

Student B:

In reading both the Bloch and Braudel, I was struck by how strongly groups, forces, and long-term effects in general override individuals and events as the object of study. In 'old history' the story of events and people are told, and seemingly explained to some extent by their situation in larger groups, subject to larger forces operating over varying time scales. But for Bloch and Braudel the situation is exactly reversed -- the groups, forces and objects are the objects of study which are illustrated through events and their actors. I was struck by several aspects of this 'new history'.

The role of time in both readings is interesting because of its omnipresence. Absolutely everything historically examined is somehow situated in time, with as much distance from static events as possible. This lends a somewhat new aspect to the 'histoire des evenements' of Braudel's Book 3, since every event and is explicitly shown in as much a maximum of temporal context. Whereas Braudel spends pages describing the roots of Lepanto in long negotiations and the Franco-Spanish war they almost engendered, as well as the effects of the Christian victory, the battle itself is described in a few sentences (though this is also because the battle has been described elsewhere). Historical figures are usually only described through the events they effect, which are placed in a temporal context. Even outside the domain of events, the notions of transhumance, nomadism, mountains, and plains are given temporal significance -- nomadism and mountain-dwellers are shown to precede transhumance and plain-dwellers in the history of the Mediterranean, two almost anthropological facts whose place is to temporalize static geographic notions.

Braudel's concern with time is explicitly stated when he describes structure, conjuncture and evenement as dividing up history into geographical, social, and individual time. Different phenomena Bloch describes fit neatly into these types of time -- the discussion of the sufficiency of certain rivers for water mills, domestic milling by a fixed group changing slowly over time, and the individual disputes over milling and decrees to prevent hand milling fit respectively into these three categories. I was intrigued by Braudel's suggestion that by temporalizing every aspect of history and asserting different types of time, he gives one much more freedom in how to think about history. When Braudel responds to his friend's claim that the books of "The Mediterranean" could have gone in reverse order by comparing the book to an hourglass, it seems that Braudel is allowing us to think about time in a non-linear fashion, as an object which can be viewed from several angles rather than an arrow which just moves forward.

Also interesting is the prominence of economic factors in both Bloch and Braudel's analyses. For Bloch, one of the two forces driving the advent and triumph of the water mill is the profit motive of the lords and town leaders who charged the tenants and townspeople to mill their grain in the local water mill. For Braudel, a huge range of processes on all three levels are driven by economic concerns. Transhumance cannot exist without the motive of higher profit when goods are transported, plain agriculture cannot exist unless it is part of a trade economy, the overpopulation of nobles and the poor alike is linked to economic depression, the pepper trade figures enormously in state politics, and so on. I found it interesting that Braudel sees a significant amount of quantitative economic facts (or estimates) about the Mediterranean to be essential to the new kind of history he wanted to write. Almost every direction for further research (the ownership of the plains, shipping data, expulsion dates of bandits, etc.) he offers is concerned with gathering more specific economic (or social) data, perhaps showing his belief that history that although his work was forced by prior work to use events as the backbone of the long-term phenomena shown, future work should rely increasingly on short-term data. Or perhaps he feels that of the two times of evenements he describes in the introduction to part three, economic and social evenements have just begun to be worked on, while political ones have been the traditional subject of 'old history'.

Of all Braudel's analyses, I was most surprised by how often he was able to identify the unity of large 'zones', usually through data. The rise and fall of urban industry, for example, is shown to be surprisingly uniform throughout the Mediterranean. Nomadism and transhumanism are shown to operate in two sharply delineated, coherent zones for plausible reasons, and the validity of dividing up the Mediterranean into different shipping zones through geographic and climate considerations is shown.

On a critical note, I'm wondering how Braudel can accommodate the actual 'decline' of the Mediterranean relative to Northern Europe. Though possible reasons for this decline are mentioned several times, it isn't explicitly addressed (at least in the section we read). This overarching decline does not fall into structure, conjuncture, or evenement (unless 'the Mediterranean' is taken to be a social group) and yet seems like a major historical process that should be analyzed. Traditional histories such as Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" are free to focus on the fortunes of political entities, but I don't see how the fortunes of an empire or even one of the regions which Braudel demonstrated the unity of can be treated in his model. Maybe I'm wondering more generally how the much more social, economic and long-term approach taken by Braudel can deal with the long-term

political events addressed in 'old history'. Would the thesis be that such an event necessarily has to be addressed through the structures and conjectures the long-term political event is set in, or something else?