

Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean*

In *The Mediterranean*, Fernand Braudel pioneers a new method of historiography by examining human history using three lenses, each corresponding to a resolution on a continuum which he describes as a *durée* (literally, a duration of time). I think of Braudel's approach to history using the metaphor of the microscope—each *durée* corresponding to a different level of magnification one uses when examining an object under a microscope. Under different magnifications, different structures reveal themselves. Conversely, if you have a sense of what you are looking for, you can choose which resolution to begin your investigation with—you would not look at a paramecium using the same magnification you would use to examine the atomic structure of a nanotube. Similarly, Braudel's three *durées* each provide a different historical framework with which to study history, and each one makes visible structures and processes that would not be apparent using the other two.

Braudel calls those events which are the most readily apparent, those that are the stuff of politics and newspaper headlines, the *événementielle*. Durations of intermediate length, lasting no more than half a century, are named the *conjonctures*. Braudel believes that most economic events resolve themselves during cycles the length of the *conjoncture*. However, Braudel is most concerned with the *longue durée*, the slow-moving framework in which the theater of history plays itself out. Braudel claims that the *longue durée* resolves and overturns the evanescent occurrences which comprise the *courte durée* and the 'events carrying the same sign' that occur in the *conjoncture*. It is apparent when reading *The Mediterranean* that Braudel is more emotionally and intellectually invested in pursuing the *longue durée* as an explanatory trope than the *conjoncture* or the *courte durée*. The *longue durée* is told on the scale of centuries, and the shifts in it are imperceptible to the individuals living with it.

Whereas most historical accounts are driven by the decisions of monarchs, politicians, and warriors, the primary actor in Braudel's application of the *longue durée* to the Mediterranean is the land itself. In the first paragraph of his massive text, Braudel writes that "[The Mediterranean] is, above all, a sea ringed round by mountains (25)", and goes on to articulate how civilizations within the Mediterranean are shaped by their surrounding terrain. He claims that mountain civilizations are by definition marked by "backwardness and poverty" (with the exception of the Alps, which is, as Braudel expresses it, "after all, the Alps") and describes how early agricultural practice was aimed at draining the valleys of mountain runoff, and how this enterprise contributed to the formation of the great cities which continued to dominate the Mediterranean, politically and economically, through the sixteenth century.

I agree with Braudel that, fundamentally, human history is constrained (and often also facilitated) by structures which exert themselves over centuries or millennia, but Braudel goes so far as to suggest that geological structures are an obstacle impeding human progress. He writes: "mountains are mountains: that is, primarily an obstacle...(39)." This passage clearly states an assumption which undergirds much of Braudel's historiography—that human history is teleological, and that the structures which constitute the actors of the *longue durée* block or hinder the forward progress of civilization.

One other problem that I had with Braudel's treatment of Mediterranean history is the way in which he classifies forces according to the *durée* in which they act (and conversely, the classification of *durées* into periods ruled by particular forces). This concern could merely be an artifact of the sections of *The Mediterranean* which I read, but in the assigned chapters, Braudel's *longue durée* is told in terms of how the geological features of the terrain influenced the course of the history of the Mediterranean. Applying the lens of *conjoncture* to the Mediterranean, Braudel examines how trade routes, population density, and economy contributed to the material life of the Mediterranean in the sixteenth-century. Finally, the *courte durée* is exemplified by his grudging exploration of the effects of the Battle of Lepanto. However, even this story is told with an eye to the wider implications of a seemingly inconsequential event—an examination which would fit better at the level of *conjoncture*.

The three *durées* which Braudel considered are driven, respectively, by geological structures (extra-social phenomena), material flows (social phenomena), and historical actors (individual destinies). But couldn't economic history be told at the level of the *longue durée*, a story constrained by the biological needs and physical output of the human body? And doesn't economic history often progress in spurts over short periods of time because of technological discoveries or social revolutions? The same questions can be asked of cultural history, political history, intellectual history, or any other subdiscipline of history. Braudel's application of different temporal resolutions to different structures and actors seems artificial, and some historical phenomena resolve themselves on scales which Braudel's system does not anticipate.

Finally, I have a question as to how second-order modernity will affect the way the structures of the *longue durée* impose themselves upon human history. Technoscientific innovation has altered our relationship to our environment in a number of ways—we traverse it faster than ever before, we control irrigation, we create pollution, we have invented technologies which keep us warm in winter and cool in summer. However, such technologies are certainly unequally distributed across economic and political boundaries. Furthermore, within the last century we have developed technologies which pose communal risks to our environment on a global scale. We have the ability to change our environment faster and more radically than ever before. If Braudel is right in claiming that civilizations are shaped according to the environments in which they exist, how have the developments of the last hundred years affected the way we would apply the *longue durée* to our recent history? Is it too soon to even consider such a project, since this story would have to be told on an epic scale?