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Braudel: historical time and the horror of discontinuityⁱ

In his Inaugural lecture at the Collège de France entitled ‘The situation of history in 1950’ which Fernand Braudel delivered just 5 years after the end of WWII, and a year after the publication of *The Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II*, he reflected on the traumatic experiences of the previous decades, which had

‘thrown us violently back into our deepest selves, and thence into a consideration of the whole destiny of mankind – that is to say into the crucial problems of history’.

The age he and his audience were living in was ‘too rich in catastrophes and revolutions, dramas and surprises. The social reality, the fundamental reality of man has been revealed to us in an entirely new light, and whether we would or not, our old profession of historian is endlessly burgeoning and blossoming in our hands’.

This statement makes clear first that Braudel is not immune to a ‘catastrophist’ vision of history, which recognises and privileges such moments, and second that his call for a fresh approach to the study of history, a new start, is directly linked to this time of crisis. He even specifies 1929, the year in which Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre founded a new history journal, the *Annales*, as the moment when the innovative approach to history was born. And yet paradoxically he makes clear, both in this lecture and elsewhere in his writings, that revolutions or moments of rupture have little place in his project for a new kind of historical understanding. As he states, ‘there can be no science without historical continuity’; it is an ‘anonymous history, working in the depths and most often in silence’ that he prioritizes.ⁱⁱ

What I seek to decipher is how far Braudel invokes notions of historical rupture in his own work, despite his preference for the continuous. Braudel's ideas have a particular salience for those seeking to understand the history of the "New World", amongst whom I count myself: is there any sense in which we can look for continuities beneath the dramatic changes and in some cases wholesale destruction resulting from European discovery and colonization of the Americas?ⁱⁱⁱ While my discussion relies almost exclusively on Braudel's own writings, I hope the issues go beyond a scholarly exposition of the ideas of a great historian, to raise more general concerns about the nature of historical time and the time of historians. It may seem perverse to explore the salience of notions of rupture and discontinuity in Braudel's work, and how – and how far - he avoids them, since his fame rests most distinctively on his conception of the long time span, or *longue durée*, which privileges a temporality that transcends rupture and discontinuity. The vision of long-term continuities is the cornerstone of his philosophy of history, and his own craft as a historian. The *longue durée* has for him an 'exceptional value'. It is usually contrasted with event-based history, or political history (*histoire événementielle*), that privileges 'a short time span, proportionate to individuals, to daily life, to our illusions, to our hasty awareness – above all the time of the chronicle and the journalist'. However the *longue durée* can also be understood as an alternative to a history that privileges crisis and sudden breaks. It is grounded in 'inertia' ('one of the great artisans of history'). It is a 'semi-stillness' around which all of history gravitates.^{iv}

And yet Braudel devotes little in the way of sustained discussion to the question of breaks and ruptures in his published work. There are casual asides, frequent references, but in much of his work his preference for deep, long-term temporality, the almost motionless quality of the *longue durée*, is a way of writing against the grain of conventional periodization, and forcing us to think ever anew about the fundamental frameworks of historical understanding. It is only in his last major work, *L'Identité de la France*, that he develops a more systematic periodization, but again in ways that challenge historical convention.

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continuity versus discontinuity in mid-century France

Braudel's work makes constant reference to the different social sciences.^v One figure with whom he felt affinity was the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Indeed, there are many similarities in the detached, long term vision of these two giants of mid-twentieth century French intellectual life. Both were born on the periphery of the French nation: Lévi-Strauss in Belgium in 1908 and Braudel in Lorraine in 1902. Both reveal clearly their preferences for traditional rural life, and share a passion for geology, but neither of them is a straightforward romantic, since their perspective seeks to embrace the modern as well as the pre-modern. At the same time, both were fascinated with the achievements of scientific thought in their own time: Lévi-Strauss particularly in the abstract fields of mathematics, cybernetics and linguistics, Braudel in the more applied fields of economics, demography and geography. For both, the neolithic is the fundamental break in human civilization.^{vi}

On the other hand Lévi-Strauss, a firm anti-Bergsonian, accorded great weight to the principle of discontinuity throughout his work. He takes as axiomatic that the human mind experiences and apprehends the world discontinuously, and the ‘structures’ of his structuralism are composed of discontinuous elements. While Braudel pays no attention to this aspect of Lévi-Strauss’s ideas, the issue of continuity and discontinuity – a legacy of the earlier dominance of Bergson’s philosophy - was hotly debated in French intellectual life, and Braudel joined battle, firmly on the side of continuity.^{vii} For him there could be no scientific understanding without the principle of historical continuity. To quote his inaugural lecture again: ‘who would deny that the great questions of the continuity or discontinuity of our social destiny, which the sociologists are so busy discussing, are essentially a question of history?’^{viii}

The *Annales* school in general, including Braudel, had been strongly influenced by the sociologists associated with Émile Durkheim (including Marcel Mauss and Maurice Halbwachs). However Braudel’s main sociological interlocutor for his own time was the influential and prolific Georges Gurvitch, who held Durkheim’s chair of sociology at the Sorbonne, and who made the principle of discontinuity the cornerstone of his social theory. When Braudel writes of ‘sociology’ or ‘sociologists’ without further qualification, he is mainly referring to Gurvitch, and while he respects and is influenced by Gurvitch’s scope, he denounces his anti-historicism. Gurvitch’s idea of social time, he writes scathingly, is a multifarious object which ‘can be cut, frozen, or set in motion entirely at will’.^{ix}

Gurvitch himself was born in Russia, and at the time of the 1917 revolution was 23, studying in Petrograd. The experience left a deep mark, since as he later wrote, he saw ‘the almost total explosion of the pre-revolutionary global social structure [...] social law being born spontaneously, fully independent of the state and its juridical order’.^x He left Russia 1920, despairing of the possibility of establishing a pluralistic, democratic state. The interplay between determinism and freedom is central to his social theory.

An exchange between Gurvitch and Braudel in *Annales* during the 1950s can help to pinpoint what was at stake for each. Braudel’s frustration at not being able to include Gurvitch’s ideas within his grand scheme for history is palpable:

Let’s disentangle this idea of discontinuity which is so central to Georges Gurvitch’s work, and on which he constructs almost his entire [theoretical] edifice. For him the social, with its distinct, multiple and disjointed realities, receives many cuts through time, some light, others deep and almost total. Now, if history really is discontinuous and fragmented, all the social sciences that seek to grasp hold of the present perceive, beyond the present moment that they observe, so many ruptures and faults that they are virtually isolated in the brief living moment [...] Cloistered in it, prisoners. The present is for them a more or less autonomous reality. A veritable anti-historicism has ambushed the social sciences. They are unable to make use of the past and to be nourished by it.

The imagery of nourishment recurs throughout Braudel’s work; history seems here to play the role of the maternal body, and indeed the trope of cutting, which is at

issue in these opposed ways of conceiving social and historical time, becomes for Braudel a bleeding gash:

‘the intellectual preference for discontinuity is surely also in a way a desire to break with history, to destroy the bridges, to conceal, but also to open up at the heart of his intellectual system a great wound’.

In the end, however, for Braudel the discontinuity at the heart of Gurvitch’s sociology becomes repetition: ‘if social destiny is constantly shattered in pieces at the same time as it ceaselessly pursues and reproduces itself, discontinuities must be seen as catastrophes which repeat themselves, not exceptions occurring in the nick of time to free sociology from a reliance on history’. ^{xi}

Both Braudel and Gurvitch use repeatedly the imagery of surface and depth to define what are for them the sources of true understanding, the foundational aspects of human life. For the historian, depth is associated with silence, stillness and continuity, in contrast to the events and transformations on the surface. The ‘structures’ that Braudel writes of repeatedly are found at the deepest levels. But for Gurvitch the reverse is the case: the outer surface of social reality is manifested in institutions, in structures, in organization, while the hidden depths are dynamic, effervescent, the source of creativity and revolution. For both thinkers, the outer, the superficial corresponds to what their own disciplines have conventionally studied; and for both their own original contribution is to reveal the more profound sources of human existence. ^{xii}

There is a certain sleight of hand in the debates around continuity versus discontinuity. While Braudel sees Gurvitch's preference for discontinuity as anti-history, in practice it is more a methodological principle of suspending temporal flow altogether, than a strictly temporalizing or periodizing one. Gurvitch at some points is clearly thinking of revolutionary moments, such as the one he had himself witnessed in Russia, in which the social fabric is torn apart, and profoundly altered. But at the same time, the primacy of discontinuity in his theory is a means for identifying distinct social types which, as he acknowledges, are not based on historical description, but are heuristic tools for sociological understanding:

the method of sociology is typological, while that of history is individualising.

The object of sociology is the typology of total social phenomena based on types of global structure [...] located by sociology in a temporality reconstituted in terms of its rupture between present, past and future. Historical temporality by contrast is reconstructed by making the past present and the present past.

For Gurvitch the point is that continuity as a temporal principle – far from being more 'scientific' - is every bit as much of a reconstruction as discontinuity. Sociology uses the data of history to show the discontinuity of social types. By contrast continuity is the aim, not the precondition, of history. History constructs continuity in order to bridge the ruptures identified by sociology.^{xiii}

Behind the elegant oppositions and point-scoring there is a serious issue, a fundamental disagreement about the significance and value of revolution in human

destiny. The reality of human agency in promoting radical social transformation was at the heart of Gurvitch's theory. 'Historical reality is Promethean' he writes.

'A society that exists in history is one in which there is a consciousness of a possible revolution or counter-revolution that can be brought about by the will of social actors'.

Human societies based on enduring and continuous time, where the conditions for human agency and contestation did not exist, are outside of history in his view. For Braudel, by contrast, history is not only found most importantly in enduring and continuous time, but also lies beyond the consciousness and the actions of individuals. History 'escapes the awareness of the actors, whether victors or victims: they make history, but history bears them along'.^{xiv}

Reviewing the work of the German historian Otto Bruner, on the social model that characterizes Europe from the 11th to the 18th century and how it breaks down, Braudel notes that for 'whoever is determined to pinpoint this breakdown chronologically, the night of 4 August 1789 offers a pretty spectacular watershed'. But this is only a figure of speech, for next to the French Revolution

'shading into it but not to be substituted for it, stands that other gloomy figure, the Industrial Revolution. That in any case was the end of one of the great phases of Western history, whose beginnings had their origins seven centuries earlier'.

However, two pages later Braudel retreats from this concession, arguing that the modern state 'has its beginnings in the fifteenth and even more in the sixteenth century, and the break, the bursting-forth of the "state-society" does not in fact wait until the French

Revolution’. In another context, he dismisses the currency of revolutions altogether: ‘the word *revolution*, here as always, is a misnomer. Etymologically speaking, a revolution is the movement made by a rotating wheel or a revolving planet; a *rapid* movement, once it begins it is sure to stop rather quickly. Yet the Industrial Revolution is a perfect example of a slow movement that was barely noticeable at the beginning’.^{xv}

While much of Gurvitch’s theory resonates strikingly with concepts of ‘modernity’, it is striking how little currency the term had had in mid-century sociology. More recently another French sociologist Alain Touraine, has identified modernity explicitly with the idea of revolution:

The most powerful Western conception of modernity, and the one which has had the most profound effects, asserted above all that rationalization required the destruction of so-called traditional social bonds, feelings, customs, and beliefs, and that the agent of modernization was neither a particular category or social class, but reason itself [...] The West [...] lived and conceived modernity as a *revolution*.^{xvi}

Leaving aside the intellectual debate over continuity and discontinuity, there is a broader point to be made about how Braudel situated himself with regard to the periodizations of modernity. Much of his work can be read as a sustained rewriting of the script of modernity. While theories of modernity are based on the idea of a rejection of continuity with the past, Braudel relentlessly pursues connectedness. Situated in the ‘Early Modern’ period he argues that there is no fundamental discontinuity, that ideas of

rupture are superficial, and must be contextualized in the light of economic, geographic, and demographic evidence to the contrary.^{xvii} In particular Braudel is constitutionally suspicious of the appeal to drama in historical writing, although he has occasional lapses himself.^{xviii}

Braudel's occasional references to revolutions illustrate the point. For example he dismisses Ernest Labrousse's retreat into short-termism in the latter's 1948 lecture 'How are revolutions born?'. Labrousse, he proclaims, attempts to link

'a new-style pathetic fallacy (short-term economic) to a very old pathetic fallacy (political, the "revolutionary days"). And behold us back up to our ears in the short time span [...] The historian is naturally only too willing to act as theatrical producer. How could he be expected to renounce the drama of the short time span, and all the best tricks of a very old trade?'.^{xix}

In his last major work, *The Identity of France*, Braudel explicitly states his position on the continuing debate concerning the significance (or not) of the French Revolution:

the failing [of Taine and Tocqueville] is simply to believe that France begins in the 18th century with the Enlightenment, that France was born from the dramatic ordeal to which it was subjected by the violence of the French Revolution - the Revolution with a capital R which was until quite recently, without us students of history always being aware of it, a sort of Bible, a commitment, an ideological reference point. Obviously I dispute this worship, as I do all other worship or

retrospective idealization. But more particularly I protest against the narrowing of the chronological time-frame that it implies: the ancien régime and the French Revolution are close to us, almost contemporaneous with us. We stretch out our hands and we can touch them”.^{xx}

In rejecting an approach to the past that privileges rupture Braudel seeks to historicize modernity, and to modify the great periodizing devices at the heart of the social sciences. Another obvious case is that of ‘capitalism’ itself. Both *The Mediterranean* and *Capitalism and Material Life* are sustained historical accounts of the developments normally associated with the term capitalism, but which refuse it as a principle of periodization. In a 1950 essay on historical economics Braudel is explicit:

‘the transition from one world to another is the great human drama on which we need to shed light. When Sombart and Sayou argue as to when modern capitalism was born, it is a rift of this sort [a structural rift] which they are looking for, even though they do not give it that name and cannot set a precise date for it. I do not seek a philosophy of these catastrophes’.^{xxi}

In this version, while Braudel rejects notions of rupture and catastrophe, he does acknowledge that there was a ‘transition from one world to another’ and that this constitutes ‘the great human drama’. What are we to make of this? How different are these two worlds? ‘Capitalism’ as he remarks elsewhere ‘is protean, a hydra with a hundred heads’. While acknowledging the significance of capitalism as an organising principle for understanding aspects of economic life from the 11th century to the present

day, he sees it as a 'restricted layer' relating to activities that take place at the summit of economic life, and rejects it as an absolute category of difference. The success of capitalism depends profoundly on the creativity of pre-capitalism, and the gradual success of capitalism has still not replaced all other forms of organization. Capitalism 'has betokened modernity, flexibility and rationality from its earliest beginnings. It is in the vanguard of the economic life of the past'. Thus past moments and structures intermingle not only with the present but also with the future.^{xxii}

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history as refuge

On a number of occasions, Braudel affirms his sense that only history can provide a satisfactory understanding of the present, and in his choice of subject-matter he situates himself strategically at the crossroads of past and future. Nonetheless, he himself devotes little attention to typical figures of modernity, the industrial workers and the middle classes. The overwhelming impression from his work is that it is the past, the past of the French and Mediterranean countrysides, and the techniques of peasant production, that fire his imagination. This is nowhere more tellingly illustrated than in his evocation of his own childhood:

A very old bell struck the hour in the small Lorraine village where I grew up as a child: the village pond drove an old mill wheel; a stone path, as old as the world, plunged down like a torrent in front of my house; the house itself had been rebuilt in 1806, the year of Jena, and flax used to be retted in the stream at the bottom of the meadows.^{xxiii}

It is hardly surprising that the *Annales* historians were identified with reactionary politics in France. Braudel's dismissal of the political as a basis for historical understanding, his celebration of peasant livelihood, his lack of interest in human agency, the rejection of revolution as a source of inspiration, all conform to conservative ideologies. Moreover, it is commonplace for assertions of – and celebrations of - deep continuity to be associated with aristocratic and ruling elites, or at the very least with right-wing nationalism. There is a triumphalist dimension to them, a refusal of defeat. Arguments in favour of deep continuity such as those of Braudel work best for the victors, for the centres of civilization. They are hard to sustain in areas that have been subjected repeatedly to the ravages of war, of conquest, of religious conflict.

Nonetheless Braudel has an answer to this, and it is that the historian's broad sweep can demonstrate how ephemeral human affairs are, even in moments of tragedy. Thus, surveying the process of European colonization of India, China, and the Islamic world in *Capitalism and Material Life*, he notes that in the end they recovered their independence:

So stormy conquests looked at retrospectively, through the eyes of men today, seem like episodes, whatever their duration. They came into being more or less suddenly, then collapsed one fine day like stage sets.^{xxiv}

The same unsentimental approach is applied in *The Identity of France* to the roll-call of military defeats suffered by the French – 1815, 1871, 1914, 1940: 'these monstrous wounds scar over with time, they are effaced and forgotten. This is the

imperious rule of all collective life'. Braudel's own experience as a member of the defeated French army in 1940 is mobilised to reinforce the point:

'we the defeated, unjustly and without warning condemned to captivity, we were the lost France, like the dust that the wind whips up from a heap of sand. The true France, the France in reserve, deep France was behind us, she would survive, she did survive'.^{xxv}

There is, then, a therapeutic intent in the avoidance of commonplace ideas of crisis and rupture. As we have seen, Braudel identifies discontinuity as a 'great wound'; continuity on the other hand is referred to on several occasions as a 'shelter', some kind of refuge from the 'storms' of historical events. In part the therapeutic quality of history for Braudel derives from his refusal to allow people, neither collectivities nor still less individuals, to be the subject of his accounts. People are merely the instruments through which the great historical processes of the rise and fall of civilizations are accomplished. But it is perhaps worth asking nonetheless what are the conditions under which history can and cannot fulfil this type of therapeutic function. Is such a stance in part a refusal to mourn? In an essay published in 1958, Braudel seems to recognise that there was an element of flight from reality in his elaboration of the long time-span during the years he spent as a prisoner of war:

Rejecting events and the time in which events take place was a way of placing oneself to one side, sheltered, so as to get some sort of perspective, to be able to evaluate them better, and not wholly to believe in them.^{xxvi}

And yet Braudel's work escapes the confines of such labels. His rigorous materialism has been a source of inspiration to Marxists, and his own work has offered a deeper, more historically grounded analysis of the rise of capitalism than that of Marx himself, although of course his approach to historical time is fundamentally at odds with the catastrophist and discontinuous element of the Marxist philosophy of history. As Eric Hobsbawm notes, the 1950s British Marxist historians were heavily criticised by the French Communist Party for collaborating with the 'reactionaries' of *Annales*, but outside France there were 'friendly and cooperative' relationships between many left-wing historians and the *Annales* group. Not only because of their emphasis on the material, but also as Hobsbawm recognises because of their intensive preoccupation with the 16-17th centuries: 'a crucial period in the development of the modern world'.^{xxvii}

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the periodizations of deep time

Braudel's programmatic statements mostly privilege continuity, but of course in his historical writings, and his discussions of the work of others, he cannot avoid issues of breaks, transitions and revolutions in historical time, and when he addresses them, it is often to propose his own periodization, challenging conventional understandings. For example, with regard to the St Bartholomew's Eve Massacre of 1572:

'to Frenchmen, [it...] was a traumatic turning-point in the history of their country and Michelet was later to give it the same passionate emphasis. The real turn of the tide however, in my view, came several years later, in 1575 or even 1580'.

Again, rebutting Gurvitch's gross contrast between the ideas of the [bad] nineteenth century and the [good] twentieth, he writes:

'If there is discontinuity from one epoch to another, surely we have just lived through it recently, for better or worse, although we cannot be sure that the tidal surge has finished passing over us. The contrast is not before and after the year 1900, but before and after the 1930/40s. That is when a new century began'.^{xxviii}

The 1958 essay on History and the Social Sciences reveals clearly his ambivalence towards periodization. While he admits that 'even more significant than the deep-rooted structures of life are their points of rupture, their swift or slow deterioration under the effect of contradictory pressures', this is only to reveal his personal preference for models derived from qualitative mathematics, which relate to the 'extreme *longue durée*, sheltered from all accidents, crises and sudden breaks'.^{xxix} Alongside the ever-present imagery of water, of the sea, of currents and tides, he typically employs images with a cyclical element; turning points, the swinging pendulum ('a powerful swing of the pendulum carried [Spain] towards its transatlantic destiny'), the turning wheel, or in a more contemporary idiom motors ('cities are like motors, turning over, warming up, exhausting themselves then setting off again').^{xxx} This obviously accords well with his choice of subject matter. Crisis and decline in one place, after all, are matched by expansion in another. But even more substantial and generalised evidence of decline is treated with scepticism. 'Civilizations' in his terms are rarely mortal. 'These breaks occur more rarely and farther apart than one might expect. And even more importantly they do not destroy everything equally'.^{xxxi}

Braudel's historical texts are constructed as narratives of development, of fluctuation, of rise and fall. As such there are constant periodizations of a kind, which signal new developments, the decline of previous centres of civilization. There is recognition of the impact of new technologies, of shifts in the balance of power, but they are contextualised in such a way as to play down the drama, the absolute quality of beginnings and endings and instead to portray historical change as a continuous process of unfolding, so that decline in one place means expansion in another.

Central to this fluctuating vision of historical movement are cyclical models derived from the social sciences, which allow Braudel to ground his imagery of the cyclical in a material reality which is also a progression, and does not simply return to the point of departure. At times he talks of 'geographical' cycles. 'History usually only concerns itself with the crises and high points of these slow movements. In fact, these points are only reached after immense preparation and are followed by interminable consequences'. The cycles and inter-cycles of economic history are frequently invoked. He is as cautious about economic periodization as about any other, but economic cycles fit better with his historical temporality. They allow him to accept the reality of crises but to place them in a more global context in which they can be understood as the necessary fluctuations of the system – the 'wavelets of history'.^{xxxii}

In the light of this constantly reiterated commitment to continuity, it is perhaps surprising to find that there are fields in which Braudel asserts the reality of discontinuity, and although he sees no need to highlight them, he invokes them as though they were

obvious. The first is essentially technical, although it involves a constellation of economic triggers and consequences. From this perspective there are two decisive breaks in human history: the first the neolithic revolution, which involved a general shift to agriculture; the second the industrial revolution ‘the greatest break in modern history’.^{xxxiii}

But both of these revolutions are closely associated with another absolute principle of periodization, that of demography. Time and again it is in terms of large-scale populations that Braudel accepts the reality of breaks in historical time: ‘A demographic growth can and does entail ruptures and changes’. The moment that he signals as ‘a cut so significant that there are no others like it that we know of in the whole of our history’ is the year 1450, the moment at which population decline in Western Europe reached its nadir.^{xxxiv}

Perhaps the most striking example of the demographic basis for Braudel’s periodization is to be found in *The Identity of France* where he characteristically takes issue with the standard narrative structures of French history. It seems that ‘France’ as he defines it was in essence already in place by the end of the Neolithic. It was at that point that waves of immigrants and invaders substantially changed both the population and its mode of life, especially in the north. The immensity and diversity of France, its geographical destiny as a crossroads for currents and influences from the great continental land-mass, as well as from the Atlantic, the North Sea and the Mediterranean, was in Braudel’s view established by the fifth millennium BP. Thereafter its population

did not change significantly (although there were constant ‘transfusions’ of blood from immigrant groups) until the demographic transition of the early 19th century:

Gaul existed before it was created. There was a real unity between what came before the creation of Roman Gaul and Gaul proper. The demographic cards were already played by the end of the neolithic; the ethnic mix was established and remained in place. The later invasions, especially that of the Celts – which we believe to have been substantial and violent, and with a powerful cultural impact - were gradually absorbed by the mass of the existing populations. These were conquered, and sometimes expelled from their land, but in time they recovered, stretched out and became prosperous once again [...] The same was probably true of the Roman conquest, and of the barbarian invasions of the fifth century [...] What counts is the mass of population, the majority that is already there.

Everyone else eventually gets absorbed into it.^{xxxv}

The four versions of ‘Gaul’ are fundamentally the same, following on from and replacing earlier versions: Celtic/independent/protohistoric, Roman, Merovingian and Carolingian. The later conflicts of France are interpreted as the product of the diversity of the country. External invasions (including the German invasion which he had himself witnessed) are extensions of internal conflict and civil war, a permanent aspect of French history, a feature of continuity. The Revolution from this perspective, following the work of family historians such as Flandrin, is treated fundamentally as a civil war between north and south, between individualised and atomistic family structures in the north and more cohesive patriarchal structures in the south.

Thus in *The Identity of France* Braudel does offer periodizations, but of a kind that often derive more from archaeological and ethnological research than history proper. Rupture in demographic and technical terms can be acknowledged in prehistory, where an existing population has been substantially replaced by new immigrants and invaders, or at the very least have adopted the language and practices of the incomers. In privileging the deep history and prehistory of France, Braudel demonstrates the close link between his fascination with ‘civilizations’, with the shifting centres of power, prosperity and influence, and his commitment to continuity. Without entering into debate about how convincing his dismissal of standard periodizations may be, it is clear that the land-mass and the populations that constitute France have a historical density, and a role in the unfolding dramas of European hegemony, that is unusual if not unique.

Finally, there is another field in which Braudel accepts discontinuity as an important principle, though it is one to which he devotes little attention in his own work. In his critique of Gurvitch he acknowledges that discontinuity is typical of the human mind: ‘I do believe in the historical discontinuity of ideas. Ideas advance ‘in leaps’, by ruptures, by abrupt shifts of focus’.^{xxxvi} Why this concession? In part, perhaps, it is the product of the disavowal of Bergson’s philosophy in mid-century France. But in part it is surely a recognition that when historical development is examined at the level of human beings, rather than of global processes, the experience of rupture, and indeed the desire to break with the past, is a powerful element of human praxis. The history of ideas is fundamentally the history of the ideas of particular individuals, rather than of populations

(whose collective ‘ideas’ would be closer to the conventional anthropological ideas of culture).

Indeed the history of Braudel’s own ideas, together with those of the *Annales* group more broadly, constitute a good example of just such an ‘abrupt shift of focus’. As Braudel admits in the preface to *The Mediterranean*, ‘to its author, every work seems revolutionary, the result of a struggle for mastery’. This is surely the explanation for the paradox of his Inaugural Lecture, mentioned at the beginning. He feels free at one and the same time to advocate the centrality of the *longue durée* as a historical method, and to talk of the need for a new approach to history, to correspond to the ruptures and catastrophes that he and his audience had lived through. As a member of the defeated French army of 1940, he is able to conceive of himself as one grain of sand blown from the enduring sand-dune. But as an intellectual, he is the master of his own ideas, and confident of the historical revolution in which he played such a central part.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

ⁱ Warm thanks to Sally Alexander for inviting me to participate in a round table on Braudel and notions of historical time in March 2002, and to the other participants in the discussion.

ⁱⁱ ‘The situation of history in 1950’ in *On History* Chicago 1980, pp.7, 10

ⁱⁱⁱ See Olivia Harris ‘The coming of the white people: reflections on the mythologization of history in Latin America’ *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 14(1):9-24, 1993; Tristan Platt, Thérèse Bouysse-Cassagne, Olivia Harris *Qaraqara-Charka: Mallku, Inka y Rey. Historia de una confederación ayмара del sur andino, siglos XV-XVII* La Paz, 2004.

^{iv} *Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800* [1967] New York, 1973, p.443; ‘History and the social sciences’ in *On History* pp.27-8, 33, 45

^v The constant dialogue between history and the ‘social sciences’ was at the heart of the distinctive approach pioneered by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in the *Annales*.

^{vi} Braudel welcomes the detailed attention given by Lévi-Strauss to relations of kinship, myth, ceremonial, and institutions, whose operation reveal a very slow pace to historians *On History* pp.75-6.

^{vii} Henri Bergson (1859-1941), the influential French philosopher of time, was insistent on the need to distinguish the concept and the experience of time, the latter grounded in duration and thus continuity (for example *Time and Free Will: an Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* [1889] London, 1910).

^{viii} *On History* p.17

^{ix} ‘History and Sociology’ [originally published 1958-60] *On History* p.78

- ^x Philip Bosserman *Dialectical Sociology. An Analysis of the Sociology of Georges Gurvitch* Boston, 1968, p.12.
- ^{xi} 'Fernand Braudel 'Georges Gurvitch ou la discontinuité du social' *Annales E.S.C.* 1953: 347-61, pp.349, 359, 360 (the translations from this text are mine).
- ^{xii} Both Braudel and Gurvitch through such images echo basic postulates of the Freudian unconscious. Braudel's vision of a timeless dimension underlying the surface oscillations of event-based history calls to mind Freud's portrayal of the unconscious as timeless; Gurvitch's imagery of a surface of order and institutions overthrown again and again by violent, creative and irrational forces that erupt from below like volcanos (the image is Gurvitch's own) has close affinity with the Freudian economy of id, superego and ego.
- ^{xiii} Georges Gurvitch 'Continuité et discontinuité en histoire et sociologie' *Annales E.S.C.* 1957:73-84, p.74.
- ^{xiv} Gurvitch 'Continuité et discontinuité' p.79; Bosserman *Dialectical Sociology*; Georges Gurvitch *The Social Frameworks of Knowledge* Oxford, 1971; Braudel *On History* p.67. This was also a major criticism of the *Annales* approach to history by Marxists, for example Jacques Rancière derides static history as 'a way of leaving the scene of politics, and of expressing disgust. Its main ideological feature is to say that the story of the working-class movement, the story of strikes and congresses and struggles and all that, is only superstructural illusion, ideology' in Raphael Samuel (ed) *Peoples' History and Socialist Theory* London, 1981, p.271.
- ^{xv} 'On a concept of social history' *On History* pp. 124, 126; *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism* Baltimore 1977, p.105
- ^{xvi} Alain Touraine *Critique of Modernity* [1992] Basil Blackwell 1995, pp.10-11.
- ^{xvii} As Immanuel Wallerstein notes, a crucial periodization for historians is based on a mythological break between medieval and modern times, and between early and late modern history. Braudel's "'upside down" view of capitalism is[...] a devastating attack on these mythologies' ('Braudel on capitalism, or Everything upside down' in *Journal of Modern History* 63, 1991, p.359).
- ^{xviii} For example, in an essay on the history of civilizations, published in 1959, he writes uncharacteristically of the industrial and scientific revolutions: 'Toward 1750, the world with all its many civilizations underwent a series of upheavals, a chain of catastrophes (nor were they the prerogative of the West alone). We are still suffering from them today' *On History* p.214
- ^{xix} *On History* p.30. In a later essay published in the same volume he is even more explicit: 'The French Revolution is not a total break in the destiny of French civilization, nor the Revolution of 1917 in the Russian', p.210
- ^{xx} *L'Identité de la France* Paris, 1986, vol.I, p.13. All translations from this work are mine.
- ^{xxi} *On History* p.89; see also *Afterthoughts* pp.112-4
- ^{xxii} *On History* pp.112-3; *Afterthoughts* pp.40, 46-7; *Capitalism and Material Life* p.xiii
- ^{xxiii} *Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800* [1967] New York 1973, p.441
- ^{xxiv} *Capitalism and Material Life*, p.64.
- ^{xxv} *L'Identité de la France* I, pp.17-18; a similar image is found in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* [1949], London 1973, vol.II, p.757: 'Civilizations, like sand dunes, are firmly anchored to the hidden contours of the earth; grains of sand may come and go, blown into drifts or carried far away by the wind, but the dunes, the unmoving sum of innumerable movements, remain standing'.
- ^{xxvi} In 'History and the Social Sciences' *On History* p.47
- ^{xxvii} Eric Hobsbawm *On History* Abacus, London 1997, p.238-40
- ^{xxviii} *The Mediterranean* vol.II p.902; 'Georges Gurvitch ou la discontinuité...' p.352
- ^{xxix} *On History* p.45. Braudel's commitment to notions of unfolding and development rather than rupture can be sensed when, for example, the rise in numbers of shops in the seventeenth century is characterised as 'another triumph of the continuous' *Afterthoughts* p.26.
- ^{xxx} The quotes are from *The Mediterranean* vol.I pp.19, 352
- ^{xxxi} *On History* p.12
- ^{xxxii} *The Mediterranean* I, p.101-2; 'Georges Gurvitch ou la discontinuité...' p.361; *On History* p.86
- ^{xxxiii} *L'Identité de la France* II, p.27: 'the great fracture brought about by the arrival of the neolithic [...] an agricultural revolution as important as the English industrial revolution would later be'; *Afterthoughts* p.107
- ^{xxxiv} *On History* p.206; *L'Identité de la France* II, p.116.

^{xxxv} *L'Identité de la France II*, p.61

^{xxxvi} 'Georges Gurvitch ou la discontinuité...' p.359.