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Early Modern History and the Social Sciences

Testing the Limits of Braudel’s Mediterranean

Edited by John A. Marino
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INTRODUCTION

JOHN A. MARINO

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World of Philip II*, which Peter Burke's *History and Social Theory* calls "a book with a good chance to be regarded as the most important historical work of the century,"¹ the Rockefeller Foundation Study and Conference Center in Bellagio sponsored a conference (23–27 June 1997) on early modern history and the social sciences. The conference was neither a celebration nor a revision of Braudel and his works, but rather used Braudel as a point of departure to further the dialogue between early modern history and the social sciences in light of contemporary social theory and historical practice.² Conferees were well aware that Braudel's *Mediterranean* (defended as a thesis in 1947 and published in 1949) should be read together with other exemplary theses of his generation, such as Maximilien Sorre's *Les fondements biologiques de la géographie humaine* and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*,³ as part of an important French postwar "structuralist" contribution to the cross-fertilization of twentieth-century social science.⁴

4. Burke, *History and Social Theory*, 110–14, emphasizes structuralism's debt to linguistic theory.
Braudel’s own conversation with the social sciences grew out of his “faithful[ness] to the teachings of Lucien Febvre and Marcel Mauss… always wish[ing] to grasp the whole, the totality of social life.”5 In a 1951 Annales article, “Geography Confronts the Human Sciences,” Braudel expressed his views on the exchange of ideas among the social sciences in an extended metaphor of a building, one perhaps not unlike Philip II’s monastery-palace-mausoleum El Escorial whose concord and harmony among its parts and whose communicating rooms and courtyards have been shown to exemplify an Augustinian aesthetics:6

For me, the human sciences do not exist behind limited confines. Each of them is an open door onto a hallway of the social, which opens to all the rooms and leads to all the floors of the building on the condition that the researcher does not stop in his own steps halted by self-regard in the face of other neighboring specialists, but on the contrary, is ready to use, when it may be necessary, their doors and their stairs. Thus each social science possesses its own specific path, its own perspectives and its own methods. Every separation, every barrier between the social sciences is a regression. There does not exist a history sufficient unto itself, nor a geography, nor a political economy. There does exist a group of researches joined together which need not be separated apart.7

And just as the convent church lies at the center unifying Philip II’s ideal palace complex of the Escorial in Franz Hogenberg’s 1572 engraving in Georg Braun’s Civitates Orbis Terrarum,8 so too history takes primacy of place in Braudel’s human sciences.

One could faithfully describe Braudel’s openness to the social sciences—their interconnections, confluences, and limitlessness—with another metaphor, that of the Mediterranean, not his book, but the sea itself. For Braudel,

the inland sea had “at least two faces”: peninsulas (“miniature continents”) and seas (or rather “a complex of seas”), which could not be understood without their near neighbors—the vast, boundaryless stretches “from the Atlantic Sahara to the Gobi Desert and up to the gates of Peking” and “northern Europe beyond the olive trees…with its Atlantic horizons.”

Braudel’s study of the Mediterranean Sea (and social science) would be more than a series of sea voyages from one port to another, but would explore the structures of an inexhaustive, expansive, and ever-changing world.

The genesis of the book, for its part, is like its argument, a story about time and space, an artifact layered with the theses and trends of social scientific research across the first two thirds of the twentieth century. How Braudel’s Mediterranean—a monumental work in breadth, scope, and erudition—evolved far beyond the rather conventional, diplomatic history of the author’s 1923 thesis proposal on the Mediterranean policy of Philip II (a reflection of his Parisian education at the Lycée Voltaire [1913–20] and the Sorbonne [1920–23]) into an ambitious portrait of the historical trajectory of the Mediterranean basin at large has been well rehearsed. While teaching lycée in Algeria (1923–32, with a 1925–26 interlude for military service in the Rhineland), the original thesis was conceived and Braudel gathered archival materials on the thesis “between 1927 and 1933, when I lived in the archives without hurrying—not even hurrying to choose my subject—... [and] my decision ripened of its own accord” to shift the emphasis from Philip II to the Mediterranean. Reinforced by the fortuitous encounter with Lucien Febvre on the twenty-day return voyage from Brazil in 1937, which changed his professional career and found him an adopted father, Braudel had worked out his thesis “in its main lines, if not written entirely, by 1939, at the close of the first youthful resplendence of the Annales of Marc Bloch and


Lucien Febvre, of which it is the direct fruit.”12 Recalled to military service, Braudel was captured in 1940, and while a prisoner of war until 1945, he wrote out his chapters and mailed them to Febvre. By 1947 the thesis was ready to be defended at the Sorbonne, published in 1949, and completely revised and enlarged in its two-volume second edition in 1966.13 Braudel’s work thus provides readers at the beginning of the new century with a kind of archeological dig to uncover half-forgotten theories, speculative hypotheses, and superseded propositions—all embedded in a grand geohistorical design and enriched with a gold mine of enduring archival value, literary exempla, and personal passion.

To prove its chief claim that historical time moved with different rhythms over long-term geographical structures, middle-term socioeconomic structures, and short-term individual events, Braudel argued that the traditional history of Philip II’s Mediterranean policy was explicitly tied to the constraints imposed upon politics by geography, economy, sociology, and human psychology. For Braudel, constraints or limits meant possibilities, not probabilities. He, therefore, emphatically defended human freedom and consciously avoided the dangers of determinism, as he summarized in his 1950 inaugural lecture to the Collège de France:

The dangers of a social history are clear to us all, and in particular the danger of forgetting, in contemplation of the deep currents in the lives of men, each separate man grappling with his own life and his own destiny; the danger of forgetting, perhaps even of denying, the inimitable essence of each individual. For to challenge the enormous role that has sometimes been assigned to certain outstanding men in the genesis of history is by no means to deny the stature of the individual as individual and the fascination that there is for one man in poring over the fate of another.14


Despite such disclaimers the inextricable structures of time and place define Braudel’s historical practice.

The multiplicity of historical rhythms or time spans to be employed for historical analysis were only one of the possible “common languages” that Braudel argued were available for the development of the social sciences. His goal was to foster discussion across disciplinary boundaries and to encourage venturing outside one’s own specialty in order “to orient some kind of collective research and make possible the first stages of some sort of coming together.” For Braudel, other possible common research programs for the social sciences might include the languages of social mathematics (the languages of necessary facts, of contingent facts, and of conditioned facts); of communications (the languages of the exchange of women, of goods and services, and of messages); and of place, geography, or ecology. What Braudel’s prescience saw so clearly at midcentury—history’s “formidable but challenging responsibilities” and “a general crisis in the human sciences…all overwhelmed by their own progress”—is as much with us today as it was then, and is the injunction inspiring the present collection.

As the postmodernist crisis in social thought and the linguistic turn in historical studies have increasingly called into question social scientific epistemologies, the relationship between history and the social sciences has strengthened. While still focusing on the problem of social change, such historically focused and self-reflective tendencies have shifted research in both history and the social sciences to include both spatial and temporal as well as comparative dimensions. This collection of essays is not interested in a revision of Braudel’s text, in reevaluating and correcting his theses in terms of present methodologies or new knowledge. Individual essays do indeed review various historiographical traditions to arrive at conclusions about their disciplines, but the overall thrust of each contribution is grounded in present practice in the respective social scientific disciplines (geography, economics, sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, and their relationship to history; that is, the problem of social change) and geared toward influencing prospective trends in their development in the twenty-first century. Here Braudel’s insights offer a double inspiration, for he was deeply concerned about the totality of the social and about the exchange of ideas across disciplinary boundaries as they affected the great issues of early modern European history—the rise of

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