

Contingency from Braudel to Blumenberg

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A strange but productive thing happens when you read Fernand Braudel and Hans Blumenberg alongside each other. That it is strange is not surprising: the two have almost nothing to do with each other. Each was a dominant force in their country's postwar historical profession—France for Braudel, West Germany for Blumenberg—and each was shaped by their very different experiences of the Second World War. Braudel was an economic historian, with a bit of geography and demography as well, while Blumenberg was an intellectual historian, with an interest in metaphors and concepts. They spoke to fundamentally different questions, literatures, traditions, and communities. But together they offer a new way of thinking about one of the key organizing concepts in our contemporary historical discipline, which is the concept of contingency.

Braudel almost never used the word “contingency,” except in passing. In his essay “The Situation of History in 1950,” he argued that his approach was “not to deny the individual on the grounds that he is the prey of contingency, but somehow to transcend him, to distinguish him from the forces separate from him, to react against a history arbitrarily reduced to the role of quintessential heroes.”¹ Another programmatic statement can be found on the last page of his *Mediterranean*, where he described even Philip II as an individual “imprisoned within a destiny in which he himself has little hand, fixed in a landscape in which the infinite perspectives of the long term stretch into the distances both behind him and before.”² From statements like these, and indeed from the entire architecture of Braudel's work from the *Mediterranean* to *Civilization and Capitalism*, we think of Braudel as the poet of the structure, perhaps even as a geographical determinist, someone who registers contingency, if at all, only in the ephemeral world of mere events.

Today historians care a great deal about contingency. To take only one suggestive metric, the word or its derivatives have appeared in eighty-six articles in the ninety-six issues of the

¹ Fernand Braudel, “The Situation of History in 1950,” in *On History* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 10.

² Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972–73), 2:1244.

American Historical Review published since the year 2000. “Contingency” is one of the “five C’s of historical thinking” developed by the American Historical Association for teaching teachers about history. In actual usage, the concept has moved from the province of “alternative history” or the formation of testable counterfactuals to a general approach to causality or, more precisely, an alternative to causality. Many historians today use “contingency” to capture some mix of accident and agency, to indicate that some historical process or event was not inevitable, but rather the outcome of a contextually specific set of prior conditions and the volition of some human will. In this way it is usually opposed to “structure,” and the two concepts organize different time horizons and methodological approaches. Contingent histories tend to have more eventful temporalities and more discontinuities than structural ones do, and they tend to avoid the *longue durée*.³

Braudel offers another way to think about contingency, which is to recognize that a claim that something is contingent implies a claim of what it is contingent *upon*. In that way, Braudel is actually a historian full of contingency, but usually with the same set of geographic, demographic, or economic root causes. As William McNeill wrote of Braudel, his “most successful innovation in the writing of history [was] his insistence on the basic importance of geographically variegated everyday custom and almost unconscious routines, which, he claimed, set limits to all deliberate effort, whether in matters economic, political, or military.”⁴ Those limits, the conditions of success and failure, the local patterns of everyday life, are for Braudel all *contingent* upon geography, climate, and demography.

In sharp contrast to Braudel, Hans Blumenberg was greatly concerned about contingency. In his *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, he argued (among many other things) that the basic condition of modernity was the anxiety that comes from the recognition of the contingency of the world.⁵ In his view, ancient philosophy admitted no contingency: The universe could not *not* exist. Christian theology added an element of contingency, but one with explanation: The world exists as it does because of God’s will. God could have chosen another, different world but didn’t—a problem that later gave rise to theodicy. The condition of modernity, then, is the anxiety produced by the absence of God’s will as an explanation for the existence of this specific world and everything in it. For Blumenberg, this modern problem emerged in a specific time and place: between the death of Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464 in Todi, Italy) and the death of Giordano Bruno (d. 1600 in Rome). In other words, it happened in the Mediterranean world during the age of Philip II.⁶

And although it is not his subject, it is very likely that many or most of Braudel’s fleeting historical figures (Philip included) would have agreed with him that they were “imprisoned in a destiny in which [they] had little hand,” but they would have thought it God’s plan, not the inexorable forces of geography. From our own vantage point, we might be able to see Braudel’s work as an attempt to solve the legitimating deficit of modernity by recognizing the dependence of human society on the natural world and on the cumulative forces of history.

When we read Braudel and Blumenberg together in this way, something is revealed about the approach to history commonly practiced today in American academia. In our avoidance of

³ For a useful discussion of this, see William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 101–13.

⁴ William H. McNeill, “Fernand Braudel, Historian,” *Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 1 (2001): 135.

⁵ I am relying on the 1983 English translation, and I am indebted to the discussion of Blumenberg in Ari Edmundson, “A Selective Affinity: Niklas Luhmann’s Systems Theory and the Sense of Contingency, 1958–1973” (PhD diss., University of California–Berkeley, 2019), chap. 2.

⁶ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (MIT Press, 1983), Part 4.

determinism and our embrace of human agency, we have sought to critique the legitimacy of the world around us, to embark on a project of denaturalization. I am wholly in favor of such a project, but I fear that by jettisoning a commitment to the causal implications of contingency and by overlooking the fundamental condition of anxiety produced by the embrace of the contingency of the world without any clear normative foundations, we are accidentally undermining our ability to build a cumulative intellectual community. A