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BROAD, BROADER. . . BRAUDEL

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Revised, extended version of a review prepared for the American Historical Review, which is scheduled to appear in the spring of 1981. I am grateful to Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Louise Tilly, and the members of their seminar on French history (University of Michigan, fall 1980) for the incentive to expand the review, and their indulgence in raising questions about its obscure and controversial points.

As guides to unfamiliar terrain, some historians dismay us by stumbling over their footnotes, losing themselves in blind alleys, and confusing the Parthenon with the Pantheon. Soon we long to grab the guidebook and wander away on our own. The great guides, however, come from two different corps: mappers and musers. The mappers thrust a sketch of the terrain at us, then start us marching along the main streets, ticking off the sites. It works: we see the Roman grid underlying Turin or the vast plan of Leningrad as if we had conceived them ourselves. The musers, in contrast, begin meandering with us. They point out fascinating corners, turn abruptly to make connections we had never imagined. They leave us uncertain about the grand design, yet delighted by our fresh perceptions.

Fernand Braudel sometimes talks like a mapper, but he is really one of the great musers. Two decades ago, his rambling survey of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean displayed an extraordinary sense of the interdependence among structures and changes which seemed remote from one another, or even antithetical -- for instance, the rise and fall of upland banditry as a function of fluctuations in lowland state power. Now he conveys that same sense at a scale which dwarfs the Mediterranean and the sixteenth century: his subject has become the experience of the entire world from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Even those four centuries do not contain him, as he moves backward to the Roman Empire and forward to the 1970s. In three bulging volumes, Braudel attempts no less than a general account of the processes by which the capitalist world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries took shape.

Braudel's account lacks the schematism of an H.G. Wells or a V. Gordon Childe. Complexities, nuances, contradictions and doubts fill every chapter. The marvelous, abundant illustrations -- plates, graphs, maps, diagrams and tables by the hundreds occupy about a fifth of the text -- nearly always lend new

nsights, yet rarely fall neatly into a developing argument. Indeed, Braudel often makes an explicit distinction between his procedure and the assembling of evidence for a connected set of propositions. As he begins a survey of a number of instances in which agricultural capitalism became dominant; for example, he declares that "our aim is not to study these different cases for their own sakes or to seek the means of preparing an exhaustive list for the whole of Europe; we only want to sketch a line of reasoning" (Braudel 1979: II, 245). Braudel's very prose bristles with complications; parentheses, dashes, colons, semicolons and comma after comma mark off allusions, asides, qualifications, and repetitions. Not that the prose is dreary or obscure. On the contrary: Braudel writes with the verve of a restless lecturer who can't stop recasting as he speaks.

He speaks at length. The main texts of the three volumes total to more than 800 thousand words. The notes (inconveniently stored at the backs of the books, and studded with mentions of op. cit., which lead back to distant references, or to none at all) occupy another 90 dense pages. Many readers will feast on the references. Braudel has read widely and well in the Romance languages, plus German and English. He gives us the benefit of that reading. What is more, the bibliography continues, varied and abundant, right up to items published (or circulating yet unpublished) in 1979. For a work on this scale, the currency of the references is in itself an editorial feat and an intellectual tour de force. Yet it adds to the book's challenge. All things considered, few reflective readers of Civilisation matérielle . . . will be able to sustain a pace as fast as 400 words per minute. The three volumes will therefore require at least 35 hours of brow-furrowing attention, plus the time to dawdle over the illustrations and to track down the notes.

To be sure, many of Braudel's readers will have a head start. An earlier version of Volume I appeared in 1967. Braudel then presented it as the first, material-culture, half of a two-volume work called Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme. An English version of that first volume has attracted many admirers. The new first volume follows the same general plan as the old, but includes many editorial retouches, some sections which differ significantly in title and content from their predecessors, a set of notes (a feature sadly lacking from the earlier edition), references to many works published after 1967, and almost twice as many illustrations as before.

The smaller alterations in the first volume record the normal outcome of another dozen years' reading, reflection, and response to criticism. The shift from a diptych to a triptych, however, represents more than a clever adaptation to an overgrown second half. The new organization gives more importance and autonomy to the short- and medium-run dynamics of economic activity than did Braudel's earlier statements on the subject. It also expresses a greater skepticism with respect to technological determinism and evolutionary processes. In the first edition (p. 329), for instance, Braudel asked "Do techniques have their own history?" "Yes and no" was his indecisive answer. In the new version (I, 379), "the reply will surely be negative." Again, where he once considered credit to be a "luxury" which even the countries of Eastern Europe, with their "natural economies," lacked before the eighteenth century (e.g. 1967, p. 368), by 1979 (e.g. I, 419-420) he saw some version of money and credit everywhere, and only maintained that the range of monetary techniques expanded with economic development. So even faithful readers of the first edition will have something new to learn from the second.

As crystallized in titles and subtitles, the topic's three divisions

now run: 1) material culture and the structure of everyday life; 2) economy and the workings of exchange; 3) capitalism and world time. The breakdown does distinguish the emphases of the three volumes. It does not, however, reflect a causal hierarchy or a tight analytical model that we shall see clearly as we work our way through one volume after another.

In the first part, Braudel seeks to describe how the techniques of production, distribution, and consumption varied throughout the world -- especially the western world -- over the four centuries after 1400, and to show how those techniques shaped everyday experience. That first volume reveals the richness of Braudel's reading and reflection. Backed by his engaging and well-produced illustrations, he gives us disquisitions on epidemics, on agricultural techniques, on the varieties of herring, on the vagaries of clothing style. Yet a careful reader encounters surprises and disappointments. For one thing, it eventually becomes clear that -- despite the ample demographic documentation on which he draws -- Braudel has little concern with vital processes as such. The opening section on population avoids most of the questions on which European historical demography has focused: the responsiveness of vital rates to economic fluctuations, the relationship between household structure and fertility, the onset of long-term declines in fertility, and so on. Braudel concerns himself with population size, growth and decline mainly as indices of power, welfare, and vulnerability to the environment.

Again, as the volume proceeds Braudel builds up a case for inefficient transportation as a major brake on European economic growth. Yet he never quite manages to reconcile that conclusion with his earlier portrayal of the Mediterranean shipping routes as speedy "liquid roads", or with the sort of

evidence Jan de Vries has assembled concerning the great importance of low-cost water transport in the economic development and communication structure of the Low Countries (see de Vries 1978). At a minimum, one might have expected a comparative analysis of the advantages enjoyed by regions which had access to navigable rivers, canals, and seas.

Most of all, Braudel tantalizes his readers by raising fundamental questions, then leaving the questions to levitate themselves. One example is his discussion of Lewis Mumford's claim that nascent capitalism broke up the narrow frame of the medieval city by substituting the power of a new merchant aristocracy for that of landlords and guild-masters: "No doubt, but only to link itself to a state which conquered the cities, but only to inherit the old institutions and attitudes, and entirely incapable of doing without those institutions and attitudes" (I, 453). Another is the conclusion of a long, informative treatment of the variants and interactions of money and credit: "But if one can maintain that all is money, one can also claim, on the contrary, that all is credit: promises, reality at a distance . . . In short, the case can be made first one way, then the other, without trickery" (I, 419). Indeed, the so-called "conclusions" of the entire volume have the same ambivalent tone, with an additional note of complaint about the inadequacy of the available evidence:

I would have liked more explanations, justifications, and examples. But a book is not indefinitely expansible. And in order to pin down the multiple aspects of material life, it would require close, systematic studies, not to mention whole sets of syntheses. All that is still lacking (I, 493).  
Five hundred pages into a dense compilation-cum-synthesis, one wonders.

In the second volume, Braudel proceeds from a survey of the techniques by which people in different parts of the world exchanged goods, to a discussion of various types and scales of markets. He then tries to identify the peculiarities of capitalism as activity and organization, before examining its articulation with social hierarchies, state structures, and broad forms of civilization. Despite a thick and thoughtful survey of definitions, Braudel never quite lays out a working definition of the capitalism he has in mind. It takes a while to see that he has chosen to emphasize the conditions of exchange rather than the relations of production; he has thus aligned himself, among recent combatants on that bloody field, with Immanuel Wallerstein and André Gunder Frank, and separated himself from analysts such as Robert Brenner and Witold Kula. In response to Kula's claim that the landlords who "refeudalized" eastern Europe did not, and could not, calculate as capitalists, Braudel declares:

To be sure, that is not the argument I wish to challenge. It seems to me, however, that the second serfdom was the counterpoint of a merchant capitalism which took advantage of the situation in the East, and even, to some extent, based its operation there. The great landlord was not a capitalist, but he was a tool and a collaborator at the service of the capitalism of Amsterdam and other places. He was part of the system (II, 235).

What, then, is that capitalist system? Gradually, Braudel reveals a vision of capitalism as an arrangement in which two or more large, coherent, market-connected "economic worlds" become linked and interdependent through the agency of big manipulators of capital. Thus, in European history, the role of grand commerce in the development of capitalism becomes paramount. Thus, in Braudel's view, a single capital-concentrating metropolis tends to emerge as the dominant center of any capitalist world-economy.



Braudel's tack moves us in a very different direction from the identification of capitalism as the system in which the holders of capital control the basic means of production, and reduce labor to a factor of production, a commodity one buys and sells; in that sort of definition, the confrontation of a capitalist with a proletarian -- a person who depends for survival on the sale of labor power -- occupies the very center. With Braudel, we do not recognize capitalism by its characteristic social relations, but by its general configuration. With the alternative, we recognize a capitalist system by the prevalence of a social relationship which we can observe at the smallest scale. It is the difference between a blancmange and a Saint-Honoré: the smallest spoonful of the almond jelly is still blancmange; but unless crust, cream, and iced puffballs come together in the right pattern, you have no Saint-Honoré. Paradoxically, with Braudel's Saint-Honoré capitalism, once we have identified the dish as a whole, every part of it qualifies as Saint-Honoré. That is how Braudel can say of the non-capitalist landlord: He was part of the system.

The exchange-oriented definition has some analytical advantages. For one thing, it trains attention on the enormous importance of bankers, merchants, and other capitalists who knew nothing of production but plenty of prices and profits; their activities greatly facilitated changes in the relations of production. For another thing, the exchange-oriented definition brings out the continuity between small-scale and large-scale production under capitalism, and thus reduces our fixation on factories, large firms, and labor under conditions of intensive time- and work-discipline; the concentration of capital and of workspaces certainly made a difference to the autonomy of workers and the quality of work, but cottage industry and related forms of production often proceeded

in a thoroughly capitalist manner. The exchange-oriented definition of capitalism steers far clear of a misleading emphasis on the technology of production.

Still, the disadvantages of Braudel's definition outweigh their advantages. The definition, in turning away from technology, abandons the relations of production entirely. Encomienda, hacienda, slavery and, as we have seen, serfdom all become capitalist forms of labor control. Large chunks of world experience become capitalist. The historically-specific analysis of the development of capitalism as a system gives way, paradoxically, to the very inquiry it was supposed to replace: the search for explanations of the British and western European "takeoff."

In fact, Braudel gives some signs of compromising the excessive broadness of his definition; in this regard, as in many others, he neglects to stick to his announced principles throughout the inquiry. Having committed himself to a conception of capitalism involving the linkage of two or more large, distinct markets by capital-wielding merchants, he has already committed himself to seeing the whole of those markets as integral elements of a capitalist system. Yet he persists in searching within those markets for signs of the emergence of capitalism. Thus he declares for the end of the old regime that "The majority of the peasant world remained far from capitalism, its demands, its order, and its progress" (II, 255). Thus he concludes that "Capitalism did not invade production as such until the moment of the Industrial Revolution, when mechanization had transformed the conditions of production in such a fashion that industry became an arena for the expansion of profits" (II, 327). If consistency be a hobgoblin of little minds, Braudel has no trouble escaping that particular demon.

When Braudel is not bedeviling us with our demands for consistency, he again parades his indecision. Throughout the second volume, he repeatedly begins to treat the relationship between capitalists and statemakers, then veers away. Savor this summary of his efforts:

Finally and especially, must we leave unanswered the question which has come up time after time: Did the state promote capitalism, or didn't it? Did it push capitalism forward? Even if one raises doubts about the maturity of the modern state, if -- moved by recent events -- one keeps one's distance from the state, one has to concede that from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, the state was involved with everyone and everything; that it was one of Europe's new forces. But does it explain everything, subject everything to its control? No, a thousand times no. Furthermore, doesn't the reverse perspective work as well? The state favored capitalism and came to its aid -- no doubt. But let's reverse the equation: the state checks the rise of capitalism, which in its turn can harm the state. Both things are true, successively or simultaneously, reality always being predictable and unpredictable complexity. Favorable, unfavorable, the modern state has been one of the realities amid which capitalism has made its way, sometimes hindered, sometimes promoted, and often enough moving ahead on neutral ground (II, 494).

Yes, it appears, we must leave unanswered the question which has come up time after time. When we arrive at the same point again and again, we begin to suspect we are walking in circles. That is the price, I suppose, of walking with a great muser.

The third part of Braudel's magnum opus begins with a delineation of world-economies as the fundamental units of analysis, and continues with a

roughly chronological portrayal of the successive world-economies which prevailed in Europe and elsewhere in the world. The survey is complicated by the simultaneous efforts to specify the changing places of smaller areas and individual cities within those world-economies, to trace the interactions among world-economies and -- as if that were not already enough -- to explain how and why Europe finally became the world's master and its prime locus of large-scale industrialization. Here especially Braudel lets shine a scintilla of sentimental chauvinism: Why did France never quite become Number One? At one moment, Braudel permits himself the speculation that the demands of Paris were to blame. In the mid-sixteenth century:

Did Paris miss the chance to acquire a measure of modernity, and France with her? That is possible. It is permissible to blame Paris' possessing classes, overly attracted to offices and land, operations which were "socially enriching, individually lucrative, and economically parasitic" (III, 280; the quotation is from Denis Richet).

Yet Braudel's gloom does not last long. Soon he sets off on a knowledgeable exploration of the changing regional divisions within the French economy -- one of the finest surveys of the subject anywhere. That conversational mode provides both the charm and the frustration of the volume.

Precisely because the conversation ranges so widely, a look back over the third volume's subject-matter brings out an astonishing fact: the grand themes of the first volume -- population, food, clothing, technology -- have almost entirely disappeared! Despite the sense of material life as a constraint on human choices so well conveyed by that first volume, now we see nothing of constraint. Braudel's discussion of the peopling of North American colonies (III, 348ff.), for example, involves no effort whatsoever to judge the contributions of changes in fertility, mortality, nuptiality, migration, or their relations to each other.

Indeed, by this point Braudel has become so indifferent to population problems that he settles for graphs of English fertility and mortality changes (III, 489) drawn from G.M. Trevelyan's ancient text on social history. Despite contrary indications in the opening volume (and despite the crucial place of Braudel's collaborators in the development of demographically-based social history), Braudel makes no significant effort either to analyze demographic dynamics or to incorporate them into his explanatory system. Somehow that no longer seems to be part of the problem.

What is? Early in Volume II, Braudel calls his readers' attention to a perplexing situation. In the sixteenth century, he concludes,

the thickly settled regions of the world, subject to the pressures of large populations, seem close to one another, more or less equal. No doubt a small difference can be enough to produce first advantages, then superiority and thus, on the other side, inferiority and then subordination. Is that what happened between Europe and the rest of the world? . . . One thing looks certain to me: the gap between the West and the other continents appeared late; to attribute it to the "rationalization" of the market economy alone, as too many of our contemporaries still have a tendency to do, is obviously simplistic.

In any case, explaining that gap, which grew more decisive with the years, is the essential problem in the history of the modern world (II, 110-111).

The suggestion, tucked into Volume I, that a difference in energy supplies between Europe and the rest of the world might have been crucial, has by this time vanished. The action of the state has, as we have seen, dissolved

as a likely explanation. China, India, and other parts of the world turn out to have created commercial techniques as sophisticated as those of the Europeans. Paul Bairoch's estimates of gross national products at the end of the eighteenth century (quoted with a mixture of consternation and approval in a stop-press revision inserted at III, 460-461) show no significant advantage of western Europe over North America or China -- so "initial advantage" loses its remaining shreds of credibility as an explanation.

By page 481 of Volume III, Braudel offers an indirect admission of theoretical defeat: ". . . the Industrial Revolution which overturned England, and then the whole world, was never, at any point in its path, a precisely delimited subject, a given bundle of problems, in a particular place at a certain time." All the previous history recounted in this vast review, Braudel tells us, somehow converged on that outcome. The only way to analyze industrial growth is to break it into its many elements, to take up those elements one by one, and to trace their multiple connections. That Braudel's earlier analyses forecast just such an intellectual strategy, and that Braudel follows the strategy with subtle brilliance, do not eliminate a certain disappointment that our muser has not managed to transform himself into a mapper.

At the start of the third volume, it looks as though Braudel will try to perform his miracle by relying on Immanuel Wallerstein's model of the European world-system, especially its distinction of core, semi-periphery, and periphery. But Braudel eventually opts for a more relaxed identification of the world's economically independent regions, leans against Wallerstein's claim that the European capitalist world-economy was the first one not to consolidate into a political empire, doubts that empires as such stifle the potential of world-economies,

and maps out multiple European world-economies well before the supposedly critical unification of the sixteenth century. He follows Wallerstein especially in building his account around the successive hegemonies of capitalist metropolises: Venice, Genoa, Antwerp, Amsterdam, London, New York. He accepts, for a while, Wallerstein's unconventional characterization of the seventeenth-century Dutch and English states as "strong" states, on the ground that their modest apparatus demonstrated the efficiency with which their dominant classes could work their will. When self-conscious about the problem, he remains faithful to Wallerstein's focus on conditions of exchange, rather than relations of production, as the essential features of capitalism. But in fact he neither uses the core/semi-periphery/periphery scheme as a tool of analysis nor attempts to test it by means of his vast store of information. It is a grand story, elegantly told . . . and nothing like a definitive solution to the "essential problem."

Should we have expected anything else from a man of Braudel's intellectual temper? He approaches a problem by enumerating its elements, fondling its ironies, contradictions, and complexities, confronting the various theories scholars have proposed, and giving each theory its historical due. The sum of all theories, alas, is no theory. We end our long promenade delighted with all we have seen, grateful for our guide's wisdom and perspicacity, inspired to revisit some of the hidden corners he has revealed, but no more than dimly aware of the master plan.

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