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Commentary 1, Annales School

Currently, few historical works devote as much attention and detail to geography than did Fernand Braudel in *The Mediterranean*. Discussions of geography tends to be downplayed by today's historians, especially given the pressure that they present novel, clearly defined arguments. Indeed, the mere narration of facts is discouraged while concision is valued. Nevertheless, Braudel begins his political, social, and economic study of the region with an extensive examination of its geography. According to the Annales School, there is much logic behind this methodology. Events and conjunctures are determined by key physical parameters—the structures. In fact, Braudel writes that “human life responds to the commands of the environment, but also seeks to evade and overcome them, only to be caught in other toils, which as historians, we can reconstruct more or less accurately” (267).

The notion of economic inequality is important in understanding the socioeconomic stratification that had solidified by the age of Philip II. Braudel's analysis of the reasons why the pauperization of the masses was as severe as it was exemplifies how intermediate consequences (or conjunctures), stemmed from geography. Although he expands further in the second volume, Braudel writes that a primary cause of their impoverishment was agriculture. Specifically, he points to the shortage of farmable land and even suggests a Malthusian trend: “The number of mouths to feed was increasing more quickly than the resources” (426). The reader is not surprised by the *Mediterranean's* difficulties with land cultivation, however, because Braudel makes a similar point in the first chapter. Take for instance Braudel's discussion of Lombardy in the plains regions, where flooding and malaria were endemic. Here, man began to transform the plains as early as the twelfth century (72). And in effect, economic security was secured for a few. The price was the enslavement and rising social misery of all others (74).

A particular point underscored by Braudel throughout his work is that the *Mediterranean*, unlike the North, “never managed to bring off a successful revolution” (735). Braudel notes that the absence of social revolution in the historical record is due to “the intense, relative pauperization of large numbers of the population” (453). After reading this I could not help but question Braudel's logic, however: why would a majority of impoverished people not revolt? In the Marxian sense, what had they to lose? It is at this point that Braudel introduces another definitive trait of the Annales tradition. In addition to embracing geographic determinism, Braudel argues that disturbances broke out so frequently that they eventually became norm. In doing so, Braudel critiques past scholars who confused the mundane with the insignificant, thereby failing to grasp its long-term importance. Braudel's historiographic point here is that scholars must look at daily occurrences, not only examine landmark events. For herein lies the “surface signs of a valid social history” (737). He then writes: “That is the historian's problem...[to see] correlations, regular patterns and general trends where at first sight there appears only incoherence...” (737). Such an observation may seem obvious to us today, but was groundbreaking to students fifty years ago.

There is no doubt why Lucien Febvre, the co-founder of the Annales school, would deem Braudel's work a “manifesto, a sign” (38, *A New Kind of History*). But *The Mediterranean* also displays a weakness. Braudel's obsessive pursuit of precision and quantification places the work in a tier of its own—massive yet perplexing. For example, the first chapter,

however informative, lacks a theoretical framework. From mountains to plains, North to South, East to West, Braudel jumps from one densely packed narration to next. Frankly, there were times when I could not help but lose track of which "zone or region" the author had in mind.

As a student of East Asian history, my last point asks whether a study of such detail and breadth could be duplicated on, say, Korea during the last fifty years of the Yi dynasty. In other words, Braudel, Bloch and Febvre all cover areas in or closely linked to Europe. Here, archives are rich and records generally available. At one point, Braudel even remarks that his problem is not with the lack of resources but rather the overabundance of them. The long duree approach may simply be impossible in regions where such a plethora of information is inaccessible, however. Does this make the study any less substantive? Finally, a shortcoming of this highly structured method of analysis is that it may close doors to less tangible, psychological factors such as a people's religions or beliefs. In the case of 19th century China, could the failure of the Chinese to "advance" their political and economic systems earlier be attributed to the vast land and its plentiful natural resources? Yes, indeed. But physical parameters only unveil part of the story. How would the Annales scholar explain East Asia's strict adherence to Confucianism for thousands of years? This leads me to wonder whether a subject as broad as the history of a region or country is even realistic. Does history need to be broken down into narrower, more concentrated disciplines? This is what the post-modernists would argue.