

# Fernand Braudel's "On History" in Retrospect\*

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The book "On History"<sup>1</sup> collects the non-empirical writings of Fernand Braudel (1902-1985). His empirical studies are well known to historians around the world [(*The Mediterranean* (2 volumes), *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century* (3 volumes), *The Identity of France* (3 volumes)].<sup>2</sup> The methodological aspect is however insufficiently discussed. As he wrote on page 133: "It is never too late to speak of important works"; *On History* serves as an important reference by which to evaluate Braudel's methodological contributions.

A first review of these collected essays appeared in *History and Theory* (1971, vol. 10, pp. 346-355). J.H.M. Salmon wrote his review soon after the publication of the French version. His method of review was to "restate the themes that recur in *Ecrits sur l'histoire* with all the objectivity at my command" (p. 354). He offered his criticisms in the last two paragraphs: "Yet I feel obliged in conclusion to remark that Braudel's hesitation about the wisdom of publishing these pieces was well founded" (p. 354).

Twenty years later, after reading the entire book with attention, I have different feelings. My strategy here is not to restate the themes with complete objectivity, but to state my observations on the structure and arguments of each chapter. As a general rule, it is preferable for readers of a review to take into account the following differences: the generation gap, the gap of the states of art in social sciences, the perspectives of historical analysis, and the cultural differences between the author and critic. This rule is applicable here.

This book contains 12 chapters, including an abstract from the preface of *The Mediterranean* (chapter 1), Braudel's inaugural lecture given to the *Collège de France* in 1950 (chapter 2), his most famous article on the *longue durée* (chapter 3), three articles on the relationship between history and other social sciences (chapters 4-6), five book reviews (chapters 7-11), and a long critical survey on the history of civilization (chapter 12); these writings were published between 1944 and 1963. I believe that Braudel had other interesting book

\* FERNAND BRAUDEL (1969): *Ecrits sur l'histoire*, Paris: Flammarion (Champs No.23).

<sup>1</sup> Translated by SARAH MATTHEWS: *On History*, University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. ix + 226. For convenience, all page citations are referred to the English version.

<sup>2</sup> See his *The Historian's Craft*, chapter 1 sections 6 & 7. It is rumoured that this is Lucien Febvre's formulation, not Bloch's.

reviews and independent articles that are not yet collected into books: we hope that will be done in the near future.

The short chapter 1 (two pages) is taken from the second part of the preface to his masterwork *The Mediterranean* (first edition, 1949). The points to explain are that the book contains three main parts, and more importantly, introduces Braudel's distinction of historical time of three kinds: event time (short *durée*), social time (*conjoncture*) and geo-time (*longue durée*). Retrospectively, these two pages already laid the corner stones of his lifelong methodology of historical analysis, as we see repeatedly in this review. The prefaces of the three consequent editions (1963, 1976, 1979) contain editorial remarks of minor analytical interest.

Chapter 2 "The Situation of History in 1950" is his declaration of dissatisfaction with the current historiography in France, especially the analytical methodology. He attacked this deficiency implicitly (he was polite and careful on this occasion); in the first two sections, as he declared: "It is precisely our task to get beyond this first stage of history... [Previous historical analysis] necessarily entails enormous errors of perspective and of reasoning" (pp. 11-12). Then in section III he began to argue why 'total history' and *longue durée* are necessary and useful tools "[i]n order to have a new history ... [and] to be able to answer the new questions" (pp. 12-13). The final section IV is essentially in praise of his mentor Lucien Febvre whom Braudel had just succeeded in the Chair. All in all, the contents of this chapter (especially section III) serve to clarify and to intensify the same arguments as in chapter 1. Braudel probably had similar methodological claims in these two chapters because they were published about the same date: 1949 and 1950.

The above concepts are fully developed in chapter 3: "History and the Social Sciences: the *longue durée*". This article is the most original in this book and may be Braudel's most important paper. I conjecture that this paper will be read in the next century. At the age of 55, he finally presented a full version of the concept *longue durée* that he initially formulated in *The Mediterranean* during the 1940s. He reformulated this concept more elegantly, adding further arguments in a more philosophical style. To be received as a sophisticated historical concept in France, and to be accepted by other social sciences, it should be so expressed. Braudel finally completed this requirement in 1958, after a long process of deliberation.

He had two targets in mind, one that analytical tools in history were obviously insufficient to interpret the rapidly changing world especially since the Second World War, and the other that history became a 'debtor' of analytical concepts *vis-à-vis* the rapid growth of other social sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, economics. Under such a double threat, Braudel cleverly proposed that there is one aspect overlooked in all social sciences: time. Sociology lacks a dimension of social time; geography needs to explore geo-time; demography, psychology, linguistics etc. have to investigate their own 'time'.

If this assumption were acceptable, he proposed that among time durations (*durée*) of various kinds the most penetrating is the *longue durée*. The event short-time is too obvious, the middle-range time (10-25 years) is not too difficult, but the long-run underlying movement (a century or longer as the unit of analysis) is an important aspect commonly neglected or underestimated; only after full analysis of this aspect can one understand the deeper structure of history.

It must be admitted that this 30-page article makes heavy reading. Braudel was a distinguished salesman, demonstrating his erudition and self-confidence, repeating similar arguments in very different forms, on occasion convincing but on other occasions confusing as well. It would be of interest for somebody to undertake research to investigate the origins of this concept, to evaluate the impact of this article on historiography both at home and abroad, and to predict the probability of its survival in the *longue durée*.

In contrast, chapter 4 "Unity and Diversity in the Human Sciences" is a simplified version of the previous article. In eight pages it offers no new arguments; moreover, the style is plain. This paper was first published in the *Revue de l'enseignement supérieur* (No. 1) in 1960. Experience indicates that papers by famous scholars appearing in the first issue of new journals generally lack originality; this is a fitting instance. He had just published in 1958 his previous serious article; how can one expect so soon to read important new things? I wonder why this article is collected in this book.

The next chapter on "History and Sociology" proposed a closer relationship between history and sociology based on their common interest: the need to explore the aspect of 'time'. This was written at the invitation of Georges Gurvitch (Professor of Sociology, University of Paris) for his *Traité de sociologie* (1958-60). Braudel and Gurvitch had two properties in common: they were close friends since their years as prisoners of war, and both were fascinated by the application of the analysis of 'time' to their own disciplines. Gurvitch "distinguishes a whole series of time: the time of the *longue durée* and slow motion, time the deceiver and time the surpriser, time with an irregular beat, cyclic time running in place, time running slow, time alternating between running slow and fast, time running fast, explosive time" (p. 79). He was a sociologist obsessed by time. This piece is 'friendly' by comparison with the 'fighting' ambience sensed in chapter 2.

I have two brief comments. The arguments and main points in this chapter were essentially the same as those expressed in previous chapters. On the other hand, from the point of view of 1990, the main streams of history and main currents of sociology do not cross (the *Journal of Historical Sociology* started in 1988 may serve well as a bridge between the two disciplines).

"Toward a Historical Economics" in chapter 5 disappointed me most. As an economic historian I expected an instructive analysis because he had abundant experience in research in socio-economic history. This paper was originally published in the first issue of *Revue Economique* in 1950. When

I investigated this issue, I discovered that Braudel was a member of the editorial committee. My previous rule (i.e. that articles by important scholars in the first issue of a new journal are in general unoriginal) applies again! For such an interesting and important topic, he used less than eight pages and two notes to complete this article having three sections. Frankly, I fail to follow his arguments, and I cannot imagine how economic historians can benefit from this paper. If this paper bore my name, nobody would publish it. How could he have been so perfunctory as a professor at the *Collège de France*?

Chapters 7 to 11 are book reviews. I think chapter 7 "Toward a Serial History: Seville and the Atlantic, 1504-1650" is the best, in the sense that Braudel knew the subject almost as well as the authors, his arguments were powerful, and his criticisms contained much insight. Pierre Chaunu is a prolific historian in the community of French history; his 12 volumes (with co-author Huguette Chaunu) of *Séville et l'Atlantique* (1955-60, 7,343 pages) is a notable example of long-series quantitative history (*histoire sérielle*). He reconstructed the dynamic movements of the economy and society based on series of long-term statistics. Hence Braudel praised him highly at the beginning and in section III (pp. 97-100).

In Section I "Structure and Conjuncture" Braudel made the criticism that Chaunu's study "is an arbitrary expanse" (p. 92). I am unable to judge this criticism, nor do I know any response from Chaunu, but sections I and II (pp. 92-97) seem replete with strong arguments on this point. Braudel's main criticism was in section IV (pp. 100-102): "The Stake: The History of Production"; he argued that Chaunu beautifully depicted the curves of various prices but neglected the movement of production, arguing that in fact production is more essential than price when one is detecting long-run economic changes.

I consider that this is an expert-to-expert review. Braudel appropriately pointed out the weakness of Chaunu's framework, his use and abuse of historical data, the formulation of the problems, etc. In short, he demonstrated with insight some other possible dimensions of the topic. To be perfect, an expert-to-expert review should offer a counter-framework and counter-logic, but Braudel simply argued in one page that *longue durée* and global history are better tools to improve Chaunu's works (p. 96).

Sorre's book *Les bases biologiques de la géographie humaine* reviewed in 1944 is collected here as chapter 8. Braudel was then in a German camp for prisoners of war. I guess that he wrote this review and mailed it to his mentor Febvre who was the editor of *Mélanges d'histoire sociale*. This surmise is confirmed by Febvre's note 5 (page 117). This journal was *Annales* published by another name during the war period.

Why did Braudel review a book about "biological bases of human geography"? I conjecture that the theme human geography attracted him first. Febvre and Braudel were geo-historians at earlier stages of their careers, this book that interprets human geography from the point of view of biology

certainly caught their attention. As Braudel wrote in the first paragraph: "It is a work of cardinal importance, of commanding interest, and one which poses a good many problems,...It is an exploration,...a series of trial contacts" (p. 105).

Overall, I can feel his excitement in summarizing interesting parts of this book, side by side with his comments. He passionately introduced this 'biological book' to his fellow (geo-)historians, hoping thereby to shed new light on historiography. Braudel was however a layman in this field; the contents of his review are interesting even for current historians, but in terms of style it contrasts sharply with the previous review of Chaunu's work, in which he offered strong arguments and expert insights. Why is it collected here? - perhaps as a souvenir of his days as prisoner.

Otto Brunner's *Neue Wege der Sozialgeschichte* (1956) is reviewed in chapter 9. On the first three sections in which Braudel summarized the book together with his unstructured comments, I have no comments. The title of the final section 4 is: "What Is Social History" (pp. 128-131). This is of course an attractive proposition; Braudel's answer to this self-posed question must be significant. I am disappointed to find that Braudel was, in less than two and one half pages, advertizing again the superiority of *longue durée* and total history.

Three books on historical demography are reviewed in chapter 10. It seems that Braudel was angry at Ernst Wagemann's research: "Works which are, true to tell, hasty, narrow written, and unfinished, fevered, amused, amusing, if not always entirely reasonable" (p. 134). I find my background in this field made it difficult to follow his arguments in eight and a half pages (pp. 133-141).

By contrast, I think I can follow his points in his review of Alfred Sauvy's work. As a demographer of international reputation, the logic and rationale of Sauvy the economist was easier for me to understand. A main difficulty when one reads these pages is that Braudel the historian started to speak in terms of neo-classical economics — total, average, marginal productivities — and to use these terms to comment on Sauvy's findings. I confess that I am totally lost in this controversy (pp. 142-4), and I doubt that most historians can understand Braudel's points without the help of a conventional geometric diagram that appeared in basic economics. Did Braudel forget his *longue durée* and total history? Certainly not (see pp. 148-9). It would have been interesting to see Sauvy's response; I have no hint in this regard.

The third book under review was Louis Chevalier's *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle* (1958). Braudel confirmed that "assuredly a fine subject and equally assuredly a fine book. I have read it and reread it" (p. 149). I agree totally with him. 'Dangerous classes' is an interesting and important topic touched upon by little serious research. Among other matters, Chevalier analyzed the problem from the points of view of suicide, infanticide, prostitution, insanity, concubinage, death among the workers and the 'criminal army' (p. 157). I feel that Braudel had strong affinity with the issues treated in this work. He also had something relevant to

write; in fact he also offered some delightful arguments. In terms of size and weight, I believe that this section qualified to be an independent review. In my opinion, this is the best review second only to that of Chaunu's work in chapter 7.

The final review was of Harvin Harris (1956): *Town and Country in Brazil*. The book "is exclusively concerned with a journey and then a stay made in a small Brazilian town" (p. 165). The subtitle of this chapter is: "the present explains the past", a famous slogan of Marc Bloch.<sup>2</sup> My first reaction is that this book must have been written with historical perspectives. In Braudel's summary (the first three sections, pp. 165-171), I find the contents to be much more ethnological than historical. My second doubt is why a strong advocate of the *longue durée* and total history like Braudel was fascinated by a book "exclusively concerned with a journey and then a stay made in a small town"? He contributed 12 pages on this review originally published in *Annales E.S.C.* (1959) and collected it in this book. I am perplexed.

On page 173 he told us that "in 1974, in quite another region of the vast country of Brazil, I made a less poetic trip than Marvin Harris's, but one that was in its own way no less revelatory". In this entire page I read his Brazilian recollections rather than historical analysis, if any. From the point of view of 'Brazilian revelation', Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques* (1955) was much more insightful in many respects. Then, why was the book of Marvin Harris significant? Did this book recall to Braudel his Brazilian days (1935-37, 1947)? Moreover, is this book a good example of "the present explains the past"? I doubt it.

The first half of the final chapter 12 is basically a critical survey of the historical analysis of civilization(s), its meanings, definitions, and interpretations by major scholars. The second half contains Braudel's opinions on how to achieve a better understanding of this subject, in which he did not neglect to remind us of the necessity of dialogue between history and the social sciences, and of course, "that civilizations are realities of the extreme *longue durée*" (p. 209). The subtitle of this chapter is "the past explains the present", appropriate for this topic. His erudition in this subject was impressive in the long first section (pp. 179-200). His comments on Spengler (pp. 186-189) and on Toynbee (pp. 189-197) were remarkable. This is the major part of this chapter. Although sections 2 and 3 contain 19 pages (pp. 200-218) this part is, I feel, much more opinion than instructive argument.

I list the topic of each chapter in Table 1, and assign them different asterisks (\*). More asterisks reveal my stronger preference, as a summary of the above comments, but I do not intend to convince anybody in this regard.

Table 1 Evaluation of each chapter

Chapter & pages	Themes	Evaluation
1 (3-5)	Abstract from the Preface of his <i>The Mediterranean</i> (1949) on the contents and methodology of this masterwork	**
2 (6-22)	Inaugural lecture given to the <i>Collège de France</i> , on "The Situation of History in 1950".	***
3 (25-54)	His most important essay "The <i>longue durée</i> " (1958)	*****
4 (55-63)	"Unity and Diversity in the Human Sciences" 1960, repeating similar points of chapter 3 in different forms.	*
5 (64-82)	"History and Sociology" (1958). Proposing more dialogue between the two disciplines.	***
6 (83-90)	"Toward a Historical Economics" (1950).	*
7 (91-104)	Review of Chaunu's "Seville and the Atlantic, 1504-1650" (1963).	*****
8 (105-119)	Review of Sorre's "biological geography" (1944).	**
9 (120-131)	"On a Concept of Social History", book review (1959).	**
10 (132-161)	Review of three historical demography books (1960).	***
11 (165-176)	Review of Marvin Harris's travelling record of a small Brazilian town (1959).	*
12 (177-218)	A survey of the studies of civilization(s), plus his opinions on this topic (1959).	*****

As quantified in the last column of Table 1, I think that three chapters (3, 7, 12) can survive in the *longue durée*. Three are so perfunctory (4, 6, 11) that they cannot survive even in the *short durée*. The other six chapters are indifferent. Is this a 'normal distribution' — three good, three bad, six between? Unquestionably, this symmetry is *ex post*, not planned *ex ante*.

Braudel generally judged the work of other scholars from his *longue durée* standard, and criticized their erroneous analysis of events in the short *durée* context. Among the five book review chapters, I think that, except for chapter 7 on Chaunu's *Atlantic*, the other four reviews were easy for him because he was stating that this part and that part were not good enough, and what should be added and deleted. A better way to convince authors and readers is to demonstrate that, when this concept and those materials are added, there will result some predictable significant changes in the whole work. We expect this from a great historian. He failed to offer much instructions of this kind.

The present review enters no technical argument, i.e. I have offered no counter-arguments to Braudel's concept nor judged any controversial issue. Rather, I have emphasized the aspects of structure and framework of each chapter. The disadvantage of this strategy is that, even if I point out some weakness, I do not convince readers with my own arguments. I have chosen this method because I am not equipped with comparable knowledge to quarrel with Braudel; moreover, if I treated any technical problem, then this review would have been too long.

Taken as a whole, the papers collected in this book revealed Braudel's methodology of historical analysis between 1949 and 1963. As we have seen repeatedly, his three 'magic weapons' are: the *longue durée*, total history (histoire totale or globale) and dialogue with other social sciences. The *longue durée* was his favourite tool that cast its shadow everywhere except in chapters 8 and 11. He already had all these three tools in the late 1940s, and he used them repeatedly until 1963. Even in *Civilization & Capitalism, 15th-18th Century* (1979) and in *Identity of France* (1986) we still find occasionally these three 'spirits'. Such a creative scholar as Braudel could have created many more analytical tools. Why did he wear the same clothes always and everywhere from 1950 until his death in 1985?