

A Fresh Look at Fernand Braudel

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Volume 24 of the *Journal of European Economic History* (number 1, Spring 1995) contains Professor Cheng-chung Lai's notes on Fernand Braudel's *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme*. He judges the structures, the contents and the form rather severely. Does this call for a rejoinder? I have wondered about it. A rejoinder could have come from other historians who had been close to Braudel, and who were glad to call themselves his disciples and his heirs. As far as I am concerned, I had many reasons for not replying, bearing in mind my review in the *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* (1981), its revised version published in *Lire Braudel* (1986) and my paper for the Lille Colloque in 1987 (cf. *Revue du Nord*, special issue 1989). Our colleague's reservations were to be found frequently in what I had written (which he appears to have read somewhat cursorily). However I had not intended such a seething judgement as Cheng-chung Lai makes, and, ultimately that is the reason for the brief remarks that follow and that are intended to put forward a more balanced appreciation of all three volumes of *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme* and of Braudel.

1. I do not believe I am wrong in revealing in Cheng-chung Lai's notes the reaction of someone confronted point-blank with Fernand Braudel's work (that is at least my impression). It implies an important difference in approach compared with someone who has had contacts with the author for more than thirty years, not to the exclusion of all else, but sufficiently to be familiar with the development of his train of thought and to grasp the reason behind his main statements. Everyone who attended the courses and seminars at the *Hautes-Etudes* or the *Collège de France* did not necessarily see things in the same way. But what I found important was Braudel's sympathy with the idea of universality (which was underlined in the quality and the diversity of the scholars and specialists invited to speak) and his determination to examine his subject both at a specific moment in time and over what he claims as a long period - what I have called his great plan: "le grand dessein". Having said that, the existence of layers in the accumulation of his knowledge was always evident, if one paid attention. After all, he had passed his *agrégation* examination in 1923, and so had studied in his early days under the influence of several older scholars (Henri Hauser, Henri Pirenne, Werner Sombart etc.) who were *ipso facto* influenced by a certain harking-back-to-the-past factor. There is no doubt that Fernand Braudel was not satisfied with this stock of

knowledge, and right until his death he read a great deal, he listened, he spent hours in archives, he thought, he organised and so on. However, he could not remain totally aloof from certain debates of his youth (on capitalism, for example), and on received opinions of former times which he had never tried to deny. Once we become aware of this "progress" and relate it to Braudel's finished work, we no longer stall at the several hurdles that Cheng-chung Lai came up against, because we have been able to put them into context. If you compare *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme* to the economic history books available to historians about 1950 or soon after, it is not difficult to single out those practices taken from other books (e.g. giving a plethora of examples). At the same time, more importantly, we can appreciate Braudel's gigantic effort seen in his classification, his intelligence and his elegant simplification.

2. This lack of perspective, for which Cheng-chung Lai cannot be blamed, has probably been emphasised by the huge publicity campaign surrounding the book's publication in its final edition and, in its wake, Fernand Braudel himself. There was something unsound about this. Fernand Braudel's reputation has had a chequered career. It shone during the 1960s, but was somewhat tarnished about 1975, and I shall refrain from reporting the really rude remarks I heard at that time. When *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme* appeared in the bookshops, the general public received it enthusiastically. Those historians who had formerly shaken their heads in commiseration vied with one another to rush into the aura of success. They proclaimed themselves Braudel's fervent disciples and heirs, and outdid the author by turning his proposals into extraordinary findings, eternal dogma, etc.... all this, of course, without reading Braudel "with a pen in their hand" as Lucien Febvre had recommended for the *Méditerranée* (which did not exclude respect). And so Cheng-chung Lai found himself up against a "wall of applause" that opposed freedom of judgement and up against continual censoring that led to a perverse personality cult - which Fernand Braudel did not accept during his lifetime, even though he did not refuse the affection of both these groups. The result is that in France whenever anything written by a (highly-established, of course) historian or economist lands on his desk, every journalist, even the most insignificant, cries out. "Ah! It's written like Braudel! It's Braudel's work!" It is understandable that this makes those colleagues less addicted to the joys of worship bristle, and some of them retort with a very radical denial (sometimes just as unfair as the preceding attitude). Cheng-chung Lai has probably not been affected by this, but the excessive devotion with which the flatterers surrounded Fernand Braudel had another rival delayed-action effect.

3. Judging from the reverence which surrounded *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme*. Cheng-chung Lai might have expected the perfect work, that which solved all possible problems, a sort of *Summa Theologica* for historians and economists - and he would have been disappointed. He

would have been spared that affront if, instead of allowing himself to be influenced by the "noise" on the fringe, he had recorded in all their worth the hesitations, the confessions of powerlessness and the brilliant flashes of perspective that stud the text, several examples of which he quotes in the notes. The work is not a masterly lesson in the sense of an encyclical issued by a pontif invested with infallibility; it is an essay, an attempt, and as such it should provide food for thought, not for repetition and re-hashing. The book, like the *Annales*, carried the stamp of its founders and Braudel. The journal provided a ground where various disciplines and researchers scattered far and wide could meet. It also provided link-ups, points of convergence and entreaties. We know that Braudel never wanted it to be transformed into an academic school, nor to be swayed easily by any fashionable current. One of his Indian listeners, Aniruddha Ray, wrote of his memories in the *Statesman Saturday* in December 1992: "Braudel remained an unassuming man", and he backed up this statement with an actual experience of his, concluding, "There was neither any compulsion nor any dogma in Fernand Braudel". If Chang-chung Lai had come to the book free from the muddle created by those disciples who, under the pretence of worshipping Braudel, were over-infatuated with themselves, he would have been in a position to read the work in a serene frame of mind, to distinguish what was possible, what was a hypothesis and - indeed why not? - what was a mistake or a weakness. And he would have been able to recognise what was new and stimulating. In short, to be fully understood, Fernand Braudel must be rescued from his false friends. The tedious pages and the asides are all cut down to size in the end: their importance is minimal.

4. The last comment is the most crucial one. Cheng-ghung Lai's expectation of the perfection was not due exclusively to laudatory clamour. It stemmed from a theoretical framework which *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme* ought to have adopted in order to be convincing. Fernand Braudel has delighted in an "artistic" fuzziness, and has not bothered about making strict definitions of the ideas he has used. He has been incapable of constructing his work with a theory. To use our colleague's metaphor, this history of capitalism brings more heat than light. Cheng-chung Lai regrets that Fernand Braudel chose to privilege description rather than theory, and that is why, among all the reviews, he singles out J.C. Perrot's: he believes Perrot to have tried most to bridge his needs, though without convincing results. But what sesame should he have trusted in to base his work on an adequate theoretical model? Economists are legion, and everyone of them takes his stand in a different place, constructs his masterpiece based on his own argument and creates his own group of faithful followers. There should have been a preliminary discussion of theories, without any guarantee of leading somewhere, since the experts themselves are in disagreement. Furthermore, political economy has capsized before recent difficulties so many times (since the 1929 depression at least), and has had to re-do its

calculations at every crisis, expressing sometimes repentance and sometimes unanswerable truisms, that one may justly wonder what sort of acclaim it deserves. Political economy has not been able to throw light on the future, nor has it managed to provide the key to changes that took place in the past. There is an explanation for this: political economy developed from intuitions that were "genial" but from the start ill-adapted to real situations and, owing to the force of circumstances, became more and more ill-adapted as the years pass by. And so the first task is to really establish what has been and what the present is. Knowledge of the laws of astrophysics does not exempt one from peering at the sky. Fernand Braudel's book is the equivalent of a historical-geographical map of economic life. It fulfills an essential function. I am sure that the resolution - in the optical sense of the term - is not yet brought into focus, and I share Cheng-chung Lai's hope for an elucidation of the mechanisms - both now and in their development. It does not seem to me impossible *a priori* to approach them. However, one will reach them only by impugning obsolete economic theories, the historians' reflex in bowing down before magical formulae and their cosy refuge in studying a narrow event in a narrow time span and within a narrow geographical area. Thus the merit of *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme* may lie in its stimulating reflection on this question. The attitude towards the book must be that of complacent torpor nor of specious disparagement. The conclusion is up front in a real dialogue among historians, economists, sociologists, in a tightening up of research and a better grasping of issues; in short, the pursuit of a grand design.