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Fernand Braudel. Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century. v. 2 The Wheels of Commerce

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BOOK REVIEWS


Fernand Braudel's *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th century*, is a majestic work completed 23 years ago but first published in English in 1982. *The Wheels of Commerce (Les Jeux de l' Echange)* is the second volume in the series and is devoted exclusively to commerce. This text must be seen as one of a series of works written by Braudel and a fairly long line of contemporary scholars on the rise of the West and the evolution of capitalism. Others include E. Jones, *The European Miracle* (1981); J.M Blaut's *1492* (1992); A.G Frank's *Re-Orient* (1999) and his earlier work *World Accumulation* (1978) and Samir Amin's *Eurocentrism* (1988). Add to these David Landes' *Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998); Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1973) and Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), the oldest of them all - although Braudel's approximately 2000 footnotes do not include a single reference to Williams--nor Rodney, for that matter. Languages utilized by Braudel in the course of research include French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Italian and English.

So is this text just another Eurocentric tome, an exercise in self-congratulation? What are some of its stylistic and structural tendencies, its conceptual assumptions, methodological orientations and epistemological shifts, if any? Are the facts "like fish on the fishmonger's slab" in Braudel's narrative? Is he an inductive empiricist or a visionary? Does he have an overarching logically consistent scheme and framework, or not? Does he produce generalizations or consume them? What is, in Braudel's work, the role of the individual in the socio-historical process? What do the core assumptions of this work imply about the West and the Rest? What is the role of the historian in Braudel's view? As Wallerstein, his disciple and Director of the Fernand Braudel Center at Binghamton retorts, is he "a preacher to empty pews"--in his views about the unity of the disciplines? Indeed, does he practice what he preaches? A methodological monist or a pragmatist? Is he "too big" or "too little," an issue commented on by Frank recently?

A thoughtful researcher once identified three Popperians. Which of the Braudels shows up in this tome, granted that Popper and Braudel have so much in common. Larger than life figures, they both towered over the 20th century, one of German heritage, the other French. It is impor-
tant to note as well that Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations* was a major contribution to epistemological studies, areas with which Braudel preoccupied himself throughout his career. Scholars should undoubtedly reflect on matters such as these in the context of Braudelian Studies. In the discussion which follows, however, we briefly comment on a few of the issues mentioned with a focus on the structure, style and subject matter of the text at hand.

There are five major segments in the *Wheels of Commerce*. The discussion includes a focus on (a) the instruments of exchange (b) markets and the economy (c) production (d) domestic capitalism and (e) society. In each of these segments we have intensive analyses. Markets, storehouses, shops, depots, granaries and stock markets; peddlers, wholesalers and bankers, bills of exchange; fixed and circulating capital, land, money and plantations; and individual firms and joint stock companies are some of the multiple units of analysis. Braudel's work also encompasses larger themes and conceptual issues such as the rise of trading empires and economic policies such as mercantilism, within the five organizational units. Pithy, concise sentence units are not the norm. At its worst, mixed metaphors are juxtaposed with tautological phrases and undigested mistranslations. At its best, elegance and erudition flow from his pen. There is a considerable attention to minute detail—for Europe—whilst arbitrarily chosen, random examples and case studies prevail for elsewhere.

Braudel provides an illuminating discussion of the emergence of various mercantile groups within Europe, their rivalries, colonies and networking systems. Portuguese merchants flocked to Spanish America. Armenian merchants swarmed into Portugal, Spain, Moscow and Amsterdam, often unwelcome and viewed as a threat to local merchants in Marseilles and elsewhere. Networks of Jewish merchants extended around the world, argues Braudel. They were even more successful than the Armenians and far surpassed the Italians "perpetuating a tradition stretching over many centuries." With the expulsion from Spain in 1492, and from Portugal a few years later, Sephardic Jews headed in the direction of the Atlantic seaboard and elsewhere, becoming exceedingly rich:

Undoubtedly too they were among the architects of the first colonial fortunes of America in particular with the spread of sugar cane and the Brazilian and Caribbean sugar trade.

Braudel is generally dismissive of Africa, whilst random conjecture
and inferences emerge for Japan, China and India. Obscurities are generalized into the norm and abnormalities elevated to universality. Disembodied and disconnected communities are sometimes arbitrarily plucked from the air. His non-European examples are sometimes misleading. His discussion of pre-industry is a fitting example of his scanty use of sources for regions outside of Europe—and his inability or unwillingness to free himself from prejudices and stereotypes. Armed with two non-representative references, Braudel pontificates on Africa in a rather unsavory way and in absolutist terms, throwing caution to the wind and contradicting much of what we know about the emergence of sustainable and complex metallurgical traditions in the continent. In his words, "Black Africa, with its blacksmiths (who had much in common with witchdoctors) its primitive weavers and potters fitted entirely into Category A." Note that the latter category implies tiny workshops with no more than two apprentices and an absence of division of labor. The works of several scholars on metallurgy and other industries in pre-colonial Africa have proven these pontifications wrong. High levels of specialization emerged in various parts of the continent before the 15th century not only in metallurgy but also in textile and food processing. In a similar vein, in his comments on India and China, Braudel arrogantly asserts that the workforce "did not produce the high quality of tools with which we are familiar in European history," a debatable viewpoint in the light of the works of Needham, Frank and others.

Through his Eurocentric lens Braudel proceeds to discuss the variables associated with the rise of capitalism, which for him includes a mix of values in favor of dynastic continuity and wealth accumulation; profitable marriages which no doubt assisted in the consolidation of property; social divisions alongside social mobility, and what he considers the liberating action of long distance trade: "Long distance trading was not everything but it was the only doorway to a superior profit level." What was liberating for Europe was no doubt liberating for the whole world, implies Braudel. The genocidal campaigns, which brought about the destruction of populations, exploitative structures, mechanisms of impoverishment and processes of dehumanization, are excluded from the narrative. In fact Braudel pontificates as follows:

The obvious first condition was a vigorous and expanding market economy. A whole range of factors, geographical, demographic, agricultural, industrial and commercial, contributed to this. It is evident that such development operated world-wide: the population was
For the millions who lost their lives in the process of capitalist expansion in Native America and elsewhere Braudel sheds not a single tear. There is a major convergence between Eric Williams and Fernand Braudel in the acknowledgement of the centrality of colonial commercial activity for the emergence of capitalism. Braudel’s triumphalism is, however, in deep contrast to the moral outrage of Williams. Williams successfully identifies the prehistory of Barclays Bank and the slave trading credentials of David and Alexander Barclay. Braudel is on the verge of uncovering the primary source of capital of the Bank of France:

Even more fascinating to my mind would be the prehistory of the Banque de France of the families who founded it who all or almost all seem to have had connections with the silver of Spanish America.

Braudel’s discussion of the significance of the Jamaican plantation converges with that of Eric Williams:

In fact the balance of trade for Jamaica even calculated in colonial pounds works out at a slight advantage for the island (1,336,000 to 1,335,000 pounds sterling) but at least half of the total for imports and exports made its way invisibly back to England (in freight charges, insurance, commissions, interest on debts and transfers of money to absentee landlords). All in all the net benefits for England in the year 1773 was 1,500,000 pounds sterling. In London as in Bordeaux the proceeds of colonial trade were transformed into trading houses, banks and state bonds. They made the fortunes of certain powerful families whose most active representatives were to be found in the House of Lords....

The Jamaican plantation was a "capitalist creation par excellence," a "wealth creating machine," "remote controlled" from Seville, Cadiz, Bordeaux, Nantes, Rouen, Amsterdam, Bristol and Liverpool. It was assailed by pillage and piracy and was similar to other plantations in the regions such as those of Saint Domingue. Planters often lost money while middlemen thrived and siphoned the money to the metropolis. For Braudel the narrative is about wealth creation but the exploitation of Africans, the violation of their human rights, and their justifiable quest for liberation merit very little discussion. Braudel glibly cites, in a fashion, the Maroon Wars of 1730 to 1739 and the "difficulties and dangers of runaway slaves." No enlightened humanism or moralistic outrage
emerges from his discourse.

Braudel is too expansive, too impressive, too exhausting and too exhaustive to be written off with a stroke of the pen. His masterpiece is no doubt a labor of love and a product of passion, no less than an extensive intellectual enterprise which has in no small measure contributed to our understanding of the accumulation of wealth and resources and the rise of Europe to hegemonic status between the 15th and the 18th centuries. The historian, according to Braudel, must give both micro details and focus on total society. The thousands of humble points of intersection must be brought to the fore, discussed and explained in the context of a comparative method, he posits, but he fails to do this with respect to the regions outside of Europe in his tedious and painstaking analysis. Dialectical interconnectedness between Europe and the rest of the plundered world is hinted indirectly by Braudel but not adequately or systematically examined. Europe's debt to Africa and the Caribbean remains only partly recognized. Detailed minutiae are grafted on to an essentially unilinear Eurocentric evolutionary model. European capitalism was the product of "the patient accumulation of wealth," argues Braudel, and by editorial fiat, swashbuckling piracy and blood curdling episodes of violence, tyranny, despotism and treachery are erased from the annals of global history. European hegemony and the rise of capitalism are portrayed as an inexorable force presumably destined by the gods:

Capitalism could only emerge from a certain kind of society, one which had created a favorable environment from far back in time without being aware in the slightest of the process thus being set in train or of the processes for which it was preparing the way in future centuries.  

But Big History this is, if one contemplates the gargantuan scope of the enterprise, and the Meta theories and Mega philosophies confronting any scholar who contemplates the rise of capitalism, and Europe's rise to fame and fortune. The boldness of the enterprise must however correlate with a spirit of openness, humility and inter-connectedness with Africa, Asia and the Americas, from which Europe benefited so bountifully.

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References


2. Braudel, Civilization p.147
3. Braudel p.159
5. ---Historical Development of Science and Technology in Nigeria, Edwin Mellen. 1992
7. See Gunder Frank, ReOrient, Global Economy in the Asian Age, University of California Press, 1998. See also Thomas Patterson, Inventing Western Civilization, Monthly Review Press, 1997; Zia Sardar et al., Barbaric Others, Pluto, 1993. Incidentally the phrase "parochial Eurocentrism" was borrowed from Frank. I initially thought of "xenophobic eurocentrism" but eventually considered that too exaggerated a description for Braudel's writings.

6. P. 600
7. Eric Williams, Capitalism and Slavery. University of South Carolina, 1944.
8. Braudel p.150
9. P. 279
10. P. 273
11. P. 279
12. P. 599
13. P. 600