

Economic crises are a characteristic of the modern era, and have not only economic, but also social, political and even cultural or moral dimensions. They change the character of economies, the models of behaviour and action of individuals and whole societies, and do so both in long- and short-term perspective. They have broad-spectrum effects. They often lead to the development of distortive market conditions (monopolisation) and enrichment via speculation. They cause life tragedies for large, medium and small entrepreneurs, their employees and their families. The irrationality of the crisis produces a mass of what at first sight seem incomprehensible paradoxes: while some starve, others burn grain to keep warm, and in the Great Economic Crisis, the huge American economy suffered a shortage of currency in circulation leading to use of substitute money of various kinds, even wooden money. Crises may, however, have their positive sides. Some national economists speak of their “curative effects”, by which they mean that weak and economically irrational businesses got to the wall, and out-dated economic structures are transformed to meet a standard of higher rationality. One can hardly deny the connection between crises and processes of economic concentration, rationalisation and technical-technological modernisation. In short, crises raise a whole series of questions, and not only for economic science or government policy. Answers to them have fuelled attempts to reform capitalism, or even entirely abandon it as the bearer (root cause) of crisis.

This collective, interdisciplinary monograph explores the phenomenon of crisis in its Central European forms, with regard to the specific conditions and context of time and place. The development of the Bohemian Lands, Czechoslovakia, and also of Slovakia and Slovenia, is compared with global development. The book is the result of a two-year co-operative project between scholars in economics and history, with some representatives of allied disciplines. The idea originated with a conference held at the Economics University and Charles University in Prague in November 2013.¹ The book is not, however, just a classic collection of articles based on conference papers. Not all the speakers at the conference joined the discussion platform, initiated at the conference, which provided the basis for the conception

¹ The conference, entitled, “The Phenomenon of Economic Crisis in the Bohemian Lands/Central Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries (Transformation of the cyclical development of the economy in the process of mounting globalisation)” took place, divided into a number of sections, on 18th-19th of October 2013 at the Economics University, Faculty of Business Economics and Charles University, Faculty of Law.

and realisation of the book. This platform and the book itself is narrower than the conference in thematic range but deeper in terms of content. We should add that even those researchers who took no part in the book project deserve our thanks, because the very fruitful conference discussions were an inspiration both for our editors and the authors of the various individual sub-chapters.

The core of the book is concerned with examination of selected symptomatic problems of the downward phase of economic cycles, prior to 1993 always with a focus on the Bohemian Lands, which looks at both state economic policy and the behaviour of individual entrepreneurial subjects. It presents to readers a wide range of forms and contexts of crisis episodes and the transformations that they caused in times of increasing globalisation in the 19th, 20th and even the start of the 21st century.

“Economic crisis” is a key term that is ever more widely employed in public debate and the media, but it should be noted, of course, that social scientists, business people, journalists and the lay public have used and still use a whole series of other terms for the downward phase of the economic cycle, and these terms have their own history. Jaroslav Krameš's sub-chapter on Czech economic thought explains persuasively that it is not always clear what people who have used the term “economic crisis” precisely mean by it. In Czech milieu it has several equivalents, such as “hospodářský pokles” [“economic setback”], “hospodářská tíseň” [“economic squeeze”], “rozhoda” [“break-down”], and also “depression”. The editors and authors of chapters have taken care to draw attention to period terminology but in the end have transposed it into contemporary terminology. One obvious problem lies in a certain lack of fit between the paradigm of contemporary economics, which works with the concept of “depression” and the vocabulary of historians today, who prefer the traditional concept of “crisis”, and usually employ the term “depression” preceded by the adjective “Great” for the twenty years of major economic difficulties that lasted from 1873 to the beginning of the 1890s. The editors decided to leave the choice of terminology to the authors of the individual sub-chapters, and from the contexts of the accounts it is always sufficiently clear which developments are meant.

The book progresses from economics and economic theory to economic historiography and finally the theme of crisis in historical perspective. It opens with a sub-chapter by the economist Jan Vorlíček dealing with the theory of economic cycles and their causes as generally accepted in standard economics today and sub-chapter by Pavel Sirůček dealing with the Depression phenomenon in the context of long term evolutionary waves. This leads into a presentation of the discourse of economic crises in Czech historiography, taken right up to the present, by Eduard Kubů and Jiří Šouša. Jaroslav Krameš and Ilona Bažantová contribute accounts of the perception of crisis in Czech economic thought.

The second, third and fourth chapters offer research-based recapitulations of crises and crisis developments. The second chapter is distinctive in presenting a functional combination of macro- and micro-approaches, i.e. the investigation of economic milieu and the movement of individual economic subjects within it. In addition to sub-chapters that are synthesising in nature (Jakub Rákosník, Lukáš Fasora, Adéla Jůnová Macková, Žarko Lazarevič, Ludovít Hallon) there are analytical sub-chapters summarising the findings of long-term original research by the authors. Their conclusions, often surprising, are very valuable and revealing. We would particularly highlight the study of cartelisation in the context of the

economic cycle and the way in which the two factors interact. Until now, no modern historian in this country has posed this kind of question (Vojtěch Pojar, Tomáš Gecko, Kateřina Rozinková). Remarkable findings in the field of rationalisation and enterprise emerge from analyses of individual business subjects (Ivan Jakubec, Jaroslav Jelínek, Martin Minařík, Michaela Závodná). It is becoming clear that it is thoroughly misleading to say, "This is a crisis" on the assumption that the crisis runs across the entire economy without exception. It does not. There are companies that prosper in an economic crisis and even make more money than before, and these are often large firms rather than simply "market dwarves".

The third and fourth chapters then logically concentrate on the macro-economic sphere. Research on the development and entrepreneurial activities of economic subjects in centrally directed economies is not yet very advanced. The surviving records of individual firms have mostly not yet been archivally processed and made accessible, and, to make matters worse, neither have most of the archival funds of directive state institutions including the State Planning Committee 1949–1989. One reason is that the actions of firms in very limited market and indeed essentially non-market conditions has not seemed a particularly attractive subject for historians. Serious and substantially source-based research with an understanding of the systemic problems of the period between the Second World War and the Velvet Revolution has therefore been scanty. Against this background the studies by Christoph Boyer, Drahomír Jančík and Vít Pošta appear all the more groundbreaking. These authors are forming entirely new and original perspectives on the theme of symptoms of crisis in centrally planned economies, despite the fact that according to Marxist doctrines they were in principle "crisis-free". In reality, state socialism found itself in almost permanent crisis, as is suggested by what were almost permanent efforts at economic reform. Our monograph thus sets the more than four decades of the communist experiment in the context of economic crises.

The sources for post-1989 economic development are largely limited to publicly accessible statistical data and official documents. Sociological research projects represent a specific case. Firms do not publicise detailed data on their activities, as such data constitute part of their immediately relevant *know how*. It is therefore not surprising that our attention has focused on secondary economic, social and legal analysis of recent crises (Pavol Minárik with Marek Vokoun and Alena Zemplerová, Petr Hájek, Zuzana Džbánková and Jiří Buriánek). We have deliberately left out the economic down-turns arising from the initial introduction of transformation measures. Today, the public is inundated with professional predictions from the Czech National Bank, all kinds of state institutions, as well as various private, independent institutions or academic centres and "experts" recruited from different fields and branches of economic life. Jindřich Soukup's analysis of macro-economic prognoses made in connection with the recession of 2009 is therefore very instructive, and serves as an excellent conclusion.

Prague 20th August 2015

Eduard Kubů and Jiří Šouša