

Week 3 Annales

On Braudel

In Braudel's history, there are three layers: 1) "the bedrock of history" (geography, environment, or climate) 2) structure or "underlying reality" 3) events. At each of these levels, he gives an amazing analysis about the Mediterranean world. It seems to me, however, that he fully deals with neither the ways in which the structure shapes, constrains, or permeates the layer of events, nor the ways in which the events, however ephemeral they might be, reflect, constitute, or perpetuate the underlying structure. Those three levels are not integrated into a coherent story. I think that the emphasis of current historiography is being put on the interaction between the last two layers, probably due to Braudel's (or Annales school's) influence. (Not many historians take the layer of the environment into their account yet.)

Still, there remain two choices for us: 1) to explain (not chronicle) the events in the light of the structure 2) to suggest the structure in the light of the events. Braudel seems to say that 2) is more important. I would choose 1), emphasizing that to do 1) is not to portray the events as Braudel does in his part III. I fully agree with Braudel that political and military events are not all that matter in history, expecting him to deal with the lives of ordinary people. But I don't like the way he treats the people. He pays attention to every detail of human society, but the details are almost always summed up to produce the numbers. And the numbers are used to construct a structure, the "underlying reality." He aims for a total history, but in the face of totality we lose sight of each person.

After reading Braudel's everlasting history, I came to wonder how he would have written about "the age of revolutions" or "the age of extremes," apart from the suspicion that he would not want to write about them. Some events – political, military, culture, and even economic – just come and go. Some other events, however, have transformative impact on the underlying structure, sometimes even overcoming the dictation of the geography and environment. I think I have to look for his writings about different periods from that of *The Mediterranean*.

On Bloch's technological determinism

In his account of the watermills, the “triumph” of the watermill against the hand-mill is a “spontaneous event,” which means that it could be only slowed down but never be blocked. I am surprised that he still calls it a spontaneous event after he presented all the complexities and details himself. Then, another spontaneous event will be the advent and the triumph of steam-mill against the watermill and the windmill. If we follow this logic, technology has its own internal logic of development. It is so spontaneous that you cannot stop it, even though you might slow it down sometimes. I very much appreciate his pioneering efforts to give considerable attention to the details of life – technique. But his way of describing technology was to go through much criticism and revision, I think.

On Braudel’s geographical determinism

I can say that technological determinism in its naïve sense is simply wrong. It is not technology itself that determines the course of human society. We as human beings make it and use it to change, consciously and unconsciously, the relationship between human society and nature, or the relationship among ourselves.

However, can we say simply “No” to the geographical determinism of Braudel as we do to the technological determinism? Braudel says his “geographical determinism” can be “extreme, but not altogether mistaken” (p. 134). If we still can falsify it, on what grounds? Sometimes, doesn’t it seem that geography or climate determines to some extent the structure of society and the course of history and also that we as human beings cannot do much about it? What is, if any, the difference between technological determinism and geographical determinism?