

Fernand Braudel: The Greatest Geographer of the Twentieth Century?

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In 1981, I entered the graduate program in geography at the University of California, Berkeley and found myself in a war zone. The traditionalist scholars who hewed to the old “land and life” model and the young Marxian social theorists held each other in mutual contempt. The only author who found respect on both sides was Fernand Braudel. As my partner, Kären Wigen, and I had advisors in opposing camps, we thought it a good idea to immerse ourselves in his works. In rereading *Civilization and Capitalism* in the summer of 2024, I found the pages falling out of their binding, the handsome paperbacks destroyed by too many readings—and the passage of too much time.

The passage of time has also taken a toll on some of Braudel’s claims. I was especially taken aback by his depiction of Central Asian nomadic peoples: “As soon as they appeared in history, they were what they would remain until their decline . . . hordes of violent, cruel, pillaging horsemen full of daredevil courage.”¹ To be sure, such framing has a long pedigree across the Eurasian sedentary zone, but I would have expected something better from a scholar as great as Fernand Braudel.

And I do mean great. As Keith Thomas argued in a 1973 review of *Capitalism and Material Life*, “If there were a Nobel Prize for history there can be little question about its most likely recipient.”² I would venture to add that Braudel was the greatest *geographer* of the twentieth century, without rivals.

That is quite the claim to make, as Braudel was not, formally speaking, a geographer. But geography suffuses not just the first part of *The Mediterranean*, but his entire corpus. And not just “geography” in the general sense, but geographical inquiry in many diverse registers.

¹ Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations* (Penguin Books, 1995 [1963]), 164.

² Keith Thomas, “Historian of Everything,” *New York Review*, December 13, 1973, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1973/12/13/historian-of-everything/>.

To appreciate Fernand Braudel's contribution, we need to know something about the discipline when he was intellectually coming of age. Human geography in the 1920s was under the spell of Friedrich Ratzel, noted for his environmental determinism and the concept of *lebensraum*, which was later to undergird Nazi ideology. The leading US geographer of the time, Elsworth Huntington of Yale, found acclaim by melding crude Ratzelian determinism with pseudoscientific racism, forging an unholy synthesis that would do much to discredit the discipline. Not coincidentally, Huntington mapped New Haven, Connecticut, in the central portion of his favored zone of optimal "climatic energy."³

Braudel embraced a geography of a different kind: "environmental possibilism," developed in France by Paul Vidal de la Blache. Although ignored today, Vidal's works are everywhere in Braudel; they were "read and reread,"⁴ he tells us, when he was writing *The Mediterranean*. Equally important was the work of his mentor, Lucien Febvre. Although remembered as a historian, Febvre cared enough about geography to write a book on it, a devastating "possibilist" riposte to Ratzelian determinism. Febvre scoffed even at "environmental influence," which he regarded as reeking of astrology.⁵ Instead, he insisted that people adapted to their natural environments while continually transforming them. This made geography not a "factor" but something far more basic: a fundamental dimension of life. As he saw it, "history" and "geography" were two sides of the same coin. Braudel took the whole coin and pocketed it for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, Braudel's intellectual partnership with Febvre came to a premature end; as originally envisaged, *Civilization and Capitalism* was to be a joint project, with Febvre providing the nonmaterial volumes.⁶ That project, had it come to fruition, would have merited the designation of "total history."

Although a thoroughgoing possibilist, Braudel often portrayed topographical features as guiding the development of trade networks and other economic activities. He can therefore be described as an "environmental determinist" of sorts, as perceptively argued by Diliانا Angelova in her contribution to this symposium. But his was a minimal and hedged version of the doctrine, far removed from the causal inevitability found in the works of scholars like Huntington. In their view, physical geography determines not just the course of trade routes but also the substance of thought and the direction of cultural development. In hardcore environmental determinism, "geography" is nothing less than "destiny"—to quote the title of a recent book.⁷ Needless to say, Braudel had no use for such secular predestinarian thinking. (See postscript.)

Throughout his career, Braudel leaned on geographers, both well-known and unsung. *The Wheels of Commerce* is dedicated to Pierre Gourou, "in token of double affection"; *The Identity of France* turns repeatedly to Pierre Bonnaud, author of *Land and Languages*,⁸ a book essentially unknown in the United States. But Braudel's geohistorical synthesis was very much his own. It

³ Elsworth Huntington, *Civilization and Climate* (Yale University Press, 1915); see also Martin W. Lewis, "Environmental Determinism, Elsworth Huntington, and the Decline of Geography," *GeoCurrents*, 2010, <https://www.geocurrents.info/blog/2011/02/10/environmental-determinism-ellsworth-huntington-and-the-decline-of-geography/>.

⁴ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972–73), 2:1273.

⁵ Lucien Febvre and Lionel Bataillon, *A Geographical Introduction to History* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), 16, 360.

⁶ Fernand Braudel, *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 3.

⁷ Ian Morris, *Geography Is Destiny: Britain and the World: A 10,000-Year History* (Macmillan, 2022).

⁸ Pierre Bonnaud, *Terres et Langues, peuples et régions* (Auvernhà tarà d'Oc, 1981).

was also deeply rooted. He went so far as to argue that landscape has "as much to tell us as the richest documents of the archives"⁹ and that the "[Mediterranean] sea itself ... is the greatest document of its past experience."¹⁰ That was exactly what I was taught by the old-school Berkeley geographers—particularly James Parsons—although I have yet to meet a historian who concurs.

Braudel's geographical scope was encompassing. He was fascinated by places as intimate as a single village and as vast as the emerging global system. He depicted regions, regardless of scale, as generally overlapping, always crosscut by networks, and perpetually in flux, if often at a glacial pace. Braudel's vast geographical knowledge, combined with his archival sleuthing, helped him highlight places that have been slipping out of the historical imagination, such as Ragusa, which is now called Dubrovnik. "The Tyrrhenian Sea," he tells us, "would have almost become a Ragusan lake if it had not been for the presence of Marseille and later Livorno."¹¹

Braudel was even a fan of formal spatial models, particularly those of Johann von Thünen, who modeled the distribution of economic activities in a hypothetical "isolated state."¹² More problematic, he embraced the geometrical abstraction of Central Place Theory, particularly as deployed by G. William Skinner for China. Braudel wrongly¹³ argued that the Chinese organization of markets, and hence the map of settlements, "was strictly, almost mathematically, based on geography ..."¹⁴ Yet elsewhere he decried the "dehumanizing" mathematicization of history and social inquiry.¹⁵ Seeming contradictions like this litter Braudel's work, although they are almost always resolvable through careful reading.

What most distinguishes Braudel's geographical vision is his assertion that inequality itself is a fundamentally spatial phenomenon, rooted in the hierarchical relationship between centers and peripheries. "My conclusion," he wrote, "is that the organization of territory itself creates inequality and hierarchies. Marx saw the conflict between town and country as the oldest example of class struggle, a masterly insight."¹⁶ The resulting vision may seem unduly constraining and inadequately concerned with disparities of wealth and power inside the metropole, but it is difficult to deny its historical salience.

It has been argued that the truly geographical mind is characterized by topophilia, or the love of place. Here again, Braudel fits the mold. His self-professed love of the Mediterranean generated a massive masterpiece, and his affection for France inspired another, half-finished at the end of his life. It is difficult to say which was his greater love. Intriguingly, he chose to live his final years, or so he tells us,¹⁷ in the town of Céret, a few miles from the Mediterranean. This

⁹ Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France*, vol. 1: *History and Environment* (HarperCollins, 1989 [1986]), 32.

¹⁰ Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 1:17.

¹¹ Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 1:121.

¹² Braudel opined that von Thünen "ranks alongside Marx as the greatest German economist of the 19th century," although he faulted him for missing the inequality that was generated by the spatial zones that he modeled; Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, vol. 3: *The Perspective of the World*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper and Row, 1984 [1967]), 38.

¹³ Central Place Theory is based on retail trade. The spatial patterns of the urban hierarchies that it describes, however, have been shown by several scholars to have been based more on administrative hierarchies and on wholesaling networks than on retail trade; see, for example, James Vance, *The Merchant's World: The Geography of Wholesaling* (Prentice Hall, 1971).

¹⁴ Braudel, *Afterthoughts*, 31.

¹⁵ See, for example, Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 2:1243; see also Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, 1:562.

¹⁶ Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, 1:176.

¹⁷ Braudel, *Identity of France*, vol. 1, 61–62; Braudel, *Identity of France*, vol. 2, 676.

Catalan-speaking community is in France, but just barely. To the end, Braudel sympathized more with peripheries, and peripheralized peoples, than with centers of power and their elite denizens.

To conclude, I would like to briefly speculate about Fernand Braudel's geographical legacy. Just as *The Mediterranean* was being published, academic geography began to wither in the United States, with most major universities shuttering their departments in the following decades. But by the 1980s, history was beginning to fill the gap, with burgeoning spatial and environmental history programs transforming the discipline. The works of Fernand Braudel surely played a role in this extramural revitalization of geographical scholarship. And for that, I give him my undying thanks.

Postscript. In the mid-twentieth century, the discipline of geography turned against the rigid environmental determinism that had previously characterized it, with the pendulum swinging so far in the opposite direction that any consideration of the role environmental features play in human history came to be effectively forbidden. The "cutting-edge" quantitative geographers of the 1950s and 1960s thus began their research projects by hypothesizing an "isotropic plain," featureless in all directions. They correspondingly relegated most of their forebears, including a scholar as brilliant and creative as Ellen Churchill Semple, to the ash heap of intellectual history. As a result, an analytical gap emerged that would eventually be filled by a new cohort of environmental determinists trained in other disciplines, typified by best-selling author Jared Diamond.¹⁸ Unfortunately, these writers have little interest in the history of environmental determinism—and it tells. For an indispensable guide to the intellectual history of foundational geographical ideas, including environmental determinism, see Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*.¹⁹ A

¹⁸ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (W. W. Norton, 1997).

¹⁹ Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (University of California Press, 1976).