It has now been more than a half century since the publication of Hobsbawm’s formulation of the seventeenth century as a time of crisis. Yet the historical questions that Hobsbawm raised, and the historiographical solution that he offered, retain their vitality despite the numerous fierce debates that they have spawned during the intervening years. Unlike others before him who had identified the various ills that befell Europeans who lived at that time, he did not see the seventeenth century as merely an age visited by the misfortune of numerous, but discrete, crises. Rather, he argued that it was fundamentally, structurally, a moment of crisis sui generis. Moreover, in keeping with his Marxist intellectual foundations, he invested this crisis with a purpose, discarding the lingering limitations (dare I say shackles?) of the old feudal order and thereby opening a space for the industrial capitalism that he understood to be the defining characteristic of the modern economy.

Indeed, Hobsbawm’s notion of the good that might follow such a crisis of great magnitude and broad scope might have a renewed value during the global economic crisis of the early twenty-first century. The insights of historians are enjoying a rare vogue at the moment, particularly in the hope that they can help to ameliorate (or at least explain) the problems of the present. In that spirit, what does the general crisis of the seventeenth century, in all of its many dimensions, teach us?

Two lessons seem particularly salient. First, fundamental historical changes—even those that turn out to be beneficial in the long term—bring in their wake considerable suffering and distress. To take one example from the many provided by the seventeenth century, and recounted in these articles, the re-allocation of labor to greater productivity uses almost always re-allocates resources as well. Indeed, the newly unemployed are often left behind altogether.

Second, fundamental historical changes are much more difficult to frame than might be expected. In our respective writings, as well as in our collective discussions, those of us who contributed to this volume repeatedly returned to the same two stick-

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ing points—the problem of definition and the problem of periodization. No matter how much the broad sweep of the seventeenth century looks like a rampant crisis, the devil really is in the details. As all of the contributions demonstrate, a close look at the arts, the courts, trade, population, and politics reveals a wide range of experiences, varying both by location and by time. Nonetheless, the feel of the (European, at least) world was clearly different in 1680 than it had been in 1630. A person’s chances of dying of plague, or of being burned as a witch, diminished sharply; the goals and aspirations of governments became more secular and more law-oriented; and the employment that would henceforth sustain the population began to shift toward the modern sector. Even if the “general” crisis of the seventeenth century was, in fact, the cumulative expression of a wide variety of phenomena with different manifestations, and hence not general in the usual sense of having a common shape or identical chronology, it was nonetheless general to the extent that it decisively altered all aspects of the European experience forever.

It remains to be seen whether the dire economic conditions of 2009 will ultimately issue into a new, more beneficial order, as arguably the seventeenth-century crisis did. Will the fever heal the patient or kill her? Or should we be more circumspect about such metaphors? As Rabb warned in his first contribution to the seventeenth-century debate, metaphors have their uses, but they cannot do everything. Structural change in history works on a timescale radically different from that of illness in humans; the differences might not just be of degree but also of kind. Indeed, when The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe appeared, we were in the midst of another moment of perceived crisis, which seemed to end quickly, although a longer historical view than our own may yet see unity where we see only discontinuity.

De Vries makes a strong case for important structural changes in Europe during the first half of the century, arguing persuasively for the existence, and importance, of crisis in the European economy.