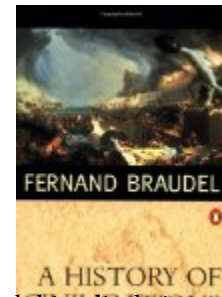


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Fernand Braudel. *A History of Civilisations*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995. xl + 600 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-012489-7.

Reviewed by Norman A. Etherington (History Department, University of Western Australia)
Published on H-ANZAU (March, 1997)



This is the last of the major works of Fernand Braudel to be translated into English. Originally published in 1963, it was intended for students in the final year of secondary school. Why should a world famous historian write such a book? The reason was that Braudel took a missionary interest in spreading his kind of history through the entire French educational system. The Annales project of enlisting all the social sciences in the service of history seemed to have scored a major victory when, in 1957, the last year of historical study in high school (lycee) was set aside for comparative examination of 'the main contemporary civilisations': Western, Soviet, Muslim, Far Eastern, South-East Asian and Black African. By 1960, however, the program had come under attack from conservative teachers and university professors who sought to restore the old chronological approach which culminated in the study of the twentieth century. Braudel decided to lend his prestige to the debate by writing his own general survey of civilisations.

For a few years it was used in the schools, but was eventually dropped, partly because teachers complained it was too difficult for their students, and partly because Braudel's supporters lost the debate. The odd result is that today's students in French intermediate schools (the colleges) get a more sophisticated combination of history, geography, economics, art and ideas, than is given to advanced students in the lycees.

However, even after the debate was lost, Braudel's work lived a life of its own. Translations were taken up by secondary schools in Italy and Spain. In 1987 a second French edition appeared, shorn of its original pedagogic apparatus. It is this version which Richard Mayne has rendered into highly readable English. Historians who have baulked at reading the massive Mediterranean

World in the Age of Philip II will find this a lively introduction to Braudel's methodology, despite its 600 pages. Part I gives an exceptionally clear-headed account of Braudel's method of bringing all the social sciences to bear on problems of historical interpretation. It could be useful for introducing university students to the distinctions the Annales School made between the short-term study of events, the under-lying structures of societies, and the *longue duree*. Readers may also enjoy the experience of second guessing Braudel's speculations on the future course of development of different parts of the world.

The book should not be mistaken for a grand interpretation of history along the lines pursued by Oswald Spengler, H. G. Wells or Arnold Toynbee. Braudel does not push his narrative back to the origins of agriculture or the classical world of the Mediterranean and gives only very sketchy versions of the ancient societies of Asia and Africa. Instead, he tries to show how several different 'civilisations' emerged over time and to assess their prospects for future development.

The idea of Braudel as a Europe-centred historian is wrong. As a young man he taught high school for nearly 10 years in Algeria and lectured at the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil from 1935-38. His North African experience gave him a deep understanding of Islamic history and colonialism. In Brazil he confronted the problems of economic underdevelopment. In the nineteen fifties, his international reputation as a scholar gave him the opportunity to observe the Soviet Union and the United States at close quarters. It is thus not surprising that his sections on Islam, the Americas and the Soviet Union are far superior to his fairly cursory and problematic treatments of East Asia, India and sub-Saharan Africa.

Braudel recognised the justice of Raymond Aron's observation that 'the phase of civilisations is coming to an end, and for good or ill humanity is embarking on a new phase' - that of a single civilisation which could become universal.' At the same time, he was convinced that the deep structures embedded in regional and national identities were not about to disappear and that for a long time yet, the word civilisation will continue to be used in both singular and plural.' His method for explicating each civilisation is to look first at its geographical situation, next at its economic and urban development and finally at its mental life. Despite the caricature that is often drawn of Braudel as a geographical determinist who ignored the agency of individual human beings, he accords roughly equal importance to each of these facets of social organisation. It is true that the reader will meet few political leaders in this text, but he will find numerous mathematicians, philosophers, scientists and religious thinkers.

Braudel's implicit argument seems to be that scholars have contributed far more to the making of the modern world than any emperors, dictators or statesmen. Religion is accorded at least as great a role in the formation of civilisations as geography. Although there are hints of Turner's frontier thesis in Braudel's account of the United States, he argues that it was the simple Protestant preachers of the American frontier who 'fashioned - without knowing it - the American way of life'.

Thirty years on, how well does Braudel's work stand up? From some perspectives, very well indeed. It is remarkably free of the racial or nationalist thinking that informed so many previous attempts at world history. The West is not placed atop a historical totem pole of civilisations. Time and again, Braudel confounds expectations with witty reversals of conventional wisdom. Thus, he writes of Russia after the Mongol conquests, that, 'The Mongols imposed their prestige on the Muscovite princes for a long time. They came from a more civilised society, a better organised State (on which the Muscovites modelled their own), and a money economy unrivalled in the North.' Likewise Braudel writes of 'Turkey's real greatness, denied for a long time in the West'. He does not fall into the trap of regarding Marxism-Leninism as the fundamental motor of Soviet history and prefigures Mikhail Gorbachev in locating Russian 'civilisation' within a common 'European home'.

At other moments, however, Braudel succumbs to easy generalisations. While admiring the early achievements of the Chinese, he emphasises the 'immobility' of their society in later times, offering no better explanation

than that merchants dreamed of making their sons into mandarins rather than entrepreneurial capitalists. After the brilliant accomplishments of Islamic science and mathematics, it was 'the West' who 'took up the torch'. Braudel's explanation for the dynamism of Europe is almost Hegelian in its depiction of people striving for liberties before the French Revolution and Liberty afterwards. His summaries of the historical development of black Africa and Southeast Asia are perfunctory and mechanical. Australia before Captain Cook is portrayed as the desperately impoverished home of the 'Australoids' who 'became a living museum of archaic, primeval ways, from which sociologists and ethnographers have gleaned a wealth of knowledge about primitive societies.' In fact, the entire British Empire/Commonwealth seems to have challenged the explanatory capacity of the civilisations paradigm. A weird map appears on page 508 purporting to depict 'The English-speaking universe', and 'the British Empire at its greatest extent'. The United States is ignored in the first category and the second leaves out Newfoundland, most of the British West Indies, the Malay peninsula and the former Mandated territories of the Middle East.

Braudel is most obviously dated in the passages which attempt to account for varying degrees of development and underdevelopment. He writes approvingly of W. W. Rostow's theory of 'economic take-off' and accepts the old picture of Latin America as a dual economy. His compartmentalised approach to social analysis avoids the pitfalls of simple-minded Marxism, but nowhere rises to the analytic power of Barrington Moore's contemporary *Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

Most problematic of all is the concept of civilisation itself which stands at the centre of this work. From start to finish it remains a nebulous and unsatisfactory term. Braudel admits that beneath the level of European civilisation stand a number of 'national' civilisations, which themselves are composed of sub-civilisations. These in turn are differentiated from 'cultures', which are marked off by little other than their lack of towns and which Braudel cannot help treating as primitive and inferior.

By and large the translator has done his work well. Not only is the English prose lucid and lively, but there are very few obvious mistakes. One that stands out is Braudel's division of the French Revolution into three phases, the second of which is dominated by Robespierre and the Terror. The first phase of moderate reform, according to Braudel, was marked by only a few dramatic

events, among them the storming of the Bastille and the Great Fear (la grand peur) in the countryside. The latter event Mayne almost certainly mistranslates as the Terror. Although it is understandable that Mayne should wish to bring his text up to date, it is strange in a work clearly written in the early sixties to read of Benin, Burkina Faso and Kampuchea, instead of Dahomey, Upper Volta and Cambodia. Norman Etherington Norman Etherington is Professor of History at the University of Western Australia, and President of the Australian Historical Association.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-anzau>

Citation: Norman A. Etherington. Review of Braudel, Fernand, *A History of Civilisations*. H-ANZAU, H-Net Reviews. March, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=888>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net and the Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History, all rights reserved. Permission is granted for the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use contact Paul Turnbull <paul.turnbull@anu.edu.au> or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.