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# FERNAND BRAUDEL AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

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From the steep slopes and sandy beaches that surround its shores, for thousands of years sundry people and races have been drawn to the waters of the Mediterranean – including, for example, those Mongols who arrived towards the middle of the thirteenth century as the last wave of that human tide that had swept most of Asia and south-eastern Europe. One can, therefore, be indigeneous to the Mediterranean and live there for a number of generations or even centuries: but one can also become naturalized in a short time, from various places of origin, from the three continents that enclose this great Inland Sea. Today fully-fledged seasonal and temporary migrations pour visitors coming from the most far-flung of north European countries. From Lorraine, one of its regions lying between France and Germany, a concurrence of fairly unusual circumstances contrived not only to interest young Fernand Braudel in the Mediterranean but, from 1923, to attract him to live in its very heart. An exceptionally brilliant winner of a nation-wide competition for high school teachers, he was just over twenty when he arrived at Constantine, from where he soon passed to the even more seductive Algiers.

In addition to having a long and distinguished ancestry, the study of history and geography have both enjoyed in France a remarkable association and osmotic relationship with the sciences, the universities, pedagogy, and education that stretches practically to the present. In Italy today the study of history, when it does not form part of legal studies, has for years been closely associated with the disciplines of philosophy, a clear result of Germanic influence. France has, however, chosen a decidedly different option and has conceived of the inter-relationship of history and geography. Such an intellectual marriage, of great relevance both on the level of research and as regards the formation of a distinct mentality, goes back at least to Classical Aristotelian tradition. On reflection, it is not only possible to find precedents for certain Braudelian ideas in the sixteenth

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THIS is the text of a lecture delivered on 6 June 1986 during the Second General Assembly of the Community of the Mediterranean Universities that was held in Ancona, Italy, during which occasion the Mediterranean Prize was posthumously awarded to Prof. Fernand Braudel. The paper has been translated from Italian by Louis J. Scerri.

century, both in Jean Bodin and in Henri de La Bopelinière, but one can also retrace the threads that link those concepts from that time to our period, especially through the work of particular great Illuminists. Without going back that far, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in addition to an extremely vigorous historical school of which Jules Michelet was not the only exponent, there had arisen in France a strong tradition of human geography whose major exponent was Paul Vidal de La Blache. It will not be superfluous to draw attention to the fact that, just at the same time as Braudel's ideas about the Mediterranean were forming in the intensely vivid Algerian context, in 1929 the journal *Annales* was first published, which reserved for geography a prime place.

These are just brief references to point out that, right from the beginning, Braudel's work and his fruitful encounter with the Mediterranean realities did not spring up in a scene that completely lacked stimuli or exciting methods of inquiry. His great originality and the complex of his creative intuitions were grafted upon scientific ideas that were already strong rooted and they came to mature in a lively university environment. This is not to say that there was not in France too, during the first decades of this century, strong objections to innovative ideas and that there could not be felt that force of intellectual inertia with which less productive spirits instinctively identify themselves. Nor can it be said that the *Annales*, on one hand, and Fernand Braudel, on the other, did not point out the direction of secession from those traditional attitudes that had a large following in their country. One has to stress that in the humanities, from philosophy to psychology as from sociology to history, France at the beginning of the twentieth century represented a veritable intellectual crucible, out of which the emergence of innovatory ideas did not come as a surprise. In other words – whatever her influence on particular European and Mediterranean regions, which in certain cases was formidable – France was undeniably one of the poles of intellectual activity in the most diverse of fields, thanks to its potential, with its organization of cultural institutions, schools of the highest level, and successful dynamic methodologies. Indispensable as this tribute is to the lively environment from which Braudel emerged, yet it obviously does not serve to explain the directions that his ideas were to take. Let us therefore turn to Mediterranean Studies which were his specialization from 1923, since – and this has to be mentioned at least in passing – Braudel was to be concerned above all, although not exclusively, with this subject with its various interests for over half-a-century and practically until about 1980. In particular one has to insist on the potential comprehensiveness of his approach to the various phenomena that was so typical of his method and

which led him to an intuition and a vision of history that is, so to say, unequalled.

It is certainly not the case here to run through once again that vast range of concentric or parallel perspectives in which over the years, but particularly recently, the complex of systems of historical knowledge has been subdivided. It is well-known that there exists the history of biology, or of law, of literature, and of the arts, as well as of philosophy and other disciplines. Every form of material and everyday life, just like those of institutional, political, and scientific ones has its own particular type of history which has imposed itself as a dimension of organized knowledge that cannot be ignored. It is a reality that pervades the educational development of anybody who goes beyond secondary education – where history is expected to be taught as if it were only, or almost only, the narration of certain events, sometimes of a religious – cultural or economic, but more of a politico-diplomatic and military, nature. History for Fernand Braudel naturally does not consist of this latter dry and extra-ordinarily impoverished version, but neither is it merely the sum-total of the various specializations that are also taught at university level. As he has so convincingly shown right from the first publication of his book on the Mediterranean in the age of Philip II, in 1949, history is life in all its human dimensions and therefore his Mediterranean has come to be depicted as a world, that is to say an extremely complex organism.

One has to linger for some time on this view which is so basic for Braudel's vision of history. If it is true that Braudel gave particular attention to what those interested in the subject call economic history, in his works – and above all in that on the Mediterranean – he evoked and treated much more and of a more different nature. Even before anyone dreamed of talking about interdisciplinarity, he instinctively refused to be pent up within the bounds of any one particular discipline. Not only that, but he never believed that by putting together the ingredients of a certain number of systems of knowledge one could obtain a historical knowledge worthy of its name. No more catalogue, he believed, could exhaust that wealth of the various aspects of the life of man, ancient as well as modern. History for him is, therefore, not the sum-total of information provided by existent specializations or others that could yet come into being: it is instead the knowledge of the human reality in its widest sense, in its indefinite but always concrete dimensions.

Braudelian history, in short, does not follow either academic traditions or preferences. His intention is on one hand to focus on the problems of men in their concrete outlines and their complex interconnections, and on the

other to explain their organic and structured valencies. To illustrate this conception, the example provided by his analysis of the Mediterranean world is certainly the most relevant. First of all – even if for Italy one could quote the contemporary panoramic vision of the book by Pietro Silva – it was certainly not usual for a historian to choose a geographical area as the subject of his inquiry. Historians have always chosen to focus most of their works on states, cities, wars, or even particular personages. By so doing they have shown that they believed that the coherence of their work was based on an investigation of constructions or a series of interventions directly related to the actions of man, either singly or in a group. So they substantially left out of consideration not only that area or environment in which such actions took place but also, to some extent, even the time – by which is understood that complex of durations that last longer than the life span of the actors themselves. Such a conception and such a practice of history suffer from a theatrical and psychological vision of things, as if the course of events was some sort of spectacle taking place on a stage. This is such an attractive and persuasive perspective that it has not only survived to our times but it is still considered as being valid by many. Even though the matter may greatly surprise us, today this archaic method of writing history is still deemed a legitimate exercise. The reason is quite simple: those mental promptings that characterized the birth of civilization and that have been passed down to us are very much alive.

Fernand Braudel's method of looking at events can, in some ways, be traced back to predecessors more or less remote in time. A contemporary Italian historian had also selected the Mediterranean as the topic for his investigation (in all its extent and over a long period of time). However, these two reminders indicate precisely the enormous advances of the French historian. Indeed, for Braudel the Mediterranean is not simply a spatial container where various rulers succeeded one another and is certainly less the tendentious support for an ideology, as used by Pietro Silva who thought he could link the distant Roman Empire to the contemporary one of the Lictorian Fasces. Braudel managed first of all to free himself of those conditioning and debatable myths which various civilizations had cultivated and brought to the Inland Sea – from that of Roman unity to that of the holy Muslim war or of the Christian Crusades. His greatest and essential merit lay in his serene acceptance of the two inseparable faces of the human reality. In other words, he has grasped that indissoluble link of antagonism and friendship which – one as much as the other – joined together the peoples and the nations that settled around its shores. The French historian – partly at least thanks to his first stay in North Africa which though

Muslim had a markedly strong Christian presence – learned to free himself of those recurring ghosts that have been so important for the orientations of the coastal civilizations. He has offered an outstanding example, moral as much as scientific, of how one can analyse in a clear manner and without that murky rusty sediment the centuries-old clash of peoples in conflict, whether it is military, or religious, or political, or one of differing customs. He succeeded in achieving this because in his youth he did not imbibe those ancestral mutual hatreds: his maturity enabled him to rise above them through his unconditional support for the human condition, his profound and enlightened comprehension. His great work on the Mediterranean therefore constitutes in the first place a lesson in civil and mental coexistence, in addition to the recognition of the equal dignity of all the chessmen of this vast board. In this way the book goes near to affirming that which unites over that which divides, to a vision of constructive interpenetration.

It was absolutely indispensable to stress in the most explicit manner that the very form of the scientific conclusions of Braudel's work on the Mediterranean should be based on an inspired belief of the fundamental solidarity that welds together the peoples that gravitated to that sea. It should be pointed out rightaway that the vastness of his vision translated itself in an unusual and original breadth of the spatial conception of the subject as he studied it. In particular reference is made to the multiple associations that the French historian so persuasively presented, grafting to the Mediterranean basin large stretches of the European and Asian continents and of the immense Sahara. For Braudel the Mediterranean is a world that finds meeting on its shores the dialectical lines of demarcation both of large terrestrial zones and wide stretches of sea, and of the dialogue between those peoples who were thus brought into contact. However, that which most impresses in his global analysis of this reality is not the extraordinary and organic widening of the geographical horizons as much as that scientific element to which reference has already been made. As is well known, right from its very first edition, the book on the Mediterranean was divided into three sections which most critics have rendered into images of three distinct periods of time: the long term one lasting many centuries; the medium term of conjunctures persisting for a few decades; and that of events which is restricted to a duration of a few months or days. There is no doubt that a similar tripartite division, which is indicative more than anything else, cannot be understood and much less applied in a rigid and mechanical manner. Indeed what is important is not only or just a matter of measuring one phenomenon or another, as if the most important function of each one of them were to prolong itself in time. This is merely a preliminary analysis

to draw attention to the fact that what matters is not only that which makes an impression in an instant, the exceptional event that gets talked about, but rather and perhaps not less that which seems to be covered in silence and which acts in a manner which is more muffled and continuous and, in the end, more potent. Such a methodological distinction should not conceal that which is scientifically more important, that is the fact that the various durations are taking place at the same time, in a way that the global rhythm of history always corresponds to the result of all the forces that interreact within it.

This is exactly what can be called 'layers' since – if one had to use a metaphor to describe the geohuman future – there is no better metaphor than that of geological evolution. There are indeed certain structures in the history of men and of their environment, certain structures that seem not to change – like, for example, certain religious beliefs, certain social divisions, certain methods of construction. Still, in spite of their recurrence in one generation after another and in one century after another, even they are subject to changes – as for example, the very surface of the earth which did not always have the same distribution of the land masses and which is today still moving in a very imperceptible manner. Similarly, the methods of cultivating fields, weaving textiles, and making war are subject to change which, at times, can be quite rapid. It is quite useful to continue with this example and to recognize the fact that from time to time there occur certain cataclysmic events, from volcanic eruptions to social revolutions, from the outbreaks of fatal epidemics of former times to the nuclear explosions of today. The crucial matter is to keep in mind that all things that take place are closely related to one another, that a process of long duration can lead to a catastrophe, seismic or historic, that occurs in a few moments, and that life in its totality is made of strata, each of which is in continuous activity within itself or in relation to the others.

Such a vision of the Mediterranean reality was innovatory not only with respect to the caution it prescribes to the necessary differentiation in the measurements of temporal rhythms of the phenomena. It has even been more innovatory inasmuch as it has made scholars to accept the evidence that in history there is not just room for the most dramatic events or the deeds of some personage who is accepted as a protagonist. The history of man, and in this case of Mediterranean man, is at the same time and not less importantly, to be seen in the activities of shepherds and of farmers, of the sea-farers, as well as in those of the weavers and of miners. All human beings in their various daily activities are therefore restored the dignity of actors in their own right – even if they had been only slaves, as was the case

with many during the period which Fernand Braudel studied. Indeed how can the fleets, which at that time embodied the power of the various navies and the respective States, be even conceived without the motive energy provided by the slaves or by the galley crews whose condition was much similar to the slaves'? Thus the French historian has singularly extended both the horizons and the area of competence of historical knowledge since Braudel includes within it, in addition to the great rivalries, even the anonymous deeds of he who day after day toils to produce something, or struggles for survival, or modifies perhaps imperceptibly the conditions of his existence. History is the great symphony in which all tones merge; it is not the narration of exceptional deeds but the recovery and the study of all traces of human activity, at whatever stage and in whatever environment they manifest themselves.

So the vast depiction of the Mediterranean world does not only constitute just the arena in which Braudel's vision and scientific analysis were progressively given expression, but actually the workshop of his revolutionary field of inquiry. It is enough to leaf through the pages of his first great book, which is dedicated to it, to meet bandits side by side with merchants and a study of the routes of gold close to an investigation of those of grain. Similarly the role of the winds in navigation is considered to be no less important than that of the artillerymen on the different types of vessels, just as insurance rates are not treated more lightly than the making of woolen cloth. Life in all its various dimensions is therefore restituted to our consciousness, through the sharp and impartial careful examination of all phenomena, always on the evidence and the basis of authentic contemporary sources. One, therefore, should not be surprised to find the French historian introducing his treatise in a manner so unusual in works of this kind: 'I have loved the Mediterranean with passion . . . I have joyfully dedicated long years of study to it — much more than all my youth. In return, I hope that a little of this joy and a great deal of the Mediterranean sunlight will shine from the pages of this book.' By way of proud self-justification, he concluded by affirming that a historical work centred on a stretch of water had all the charms and undoubtedly all the dangers of a new departure, hopeful nevertheless of having been right 'to come down on the side of the unknown' in deciding to face the task.

The navigation so tirelessly embarked upon, therefore, had to carry the writer extremely far. About twenty years later, the first edition of the book made way for a substantially enlarged edition. If it is so uncommon to encounter such considerable rewritings, the revision which Braudel had the courage to undertake was not an end of itself. Even though he was involved

in a new work (no less wide-ranging), he would not remove himself too far from the by now familiar Mediterranean waters. More exactly, he would take up once again those fundamental intuitions which have been already explained in order to extend and adapt them to reconstruct a veritable economic history of the world. It should not appear paradoxical that this same historian, so attentive to the existence of the almost static and the action of those extremely slow-working forces, should be attracted by structured dynamics which have a centripetal effect on the most refined and individually-managed economic mechanisms. In his book on the Mediterranean, drawing such a brilliant solution from the panoramas of human geography, Braudel had stressed the movements over centuries and milleniums of processes which nonetheless form part of the rhythm of time. Later, having determined to trace the development of capitalism from the Late Middle Ages onwards, he identified a structure of over-lapping strata in economic life, similar to what he had pointed out in his first great book. Just as in his earlier book he measured historical phenomena according to the scale of their duration, in the second one he analysed economic phenomena according to their degree of complexity. On one hand, that is, he had particularly lingered on those forces which slow things down and which are structurally conditioning at every level; on the other, he established that in a particular but crucial geographical area there existed a dialectic of production, of exchange and of profits, in which the action of men found itself heavily involved and not unsuccessful in imposing its laws from certain zones.

So, having set forth his model of interpretation founded on the interplay of the long-term structures, medium-term trends, and events, he proceeded to suggest another model based on the movement from self-dependence to the market economy and from this to capitalist accumulation. In his book on the Mediterranean, Braudel had established a model of approach which of these markets were decisive, precisely to the extent to which they gave emphasis in their areas, to the mediation between North-Atlantic Europe of the European economic system, he believed he could take it as a more general example of development. Now, as soon as one goes to examine where that adventure originated from, one realizes that the French historian sees its very birth in the Mediterranean basin. Perhaps out of an implicit respect to a long tradition of historiography that has never actually been gainsaid, Braudel accepts the thesis of the decline that lasted for centuries following the division of the Roman Empire. Without undervaluing in any way the civilization of the Early Middle Ages, both in its Byzantine and Islamic forms as well as in that of Western Europe, he does not discern any



sufficiently structured awakening of economic activity on an international level before AD 1000. Even after that date, on the other hand, he feels that he cannot observe – in spite of a recovery that becomes more evident with the passage of time – the rapid establishment of any dominant system. Until the sixteenth century he does not see the Mediterranean – which to him is the crucial point of encounter for the Asiatic, African, and European continents – gravitating towards one central and regulating motive force. And, as a matter of fact, he takes into consideration the spirited and prolonged rivalry among the most dynamic cities such as Genoa, Barcellona, and Venice, which for so long fought for primacy without being able to consolidate it for any long period of time.

Braudel had no doubts at all that at least from the twelfth century, and even more so from the thirteenth, certain conspicuous forms of capitalist economy had already got under way, especially in Flanders, the area of the Champagne fairs, and northern Italy. In this latter area, Braudel notes the emergence of a sort of crucial quadrilateral based on Milan and Florence in addition to Genoa and Venice. There is no need to stress that the functions of these markets were decisive precisely to the extent to which they gave emphasis in their areas to the mediation between North-Atlantic Europe and the Levant as well as the Mediterranean regions of Asia and Africa. Fernand Braudel, however, sees the origin of a fully-fledged capitalist economy when one particular centre becomes able to assume and to hold on to leadership. He is of the belief that this only happens with the decisive supremacy of Venice at the beginning of the fifteenth century. It is then, he thinks, that the trade centre of the lagoon came to be the focal point of an economic world. By this turn Braudel conceptualizes the formation of an organic complex of interdependent areas which are orchestrated by a pole which provides both its heart and motor. During the fifteenth century Venice came to represent the mighty meeting point of the regions of Germany and of central Europe and those of the Levant. At the same time Venice came to find itself at the southern end of the axis which started from London and Bruges and which crossed and gave economic life to western Europe. But this is not all, because the Adriatic City at that time also managed to become the main point of reference and of convergence of the most profitable of the Mediterranean trade routes which ran along its principal East-West axis.

It is, therefore, easy to establish that Fernand Braudel saw in Venice the first real example of the capitalist system since she was able to direct towards her the strategic trade routes of the Mediterranean in its widest sense (that is as a basin to which gravitate most of the trade of the three continents that

surround it). First of all this means that even in his second great work – to which he dedicated almost thirty years of study – the heart of world development is seen to be located on its shores. In a sense, therefore, his vision of history, just like the continued specializations of his researches, is centred around the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean of his first great book in fact had all the appearances of a world: in his second work it emerges as the area from which began the future capitalistic unification of the entire planet. It is quite obvious that for him modern capitalism first manifested itself in the Mediterranean from where it obtained its movements to conquer the globe. Between the first and the second book there is not even a chronological confusion but a widening of the horizons and a greater articulation of the problems. The subject of the first book on the Mediterranean was the second half of the sixteenth century; in the second the author's attention was directed to a longer period that lasts at least from the beginning of the fifteenth century to the end of the seventeenth: however, even in the later work the sixteenth century still proves to be the central and crucial period. Braudel's vision of historical development which is much wider in the second book is divided into three distinct phases: the phase of Venice in the fifteenth century, which is, so to say, completely Mediterranean; then that of the sixteenth century when the joints between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic start to give way; and finally that of the seventeenth century where the Mediterranean finds itself in a subordinate role to the oceanic capitalistic systems. In all his work, one can therefore distinguish a great continuity and a unity of development. It can therefore be stated that, all through a period of over fifty years of research and reflection, the features of the Mediterranean constituted the dominant motif and the dynamic yeast of the further specialization of his research.

For greater clarity it should be explained that the sixteenth century represents for Braudel the phase of the unravelling of world economic development. Perhaps in a thousand years the picture may appear different but certainly, without running the risk of being accused of Eurocentrism, it is difficult to think otherwise for the time being. Until that period, which for the West marks the end of the Middle Ages, the world was divided in three distinct areas with little or no communication among them. Not only was the American continent practically out of every trade circuit, but also most of Africa was inward-looking in spite of some feeble contacts between its eastern areas and the Indian subcontinent. Early in the sixteenth century this system of almost watertight compartments began to change and eventually transformed itself in an altogether new system that more or less unifies all three, as it does today. The establishment of one oceanic economy

after another represents indeed the start of that process whereby all the countries of the world now depend on one another. It cannot be denied that this phase commenced during this sixteenth century when the fates of all the civilizations of the world began to intertwine. From being the very heart of the former world set-up, the Mediterranean quickly went through this rather dramatic transformation which Fernand Braudel examined in the manner of the great diagnostician that he was. He observed that the connections between the powers and economies of the Mediterranean on one hand and those of Atlantic Europe on the other begin to deteriorate in the sixteenth century, even though the former continued to perform primary roles for decades more. It is in this respect that he succeeded to acknowledge the crucial role played by the Genoese economy in attracting the wealth of the recently-discovered New World and as a financial centre that regulated the huge Spanish Empire – in addition to, at least indirectly, the economy of Europe.

During the sixteenth century, that is after Venice had lost her supremacy and while Antwerp was gaining that central role of the first order that she was to keep for decades, the Mediterranean retained its decisive role at least through the vital action of Genoese finance. Its subordinate role will become clear only in the seventeenth century when the supremacy of the Dutch, with Amsterdam as its epicentre, emerges. This panoramic but clearly expressed vision represents a profound study of the Mediterranean and its destinies.