History and Time Spans

All historical work is concerned with breaking down time past, choosing among its chronological realities according to more or less conscious preferences and exclusions. Traditional history, with its concern for the short time span, for the individual and the event, has long accustomed us to the headlong, dramatic, breathless rush of its narrative.

The new economic and social history puts cyclical movement in the forefront of its research and is committed to that time span: it has been captivated by the mirage and the reality of the cyclical rise and fall of prices. So today, side by side with traditional narrative history, there is an account of conjunctures which lays open large sections of the past, ten, twenty, fifty years at a stretch ready for examination.

Far beyond this second account we find a history capable of traversing even greater distances, a history to be measured in centuries this time: the history of the long, even of the very long time span, of the *longue durée*. This is a phrase which I have become accustomed to in order to distinguish the opposite of what François Simiand, not long after Paul Lacombe, christened “l'histoire evenementielle,” the history of events. The phrases matter little; what matters is the fact that our discussion will move between these two poles of time, the instant and the *longue durée*.

Not that these words are absolutely reliable. Take the word *event*: for myself I would limit it, and imprison it within the short time span: an event is explosive, a “*nouvelle sonnante*” (“a matter of moment”) as they said in the Sixteenth century. Its delusive smoke fills the minds of its contemporaries, but it does not last, and its flame can scarcely ever be discerned.

Doubtless philosophers would tell us that to treat the word thus is to empty it of a great part of its meaning. An event can if necessary take on a whole range of meanings and associations. It can occasionally bear witness to very profound movements, and by making play, factitiously or not, with those “causes” and “effects” so dear to the hearts of the historians of yore, it can appropriate a time far greater than its own time span. Infinitely extensible, it becomes wedded, either freely or not, to a whole chain of events, of underlying realities which are then, it seems, impossible to separate. It was by adding things together like this that Benedetto Croce could claim that within any event all history, all of man is embodied, to be rediscovered at will. Though this, of course, is on condition of adding to that fragment whatever it did not at first appear to contain, which in turn entails knowing what is appropriate—or not appropriate—to
add. It is the clever and perilous process which some of Jean-Paul Sartre's recent thinking seems to propose.¹

So, to put things more clearly, let us say that instead of a history of events, we would speak of a short time span, proportionate to individuals, to daily life, to our illusions, to our hasty awareness—above all the time of the chronicle and the journalist. Now, it is worth noting that side by side with great and, so to speak, historic events, the chronicle or the daily paper offers us all the mediocre accidents of ordinary life: a fire, a railway crash, the price of wheat, a crime, a theatrical production, a flood. It is clear, then, that there is a short time span which plays a part in all forms of life, economic, social, literary, institutional, religious, even geographical (a gust of wind, a storm), just as much as political. At first sight, the past seems to consist in just this mass of diverse facts, some of which catch the eye, and some of which are dim and repeat themselves indefinitely. The very facts, that is, which go to make up the daily booty of microsociology or of sociometry (there is microhistory too). But this mass does not make up all of reality, all the depth of history on which scientific thought is free to work. Social science has almost what amounts to a horror of the event. And not without some justification, for the short time span is the most capricious and the most delusive of all.

Thus there is among some of us, as historians, a lively distrust of traditional history, the history of events—a label which tends to become confused, rather inexact, with political history. Political history is not necessarily bound to events, nor is it forced to be. Yet except for the factitious panoramas almost without substance in time which break up its narrative,² except for the overviews inserted for the sake of variety, on the whole the history of the past hundred years, almost always political history centered on the drama of "great events," has worked on and in the short time span. Perhaps that was the price which had to be paid for the progress made during this same period in the scientific mastery of particular tools and rigorous methods. The momentous discovery of the document led historians to believe that documentary authenticity was the repository of the whole truth. “All we need to do,” Louis Halphen wrote only yesterday,³ “is allow ourselves to be borne along by the documents, one after another, just as they offer themselves to us, in order to see the chain of facts and events reconstitute themselves almost automatically before our eyes.” Toward the end of the nineteenth century, this ideal of history “in the raw,” led to a new style of chronicle, which in its desire for exactitude followed the history of events step by step as it emerged from ambassadorial letters or parliamentary debates. The historians of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had been attentive to the perspectives of the longue durée in a way in which, afterwards, a few great spirits—Michelet, Ranke, Jacob Burckhardt, Fustel were able to recapture. If one accepts that this going beyond the short span has been the most precious, because the most rare, of historiographical achievements during the past hundred years, then one understands the preeminent role of the history of institutions, of religions, of civilizations, and (thanks to archeology with its need for vast chronological expanses) the ground-breaking role of the studies devoted to classical antiquities. It was only yesterday that they proved the saviors of our profession.

The recent break with the traditional forms of nineteenth-century history has not meant a complete break with the short time span. It has worked, as we know, in favor of economic and social history, and against the interests of political history. This has entailed upheavals and an undeniable renewal, and also, inevitably, changes in method, the shifting of centers of interest with the advent of a quantitative history that has certainly not exhausted all it has to offer.
But above all, there has been an alteration in traditional historical time. A day, a year once seemed useful gauges. Time, after all, was made up of an accumulation of days. But a price curve, a demographic progression, the movement of wages, the variations in interest rates, the study (as yet more dreamed of than achieved) of productivity, a rigorous analysis of money supply all demand much wider terms of reference.

A new kind of historical narrative has appeared, that of the conjuncture, of the cycle, and even of the "intercycle," covering a decade, a quarter of a century and, at the outside, the half-century of Kondratiev's classic cycle. For instance, if we disregard any brief and superficial fluctuations, prices in Europe went up between 1791 and 1817, and went down between 1817 and 1852. This unhurried double movement of increase and decrease represents an entire intercycle measured by the time of Europe, and more or less by that of the whole world. Of course these chronological periods have no absolute value. Francois Perroux would offer us other, perhaps more valid, dividing lines, measured with other barometers, those of economic growth, income, or the gross national product. But what do all these current debates matter!
What is quite clear is that the historian can make use of a new notion of time, a time raised to the level of explication, and that history can attempt to explain itself by dividing itself at new points of reference in response to these curves and to the very way they breathe. […]

Over and above cycles and intercycles, there is what the economists without always having studied it call the secular tendency. But so far only a few economists have proved interested in it, and their deliberations on structural crises, based only on the recent past, as far back as 1929, or 1870 at the very most, not having had to withstand the test of historical verification, are more in the nature of sketches and hypotheses. They offer nonetheless a useful introduction to the history of the longue durée. They provide a first key.

The second and far more useful key consists in the word structure. For good or ill, this word dominates the problems of the longue durée. By structure, observers of social questions mean an organization, a coherent and fairly fixed series of relationships between realities and social masses. For us historians, a structure is of course a construct, an architecture, but over and above that it is a reality which time uses and abuses over long periods. Some structures, because of their long life, become stable elements for an infinite number of generations: they get in the way of history, hinder its flow, and in hindering it shape it. Others wear themselves out more quickly. But all of them provide both support and hindrance. As hindrances they stand as limits ("envelopes," in the mathematical sense) beyond which man and his experiences cannot go. Just think of the difficulties of breaking out of certain geographical frameworks, certain biological realities, certain limits of productivity, even particular spiritual constraints: mental frameworks too can form prisons of the longue durée.

The example which comes most readily to mind is once again that of the geographical constraint. For centuries, man has been a prisoner of climate, of vegetation, of the animal population, of a particular agriculture, of a whole slowly established balance from which he cannot escape without the risk of everything's being upset. Look at the position held by the movement of flocks in the lives of mountain people, the permanence of certain sectors of maritime life, rooted in the favorable conditions wrought by particular coastal configurations, look at the way the sites of cities endure, the persistence of routes and trade, and all the amazing fixity of the geographical setting of civilizations.

But let us base our argument on an example, and one which can be swiftly analyzed. Close at hand, within the European sphere, there is an economic system which can be set down in a few lines: it preserved its position pretty well intact from the fourteenth to the eighteenth
century or, to be quite sure of our ground, until about 1750. For whole centuries, economic activity was dependent on demographically fragile populations, as was demonstrated by the great decline in population from 1350 to 1450, and of course from 1630 to 1730. For whole centuries, all movement was dominated by the primacy of water and ships, any inland location being an obstacle and a source of inferiority. The great European points of growth, except for a few exceptions which go only to prove the rule (such as the fairs in Champagne which were already on the decline at the beginning of the period, and the Leipzig fairs in the eighteenth century), were situated along the coastal fringes. As for other characteristics of this system, one might cite the primacy of merchants; the prominent role of precious metals, gold, silver, even copper, whose endless vicissitudes would only be damped down, if then, by the decisive development of credit at the end of the sixteenth century; the repeated sharp difficulties caused by seasonal agricultural crises; let us say the fragility of the very basis of economic life; and finally the at first sight utterly disproportionate role accorded to one or two external trade routes: the trade with the Levant from the twelfth to the sixteenth century and the colonial trade in the eighteenth century.

These are what I would define, or rather suggest in my turn following many others, as being the major characteristics of mercantile capitalism in Western Europe, a stage which lasted over the longue durée. Despite all the obvious changes which run through them, these four or five centuries of economic life had a certain coherence, right up to the upheavals of the eighteenth century and the industrial revolution from which we have yet to emerge. These shared characteristics persisted despite the fact that all around them, amid other continuities, a thousand reversals and ruptures totally altered the face of the world.

Among the different kinds of historical time, the longue durée often seems a troublesome character, full of complications, and all too frequently lacking in any sort of organization. To give it a place in the heart of our profession would entail more than a routine expansion of our studies and our curiosities. Nor would it be a question of making a simple choice in its favor. For the historian, accepting the longue durée entails a readiness to change his style, his attitudes, a whole reversal in his thinking, a whole new way of conceiving of social affairs. It means becoming used to a slower tempo, which sometimes almost borders on the motionless. At that stage, though not at any other—this is a point to which I will return—it is proper to free oneself from the demanding time scheme of history, to get out of it and return later with a fresh view, burdened with other anxieties and other questions. In any case, it is in relation to these expanses of slow-moving history that the whole of history is to be rethought, as if on the basis of an infrastructure. All the stages, all the thousands of stages, all the thousand explosions of historical time can be understood on the basis of these depths, this semi-stillness. Everything gravitates around it. […]

In the same way I would question whether any study of a town, no matter which, could be the object of a sociological inquiry in the way that Auxerre was, or Vienne in the Dauphine, without being set in its historical context. Any town, as an extended social entity with all its crises, dislocations, breakdowns, and necessary calculations, must be seen in relation to the whole complex of districts surrounding it, as well as in relation to those archipelagos of neighboring towns which Richard Häpke, the historian, was one of the first to discuss. Similarly, it must also be considered in relation to the movement, more or less distant in time, sometimes extremely distant, which directs this whole complex. It cannot be of no interest, it must rather surely be crucial to note down particular urban/rural exchanges, particular industrial or
mercantile competition, to know whether you are dealing with a movement in the full flush of its youth, or at the end of its run, with the beginnings of a resurgence or a monotonous repetition.

One last remark: Lucien Febvre, during the last ten years of his life, is said to have repeated: "History, science of the past, science of the present." Is not history, the dialectic of time spans, in its own way an explanation of society in all its reality? And thus of contemporary society? And here its role would be to caution us against the event: do not think only of the short time span, do not believe that only the actors which make the most noise are the most authentic—there are other, quieter ones too. As if anybody did not know that already!

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, “Questions de méthode,” Les Temps Modernes nos. 139 and 140 (1957).
4 See his Théorie générale du progrès économique, Cahiers pe l'I.S.E.A., 1957.
6 As far as France is concerned. In Spain, the demographic decline was visible from the end of the sixteenth century.