

A History of Civilizations

Fernand Braudel

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This book written in the early sixties appears to be a contribution of the well-known French historian Braudel to the curriculum of French high-school students, translated and somewhat edited into English.

Braudel starts out with a reflection on the role of history in elementary education, pointing out that young pupils should be treated to history as a narrative, while more advanced students should be spared the many trivial details that constitutes history as chronology (no sooner learned than forgotten) and instead be presented the grand picture. History from the perspective of 'le duree longue'.

Braudel choses to start his surveys of civilizations with that of the Muslim world. He does so in a masterly way, managing to combine the great scope with the telling detail. The reader is indeed given a sense of the long march of centuries, as well as the even deeper past that lies behind the Muslim civilization. The geographical scope of the Muslim world is made palpable, especially the fact that the Muslim universe is dominated by the Sea, but not the sea of water but of sandy deserts, making it into an archipelago. He computes the load-carrying capacity of a camel, and by extension that of a caravan, and compares it favourably to that of a freight-ship. He points out the presence of permanent over-night structures along the caravan routes still to be seen to day.

The Muslim faith constitutes a very close parallel to the Jewish and Christian, with both the Koran and the Bible sharing many stories and personalities, in addition to the same physical space. The initial Muslim expansion was made possible by the ferocity of its Arabic nomadic tribes (the Bedouins) and that its religious tolerance owes to the economical fact that its adherents were exempt from tax. (Braudel relates memorably that any infidel volunteering to convert would rather be met by a drawn sword than open arms) But Muslim civilization was built on slaves, just like the Classical one of the Greeks and the Romans. Initially the Christian and the Muslim civilization were on more or less equal terms, with the latter having somewhat of an edge. The western expansion of the Muslims did come to a halt in the 8th century and shortly thereafter it lost its burgeoing control over the Mediterreanean and thus never developed into a major naval power, but instead returned to the desert. The Christian world and the Muslim did remain bitter rivals, as seen by the Crusades and later on the expansion of the Muslims into the Balkans threatening Hungary and Vienna. The two civilizations must have been fascinated by each other, and the Muslim universe constituted a very exotic alternative to the Western.

The Muslims, who early on carried the scientific tradtions of the Greeks, and could boast of its own scientists and philosopher, never had a Scientific revolution, nor an Industrial one, and consequently was by the end of the 19th century overtaken. What eventually happened in the early 20th century was a foregone conclusion.

The last section on the Muslim world is a let-down. Here Braudel discusses the problems that the Muslim world faces in order to modernize, and his discussion reads more

like a dated policy document from the 60's than a philosophical reflection of a historian. This being written in the 60's it makes no references to the revival of fundamental Islam that has charged the uneasy relationship with the 'other side' in ways that were not contemplated forty years ago.

Unfortunately Braudel does not manage to create the same magic in his continued reviews of civilizations. When he discusses the Chinese and the developing Japanese, his presentation is sober and factual, but no longer inspired. One immediate explanation is that the far Eastern civilizations never really touched upon our own, but always remained peripheral; while the Muslim shared the same roots as our own and became in fact an alternate run. It is a well-known observation that closeness and relatedness provokes much more bitter enmity than the strange and distant does. Christian and Muslim civilizations are dominated by monotheism, while the Far eastern attitude towards religion is far more tolerant, polytheistic not to say animistic.

When Braudel returns to European civilization after the detour via Muslim and Chinese he hopes that this unconventional sequence will drive home the fact that Western Civilization is just one of many. His main point is that Western Civilization is the continuation of the Greeco-Roman mediated by the Christian Church, and that the heartland of Europe coincides with that which was directly impinged upon by the Roman empire.

Christianity is certainly what gives European a common historical identity, and the geographical growth of Europe coincided with its spread, which became completed by the religious subjugation of the Vikings in the 10th and 11th centuries.

Braudel focuses on just a few important aspects of European civilization. One is the reformation, which meant that religion became a concern of the individual rather than the Church, leading to a split into Catholicism and the various Protestant sects, roughly along the same frontiers that divided the original Romans from the Barbarians. He manages to discuss this without even once mentioning the Thirty Years War that led to the *staus-quo* that still persists.

The other great feature of European civilization is the emergence of Natural Science, whose strength lies in its cultural independence. (There is just one Natural Science in the world.) He singles out the oft forgotten Nicholas Oresme, who already in medieval times anticipated Galileo and Newton, but who had no influence (beyond the traces left to French intellectuals to study) on the scientific development as the times were not ripe. In his discussion on Newton and others the author displays erudition but no deeper understanding.

Now the Scientific revolution would never had had the impact it has had, had it not been for the Industrial revolution. Science was initially a disinterested pursuit fuelled by intellectual curiosity, giving rise to the Enlightenment. With the industrial revolution science and industry became wedded in ways that still persist today and which has led to the power of Western Civilization over the others. The industrial revolution started in England in the context of the textile industry. Its driving force was the steam-engine that supplemented and eventually displaced human power by that of the machine. Its development in the rest of Europe was spread out over a period of a century, the Scandinavian countries being the last to be touched. The Swedish variety was based on the natural resources of timber and iron-ore. For better and for worse the combined Industrial and Scientific revolution has

changed the world irrevocably.

Concomitant with the two latter revolutions was the Social, with intellectual roots in the Enlightenment, and with its first stirring in the French revolution, to which Braudel devotes a lot of attention, proud of the fact that the notion of 'Revolution' in large part of the worlds, has been synonymous with that of the French. The Socialist idea gained momentum during the 19th century, and naturally Braudel singles out Marx, and he seems to think that Socialism would have carried the day, had not the First World War intervened.

Braudels account of the civilizations of South and North America is unashamedly eurocentric. There is almost no mention of pre-Columbian civilizations (unlike his brief treatment of Black Africa) instead his focus is on European colonialization, a brief period indeed that does not afford the exalted point of the very long view. Braudel takes up the tragic case of the Black Slave Trade, which depleted human resources in Africa and led to a Black underclass. (He is careful to point out that in South America this division is far more gradual than in the North.) He does not hide his moral outrage, but points out that slavery was endemic to Black Africa, and that many slaves were sold to the Arabs, and for some reason no Black community ever arose in Muslim lands (indicating that treatment was even harsher?).

His brief survey of the United States hinges on the contrast between the mindset of the Frontier, the expansion virginal land that was a gift to Western settlers, and the settled plantations in the South that worked on Classical Roman models, clashing in the Civil War leading to the dominance of Industrial development and exploitation.

In his final survey of the Russian Civilization he touches upon the later ramifications set by the division of the Roman Empire and the subsequent development of the Eastern Orthodox Church, a point of view which in later years have gained much currency. Braudels real interest lies in the Russian Revolution. His treatment is one of politeness. Stalinistic death-camps are never mentioned, only that the problems facing Stalin of rapidly industrializing a backward country were immense to the point of being heroic. I guess such an attitude, especially among French intellectuals, was very common in the 60's. In retrospect such an attitude is interesting and revealing, and also the fact that in the 60's the Soviet Union was widely seen, almost as much by the Right as the Left, as a serious economic rival to the States.

A very enervating feature of the up-to-date reviews of Braudel is the touch-up they have suffered from the translator. Braudel died in 1985 and was hence not a privy to the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, and intermittent references to this event in account written thirty years earlier, only sows irritation and confusion in the readers mind.

December 14, 2003 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se