

'Longue Durée', 'Conjoncture', 'Event': Notion of Plural Time in History

The historian can never get away from the question of time in history. How does the present connect to the past and to the future is a conundrum that intrigues the historian. Churchill once said that the 'longer you look back, the further you can look forward'. The method of using a longer period to understand the long term processes of evolution in societies was not unknown as in the nineteenth century historians of property law, authors of medical treatises on chronic disease, sociologists studying unemployment or economists tracing long-term movements were familiar with the notion of what Braudel would later conceptualise as 'longue durée'. In *Histoire et Sciences Sociale: La Longue Durée*, Braudel sought to emphasize the importance of 'plural temporalities and the *longue durée* as methodological ground for a unified historical social science'. He applied it in his *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* by using three time frames- the very long term ('The Role of the Environment), the long term ('Collective Destinies and General Trends') and the short-term ('Events, Politics, People'). His approach was both experimental and empirically oriented. He conceived *longue durée* as a 'real historical structure formed at the interface of human activity with geography and nature'. The different temporal conceptions may provide relational keys to interpretation and analysis. Braudel's ideas have found both followers and critics.

A T Mahan's book *Influence of Sea Power in History (1660-1783)* was not only an influential book, but provided both the rationale and the blue-print for expansion of naval power among the European powers in the late 19th century. Wallerstein's history of world system would also fall within this category of a long-term view. Ernest Labrousse's classic on the movement of prices and wages in France under the *Ancien Régime* is an appropriate example. He used reconstruction of statistical data on economy and society to understand the origins of the French Revolution by establishing causal relations between the price movements and their effects on various social groups. Using these he finds a specific 'conjoncture of long-term and intermediate economic cycles together with short-term agricultural cycles'. Hobsbawm also sometimes took a long view of historical evolution. Of course, this is merely an illustrative list.

Historians like Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi and others practised what came to be known as microhistory. They did not represent a system, but rather constituted a community. It came as a reaction/response to the *longue durée* tradition and they pursued what some have called 'eclectic' historical practices. They reduced the scale and looked at a village community, a family, an individual, or a particular event. Carlo Cipolla explored the story of the village Monte Lupo in Tuscany during the plague epidemic of 1630-31 and found that what happened during the epidemic in 'the microcosm of Monte Lupo threw unexpected light on the relationship of faith and reason'. Levi argued that the approaches adopted by these historians exercised freedom 'beyond, though not outside, the constraints of the normative system'. Hobsbawm, however, did consider microhistory as a particularly clear expression of the cultural turn. Ginzburg, on the other hand, wanted *The Cheese and the Worm*, for example, to be explicitly understood in terms of a 'concept of class structure' in the tradition of Marx and Gramsci. The political undertones of Ginzburg's work were understood by his reviewers. As has

been said by Gribaudi(Levi's friend) in the 1970s microhistory was less of an academic project and more of a political intervention in the debates of the Marxist Left.

When one looks contemporaneously at a huge phenomenon like the pandemic of 2020, both these approaches may provide useful tools to explore the complex, multi-layered phenomenon, with its local and global ramifications.