedly no fewer than twelve dimensions of crisis, and the term has recently gained the ultimate recognition among the decision-planners of a U.S. government research contract for a theory of crisis in foreign policy.³³ In psychology Erik Erikson has developed his theory of "identity crisis" to deal with the problematic breakthrough between childhood and the mission of the mature man. The crisis dynamic is Erikson's challenge to the eternal recurrence of Freudian conservatism. Reluctant to define "crisis" precisely, he implies that it should be enough that the theory has worked.³⁴ This is not enough for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* — Erikson's "relevance is not immediately apparent for a theory of crisis", it coolly notes³⁵ — or for his more definition-minded colleagues. "Judging by the recent literature, there is a newly-awakened interest in this area", one psychologist observes with a full battery of psychological theories of crisis to prove it.³⁶ For their part,

³² J. A. Robinson, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), ii, s.v. "crisis".

³³ Robinson, *op. cit.*, extracts the following "generic dimensions" of crisis from A. J. Wiener and Herman Kahn, *Crisis and Arms Control* (Harmon-on-Hudson, N.Y., 1962): (1) often a turning-point in an unfolding sequence of events and actions; (2) a situation in which the requirements for action are high for participants; (3) threatens goals and objectives; (4) followed by important outcome whose consequences shape the future of the participants; (5) consists of a convergence of events that result in a new set of circumstances; (6) produces uncertainties in assessing a situation and in formulating alternatives for dealing with it; (7) reduces control over events and their effects; (8) heightens urgency, which often produces stress and anxiety among participants; (9) information available to participants usually inadequate; (10) increases time pressures for participants; (11) changes relations among participants; (12) raises tensions, especially in political crises involving nations. See also C. F. Hermann, *Crisis in Foreign Policy-Making: A Simulation of International Politics* (U.S. Naval Ordnance Test Station, China Lake, Calif., 1965). Ockham's razor evidently awaits discovery among the decision-planners.

³⁴ E. H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York, 1968), p. 7.

³⁵ Robinson, in *Internat. Encyc.*

³⁶ Kent Miller, "The Concept of Crisis: Current Status and Mental Health Implications", *Human Organization*, xxii (1963), pp. 195-201. From his survey the author derives four aspects of crisis: (1) "Acute" rather than "chronic"; (2) often results in "pathological" behaviour; (3) threatens goals of persons involved: (4) relative to the experience of the participants.

demographers have been deeply concerned with both the "crisis of overpopulation" and the "crisis of stagnancy" in relatively stable or declining European populations, notably in France. The rivalry between a neo-Malthusianism and a neo-populationism has done much to stimulate the remarkable flourishing of demography in recent years, and demographic crises of the fourteenth, seventeenth, and twentieth centuries have become, as a result, familiar themes of historical and demographic research.³⁷

Despite the philosophers and the technicians, "crisis" has also thrived more than ever in the loose company it has enjoyed since the nineteenth century. This is not, as the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* would have it, a sure sign of the "familiar dilemma that occurs in the development of new concepts" — hyper-refinement on the one hand; unrestricted usage on the other, so that "it is difficult to distinguish crisis from non-crisis".³⁸ "Crisis" is, after all, an old term and only as precise or helpful as the uses to which it has been put; with many possible uses it cannot be successfully purged by any number of definitions and distinctions. As every editor and politician knows in the age of mass media, "crisis" is good copy. The suggestion of drama and decision catch the eye and the emotions without pinning down the mind; without specifying or shocking unduly, the word magnifies events or non-events from *coups d'état* to hemline. It connotes hope for the Left, fear for the Right. In confused and restless societies where revolution still seems unlikely but tension is a fact (and myth) of life, it labels, flatters or consoles.

With fresh variations on old themes, from high culture to low, notions of crisis cropped up everywhere, then, in the past two decades. Meanwhile, the particular uncertainties of their profession have encouraged historians to turn wherever they can for aid and comfort. It may be that most academic historians read philosophical history for the luxury of righteous indignation, if at all. Certainly, the formulae and at times sheer *hubris* of the social sciences still jar the tender empiricist nerve of many historians, while the media have evoked on occasion a fear of popularization which is a reminder of how aristocratic a profession history can be. But it has been one thing to deny and quite another to find a secure niche in inherited traditions of "pure" history which the decline of innocent positivisms

³⁷ See esp. M. Reinhard *et al.*, *Histoire Générale de la Population Mondiale*, 3rd edn. (Paris, 1968), Pt. 1, chaps. 7, 10-12; Pt. 4, ch. 1; J. Ruwet, "Crises Démographiques: Problèmes Économiques ou Crises Morales?", *Population*, ix (1954), pp. 451-76; papers by P. Goubert and J. Meuvret, in *Actes du Colloque Internationale de Démographie Historique* (Liège, 1965), pp. 79-97.

³⁸ Robinson, in *Internat. Encycl.*

has exposed and undermined. Traditional assumptions that history moved ever onward and upward in endless chains of cause and effect have fared badly under pressures of criticism and events; so has the belief that facts laboriously amassed were bound to have *some* place on an evolutionary scale or in "the progress of the field". The secure national boundaries of much traditional historiography have been superseded to some degree by the supra-national dynamics of the war and postwar years. With its presuppositions shaken and a growing demand for explanation and analysis, the continuous narrative format, suited well enough to the gradual unfolding of national "stories", has fallen even further into disrepute. To compound these problems, some of the main adversaries of tradition have been unable to make up for the loss, or have become questionable traditions themselves. The relativists' "each man his own historian" hardly resolved, but only stated the problem; the idealists' "history as the recreation of thought" proved too rarefied for most historians, however eloquently argued. Except for true believers, unadulterated Marxian alternatives have seemed embarrassingly dated and confining. All this has made historians particularly amenable to frames of reference conducive to their focus on particulars while giving them a self-conscious but flexible shape and significance. The ideal approaches would be open to the problematic and irregular in history. They would enable the historian to combine diverse levels of experience and analysis.³⁹

"Crisis" was an obvious way, if only one way, of having all this and more. At the very least it was a ready-made catchword for the dramatic historical pressure points and processes that have been increasingly on the mind of the historian and his public. Sceptics are free to note that some of its appeal lies hardly deeper than that. Catchwords are hard to resist; one wonders how often "crisis" has flowed off historians' pens or into their titles with little more than the force of fad. If politicians and pundits could counterfeit crises, why not historians? Perhaps the temptation has even been built into the sociology of the profession since the war. Historians will not need to be reminded that the "education explosion" has brought large increases in the numbers of professional historians. While the old saw which has them learning more and more about less and less may be unfair, it is true that the segments of time and territory claimed by individual

³⁹ See esp. John Higham, "American Historiography", in *History*, ed. Higham, pp. 94 ff., 141 ff.; J. H. Hexter, "Some American Observations", and David Thomson, "The Writing of Contemporary History", in *Jl. of Contemporary History*, ii (1967), pp. 5-23, 25-34; Cochran, *The Inner Revolution*.

historians have tended to shrink smaller and smaller. The traditional apprenticeship of original research perpetuates the pattern. To fix upon such units of time or theme as can be shown to be "crises" of something or other is one way of making a virtue of necessity. Since moments of drama and decision have a way of turning up everywhere in history, the possibilities are practically unlimited, whatever their long-range significance.

Still, there has been much more to "crisis" than this for historians in search of method. Seeing history in terms of crises may give the historian focal points which are, or, rather, may be made to seem, immanent in the historical process itself. Both the scope and the shape of historical inquiry may define themselves accordingly. Crisis situations are relative to prior and posterior time so that the historian is obliged to deal with the process in which they occur. While providing a criterion for selection and emphasis, "crisis" has thus reinforced the analytical bent of contemporary historiography. A new American textbook series organized around "major crises" in American history and western civilization illustrates the potential for teaching as well as research.⁴⁰ The format is very much in tune with the concern for selective presentation and applied historical analysis which has had such an impact on the teaching of history in America in recent years. If undergraduate history along these lines is still "just one damn thing after another", it should not be, for once, the fault of the approach.

But notions of crisis can be serious conceptual tools. To a generation accustomed to thinking of history in terms of "structures" and "systems" the organic analogy presents no special difficulties. So much the better, as far as the flexibility valued by contemporary historians is concerned, that it need not predicate a definite direction of change with a more or less predictable outcome. The victim may or may not recover from a "crisis", may be weakened, strengthened, or radically changed by the experience.⁴¹ For that matter, what the historian defines as a crisis situation does not necessarily change anything at all so much as reveal the fibre of its subject; it may be something like his best equivalent of the instruments with which the

⁴⁰ M. D. Peterson and L. W. Levey, eds., *Major Crises in American History*, 2 vols. (New York, 1962); L. W. Spitz and R. L. Lyman, eds., *Major Crises in Western Civilization*, 2 vols. (New York, 1965). An earlier representative of this genre was B. D. Henning *et al.*, *Crises in English History, 1066-1945* (New York, 1949).

⁴¹ "It will always be impossible to assess the force and value of a crisis, and more especially, its power of expansion, at its outset": Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom*, p. 273.

physicist speeds up the processes of matter in order to make them more "visible". Moreover, crisis interpretations may open up the intermediate zone between "revolution" and "continuity" which, since the great revolutions of the eighteenth century, has so often been annexed to one pole or the other.⁴² "Crisis" is not, like "revolution", heavily burdened with specific historical identifications. In this sense, it may be particularly applicable to periods of European history before the consciousness and conceptions of revolution and reaction proper to the historical experience of industrial society. Applied to any place or period, it may assuage the historian's usual discomfort with extremes, allowing him to have both continuity and change, for "crisis" implies the continuity of organic processes but not steady equilibrium, decisive conflict but not "total" revolution.⁴³ It may do this, finally, while inviting the interdisciplinary perspectives of contemporary historiography. Crises can be of many kinds, given the current extension of the term; finding a crisis at one level of experience usually brings other levels into play. Dealing with crisis may give the historian access to several disciplines concerned with it.

Some of these implications have been explored by Thomas S. Kuhn, whose *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* stands as evidence of the attractions of crisis conceptions for historians but also formulates a theory of crisis with a much wider bearing than the emergence of new scientific theories.⁴⁴ In Kuhn's analysis scientific observations and the "paradigms" ordering them constitute the body of "normal" science. "Normal" science tends to be self-perpetuating and, contrary to general opinion and the beliefs of many scientists themselves, averse to upset and discovery. Scientific revolutions require destructions of the paradigm and shifts in the questions and techniques of a science. This is the work of crisis — a growing and unsettling awareness of anomaly in which the normal puzzle-solving rules of "normal" science break down under the pressure of technically unassimilable discoveries and external factors in society at large. Professional insecurity and proliferation of rival theories, symptoms of the crisis state, are eventually contained by the establishment of a new "paradigm". Such, argues Kuhn, was the pattern in the rise of Copernican

⁴² See Alexander Gerschenkron, *Continuity in History and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 11-39; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1965).

⁴³ For a specific case, see D. A. Chalmers, "Crises and Change in Latin America", *Jl. of International Affairs*, xxiii (1969), pp. 76-88.

⁴⁴ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962), esp. chaps. vii ("Crisis and the Emergence of Scientific Theories") and viii ("The Response to Crisis").

astronomy, the eighteenth-century revolution in chemistry, and the emergence of the relativity theory in physics. Even in bare outline this is a more sophisticated scheme than roughly similar attempts by an earlier generation of historians. Crane Brinton's easy equation of crisis with the Terror-phase in the "fever" of revolutions may come to mind, or Paul Hazard's vivid but all too simple drama of "la crise de la conscience européenne".⁴⁵ What Brinton and Hazard took as a comfortable metaphor, Kuhn transforms into an interpretative construct, reaching to the edges of its implications. The potential of the term and the direction of the analysis are neatly matched. "Crisis" aptly expresses the challenge-and-response, destructive and constructive, which Kuhn sees in the history of science; it conveys his conception of anomaly and contingent remedy in the making of scientific breakthroughs more graphically yet more flexibly than, say, conceptual frameworks hinging on "revolution" alone, on dialectical thesis-and-antithesis, or on present-serving "progress". One may object, of course, but even in disagreement Kuhn's crisis theory, like one of his "paradigms", provides a basis for discussion, research, or resistance.

Of the practical effects of crisis interpretations the recent historiography of early modern Europe is a particularly well-known case. "Crisis", says the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, "is the word that comes immediately to the historian's mind when he thinks of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries".⁴⁶ With very large literatures on the socio-economic and demographic crises of the period, the "crisis of the early Italian Renaissance", the "crisis of Italy" from the foreign invasions of 1494, and the "crisis of the Reformation" no one will disagree.⁴⁷ But the same could be said of the mid-seventeenth century after the lively skirmishing among

⁴⁵ Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, 1st edn. (New York, 1938); Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne (1680-1715)*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1935).

⁴⁶ Léopold Génicot, "Crisis: From Medieval to Modern Times", *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, 2nd edn., ii (Cambridge, 1966), p. 660. See also Édouard Perroy, "Les Crises du XIV^e siècle", *Annales, E.S.C.*, iv (1949), pp. 167-82; R. H. Hilton, "Y eut-il une Crise Générale de la Féodalité?", *ibid.*, vi (1951), pp. 23-30, and "L'Angleterre Économique et Sociale des XIV^e et XV^e siècles", *ibid.*, xiii (1958), pp. 541-63.

⁴⁷ Suffice it to mention Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, 1st edn. in 2 vols. (Princeton, 1955), 2nd rev. edn. in 1 vol. (Princeton, 1966); Franco Catalano, "La Crisi Italiana alla Fine del Secolo XV", *Belfagor*, xi (1956), pp. 393-414, 505-27; Norman Sykes, *The Crisis of the Reformation* (New York, 1967); *The Reformation Crisis*, ed. Joel Hurstfield (London, 1965).

E. J. Hobsbawm, H. R. Trevor-Roper, Roland Mousnier and many others over the "general crisis of the seventeenth century".⁴⁸

Trespassers enter such a large and disputed territory at their own risk, but a few general patterns are quite clear. The most casual reader will be struck, first of all, by the extent to which crisis interpretations have displaced older interpretative scaffoldings. Gone are most of the sharp, often heavy-handed debates between the champions of the revolutionary modernity of post-medieval Europe and those who sought to cut the early modern experience to medieval size. Instead there is a very wide consensus stressing interpenetration of old and new and formulated in terms of crisis, or rather of repeated and many-sided crises. Secondly, much of this literature is remarkably ecumenical. Marxist interpreters have availed themselves of "crisis" to uncover a transition between feudalism and capitalism similar to Marx's crisis mechanism in the transition between capitalism and socialism. The "general crisis of the seventeenth century", in Hobsbawm's view, was produced by the contradictions of a "feudal capitalism" within which expansion led to breakdown; out of the crisis came the preconditions — technological innovation, concentration on mass production, the formation of a new world economy, bourgeois revolutions — of capitalism.⁴⁹ Not to be outdone, non-Marxist historians have gone on distinguishing and refining discrete patterns of crisis, or have countered the Marxist schema with grand designs of their own. So, for instance, Trevor-Roper's "general crisis of the seventeenth century" in the relations between society and the state, a falling-out, behind surfaces of war, social unrest, and revolt, between the overripe apparatus of "renaissance" courts and "countries" no longer prepared or able to bear the load. The general crisis "must be viewed in the context of the whole *ancien régime* that preceded it"; it was caused "not by a clear-cut opposition of mutually exclusive interests but by the tug-of-war of opposite interests *within one body*" as befits "the complexity of human interests".⁵⁰

This sense of organic wholes and of their complexity is not Trevor-Roper's alone but still another characteristic of this crisis literature as a whole. Under the rubric "crisis" lines of approach once more or less distinct have tended to converge — investigation of both the

⁴⁸ The most important contributions have appeared in *Past and Present* since 1954 and in the convenient sampling, *Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660*, ed. Trevor Aston (London, 1965).

⁴⁹ *Crisis in Europe*, pp. 5-58.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

crises and the long-term *conjunctures* in post-medieval economies; study of political upheavals; a long-standing disposition to see the early modern period as a “watershed” in European history. To arrive at his crisis interpretation of the early Italian Renaissance Hans Baron was forced to reinterpret Florentine politics as well as re-analyse and re-date much of Florentine political and historical literature in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Only in this way could he hope to show that the Milanese challenge to Florentine independence, at its peak in 1402, was a turning point which shaped a distinctive republican consciousness, a “civic humanism”, in scholarship, historiography and literature.⁵¹ In Lawrence Stone’s *Crisis of the Aristocracy* we have a “static description and dynamic analysis” of the total environment of the English aristocracy, from its marriage habits to its education, between 1558 and 1641.⁵² Examples of such analytical scope can be multiplied wherever early modern European history has been written as crisis history.

Perhaps the success of crisis interpretations is all the more reason for remembering their limitations. Terms use those who use them uncritically, and “crisis” is only a word with no more, or less, reality than other words. Crises do not exist “out there” waiting to be gathered in by historians. At best “crisis” is twice-removed from the historical evidence to which historians apply it — once as all words are removed from what they are intended to signify; twice because it comes to historians through mazes of analogy from biology and medicine. Only strict constructionists will need to find this objectionable, insisting that the “conceptual frameworks” of historians should somehow be “concepts”, not metaphors in thin disguise. Historians should know better. The point is that analogies and metaphors are only as good as their capacity to describe what cannot be described and explained better in other ways. In any case, they will not do all the historian’s work for him. He should be able to distinguish what the metaphor unifies; the burden of proof rests, as always, with him.

However accommodating, crisis history may have the faults of its virtues. Some of our more sombre philosophers of history are quite at home with the overtones of sickness in “crisis”; history, they will say, *is* the sickness of man’s attempt to escape the fundamental needs of his nature.⁵³ But do mere historians really mean that situations

⁵¹ See Baron’s *Crisis* and his *Humanistic and Political Literature in Florence and Venice at the Beginning of the Quattrocento* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955).

⁵² Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford, 1965).

⁵³ Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (New York, 1959).

they call crises are symptoms of sickness and *malaise*? In some cases this is exactly what they mean; in others "crisis" is used so loosely that the difficulty is not squarely faced. The problem becomes serious if crisis interpretations persuade the observer to consider the stresses and strains of human interaction as only abnormal and "unhealthy". It is too easy to be like the country doctor — or the professionally grim analyst of our "sick societies" — who prides himself on severe diagnoses and remedies, right or wrong. With an eye for crisis historians risk seeing the pathological where, for better or worse, normal and quite unexceptional processes are at work. Or, preoccupied with the sickness, they may neglect the patient.

Similarly, they may be led to overlook or misrepresent long-range development in favour of the short-term "crisis" and so miss the significance of both. There are indications that historians have already gone too far, that a familiar shift of the pendulum has already begun. To return to the example of early modern European history, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are currently being reappraised as a time, not of crisis, but of long-term "structural transformation" with roots deep in the Middle Ages. French historians, in particular, are emphasizing the "growth and development" of an "under-developed" European economy; it is the *longue durée* from the fifteenth through the seventeenth and into the eighteenth centuries, not the crises, that counts.⁵⁴ Then, too, Hans Baron's Renaissance crisis has been sharply criticized on the basis of the continuity of communal traditions in medieval Italy, while J. H. Elliott has recently launched one of the first genuinely serious assaults on the whole thesis of the "general crisis of the seventeenth century" in the name of continuities of political substructure and conflict in early modern European history.⁵⁵ A large array of theoretical works, from anthropology to political science and economics, has scarcely been tapped on the theme of growth and development.⁵⁶ Hazardous as such predictions are, it seems very likely that these directions will occupy historians increasingly in the future.

This does not mean that historians should discard crisis interpreta-

⁵⁴ Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation Matérielle et Capitalisme (XV^e-XVIII^e siècle)*, i (Paris, 1967); Denis Richet, "Croissance et Blocages en France du XV^e au XVIII^e siècle", *Annales, E.S.C.*, xxiii (1968), pp. 759-87. Also, E. Pitz, in *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 1965, pp. 355 ff., 363 ff.

⁵⁵ Jerrold E. Seigel, "'Civic Humanism' or Ciceronian Rhetoric? The Culture of Petrarch and Bruni", *Past and Present*, no. 34 (July 1966), pp. 3-48, and J. H. Elliott, "Revolution and Continuity in Early Modern Europe", *ibid.*, no. 42 (Feb. 1969), pp. 35-56.

⁵⁶ E.g., Y. S. Brenner, *Theories of Economic Development and Growth* (London, 1966).

tions, but it does suggest that they should be knowing and careful when using them. Simply asking themselves what is meant by “crisis”, or why they have spoken of it instead of something else, would help in a profession notoriously reluctant to examine its terms. Not that historians would come up with perfect definitions, or that they should even try. This is not the historian’s job, and apart from the limitations already mentioned “crisis” remains a particularly ambiguous term. Few historians — and probably few physicians — are likely to agree on what constitutes a crisis, let alone *the* crisis. This convenient ambiguity is one of the attractions of the term. And it is a legitimate attraction for historians — *pace* the analytical philosophers, who, whatever else they may do with history, do not generally write it — provided that they can adduce their reasons and their evidence.

Whether crisis will continue to interest historians, and how, will be decided in particular fields of historical inquiry. In any event, “crisis” has a revealing history of its own. Not unlike “revolution” or “progress”, it proves to be another key word which reflects and illuminates the concerns of those who have used it over time. In historiographical terms, it had already in Thucydides technical and casual meanings and methodological connotations scientific and rhetorical in scope. When, in the nineteenth century, it was recharged with historiographical significance, it ranged from Marx to Burckhardt, and though their very different emphases persisted, the term defied exclusive definition. It is the malleability together with the attraction to minds and methods concerned with irregular movement in history that have found such wide response in our own time. For historians today “crisis” can be an analytical premise, a rhetorical device, a process in a flexibly organic conception of history, a linguistic bridge connecting various disciplines. It implies a working framework for historical investigation while encouraging the discrimination of specific historical moments, and it allows for revolution and continuity, science and rhetoric, quantity and quality. That it is fallible and approximate has its significance for historians too, reminding them that words and concepts are never substitutes for ongoing encounter with the past.

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