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Braudel, a mobilities scholar avant la lettre?

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Auteur(s) (texte brut)

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Chapô

Braudel has been cited but rarely used in mobilities literature, yet his work places movement at the heart of social, economic and political life.

Présentation longue

Fernand Braudel (1902 – 1985) is regarded as one of the most innovative historians of the twentieth century. Does he also deserve the status of a mobilities scholar avant la lettre? An adequate answer to this question is beyond the possibilities of a blog entry. Here I offer just a sketch of the genesis of his book *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* (hereafter *The Mediterranean*). This wonderful text can be read at many levels and one of them is certainly as an early example of a sensitivity that transcends disciplinary boundaries and attends to the centrality of movement in life.

The *Mediterranean* was Braudel's doctoral thesis but its beginnings in 1927 would have presaged a very different book. As an initial focus, Phillip II and his Mediterranean policies was a topic that fitted well within the cannon of French diplomatic history, namely the relation between political units and key political players and events. Yet Braudel's research would gradually diverge from this official history. This history could not account for the complexity of commercial exchanges which, he believed, were inextricably entangled with the evolution of forms of war. These everyday exchanges and movements followed tempos and rhythms that political history could not capture. But in the early 1930s this was only an intuition vaguely suggested in his first publications.

A crucial phase in the maturation of these ideas happened later, during the three years that Braudel spent at the University of São Paulo. Brazil left an indelible mark

on his outlook. The country was undergoing a process of profound transformations and the contrast between the slow rhythms of traditional societies and the accelerated rhythms of cultural and economic elites seduced by technological progress was all too evident. Braudel saw a society of multiple temporal dimensions, where different centuries coexisted in the same present. This observation proved to be a constant preoccupation in his future writings. 'My great problem', he observed years later, 'the only problem I had to resolve was to show that time moves at different speeds'. A concrete example of how this problem appears in *The Mediterranean* is the tension between determinism and agency in explaining the fragility and resilience of, for example, cities and trade routes.

Brazil also provided Braudel with time and tranquillity to study thousands of documents that he recorded with a camera in the archives of Spain, Italy and Croatia. As noted, Braudel's thesis was initially focused on Phillip II and his Mediterranean policies. Gradually, as these documents began to form a coherent picture, the Mediterranean as 'space-movement' imposed itself as the overriding theme. Rather than focusing on the man, Braudel wrote about the circumstances, the theatre in which the Spanish king displayed his rule. And that stage was a complex and lively network of travel and trade routes.

So to look over Phillip II's shoulder as he deals with his papers, means constantly being aware of the dimensions of France, for him an intermediary zone; it means becoming familiar with the postal services, knowing which routes have regular stages and which have not; noting the delays in the mail caused here and there by the civil wars; measuring their extent, duration and relative importance; and also learning the detours taken by money, particularly bills of exchange on their way to banking centres. A state had to wage not one but many struggles against distance.

Braudel described Phillip II's empire as 'a colossal enterprise of land and sea transport' which was exhausted by its own size. Essentially *The Mediterranean* is about how people (and not just states or Phillip II) struggled with distance.

The Mediterranean in the age of Phillip II is described as 'the sum of its routes, land routes and sea routes, routes along the rivers and routes along the coasts, an immense network of regular and causal connections, the life giving blood stream of the Mediterranean region'. This network of trade and travel routes constituted the

'framework for the general life of the sea', the 'infrastructure of all coherent history'. This 'space-movement' was one that expands and contracts but not in a simple linear way. 'We should imagine a hundred frontiers, not one, some political, some economic, and some cultural'. Accordingly, Braudel speaks about multiple 'Mediterraneans'. Consider slaves, salt and gold and the boundaries of the inner sea stretch south of the Sahara along the Tuareg routes; consider silver coins and you go round the world from the mines in Peru to the pepper plantations in South East Asia. Attention to these connections provided a sense for the rhythms of life around the sea's shores, rhythms that often arrive as waves from the edges, far away from the lands of the olive tree.

From the perspective of collective life and its history, we can only understand the Mediterranean as space-movement. It is filled with [...] echoes going from one extreme to the other, throughout all its extension. What happens in Constantinople always depends, to some extent, on what is plotted in Venice or Madrid [...]; as soon as any event affects the sea, a certain resonance, certain complicity is guaranteed [...]. The Mediterranean is an immense box of resonances with its acoustic connections, its points of espionage, its information specialists.

It was in Brazil where Braudel became acutely aware of the waves radiating beyond the physical or political borders of the Mediterranean, its city states and empires. 'It was in Brazil', he wrote, 'where I became intelligent'.

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Index / Ordre d'affichage

35