

The Order of Historical Time: The *Longue Durée* and Micro-History

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The *Longue Durée* and World-Systems Analysis

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Pour moi, l'histoire est la somme de toutes les histoires possibles – une collection de métiers et points de vue, d'hier, d'aujourd'hui, de demain. La seule erreur, à mon avis, serait de choisir l'une de ces histoires à l'exclusion des autres. Ce fût, ce serait l'erreur historisante.

Fernand Braudel

### **Introduction. Fernand Braudel and the Longue Durée**

In his remarks at the conference at Binghamton thirty years ago, Braudel emphasized the practical character of his conception of the plural time and the *longue durée*. His intent was not to produce a work of theory or to 'philosophize.' Rather, it was to organize his own ideas while writing *The Mediterranean*. In a much more modest way I would like to offer my remarks here in the same spirit. My concern is with practical questions of historical inquiry within the approach proposed by Fernand Braudel and later elaborated by Immanuel Wallerstein rather than with attempting to "theorize" either Braudel or "historical temporalities."

In "Histoire et Sciences Sociales. *La Longue Durée*," Braudel makes the case for a historical social science and a conception of history that is adequate to such a task. He does this by emphasizing the plurality of historical time and privileging the *longue durée*. From this perspective, Braudel attacks the linear conception of historical time and emphasis on the event that characterize positivist history. At the same time, through an examination of the conception of historical time in the various social

sciences, he make the case for the importance of plural temporalities and for the *longue durée* as the methodological ground for a unified historical social science.

Within his conception of plural temporalities Braudel emphasizes the importance of the *longue durée*. Although Braudel is elaborating a concept of structural time (that is historical temporalities beyond direct human or social intervention), we need to stress here that he is not proposing a structuralism. The *longue durée* is not a structure in the sociological sense of the word, that is a fixed attribute of the social system (as in Parsons' sociology or Althusser's Marxism). Nor is Braudel's historical account a "grand narrative." Rather, the *longue durée* is a *historical* relation that allows an open and experimental approach to the theoretical reconstruction of long-term, large-scale world historical change.

The *longue durée* may appear to be an ambiguous concept that resists hard definition. It is more accessible through description than precise concepts and hypotheses (Braudel 1995: I, 23-272). Nonetheless, it is of critical substantive and methodological importance for Braudel's conception of history. It is an embracing concept that refers to very slowly moving historical time. Indeed it represents a temporal rhythm so slow and stable that it approximates physical geography. It forms at the interface of the natural physical world and human social activity -- of physical space and human space. The *longue durée* provides the unifying element of

human history. The theoretical assumption supporting Braudel's conception is a human history formed through the "structures of the *longue durée*." Humans make their history in space and in time. The condition and limit of that history is the planet that we all inhabit -- a single physical world and twenty-four hours in a day. Thus, Braudel's conception emphasizes the physical characteristics of the earth, geography, natural resources, material processes and culture as constitutive elements of human history (e.g. *Structures of Everyday Life*). Such a conception avoids the illusions of a purely social or cultural conception of history on the one hand, and opens the way for environmental history and history of material life as constituent elements of all history that is rich in possibilities for the development of historical social science on the other.

At the same time, the *longue durée* is a tool for historical cognition and analysis that provides the ground for Braudel's conception of history and of historical social science. The *longue durée* forms a comprehensive social and analytical unit that enables Braudel to construct categories or objects of inquiry through their relation to one another in this shared analytical and practical field. In this flexible, dynamic, and open approach, objects of inquiry are understood not as things with properties, but as ensembles of changing relations forming configurations that are constantly adapting to one another and to the world around them through definite historical processes (*Annales*, 1989: 1319). Within this framework, the

establishment of relational categories— e.g. *longue durée*, conjuncture, event, or material life, market economy, capital – and the specification of relations in time and space, are keys to interpretation and analysis.

Thus, the *longue durée* implies a distinctive methodological approach and logic of explanation that redefines the intellectual heritage handed down from the nineteenth century. In contrast to more conventional social science logics based on formal comparison of commensurate units with common properties or the infinite repetition of individual actions, the assumption here is that analysis is grounded in a single spatially-temporally differentiated and complex unit subject to multiple determinations. From this perspective, phenomena do not repeat themselves. World economies, cities, markets, etc. are conceived as constituent parts of a more encompassing whole. None is like any other. Each is singular in time and space and in relation to other phenomena. Hence, the basic concepts of historical social science recognize the historical uniqueness of the phenomena under examination. It is a science of the singular. Its object of investigation is a unified, but spatially-temporally complex historical whole and the focus of analysis is the formation and reformation of relations through diverse spatial-temporal scales. From this perspective, the assumptions of conventional social science do not obtain. It is necessary to elaborate new procedures on the basis of different assumptions. Methodologically, we proceed by differentiating within a unity rather than integrating dualities.

It is in this context that I wish to emphasize the methodological importance of Braudel's concept of the *longue durée*. The *longue durée* is the key category in Braudel's distinctive approach less because of its substantive role in historical reconstruction than its methodological role in articulating his entire conceptual framework and establishing the coherence of his project of *histoire totale*. It permits him to specify phenomena in time and space and to establish the relations them. The methodological primacy *longue durée* allows him to construct the diverse temporalities that make up his concept of plural time – *longue durée*, *conjoncture*, and event, or better *courte durée* -- as a relational whole. He reminds us that, "... it is not duration itself that is the product of our mind, but rather the fragmentation of duration" (Braudel 1972: 36).

Focusing on the methodological rather than substantive historical role of the *longue durée* discloses a tension within Braudel's "Histoire et Sciences Sociales. *La Longue Durée*." Conventionally, this article is viewed as a sort of manifesto for structural time -- the *longue durée* and the *conjoncture*. In it, "events" appear to receive short shrift. They are "explosive." They "blind the eye with clouds of smoke." Braudel would prefer to speak of the "short term" rather than the "event," but even this is the "most capricious and deceptive form of time." The "event history" (*histoire événementielle*) that he is criticizing is "totally lacking in time density" (Braudel 1972: 14-15). Indeed, serial history, the *longue durée*, and conjunctural history are generally regarded as the characteristic

features of Braudel's scholarship and that of the *Annales* during its "second period."

However, a closer reading of "*Histoire et Sciences Sociales*" reveals a more nuanced appreciation of the event or short term. "Nothing, in our opinion," writes Braudel, "comes closer to the heart of social reality than this lively, intimate, constantly recurring opposition between the instant and the long-term" (Braudel 1972: 13). In the midst of his discussion of the exceptional importance of the *longue durée*, Braudel recovers the event or the short-term. This openness to the event is nowhere expressed more clearly than in *The Mediterranean* itself:

Events are the ephemera of history; they pass across its stage like fireflies, hardly glimpsed before they settle back into darkness and as often as not into oblivion. Every event, however brief, has to be sure a contribution to make, lights up some dark corner or even some wide vista of history. Nor is it only political history which benefits most, for every historical landscape – political, economic social, even geographical – is illumined by the intermittent flare of the event.... I am by no means the sworn enemy of the event" (Braudel 1995: II, 901).

Here Braudel's treatment of the event draws our attention to the plurality of social time rather than the *longue durée* in itself. Outside of plural time, the event "blinds us with clouds of smoke." But within the plurality of social time, it finds its place, if only a limited one.

Braudel writes: "In the year 1558, or in the year of grace 1958, [or even, we might add, 2008] getting a grasp on what the world is about means defining the hierarchy of forces, currents and individual movements, and refashioning the pattern of their totality.... Each 'current

event' brings together movements of different origin and rhythm: today's time dates from yesterday, the day before, and long ago" (Braudel 1972: 21). From this perspective, the "exceptional value" of the *longue durée* is its role in conceptually and practically ordering the relation among diverse temporalities within the totality of social time. Indeed, in his discussion of Sartre's biographical analyses of Tintoretto and Flaubert, Braudel suggests that the study of a specific case can lead from the surface to the depths of history. However, he comments that Sartre's inquiries would better parallel his own "if the hour-glass were turned twice from the event to the structure and then from the structures and models back to the event" (Braudel 1969: 80, my translation).

### **Italian Microhistory and the Order of Historical Time**

Within the context of this emphasis on plural time and the methodological significance of the *longue durée*, I would like to turn to the short term and particularly Italian *microhistoria*, associated with such figures as Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi, Edoardo Grendi, and Carlo Poni.<sup>1</sup> Not a school or a systemic approach, what has come to be known as *microhistoria* in Italy is described by one of its main practitioners as a "community of style" (Grendi 1996: 233). It developed as a response to serial history practiced by Fernand Braudel and the French *Annales*

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<sup>1</sup>The dialogue between structural time and microhistory has, of course, already begun with the initiatives for a "fourth *Annales*" associated with Jacques Revel, Jean-Yves Grenier and the late Bernard Lepetit (*Annales* 1989; Aguirre Rojas 1999: 190-212).

school, with which it has maintained a complex relation even while following an independent and, in a certain sense, opposite path of development (Ginzburg and Poni 1991; Ginzburg 1993).

Serial history is a strongly quantitative approach that is concerned with repetition, regularity, and quantity. It selects and constructs series of documents as a function of their repetitive character in order to identify spatial-temporal structures and establish causal relations between them. Through what Carlo Ginzburg refers to as a process of “equalization of individuals,” serial history disregards particulars and cognitively recognizes only what is homogenous and comparable. (François Furet and Jacques Le Goff, “Histoire et ethnologie,” *Méthodologie de l’histoire et des sciences humaines* vol. 2 of *Mélanges en l’honneur de Fernand Braudel* (Toulouse, 1973), 231 cited in Ginzburg 1993, 18; Ginzburg 1993, 21; Grenier and Lepetite 1989). In the eyes of the microhistorians, such a procedure with its concern for regularities implies, at least tacitly, a homogeneous conception of time and causality that produces continuity between levels. Plural time could be interpreted as a stable hierarchy where temporality simply unfolds on the axis formed by the one superior to it. In which case, the whole approach risks producing a functionalist

account of historical change history, a history of structures and structural transformations (Lepetit 1996: 75-76; Levi 1991: 109).<sup>2</sup>

In response, Italian microhistorians have engaged a highly experimental and, indeed, eclectic set of historiographical practices whose common thread is a self-conscious reduction in the scale of observation. They embrace the singular, the peculiar, the out of series, the anomalous, and engage in close analysis of highly circumscribed phenomena such as a village community, a group of families, or an individual person, event, or object. However, their concern with reduction in scale is not a preoccupation the local and small-scale systems. As Giovanni Levi writes, "... it becomes immediately obvious that even the apparently minutest action of, say somebody going to buy a loaf of bread, actually encompasses the far wider system of the whole world's grain markets." Rather, reduction in scale is an experimental and analytical procedure whose purpose is to reveal previously unobserved factors (Levi 1991: 95-97; Revel 1985: XI, XV-XVI).

Thus microhistorical practice entails intense methodological and historiographical experimentation with the short-term, the local, and the particular. It is as if the microhistorians are intentionally looking through the wrong end of Braudel's telescope. This radical reversal of perspective and reduction in scale illuminates otherwise undisclosed relations and

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<sup>2</sup> "These fragments are united at the end of our work. The long-term, the 'conjuncture' and the event fit together easily, because they can all be measured on one scale (Braudel 1972: 36).

processes. Microhistory seeks to discover “the social context in which an apparently anomalous or insignificant fact assumes meaning when the hidden incoherences of an apparently unified order are revealed” (Levi 1991: 107).<sup>3</sup>

By analyzing the contradictions within prescriptive and an oppressive normative systems, microhistory seeks a more realistic account of social action. There is no automatic mechanism through which actors align themselves with structural transformations and shifts. Rather, “all social action is seen to be the result of an individual’s constant negotiation, manipulation, choices and decisions in the face of a normative reality, which though pervasive, nevertheless offers many possibilities for personal interpretations and freedoms” (Levi 1991: 94; “Histoire et sciences sociales. Un tournant critique,” *Annales* 1989, 1320). Individual and collective strategies, choices, and negotiation are interpreted in close relation to their contexts but cannot be reduced to them. Microhistorical approaches are concerned with the exercise of relative freedom “beyond, though not outside, the constraints of normative systems (Levi 1991: 94). This individualizing perspective produces results that possess what

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<sup>3</sup> Levi continues: “The reduction in scale is an experimental operation precisely because of this fact, that it assumes that the delineations of context and its coherence are apparent and it brings out those contradictions which only appear when the scale is altered. This clarification can also occur, incidentally, as Jacques Revel has rightly point, by enlarging the scale. The choice of micro dimensions arose as a direct result of the traditional preponderance of macro contextual interpretation, in which it was the only possible direction to take” (Levi 1991: 107).

Ginzburg describes as an “unsuppressible speculative margin” (Ginzburg 1992: 96-125, esp. 105-107).

Within the interpretation that I am proposing, the result of microhistorical research may be seen as the world historical individual. Each microhistorical site or instance is necessarily different from the others and none can be reduced to the general conditions. Such instances are spatially and temporally dense, complex, and multifaceted points of convergence, confluence and concentration of multiple temporalities. Here we may see Braudel’s rationale for wanting to encapsulate the event in the short term. The microhistorians have taken us far beyond the temporal structure of the event with a distinct beginning and end that is interpreted through narration. Rather, borrowing from Reinhardt Koselleck we may speak of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous.

Here “context” is radically redefined: *longue durée* and *conjoncture* are not the external ‘background’ against which the short-term unfolds. Rather they are actively present as structuring agencies shaping constraints and possibilities. Microanalysis gives access to the highly particular and local conditions and environments in which agencies are formed and strategies for social action are deployed. It allows us to contextualize action / the acting subject at the intersection of multiple spatial and temporal levels and establish the specific conditions and relations that form actors and actions. It thereby gives specific content to Marx’s dictum that men make history but only such history as it is

possible for them to make. But, with apologies to Giovanni Levi and the microhistorians, the microhistorical is no more “real” than other levels of spatial temporal analysis. It too is a reconstruction, and it is simply capable of greater degrees of complexity (at the expense of its range of applicability) and is more adequate for certain problems.

The microhistorical project discloses the discontinuity and heterogeneity that is necessarily a part of plural time. The microanalytical, the *temps courte*, maintains its individuality. The results of fragmentary and singular microhistorical analysis cannot automatically be transferred to the more general structural spheres and vice versa. (Though they are necessarily produced through one another.) If we were to stop here, we would achieve the theoretical reconstruction of specific historical complexes, the reproduction of the world historical individual as the concentration of many determinations. Such historical reconstruction is a necessary and important part of world historical social science – the concrete analysis of the concrete situation as one twentieth-century thinker put it.

But particularization is not the point. Within the methodological assumptions of world historical social science, of a world systems perspective, we gain knowledge by the continual movement back and forth between the general and the specific, the macro and the micro, repetition and difference. What the microhistorians fail to do is, in Braudel’s phrase, to turn the hour-glass the second time, that is to say, to

reverse the methodological procedure and examine the *longue durée* and structural time through the lens the short-term, local, the particular, to do what Michael Zeuske calls microhistory as “world history from the perspective of the individual” (“*Weltgeschichte aus der Perspektive von Menschen.*” Zeuske, 2006: 9). For many of you, this point will recall Terry Hopkins discussion of ground and figure and the reversal of ground and figure (Hopkins 1982: 149).

Such a reversal of procedure yields insight into the complex, highly mediated, historically uneven character of world historical processes. They reveal how structural and cyclical temporalities do not produce uniform results, but local difference and global heterogeneity -- even results that run counter to the general trend. They are simultaneously unifying and differentiating processes.

Turning the hour-glass the second time allows to move back to the world historical whole, reconstituting it through the complex historical interrelation of phenomena. The perspective of the *longue durée* and world historical analysis allows us to systematically back and forth between specific and general relations and, taking as our point of renewed departure the concrete relation, the historical interrelation, interdependence and mutual formation of specific complexes of relations within the world historical whole. Here, methodological hierarchy does not imply a causal hierarchy. There is no fixed causal structure. Such a back and forth movement entails the manipulation of spatial and temporal

scales and the deployment diverse analytical and interpretive strategies within the framework provided by the *longue durée* depending upon the particular problem (see Aguirre 199 – 200). Such procedures entail a double movement. They allow us to specify particular historical relations and processes in time and space as simultaneously we reconstitute the spatial temporal complexity of the world historical whole. In this way reconstitute the world economy as a concrete historical whole and, by incorporating unity and world historically produced difference, reconstruct the highly mediated and historically uneven relations of world historical processes as we live them.

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