

Fernand Braudel and the Annales School

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Introduction

The Annales school of historians emerged in France in the late 1920s around a journal entitled Annales d'histoire économique et sociale (which translates as the Yearbook of Economic and Social History). The Annales school - which was about far more than just economic and social history - reached the peak of its importance and influence in the middle decades of the C20th, and still exists today. The journal is now called: Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations.

Although most of the historians associated with the Annales school were French and worked at French universities, they by no means limited themselves to studying the history of France. The Annales school was not a solid group of historians all working on similar topics and using a similar methodology. Rather, it was a loose group of historians with similar aims. It is the range and diversity of their work within broadly similar aims that makes the Annales historians so significant. Most importantly, historians of the Annales school were committed to broadening the range of the discipline of history. In the process, in some cases they pioneered, and other cases developed and publicised, a number of approaches to history that were 'new' at the time, including:

- *comparative history, the history of mentalities (or attitudes),*
- *quantitative history* amongst others.
- *They challenged conventional ideas on periodization, and wrote about problems over 'the long term' ('la longue durée').*
- *They also insisted on breaking down barriers between disciplines, and consciously drew on the methodologies of other disciplines, in particular: geography, social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, economics, and psychology, and also linguistics.*
 - *They emphasized the importance of factors in understanding the past beyond political and diplomatic history and narratives of events.*
 - *Annales historians presented alternatives to the primacy of the 'economic substructure' as a causal factor in history. They gave greater emphasis to geography rather than the economy.*
- *In summary, the Annales school challenged the contemporary dominance of political and diplomatic history and narratives of events in favour of social, economic and cultural history, and looking for broader structures in history.*

Discussion of Annales historians fits well into the historiography class for a number of reasons:

1. The Annales school emerged in reaction to the dominance in France (and indeed elsewhere) in the early C20th of political and diplomatic history and narratives of events by historians following in the tradition of the C19th German historian Leopold von Ranke.

2. Annales historians engaged with Marxist historians. Although there were some similarities between Marxist and Annales historians in their approaches, in their interest in structures and, in particular, their rejections of narratives of political history, they also disagreed on a number of issues. In particular, Annales historians presented alternatives to the primacy of the 'economic substructure' as a causal factor in history. They gave greater emphasis to geography rather than the economy.

3. The Annales school of historians also influenced the work of some of the scholars who will be discussed in later in this class, e.g. Michel Foucault. To some extent, *Annales* historians' work on mentalities and cultural history anticipated the 'linguistic turn' - the close attention to the significance of language.

The Annales School

There were, broadly, three generations of historians of the Annales school. The most important members of the 1st generation - the founders - were the medievalist Marc Bloch and the early modernist Lucien Febvre. The commanding figure in the next generation of Annales historians, who came to prominence in the 1940s-50s, was Fernand Braudel. And one of the most prominent of the 3rd generation, who is still working, is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie.

Just a few examples to give you a sense of the sort of work they have done.

Marc Bloch Works included The Royal Touch (1924). Its subject was the belief current in medieval and early modern France and England that the king could cure a skin disease known as scrofula simply by touching sufferers. In the book, Bloch analysed popular attitudes to kingship, religion and miracles over a long period of time (13th-18th), and by comparing the belief in France and England. His approach drew on social sciences: sociology, anthropology, psychology.

Bloch went on to write major *works on rural society and feudal society in medieval France and Europe in which he paid attention to structures rather than events.*

During WWII he was active in the French resistance, and was executed by the Germans in 1944

Lucien Febvre If Bloch was heavily influenced by social sciences such as sociology, then his co-founder of the Annales school was influenced more by geography. Febvre's early work gave great emphasis to the role of geography in history. *His first book was a study of a region of France in the 16th. The first chapter described the geography of the region. He did not argue, however, that the natural environment determined the history of the region, but that there were a variety of human responses to the environment in which they lived. People, their ways of life, and their attitudes and beliefs - not geography - were central to Febvre's interpretation of history. Febvre's approach to the role of geography in history can be termed 'environmental possibilism', in contrast to 'environmental determinism'. (The role of geography in history was a recurring theme in Annales school, in particular in the work of Fernand Braudel.)*

Fernand Braudel. Probably the most famous work by an Annales historian was Braudel's history of the Mediterranean World in the 16th. He wrote the first version of this book - his doctoral thesis - as a POW in Germany during WWII, and later revised it for publication. The 1st edn came out in 1949, and the 2nd, further revised, in 1966. This was history on a massive scale. Like Febvre, he began with the geography of the Mediterranean world. Although he denied this in the text, for Braudel, unlike Febvre, geography played a more decisive or even determining role in human history. I'll talk about "The Mediterranean" in more detail later in the lecture.

Braudel went on to become an exponent of history on an even broader scale and on a wider scope: 'total history' and 'global history'. He wrote multi-volume works on world history.

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. The most well known historian of the 3rd generation of the Annales school. His best known work is *a study of a French village called Montaignou in the C14th. The village was a centre of Cathar heretics. Because of this, the local bishop ordered an investigation, and had many of the villagers interrogated and punished. The transcripts of the interrogations served as the source for Le Roy Ladurie's book. He drew on the records of the interrogations to present a reconstruction of the village, its society and culture. His subjects included the housing in the village, the villagers' perceptions of space, time, nature, God and religion, family life, childhood, sexuality and death.*

Le Roy Ladurie has also written on peasants and rural history in the early modern period, and the history of the climate over the last thousand years. The range and ambition of his work, and the aim of pushing history into new areas, are all typical of the Annales school.

(These are just a few examples of work by some of the more prominent historians associated with the Annales school. There is much, much more besides.)

Fernand Braudel's Approach to History in

"The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II"

I've chosen to focus on the work of Fernand Braudel in this lecture, in part because one of the documents for a later tutorial is the Preface to "The Mediterranean", but more because if one historian has to be singled out from the Annales school as making the most significant contributions to historical theory, I think it has to be Braudel. And, I want to focus on these as exhibited in his most well known book: "The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II" (i.e. the C16th), 1st edn 1949, revised edn 1966.

I want focus on three areas: Braudel's attempt at 'total history' and the relationship between the three parts of "The Mediterranean"; Braudel on time in history; Braudel on the role of geography in history. But, for sake of convenience will try to consider them together while discussing the book.

One of the aims of the founders of the Annales school back in the 1920s was to *challenge the contemporary dominance of political and diplomatic history and narratives of events in favour of social, economic and cultural history, and looking for broader structures in history.* In "The Mediterranean", Braudel took this further than Bloch or Febvre, and sought to integrate the different types of history.

(The point of this discussion of "The Mediterranean" is not to seek to understand Spanish foreign policy in the C16. This is done far better than I can by colleagues in the Dept who are specialists on early modern history, and who draw on a far wider body of more recent scholarship than one book written half a century ago. The point here is to consider Braudel's approach to history.)

The book is divided into three parts, reflecting Braudel's division of 'historical time' into three layers (one layer for each part of the book):

- *'Geographical time' (Part 1). For Braudel, the relationship between humans and the environment was very slow, change was almost imperceptible, and was a history of repetition and recurring cycles based on the cycle of the seasons.*
- *'Social time' (Part 2). 'Social time' was a little faster than 'geographical time'. It was still slow,*

but with perceptible rhythms, over generations and centuries.

- *'Individual time' (Part 3). In 'Individual time', change was fastest and most perceptible to people.*

Braudel contends that 'events', the subject matter of traditional history, were relatively insignificant in history, and individuals, even those as apparently powerful as Phillip II of Spain, were severely limited and constrained in what they could do by broader, and deeper structures beyond their control. He argues [in the third part of the book, which deals with more traditional political and military/'events' history] that the course of human history is the result, not of events such as battles or the actions of individuals, but is the outcome of the longer-term structures - political [structure, not narrative], social, economic and geographic [which he analysed in the first two parts of his book]. Humans are prisoners of their physical environment, and also of their mental framework.

Here is a summary of the three parts of "The Mediterranean":

Part 1: 'The Role of the Environment'. This part examines the geography of the Mediterranean World. Braudel's 'Mediterranean World' was vast, extending from the Turkish Empire in the east to the Spanish Empire in the west, and included the Sahara in north Africa, eastern, central and western Europe, and even the Atlantic as well as the immediate hinterland of the Mediterranean Sea. Braudel began by looking at the mountains, hills, plains and coasts that surround the sea, at the sea itself, and the islands in the Mediterranean. The discussion of the geography of the Mediterranean World ends with an analysis of communications and cities.

Braudel divided 'historical time' into three layers, one layer for each part of the book. Thus, for part one was 'geographical time'. For Braudel, the relationship between humans and the environment was very slow, change was almost imperceptible, and was a history of repetition and recurring cycles based on the cycle of the seasons.

Part 2: 'Collective Destinies and General Trends'. This part focuses on economic, social and political structures: the economies, trade and prices, and also the empires, societies and 'civilizations' of the Mediterranean World. This part ends with a discussion of warfare in the region, and points towards the 3rd and final part.

Braudel's layer of time for this part was 'social time', which was a little faster than geographical time. It was still slow, but with perceptible rhythms, over generations and centuries.

Part 3: 'Events, Politics and People'. This is more conventional political, diplomatic and military history. And, in this part of the book, time was 'individual time', in which change was fastest and most perceptible to people.

Braudel devoted the 3rd and final part of the book to an analysis of the war in the second half of the C16th between the Spanish Empire of Philip II that dominated the western end of 'The Mediterranean World' and the Ottoman or Turkish Empire that dominated the eastern end. This part includes sketches of the individuals involved as well as descriptions of the battles, diplomacy, treaties etc. The key battle was that of Lepanto, between the Spanish and Turkish fleets, in 1571. The Spanish fleet emerged victorious but, Braudel argues, Phillip II of Spain was not able to follow up the victory and establish dominance over the whole Mediterranean World. Indeed, by the end of the C16, the Spanish Empire had turned its attention to the West, to the Atlantic World, and to its growing empire in the New World.

In order to explain why Phillip II was not able to turn the Spanish victory at Lepanto into

dominance of the Mediterranean World, Braudel referred back to the previous two parts of the book:

- He drew attention to the financial exhaustion of the Spanish economy, which greatly limited Phillip II's options, even after the victory at Lepanto. This part of his explanation referred back to part 2 on the economic, social and political structures of the Mediterranean World.
- He also drew attention to the difficulties of communications across the vast Spanish Empire in limiting the options open to Phillip II even after the Turkish fleet had been defeated. Thus, he referred back to part 1 of the book on the geography of the Mediterranean World.

The argument Braudel was making was that 'events', the subject matter of traditional history, were relatively insignificant in history, and individuals, even those as apparently powerful as Phillip II of Spain, were severely limited and constrained in what they could do by broader, and deeper structures beyond their control. In the Preface to the 1st edn of "The Mediterranean", Braudel wrote that statesmen such as Phillip II, 'despite their illusions [were] more acted on than actors'. (p.19).

In a famous and often quoted phrase, Braudel wrote (also in the Preface to the 1st edn): 'the history of events' was merely the history of 'surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs'. He noted that the history of events is 'the most exciting of all, the richest in human interest, but also the most dangerous.'... 'Resounding events are often only momentary outbursts, surface manifestations of... larger movements and explicable only in terms of them.' (p.21)

For Braudel, therefore, the outcome of the struggle for supremacy in the Mediterranean World - the example he chose for his study to demonstrate a wider point about the course of human history - was the result, not of events such as battles such as Lepanto or the actions of individuals such as Phillip II, but was the outcome of the longer term structures - political, social, economic and geographic - which he analysed in the first two parts of his book. Thus, the hero of Braudel's book is not King Phillip II of Spain, but the Mediterranean Sea itself.

Elsewhere, Braudel used prisons as a metaphor for the role of human agency in history: humans were prisoners of their physical environment and also of their mental framework. It has often been noted, of course, that he wrote the first version of "The Mediterranean" as a POW in Germany during WWII.

Historians have praised and criticized Braudel's work, and the theoretical arguments concerning the relationship between the different aspects of history, the different layers of time, and the pessimistic argument about the role of individuals in history.

Many of the criticisms have focused on this last point: Braudel's determinist argument that seems to assign paramount importance to geography. One critic (J.H. Elliot in "New York Review of Books", 3 May 1973) wrote that 'Braudel's Mediterranean is a world unresponsive to human control.' Braudel's determinism based on geography can be contrasted with Marxist interpretations of history which assign that role to the economic substructure. Braudel's geographical determinist argument has often been contrasted with the 'environmental possibilism' and 'voluntarism' of the original Annales historians, in particular Lucien Febvre (see above). I should point out that Braudel tried to deal with this in the second edn of the book. On p.225 he stated: 'It is worth repeating here that history is not made by geographical features, but by the men who control and discover them.' This sits a little uneasily with the overall argument of the book and his views stated elsewhere.

Criticisms aside, "The Mediterranean" remains one of the most distinctive and influential books written by a historian in the C20th. Peter Burke concluded, 'it remains Braudel's personal achievement to have combined the study of 'la longue duree' with that of the complex interaction between the environment, the economy, society, politics, culture, and events.' ("The French Historical Revolution",

Conclusion

The Annales was one of the most important schools or groups of historians in the C20th. They have influenced, indirectly as well as directly, historians working in countries as far apart as Brazil and Poland, and specialists on a wide variety of geographical areas.

In my own field, Russian history, the Annales school has been influential on some historians in the former Soviet Union seeking alternatives to the official Marxist interpretation of history which imposed by the ruling Communist Party until the collapse of party rule and the Soviet Union in 1991.

At the time of the peak of the importance of the Annales school in the middle decades of the C20th, many members of the 'historical establishment' in Britain looked at Annales history with suspicion and even hostility. Traditional British empirical historians looked askance at what they saw as another manifestation of the continental European obsession with theory rather than hard facts and empiricism. Among British historians who did recognise the importance of the Annales school were members of another group who stood out from the majority of their colleagues for their use of continental theory: Marxist historians, e.g. the medievalist Rodney Hilton and modernist Eric Hobsbawm.

It was only from around the 1970s that the Annales school began to be taken more seriously by historians in Britain, and that more of their works began to appear in English translations (e.g. Braudel's Mediterranean first came out in English translation only in 1972). Le Roy Ladurie's Montaliou became a best seller on the back of its 'sensational' revelations about sexuality in a medieval French village, and was the subject of television documentaries. It is a measure of the lasting influence of the Annales school that most historiography classes such as this and textbooks on historiography, such as The Houses of History, include discussion of their work.

Probably the most prominent British champion of the Annales school is the cultural historian Peter Burke, whose concise and readable book - The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-89 - is on the reading list for this class. Burke concluded (pp.110-11):

'In my own view, the outstanding achievement of the Annales group, ... has been the reclaiming of vast areas for history. The group has extended the territory of the historian to unexpected areas of human behaviour and to social groups neglected by traditional historians. These extensions of historical territory are associated with the discovery of new sources and the development of new methods to exploit them. They are also associated with collaboration with other disciplines...

A remarkable amount of the most innovative, the most memorable and the most significant historical writing has been produced in France.'

Peter Tosh, in The Pursuit of History (p.80), wrote that as a result of the work of the Annales school in broadening and refining 'the content and methodology of history', many of the new directions which the discipline has taken in the past thirty years owe much to their contribution.'

Others, of course, have been critical of their work, noting in particular the determinism in Braudel's work, the limitations of his attempts at 'total history', and the extent to which other historians were working in similar directions and later historians have gone beyond their work. Few, however, deny their influence.

[original text (now modified) from: http://www.strath.ac.uk/Departments/History/s_adams/annales.htm]