

Student C:

## REACTION PAPER 1: Braudel and Bloch

### 1. Intersecting scales.

What was most interesting to me in both the readings, but especially the Braudel, was the way that both authors employ the intersecting of different scales of time and space to tell very complex histories. Both do this by focussing on the intersection of the environment, relatively long-term social and political trends, and specific events (the "ephemera of history," Braudel, 901), rather than stressing one scale of space and time above another. This method of telling history (which I found convincing, on the whole) suggests observations at one spatial or temporal scale require observations at other scales in order to be fully understood.

Braudel is a bit hesitant to include a discussion of the final category -- the event -- but in the end does, arguing that it is necessary to gain a full picture of the history of the Mediterranean. Despite his assertion that the method of studying longer term trends as opposed to events are to be kept separate, that "for us . . . will always be two chains -- not one," and despite the formal structuring of his text into sections discussing fairly distinct scales of time and space, he intertwines observations across scales throughout his text (902).

In fact, I found that many of the most interesting tidbits of the Braudel reading came from instances where scales intersected. His discussion of "Poverty and Banditry" is a good example (beginning 734). At first, the meso-scale observations about banditry are paired with other conjunctural observations: the idea of class struggle and the relations between bandits and the state. However, Braudel then connects banditry to the mountains. "Enemies of power, bandits usually lurked in zones where state authority was weak: in the mountains where troops could not attack them and where the government had no rights . . ." (746). Here, Braudel alludes to the discussion of mountains and lawlessness in the first part: "But the mountains are an equally important factor . . . as the sea . . . in revolt against the establishment of the modern state . . ." (39). In this way he links the macro-scale backdrop of the physical Mediterranean and the meso-scale trend lawlessness. Braudel seems to say that, without human inhabitants, mountains are meaningless, just as lawlessness would have been less pervasive without the mountains.

Bloch's general argument is a good example of intersecting spatial and temporal scales. His explanations of why the adoption of the watermill took longer than some would have thought relies heavily on the combination of macro-scale structures (the lack of dependable water supplies in some parts of Europe), meso-scale social trends, (the power of the artisans, and the move towards more capitalist methods of accumulation by the upper classes), and micro-scale events, (the

everyday resistance to the change at the level of the home). The seemingly counterintuitive delay in the wide-spread use of a 'better' technology is thus explained as a combination of factors across scales of space and time.

## 2. The Emphasis on the Environment

In the introduction to the third part, Pigabiol writes to Braudel suggesting that Braudel "could have written it the other way around" (903). At first I agreed with this statement; I remembered reading the first part while having no idea about the relationships between, e.g., Sardinia, Lunigiana, and Clabria. However, as I read the section on Lepanto, I began to see why Braudel organizes his text as he had. My perception changed in the passage about the movements of the fleets before the battle of 7 October. "As its approach, Veniero, in order to avoid being trapped in the Adriatic with the rest of Venice's navy, left the coast of Morea and Albania . . ." (1099). Without the preceding section on "Seas and Coasts," where Braudel discusses the channel-like shape of the Adriatic, as well as the somewhat hard to decipher perspective map of the entrance to the Adriatic, the significance of this maneuver would not have been clear to me (124).

Without the larger scale context such events go ungrounded. One thing that bothered me, however, and this comes up in Bloch, too, is that by organizing his work in the order he does, Braudel might be placing too much emphasis on how the physical environment impacts (dictates?) human action. Similarly, Bloch asks whether the intermittent nature of streams might have slowed the spread of the water mill. However, I think that a resolution to this worry comes from the idea of history as the intersection of scales. In both readings, I think that there are enough examples of the connections between scales to allay most fears of environmental determinism. In Braudel, he talks continually of the human story even as he describes the environment. To me this suggests that he believes that the physical environment is nothing without it's human actors, and that humans are, in fact, actors who can behave independently of environmental controls. In Bloch, his final conclusions about labor and coercion as the reason that the watermill became widespread, and his emphasis on social trends and small scale-resistance, are far from environmentally derived.