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Fernand Braudel, the *Annales*, and the Mediterranean

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No group of scholars has had a greater impact, or a more fertilizing effect, on the study of history in this century than the French historians of “the *Annales* school”—that is, to speak in more concrete terms, the historians whose base is in the sixth section of the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris, whose books appear, in parallel series and steady flow, under the imprint of SEVPEN, Paris, and whose regular organ is that ample and ever-expanding periodical originally entitled *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* and now—that is, since 1947—*Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*. French in origin, French in inspiration, these historians now form an international élite, held together by a distinct philosophy and a corporate loyalty and marked by a literary style which it is easy and sometimes tempting to parody.

The loyalty of the *Annales* school is to their three consecutive founding fathers, Marc Bloch, Lucien Fèbvre, Fernand Braudel. Behind these three, of course, lie the names of older scholars who have influenced them or pointed the way—Fustel de Coulanges in institutional history, François Simiand in economic theory, Émile Durkheim in sociology, Vidal la Blache in geography, and no doubt many others, few of whom were themselves historians. For, almost by definition, the scholars of the *Annales* have drawn their inspiration from non-historians as much as from historians: theirs is a kind of history which crosses all frontiers and uses all techniques. But whatever non-historical sources have fed it, the school itself is essentially historical. The achievement of these founding fathers is to have drawn geography, sociology, law, ideas into the broad stream of history, and thereby to have refreshed, nourished, and strengthened that stream, which previously, in some ways at least, had been running dangerously dry.

I have in front of me the first volume of the *Annales d'histoire sociale*. It begins with a brief preface “à nos lecteurs” signed by “les Directeurs”—that is, by Marc Bloch and Lucien Fèbvre—in which they announce, with innocent simplicity, their radical design. History, they declare, has become sterilized. “Historians, having passed through the same experiences and drawn from them the same conclusions, have long been afflicted by the disease consequent on a

divorce of traditions." The divorce is between the old historical scholar applying the sound old rules of his craft to the documents of the past and the new social scientist adventuring among the economies and societies of the present. "Two classes of workers made to understand each other, pass each other unrecognised." Nor are these the only artificial divisions, for history has also become compartmentalized and subdivided into ancient, medieval, and modern; societies, into primitive and civilized. That very specialization of labor to which all sciences owe their technical advance can prove, and in this instance has proved, an impediment to the understanding of the living past, and perhaps—since the two are continuous—of the living present too.

To recreate the totality of a society, past or present, to understand its delicate mechanism and yet to see it, not as a machine, but as a living organism, with a dynamic of its own, distinct from the mere sum of its parts—how easy it is to state such a philosophy and yet how difficult it is for a historian to realize. It requires delicate textual scholarship, for the records of the past are texts, with their own internal mysteries, and yet it requires also a whole series of other techniques in which the imagination too must operate and by which it must be controlled. It also presupposes a general historical philosophy; a philosophy which can inform and unite and animate the particles and periods of history in the same way, *mutatis mutandis*, in which the "philosophic history" of the eighteenth century or the "historicism" of the nineteenth century united and animated the historical findings of those times.

What is the philosophy of the *Annales* school? I suppose that it could be defined as social determinism with a difference: social determinism limited and qualified by recognition of independent human vitality. Bloch, Fèbvre, Braudel, and their disciples are not concerned, as so many traditional historians are concerned, with what they call *histoire événementielle*—the mere course of political events seen in isolation from the physical and social environment which surrounds and conditions them. They are not interested in politics for politics' sake, any more than they are interested in art for art's sake or ideas for ideas' sake. They are interested, certainly, in politics, art, ideas, for these are important human activities, and history is, above all, a science of humanity. But these activities, like all other human activities, are conditioned by time and place. The thought which is thinkable in one time and one place is unthinkable in another, and the function of the historian, *quâ* historian, is not to declare that such a thought is objectively right or wrong (for historical terms are always relative, not absolute) but to state, or to suggest, what circumstances,

in a particular time, made it thinkable. And these circumstances are not themselves simple: they are not merely physical or merely temporal; they are a complex of forces which is not easily disentangled because each of them acts and reacts on the others. Geography, climate, population determine communications, economy, political organization, but each can react upon the other; man is a social animal and is conditioned by the society in which he lives, as that society in turn is conditioned by its geographical and climatic matrix; and politics and ideas are limited not only by these external forces but by the political and intellectual deposit around them, which was similarly determined, and into which they fall.

Put thus, in these general terms, this philosophy does not seem novel or controversial. Some of it is as old as Montesquieu or would have seemed a truism to Ranke. But the *Annales* school has given it a new sophistication of method. There is nothing here of the implied mysticism of the German historians, of the intellectual surrender which some of them were prepared to make to the *Zeitgeist*, of their obeisance to the self-justifying *raison d'état* of historic periods and states. The historians of the *Annales* school respect the organic nature of societies, the vitality of man, but they are also rationalists in their method. Whatever can be rationally pursued, measured, calculated, quantified, is so pursued; where internal certainty is unattainable, external comparison—carefully guarded against anachronism—may be suggested; and for the rest, where exactitude is unattainable and the comparative method inapplicable, there is neither the dogmatism of the determinists nor the abnegation of the specialists but a kind of new Pyrrhonism, a limited, suggestive suspension of judgment, which leaves the conclusion open but points tentatively in a possible direction: the Pyrrhonism implicit in the very “house style” of the *Annales*, which is the personal style of its masters, with its half-finished questions, its broken sentences, its inconclusive syntax, its parentheses, its exclamations, its *aposeiopeses*, its *nominativus pendens*.

So, if I were to try to capture the philosophy of the *Annales* school, I would emphasize three elements in it. First, there is the attempt to grasp the totality, and the vital cohesion, of any historical period or society, the conviction that history is what it is through the human life which animates it, the almost Platonic conception of man as the microcosm of the world. Second, there is the conviction that history is at least partly determined by forces which are external to man and yet not entirely neuter or independent of him, nor, for that matter, of each other: forces which are partly physical, visible, unchanging, or at

least viscous and slow to change, like geography and climate, partly intangible, only intellectually perceptible, and more volatile, such as social formations or intellectual traditions. Third, there is the determination, while never losing sight of this totality of human activity, this interdependence of its motivating and limiting forces, to reduce the area of incomprehension by rigorous statistical analysis of whatever can be analysed, by the measurement of whatever can be measured: in short, the subordination, to that ultimate human aim, of all the most refined techniques of the mathematician, the econometrician, the statistician.

This common philosophy can be discerned, in variable form no doubt, in all the scholars of the *Annales* school; and what a stimulating effect it has had on historical studies everywhere! The effect is most obvious, perhaps, in medieval studies. Medieval history, in many places, seems to be a dying subject: dying of aridity, or at least of the artificiality of its own priestly techniques. The professional medievalists had reduced it to the mystery of a self-perpetuating guild, the ritual of a closed sect. They had severed it from modern (or ancient) history and devoutly insulated it from modern methods and ideas. If that subject has been revived, at least in some areas, that is due largely to the sudden refreshment given to it by the work of Marc Bloch. Behind Bloch, of course, stands Pirenne: we all have our precursors; but to many students of history Bloch's highly sophisticated studies of the problem of gold in the Middle Ages, of slavery in the Dark Ages, and of the institutional and social character of feudalism—studies in which a virtuosity of textual interpretation and modern, non-historical techniques were combined with a passionate interest in humanity, a desire to reconstruct a living past—opened a new and tempting way through what was becoming a dry and inhospitable wilderness. It is this striking contrast which is implied, to me, in the rhetorical question of Lucien Fèbvre, “à combien de millions de lieues, pratiquement, l'École de Droit, l'École des Hautes Etudes, et l'École des Chartes ne continuent elles point de se situer?”

If Marc Bloch applied their common philosophy, especially, to medieval history, his friend and colleague Lucien Fèbvre applied it, especially, to the “early modern” period: socially and politically in his work on his own native Franche-Comté, intellectually in his work on Martin Luther and the problem of infidelity in the sixteenth century. But the contribution of Fèbvre extended far beyond his own immediate work. With his abundant energy and scintillating literary volubility, he was the tireless and often provocative propagandist of the *Annales* school, “notre histoire,” “histoire vivante,” “histoire à part

entière," "la leçon *Annales*," "nous des *Annales*." In his numerous essays, touching upon every subject within the wide range of interdependent human activity claimed for "notre histoire," he defined and illustrated its philosophy and castigated its retreating enemies. Meanwhile, under his direction, the sixth section and the *Annales* flourished. It was in his reign, after the murder by the Germans of Marc Bloch, that the "*Annales* school" began to assert itself, that the evangelical period began, that the proselytes were brought in, and that the *Annales* themselves changed their title. Their new, somewhat staccato, and challenging title aptly represented the new style: indeed, it was Fèbvre who created the new *style Annales* which has now, in a new generation, achieved an almost tabloid form.

Fernand Braudel is the third of the founding fathers, the last survivor of the great triumvirate with whose names the *Annales* school is always and rightly associated. Not unknown to historians before the war—or, if unknown, unknown only because of the inaccessibility of his first work, published in Algiers in the *Revue Africaine*¹—he burst upon the historical world in 1949 with the publication of his great book on the Mediterranean in the time of Philip II. This work was at once recognized as a historical classic, although, as with many classics, it is difficult to define its peculiar quality. A classic, by definition, breaks through the accepted standards of its time, by which it must at first be judged. It may take a generation before it is absorbed and can be examined critically. It will then, if it is a classic, be reprinted, revised, annotated, translated, and critically reviewed. This has been the fortune of *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen*, whose second edition, published in France in 1966, has now been translated into English and published to mark the author's seventieth birthday.

Braudel's great work is in some ways the culminating product of the *Annales* school, or at least of its first, pioneering phase: for that school has now passed into a period of almost bureaucratic consolidation. He himself has described the origins of the book, in the preface to the second French edition. The book, he there tells us, "does not date from 1949, when it was first published, nor even from 1947, when it was defended as a thesis at the Sorbonne. Its main outline was already determined, if not entirely written, by 1939, at the close of the dazzling early period of the *Annales* of Marc Bloch and Lucien Fèbvre, of which it is the direct result." Indeed no single book so amply and vividly illustrates, in its practice, the whole philosophy

¹"Les Espagnols et l'Afrique du Nord, 1492-1577," a series of articles in *Revue Africaine* (1928-29).

of the *Annales* school as this majestic tribute paid to the founders of the new historical philosophy. In his note of acknowledgments the author recites the names of his great precursors: "In 1931 I had the pleasure of hearing the marvellous lectures of Henri Pirenne. . . . Before the war I only once made contact with Marc Bloch, but I think I can honestly say that no aspect of his thought is foreign to me." The book itself is laid ceremoniously at the feet of Lucien Fèbvre.

Every great work has an occasion, the moment at which, or the topic around which, its long-matured philosophy is suddenly crystallized. This occasion was provided, for Braudel, by a particular moment in Mediterranean history to which he recurs. In his preface to the original edition he has described that moment. He there tells us how he began his work as a conventional study of the Mediterranean policy of Philip II—a continuation, no doubt, of his earlier work on Spanish policy in North Africa. This was a study (he tells us) of which the historical establishment approved, for it was specialized, easily defined, and neatly documented. It was also "indifferent to the discoveries of geography, little concerned (as diplomacy itself so often is) with economic and social problems, slightly disdainful towards the achievements of civilisation, religion and also of literature and the arts, the great witnesses of all worthwhile history." This study of *histoire événementielle* which he had originally projected was in fact duly completed by Braudel, and those who are interested in it can detach it, if they wish, from the great work in which it is now embedded, and by which it is controlled and enlivened. But as Braudel pursued it, he saw that it could not properly be so detached, for the policy of Philip II itself was not insulated. *Rey paplaro* though he was, immured though he might be in the Escorial, the Prudent King did not deal solely with paper. Great problems pressed upon him, and even the Mediterranean was only one sector of his foreign policy, and that not always the most important. This became apparent in the 1580s. "For in the 1580s the might of Spain turned towards the Atlantic. It was out there, whether conscious or not of the dangers involved, that the empire of Philip II had to concentrate its forces and fight for its threatened existence. A powerful swing of the pendulum carried it towards its oceanic destiny. When I became interested in this hidden balance of forces, the physics of Spanish policy, . . . I was already beginning to move outside the traditional bounds of diplomatic history. When I began to ask myself finally whether the Mediterranean did not possess, beyond the long-distance and irregular actions of Spain, . . . its own history and destiny, a powerful vitality of its

own, . . . I was already succumbing to the temptation of my immense subject.”

In the last part of his book, where he returns from that immense subject to the *histoire événementielle* out of which it had first broken and which it now at last allows to reveal itself, Braudel naturally emphasizes this epochal swing of the geohistorical pendulum. The old historians had of course recognized that the year 1580 had marked a change in Spanish policy. They had discerned the new decisiveness, the new dynamism of Philip's actions: for it was in those years that the king had at last mobilized all the resources of his vast empire for a final attempt to crush the Northern enemies who threatened it, politically and ideologically. But these historians had ascribed this change to a narrow political cause: to the arrival in Madrid of Philip's oldest and ablest adviser, the formidable, indefatigable, confident statesman whom he had inherited from his father, cardinal Granvelle. But this, personal explanation, says Braudel, is too simple, as personal explanations always are. Between the grandeur of the events—the swing of Spanish power from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic—and the incident of the arrival of Granvelle at Madrid “the disproportion is obvious. Or rather, the biographical method is in danger of misleading us . . . the Mediterranean was abandoned, and that quite independently of the cardinal. It is dangerous to fit historical judgment into the narrow frame of human lives, however spectacular, however commanding those lives may be.”

“The disproportion is obvious.” How then shall a true proportion be found? From the biographical method, the method of the political or diplomatic historian, “shuttered up in his chosen area,” Braudel turned to the “organic” method of Bloch and Fèbvre and sought to reconstruct the Mediterranean sea of the sixteenth century in its own context, as the determinant as well as the background of human history. This required him to look at that sea, and at the lands which enclosed it, and at the human communities which lived in those lands, bound together, directly or indirectly, by that great unifying inland waterway, as a unity: a unity which, being first geographical, then social, transcends the spectacular political fracture of the sixteenth century.

For in the sixteenth century, and perhaps only then, at least since the high Middle Ages, the natural unity of the Mediterranean had been broken. It had been broken politically, broken culturally, broken ideologically. In Antiquity it had been united as a Greco-Roman sea. In the Middle Ages it had been united as a Christian sea: the infidels might occupy the lands of the East, but it was the Christians who

controlled the water, the waterways, the commerce, the shipping. But in the early sixteenth century, the Ottoman Turks, having conquered Syria and Egypt and swallowed up the islands of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Archipelago, suddenly became a naval power. Thereupon the Christian powers of the West found themselves, for the first time, shut out of the eastern half of the sea and even—after the Turkish protectorate of Algiers—threatened in the West. So the dominion of the sea was polarized, to east and to west, and the long duel was fought by the two great empires which came, in that century, to dominate the politics of Europe and Africa: the Habsburg empire ruled from its new capital of Madrid, the Ottoman empire ruled from its new capital of Istanbul.

Habsburg power, Ottoman power—how different, how opposite they seem when approached by the narrowly political historian, how similar when seen in their context of time and space! In the nineteenth century, one great historian sensed the similarity. Leopold von Ranke's *History of the Spanish and Ottoman Empires* presumes it. But Ranke studied those two empires, perforce, from a somewhat narrow, documentary base. He saw both Spain and Turkey, fresh and clear indeed, with the penetrating eyes of historical genius indeed, but his documentary material was still narrowly political: it consisted, disproportionately, of the political reports of the Venetian ambassadors. Braudel, inspired by the philosophy of his masters, studied the same subject in far greater depth: first geographically, then economically and socially, finally politically and strategically. His great work descends (or ascends), rationally and methodically, from *géo-histoire* to *histoire événementielle*.

As he himself wrote, in the preface to his first edition, Braudel's work consists of three parts, each one of which is an essay in general explanation. First there is the slow, almost imperceptible history of man in relation to his geographical and climatic environment. Then there is the more mobile history of social forms, the history of different human groups, some larger than others, some more stable than others, but all equally determined, at least in part, by the obstinate physical matrix which encloses them. Finally there is the *histoire événementielle*, the history of events, "surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs." This is the familiar political history to which traditional historians have given their whole attention. To Braudel, such history is no less real or important than to them. His touch is no less sensitive than theirs, his scholarship is no less accurate and attentive to detail. But to him this political history is merely the topmost layer of his multidimensional

study: the long-exposed layer which has been rendered familiar by previous research. Because it is already familiar, his own most important work is not in that layer—or at least it is not directly in that layer: it is in the substrata beneath that layer, the currents under that foam: areas of history which have sometimes hardly been touched before, at least by historians, but whose substance, or whose course, must be understood if we are to find meaning in these fugitive, iridescent, but otherwise haphazard surface movements.

Such a task is, of course, huge. It depends on a vast reading in a wide range of disciplines: geography, economics, sociology—indeed, the whole range of human sciences. It requires an enormous effort of study, a great power of synthesis and imagination, new technical skills. The documentary materials alone are very uneven. The rich archives of Spain and Italy are well known and have been exploited by generations of scholars; those of the Ottoman Empire are all but untouched: the classic histories of that empire—Zinckeisen, Hammer, even Jorga—have all been written from Western sources. How can any man, we may ask, restore, by scholarship, the unity of so richly varied, so historically vital an area? It seems beyond human powers, and yet from the moment that we begin the adventure of reading his book, we see that Braudel has triumphed over these obstacles. The first part, on the human geography of the Mediterranean, establishes the fact. With its marvellous command of the material, its power to evoke, from literature and history, ancient and modern, Christian or Muslim, the essential timeless character, and the social and economic consequences, of mountains and plains, inland seas and islands, it convinces us that we are in the presence of a great work not merely of scholarship but of imaginative historical literature. From the beginning the multidimensional character of the work is clear. Geography is always related to forms of society; mountains and valleys are alive with people; everywhere villages and cities come to life; and the language lives too, vivid, fresh and supple, worthy of the theme.

Can this marvellously controlled multidimensional unity be sustained when we move from human geography to the more complex and intractable areas of economic history and social organization? A critic might say that, in its central chapters, the book—invariably—breaks up into a series of essays loosely held together by the geographical theme. They are wonderful essays, and no reader can read them without finding himself constantly enriched by the new facts and new ideas which they set before him. There are essays on the changing political forms of the sixteenth century—the crisis of the towns, the creation of great temporary empires, the more

lasting power of more compact states; on the emergence of the spectacular public financiers and the special conjunctures which called them forth; on the population of the Mediterranean states; on the migration of economic élites; on the "seigneurial reaction"; on piracy and banditism; on the flow of precious metals; on the organization and competition of the great monopolies in pepper and spices; on the bulk traffic in wheat; on the deforestation of the Mediterranean lands; on the expansion of Mediterranean culture through the Counter-Reformation; on the social significance of persecution, the problem of the Moriscos in Spain. These essays are so various, and so stimulating in themselves, that we may easily, while lingering in them, lose sight of the plan of the book. But they are held together, not only by their in-built geographical unity but also by certain continuous threads which run through their diversity, certain key problems to which, ultimately, they are related. The central problem is that of the decline of the Mediterranean, the moment when Europe changed (to put it very bluntly) from a Mediterranean to an Atlantic economy.

It was once supposed that the Portuguese discovery of a sea route to the East spelt the ruin of the Italian cities which had previously controlled the Mediterranean terminals of the overland trade: that, in Braudel's phrase, "four tiny ships doubled the Cape of Good Hope and a thousand-year history of profitable trade and brilliant civilisation was over." That formulation seems somewhat archaic now, but ideas can survive their formal justification, and the idea that the Mediterranean world was in decline throughout the sixteenth century was still, in 1939, worth attacking. Braudel attacks it consistently, and at every level. The caravan routes, he insists, survive the sixteenth century. The population of the Mediterranean countries—or at least of the Western Mediterranean—increases throughout the century, and that in spite of war and emigration. If the commerce of the Italian cities declines, industry takes its place and absorbs the growing manpower of Venice and Florence. The diversion of the Spanish route to the Netherlands from Coruna and Flushing to Barcelona, Genoa, and the Rhineland brought new prosperity to Italy. The very intolerance and persecutions of Spain and Italy are arguments of overpopulation. So are the poverty and banditism of the end of the century, the increased pressure on wheat supplies, the setting up of *offices de blé*. All statistics, however fallible in detail, point in the same direction: they illustrate "the youth of a world which we are told is in decline." That decline, Braudel argues, did not begin until the end of the century. The "grand tournant" is in the 1580s—the same 1580s in which Philip II turned his eyes from the Mediterranean to the Atlan-

tic: the 1580s in which famine struck Spain and Italy and Dutch ships passed the straits of Gibraltar bringing, to a hungry Mediterranean, welcome supplies of Baltic grain. With the coming of peace, at the end of the century, the decline is masked; but the crisis of the 1620s reveals it. It is in the seventeenth century, and only then, that the long "Phase A," Simiand's phase of economic expansion, ends for the Mediterranean world, and his "Phase B," the phase of contraction, begins.

The sixteenth century, then, is the last great age of the historic Mediterranean, of the Mediterranean as the center of European civilization; and it is as its historian, the historian who has sought to restore to it its lost century, the first historian both of its unity and of its diversity in that or any other century, that Braudel has a title to fame. So vast an undertaking inevitably discovers almost as many gaps as it fills, and it is one of Braudel's great gifts that he can point to those gaps, inspire other scholars to fill them, and teach those scholars his own methods. In the 1950s and 1960s numerous scholars of the sixth section, and some others, have followed the promising trails first pointed out by him, and his own studies have kept pace with theirs. Their work has appeared not only in the *Annales* but also in those invaluable volumes which regularly emerge, in distinct series, from the press of SEVPEN. Thanks to this continuing research, Braudel's arguments and conclusions have been constantly fed by new material, new statistics, and in 1963, when the author prepared a second edition of his work, it was in a different form. Not only did the new edition contain maps, tables, and illustrations for which there had been no place in the austere conditions of postwar France; the text also was remodeled, sometimes drastically.

There will always be two opinions about such revision. Some will say—some did say—that no word should have been changed in a work that had become a classic; others will agree with the author that such finality, in historical study, cannot be achieved and therefore should not be presumed. "With the increase in knowledge and the advances made in our neighbouring disciplines, the social sciences, historical books age more quickly now than in the past. A moment passes and their vocabulary has become dated, the new ground they broke is familiar territory, and the explanations they offered are challenged." This process of revision, as we all know, is continuous. Happy the scholar who is given the opportunity to incorporate, in his own work, the additions and qualifications supplied by a generation of scholars inspired, largely, by it and by him.

The textual critic can amuse himself in pursuing and identifying the

changes which Braudel has made in his second edition, and which the author himself does not think it necessary to specify. They are sometimes radical, at least in form, sometimes almost fussy in detail. Whole sections have been transposed; illustrations have been multiplied, statistics qualified, speculations dispersed into air, or condensed into solidity, by contact with new matter. There are times when every sentence seems to have been remodeled. Sometimes the reader may regret these meticulous changes, as damaging the freshness of the original work. There have been sacrifices of substance, too—perhaps to accommodate the new matter. But all readers will welcome the new matter, whether it consists of almost imperceptible additions to the rich and vivid illustrative detail, or of more perfect statistics, graphically illustrated, or of new essays (like the essay on the Jewish diaspora) inserted to illustrate and strengthen the great, unchanged general theme: that majestic, ambitious theme which, in itself, justifies the proud claim implicit in the last words of Braudel's original preface: " 'It is the fear of great history which has killed great history' wrote Edmond Faral in 1942. May it live again."