

An approach to historical analysis



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Introduction

In Part III of 'The Mediterranean' (1949), Braudel, placed history of events low in his value hierarchy, while in his two biographies on Charles V and Philippe II (Braudel 1994 Exrits sur l'histoire II), he demonstrated his deep understanding of traditional history. Braudel departed from the commonly accepted views of traditional history and postulated the *longue dur´ee* and *conjoncture* perspectives. With his understanding of existing theories Braudel was able to exposed structural images of important themes which were in it-self a landmark in historiography.

Fernand Braudel (1902-1985)

Braudel in 'Capitalism' was not interested in details from both archives and secondary literature rather he embarked on the premise of complex images within a chosen framework. This he was able to accomplish by classifying capitalism into three levels, that is, daily life market activities; production and exchange within the national market; international capital flow and trade at the world economy level.

Braudel's Historiography

A main feature in understanding Braudel's historiography is the assimilation of time and space in analyzing historical events. In addition to this methodology Braudel has elucidated new concepts which enable an understanding of time and space individually. To fully appreciate his contribution it becomes paramount to enter into discussion the way history was analyze in a conventional setting.

Historical Concepts – Longue Dur´Ee, Conjuncture, Event-History, Economie-Monde And Total History

Conventionally history was seen through the lens of a linear time frame or either emphasized historical changes in different geographic areas. Braudel on the other hand, applied a set of historical concepts for example, dur´ee, conjuncture, event-history, economie-monde and total history to subjects such as the Mediterranean world and engender significant insights into history. In analyzing historical time Braudel has promulgated long-term (longue dur´ee), mid-term (conjuncture) and short-term (event-history) views which simply demonstrates the possibility that several concepts of historical time can co-exist within a single particular subject which is being analyzed.

When analyzing historical space Braudel emphasized the economie-monde and this concept he proceeded to analyze as the economic-world that is not defined by either politics or cultures but by the exchange of goods and services. Interestingly, Braudel considered both temporal and spatial elements and proceed on the premise that these four concepts are intermarried in such a way; culminating in what he termed ‘ total history’ that is *historie totale* or *histoire globale*.

Longue Dur´ee

In an even more positive vein Braudel concept of historical time relied on allotments. In other words, Braudel has taken a century or longer as a unit of analysis and calls this *longue dur´ee*. Ten to fifty years he calls conjuncture whilst short calendar time is subsumed into another allotment. Capitalizing on calendar time which is no stranger to traditional history and utilizing conjuncture which is a term used in economics, but extended by Braudel to

non-economic aspects of history such as social and cultural changes. Braudel then extended the concept of *longue dur´ee*; thus claiming that *longue dur´ee* is a most suitable tool when investigating the slow changing and structurally stable aspects of history. In so doing he has fundamentally permitted the advantages of each method to compliment each other and minimized their inadequacies.

With an astute understanding of the existing historical theories Braudel in reviewing *longue dur´ee* elucidated,

“ It was when I was constructing my book on the Mediterranean I was led to divide the times of history according to their different speeds, according to different temporalities. I think there are actually rapid times, longer times, and almost immobile times. But it was in the end of this course, not by a preliminary operation, that I arrived at this conception of time of history. Similarly, the *longue dur´ee* of which I am the advocator, it was an artifice by which I was escaped from certain tangible difficulties. I did not think to *longue dur´ee* before writing my book on the Mediterranean”, (Braudel, 1978, pp 244-5).

Perhaps Braudel was so zealous about *longue dur´ee* due to his sojourn in captivity during World War II. He wrote:

“ I myself, during a rather gloomy captivity, struggled a good deal to get away from a chronicle of those difficult years (1940-5). Rejecting events and the time in which events take place was a way of placing oneself to one side, sheltered, so as to get some sort of perspective, to be able to evaluate them better, and not wholly to believe in them. To go from the short time span, to

one less short, and then to the long view (which, if it exists, must surely be the wise man's time span); and having got there, to think about everything afresh and to reconstruct everything around me: a historian could hardly not be tempted by such a prospect", (Braudel, 1969, pp 47-8, and p 77).

Conjoncture

Conjoncture is a French word and there is no English equivalent. It is in this vein that the Petit Robert French dictionary explains that conjuncture is a, " Situation resulting from an encounter of circumstances and which is considered as the point of departure of an evolution, an action". " The study of conjuncture is to study an occasional situation as opposed to structure in view of a prevision". This explanation swims in the same stream as Braudel's since his theory is based on changes and mutations in economic factors, for example, population growth, production output, and price changes.

According to Gemelli, and Braudel it is also used to describe social trends, for example, " conjuncture, paysanne, conjuncture seinneuriale", (Gemelli, 1995 p 107 and Braudel, 1991 p 48). This economic perception of Braudel led him to proceed on the premise that, "... the term conjuncture, ... suggest possible new directions for research and some tentative explanatory hypotheses. ... Conjunctural analysis, ... is however one of the necessary means of historical explanation and as such, a useful formulation of the problem", (Braudel " The Mediterranean" pp 892, 899).

These converging lines of evidence enable the concept of conjuncture to develop since as he so succinctly stated,

“ Traditional history, with its concern for the short time span, for the individual and the event, has long accustomed us to the headlong, dramatic, breathless rush of its narrative. The new economic and social history puts cyclical movement in the forefront of its research and is committed to that time span ... side by side with traditional narrative history, there is an account of conjunctures which lays open large sections of the past, ten, twenty, fifty years at a stretch ready for examination”, (Braudel, 1969, p 27, and p 29).

Event-History

The structured way of writing history was the method of using exact dates, names, cause-consequences and places. Braudel interestingly rejected this approach since he wanted to analyze and by extension sound harmonies with the overall environment, structure and movement; so as to yield an impersonal and collective aspects of historical changes. Braudel later developed an even greater interest in specific events as can be evidenced from a passage from his notes and his conception about events. Quoting from his personal notebook (f*23), undated, entitled “ L’Histoire, mesure du temps (History, measure of time)”. The notebook belongs to the Archives Braudel and may still not be public.

Braudel mentioned the State of Bahia (Brazil) in this passage and it is well known that he taught at Sao Paulo University during 1936-1937. It stands to reason therefore, that this idea was documented before he wrote “ The Mediterranean”, “ One evening, in the State of Bahia, I suddenly found myself being surrounded by a tremendous number of fireflies. They were lighting here and there, more or less in high place, countless, ... just like

many too brief sparkles, but shed sufficient light to see the landscape. This is so with events”, (Gemelli, 1995: 84 / Braudel, 1969: 10). This metaphor aptly describes that events are like the light from fireflies which is often brief and weak. Many criticized Braudel, for example, Hargor in 1986, but for others he was truly the master of event-history.

Fuelled by a changed attitude by the 1960s Braudel wrote,

“ Every event, however brief, has to be sure a contribution to make, to light up some dark corner or even some wide vista of history. ... I am by no means the sworn enemy of the event. ... In the first place, this kind of history tends to recognize only ‘ important’ events, building its hypotheses only on foundations which are solid or assumed to be so. ... Another is the event with far-reaching consequences and repercussions as Henri Pirenne was fond of remarking”, (Braudel, “ The Mediterranean”, pp 901-902).

Economie-Monde (Economic-World)

Braudel’s concept of economie-monde was inspired by German geographers, that is, by the work of Friz Rorig *Mittelalterliche Weltwirtschaft: Blute und Ende Einer Weltwirtschaftsperiode* 1933, (Gemelli, 1995, p 125 / *Capitalism* III p 634 note 4). At the time of this conception Braudel was in the thinking process of “ The Mediterranean”. During this period however, he perceived that the Mediterranean world was a kind of economie-monde, and this was later expressed in “ The Mediterranean” at pp 418 – 419. Relative to this, Braudel made a clear dichotomy between economie-monde (economic-world, a huge network of economic exchanges) from economie mondiale

(world economy, which refers to such as the global impacts of the Oil Shock of the 1970s).

It is evident that Braudel embarked on the premise that the economic-world model was based on the Mediterranean economy. On the heels of this construction is the believed that models for other *économie-mondels* would no doubt have a similar construction when a comparison is made. This can best be illustrated from a section in “The Mediterranean” where Braudel stated,

“Have we here enough material to measure the Mediterranean, to construct a comprehensive, quantitative ‘model’ of its economy? As a unit it could then be compared to other ‘world-economies’ [economic-worlds would be a better translation] either bordering on or connected to the Mediterranean”, (Braudel, “The Mediterranean”, pp 418-419).

Braudel enables one to make greater sense of what a center means to an *économie-monde* when he provided a definition of it as it relates to the Mediterranean,

“This world (the Mediterranean), sixty days long, was, indeed, broadly speaking a *Weltwirtschaft*, a world-economy (‘*économie-monde*), a self-contained universe. ... All world-economies (‘*économie-monde*) for instance recognize a center, some focal point that acts as a stimulus to other regions and is essential to the existence of the economic unit as a whole. Quite clearly in the Mediterranean in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that center was a narrow urban quadrilateral: Venice, Milan, Genoa, Florence, with conflicts and inter-town rivalries as the relative weight of each city

changed. The center of gravity can gradually be seen to shift from Venice, where it still lay at the beginning of the century, to Genoa, where it was so brilliantly established between 1550 and 1575”.

In line with this theoretical viewpoint, the center was not a single city, but comprised of four cities; and that with the center of gravity changing between them.

Total History

The term total history is a methodological claim of historical writing. Braudel is an advocate of this strain and using *histoire globale* and *histoire totale* interchangeably he states,

“ Similarly, the globalite, *histoire globale* that I defend, imposed on me little by little. That is something extremely simple, so simple that most of my colleagues in history do not understand me. On the contrary, this does not hinder them to attack me fiercely. . . . The globalite, is not an intention to write a total history of the world. It is not this kind of puerile, sympathetic and crazy pretension. It is simply the desire, when one approaches a problem, to go beyond the limits systematically. There is no historical problem, in my view, that is separated by walls, that is independent”, (Braudel, 1978, p 245).

In short, Braudel’s advocated interdisciplinary studies, going beyond the limits of well-defined topical studies. Secondly, he postulated that history should be observed and studied from diverse angles, with it being beneficial to expand the duration of observation (*longue dur´ee*) and to extend the geographic areas, such that extensive comparison will lead to significant

results. Finally, and in line with this, he found it essential to combine the time dimension (three kinds of historical time) and the space dimension (geo-history, *economie-monde*) in order to investigate the complexity of the subject in question.

(See Figure I for Braudel's concept of Total History)

A Century Other Century

Source: Author's Adaption

Diverging Views On Total History

Contrary to this strain Furet, a member of the Annales School, wrote,

“ Yet the idea of ‘ total history’ is elusive. ... ‘ Total history’ merely expresses the ambition of providing a fuller perspective, a more exhaustive description, a more comprehensive explanation of a given object or problem than provided by the social sciences whose conceptual and methodological innovations it has borrowed”, (Furet, 1983, p 394).

Swimming in the same stream was Stoianovick who interestingly argued that, “ One major obstacle to *histoire globale* arises from the fact that *histoire globale* has been much more the product of individual genius than of systematic theory”, (Stoianovich, 1978, p 20).

These views lends easily to Pierre Chaunu, a former student of Braudel, and a *Membre de l'Institut* who categorically stated,

“ There cannot be a total history. All knowledge is necessarily selective, a rational choice. ... total history, in its basic meaning, is evidently a non-

sense. It is a wish, it marks an direction,”, (Coutau-B´egarie, 1983, pp 96, 99).

It is apparent that Braudel’s views came under scrutiny. However, it is necessary to understand that Braudel’s total history concept is not intended to describe everything, that is, every aspect of the subject but rather it is intended to ‘ make it appear an organized structure rather than a ‘ mere heap’”, (Popper, 1961, pp 76-77).

The Contribution Of Braudel’s Five Concepts

Braudel’s five key concepts discussed above made in-roads or contributions to the historical analysis of time and space. With respect to historical time, he expanded the conventional single-speed, linear-movement of historical time into a set of historical times that can be separated into short-term, medium-term and long-term. These terms co-exist, and each has its own speed, life and function; they are inter-related and inter-acting. As to his contribution to historical space Braudel’s hypothesis was ‘*économie-monde*, a concept that some would say was not well presented in ‘*The Mediterranean*’ but finally clarified three decades later in ‘*Capitalism*’.

Advantages And Disadvantages Of Braudel’s Methodology

Braudel’s concepts are flexible and this can be considered its’ major advantage, since Braudel’s believed that the use of his concept would generate historical insight rather than rigorous ones. The disadvantage however can be seen through the lens of misunderstandings on the one hand and on the other the challenge of a writer combining all the various disciplines, for example, geography, demography cultural studies, economics and so on which is required when applying Braudel’s notion of total history.

This challenge may not be an easy one for the writer to overcome. Further, it has been said that his theories lack clear and / or strong interpretation and that he seldom attempted firsthand penetrating investigation on any specific topic.

Conclusion

Braudel's historiography can be seen as one philosophical approach to historical analysis. While this approach is not global and eternal it can be used as a viable tool in the study of history. In essence his historiography is not a final dictum but rather can be seen as a contribution to historical studies and a foundation to be built upon.

Bibliography

Braudel, F. (1949): *La Mediterranee et le monde mediterraneen a l'epoque de Philippe II*, Paris: Armand Colin (2 volumes), 9e edition (1990). Translated from the French by S. Reynolds in 1972, Fontana (1995, 15th impression): *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 volumes.

Braudel, F. (1969): *Ecrits sur l'histoire*, Paris: Flammarion (Collection Champs No. 23). English translation by Sarah Mathews (1980): *On History*, University of Chicago Press.

Braudel, F. (1977): *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism*, Johns Hopkins University Press, translated from the French by Patricia Ranum. The French version: *La dynamique du capitalisme* (1988), Paris: Flammarion (Champs No. 192).

Braudel, F. (1977) ed.: *La Méditerranée, l'espace et l'histoire* (volume 1); *La Méditerranée, les hommes et l'héritage* (volume 2), Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques; reprinted by Édition Flammarion, 1986, Collection Champs Nos. 156, 167.

Braudel's concepts and methodology reconsidered. *The European Legacy*, 2000, 5(1): 65-86 (Taylor & Francis).

Chaunu, Pierre (1992): *La Méditerranée cest Braudel*, *L'Histoire*, juillet/août, pp. 71-3.

Coutau-Bégarie, H. (1989): *Le phénomène " Nouvelle histoire": stratégie et idéologie des nouveaux historiens*, Paris: Economica (Second Edition).

Furet, François (1983): *Beyond the Annales*, *Journal of Modern History*, 55: 389-410.

Gemelli, Giuliana (1995): *Fernand Braudel*, Paris: Editions Odile Jacob.

Popper, Karl (1961): *The Poverty of Historicism*, London: Routledge.

Stoianovich, Traian (1978): *Social history: perspective of the Annales Paradigm*, *Review*, 1(3/4): 19-48.