

constructive power to make the British polity again an effective mechanism of social choice." As always with Beer, there is an implicit comparison with America, where offshoots of that radical tradition have reigned virtually unopposed. The comparison would seem to offer both encouragement and caution. The act of comparison, however, is a reaffirmation of our common destiny. [WV]

THE STRUCTURE OF EVERYDAY LIFE: THE LIMITS OF THE POSSIBLE

by Fernand Braudel

(Harper & Row; 623 pp.; \$30.00)

Brian Thomàs

It is possible to be skeptical at first about the great French historian Fernand Braudel. A sarcastic description of his absorption in details could make him sound like a throwback to the days when historians thought they could blithely dispense with theorizing and concentrate on just the facts. The reservations vanish, though, once it is plain just what the basic data are for Braudel.

Like the rest of the *Annales* school, of which he is the acknowledged dean, Braudel cares little for the grandiose events so beloved of conventional historians: the striking battles, the epigram-spouting diplomats, the towering leaders. Beneath this stratum lies the crucial category, the barely noticed "dust of history"—everyday life, the quite humble and endlessly repetitive customs that form linked chains and endure for millennia. More interested in how forks appeared than in the signing of a treaty, Braudel is attempting to see the quotidian whole—"from food to furniture, from techniques to towns"—and to define material life.

The present volume has a complicated genesis. It is a thoroughly rewritten version of a book translated in 1973 as *Capitalism and Material Life: 1400-1800*. The earlier work has grown into a trilogy called *Civilization and Capitalism: 15th-18th Century* that includes *The Wheels of Commerce* (which "compares the market economy and the higher activity of capitalism") as well as the *Perspective of World* ("a chronological study of the forms and successive preponderant tendencies of the international economy"). Neither of these works has appeared in English;

presumably translations are under way.

As in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Braudel's method is pointillistic. He tosses up a succession of observations and glimpses he has garnered from bills of lading, stray journals—practically anything he has noticed in the course of his exhaustive reading of primary sources—and then he generalizes, fully admitting the lack of hard warrant for some of his claims. This provides a fruitful way of scrutinizing capitalism's prehistory, its foundations, its teeming content.

Economists tend to view their turf as a tidy, well fenced-in field. Braudel knows better. Taking demography and geography as his point of departure, he dwells on bread, other foods, drink, then houses, clothes, and fashion; and along the way he garlands the statistics with arresting minutiae, such as what the consumption of white bread tells us about the real wealth of a region. He also pokes along through the advance of technology, transport, and money, concluding with a discussion of towns and cities.

Nor does he confine himself to Europe. Cases gathered from China and South America are woven in, serving as contrasts to the waxing commercial power of Europe. His phrase for this method is "retrospective traveling," and the temptation for a reviewer is to fall in step beside him, listing the nuggets he presents so readably: for instance, the evidence for the lack of privacy and comfort even among the wealthy until quite recently, or surmises about the adoption of table manners gleaned from renditions at different times of the Last Supper.

Braudel emphasizes the grinding poverty of everyday existence and how all classes were meshed in an interdependence so inflexible and unforgiving that a small change in, say, the frequency of crop rotation could wreck a kingdom. Moreover, as the market economy expanded, so did the ability of an alteration of daily habits to reverberate: Thus, the transformation of sugar from a luxury into a necessity added a push to imperial expansion. All this took place in an atmosphere of monetary chaos, until more reliable coinage "created a unity of the world," albeit "a unity of injustice."

The dust of history is full of quirky, novelistic interest, but I myself found Braudel's comments on the workings of

higher capitalism more compelling. The chapter on "Money" is the best in the book; just sample his discussion of exactly what happened when monetary systems broke down and were eclipsed by barter. Braudel is particularly informative on the instruments of credit that sprang into use when the inconvenience of metallic coinage was hindering the velocity of money circulation; there is also a shrewd application of a *bon mot* by Joseph Schumpeter to the effect that metallic coinage is in the end no less a means of credit than paper specie or promissory notes—each is really a tissue of promises and deferred reality. Having pioneered the tools for painstakingly reconstructing statistics from old records, Braudel then deftly employs them in accounting for the economies of early capitalism. The workings of the market exert an allure that outdoes daily life, at least for me, which is why I'm looking forward to the subsequent volumes. From the author's description, these will explore the issues raised in the "Money" chapter more fully.

One of Braudel's persisting themes is how, after people had been bound for centuries by unyielding regularities that went largely unnoticed, the emergence of capitalism gave some an unheard of degree of choice. "Capitalism alone had comparative freedom of movement," says Braudel. That liberty was limited to a tiny elite, of course, and even they did not have much leeway. The "possible" alluded to in the subtitle of this book was very limited indeed. Braudel is therefore pessimistic about the possibilities for a more egalitarian system, either then or now.

The world was hamstrung between state and citizen; towns fattened upon the surrounding countryside; lords dominated their serfs; each tugged and was tugged in a skein whose strands Braudel does much to unwind. He notes that this "is to return to the language used by Marx and to walk some of the way with him, even if one rejects his precise words or the rigorous process by which he saw every society moving from one stage to the next."

My only quibble with this great book is that the otherwise excellent illustrations are not well integrated with the text. We see plenty of photos of old coins, for example, yet the captions are too terse to illuminate the words that surround them. This is a surprising flaw in a work whose supreme strength lies

in exploring the most farflung connections and showing us how they hook up. **WV**

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