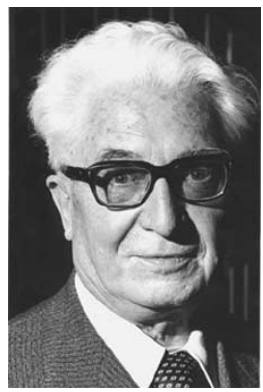
Braudel's Prison Notebooks

Howard Caygill

History Workshop Journal, Issue 57, Spring 2004, pp. 151-160 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press

FEATURE: BRAUDEL AND HISTORICAL TIME*



Courtesy of the Fernand Braudel Center, Binghamton University.

Fernand Braudel at the Inaugural Conference of the Fernand Braudel Center, State University of New York, Binghamton, May 1977.

Braudel's Prison Notebooks
by Howard Caygill

One of the unanticipated outcomes of the Geneva Conventions[1] governing the treatment of prisoners of war was the emergence of an intellectual culture within the prisoner-of-war camps of the First and Second World Wars. The development of mass warfare in the twentieth century ensured that the prison population would include soldiers who in civilian life were writers, artists, musicians, philosophers and historians. Under the conditions of long-term confinement, these individuals played an important role in creating informal educational and cultural institutions within the camps for an audience that included many prisoners who, in civilian life, would have been denied the opportunity and access to such institutions. Writers and artists in the camps responded to the needs of this audience, while also pursuing their own work within the limits established by the Geneva Conventions. This work was shaped not only by the demands of communicating with a broad, non-specialist audience of fellow inmates, but

*The two papers which follow were given at the Goldsmiths College History Seminar roundtable on History and Time, in 2003.

also by the anomalous experience of time that accompanied years of detention. Time for the detainees was a burden, not only because of the dreary routines of the prison regime but also because of the sense of being detached from crucial historical events and helpless to intervene in them. The experience of the time of confinement was to emerge in the post-war questioning not only of the experience of temporality itself, but also of historical time and agency. Indeed, some of the work produced under these conditions was destined to have an enormous impact on the development of post-war culture in the fields of music, philosophy and, not least, history.

Many innovative and influential works of the post-war period emerged from the prison-camp experience.[2] Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* was written and performed before an attentive audience of 5,000 prisoners in the POW camp Stalag VIII-A at Gorlitz in 1941. Unconventionally-scored for the instruments of the musicians available among the inmates – violin, cello, clarinet and piano – Messiaen's quartet departed from string-quartet conventions in other even more significant ways. Its metrical complexity – further developed in Messiaen's post-war work – unfolds a musical meditation on an anomalous experience of time: one that is discontinuous, stretched, compressed and reversed. The impact of Messiaen's quartet on post-war music was paralleled in philosophy by work produced in the camps also dedicated to rethinking the experience of time. Emmanuel Levinas's *Existence and Existents* (1947) was an anti-Hegelian meditation on time, ethics and political horror that determined and indeed continues to determine the climate of post-war continental philosophy. It was, the preface informs its readers, largely written in prisoner-of-war camp.[3] His putting into question of linear temporality and his development of an account of ethical agency that emphasizes passivity may be traced back to his experience as a POW. Paul Ricoeur, another POW camp inmate, describes in his 1995 interviews with François Azouvi and Marc de Launey a highly-organized and sophisticated intellectual life of confinement; indeed, it was the period during which he produced the translation of Husserl's *Ideas* vol. I (1913) that ratified the introduction of Husserl and phenomenology into French philosophy.[4] The experience of confinement so sensitively described in Ricoeur's *Conviction and Commitment* perhaps informs the subtle appreciation of Braudel's sense of historical time in *Time and Narrative* (three volumes 1983–5), his own most important philosophical work.

The impact of the prisoner-of-war camp experience on the writing of history was at least as profound as in other areas of culture. There were strong pressures on historians in the camps to contribute their historical knowledge towards making sense of the events that led and were leading to the seemingly-inevitable victory of National Socialism. Such demands contributed to a renewed sensitivity to the 'history of the present' along with the development of an innovative approach to issues of historical agency, temporality and a renewed interest in the philosophy of history – or the reflection upon the significance or meaning of history. Henri

Pirenne's *History of Europe*, presented originally as lectures in a First World War POW camp, already proposed a profound and synoptic account of the history of the continent that influenced post-war historiography, as did Marc Bloch's reflections on the philosophy of history. However, the most significant contribution was perhaps the work of Fernand Braudel, not least for its influence on the shaping of the Annales school during the post-war period.

Braudel's *The Mediterranean* (1949) was written – according to Braudel, could only have been written – during his confinement as a prisoner of war.[5] Universally acknowledged as one of the most significant works of the discipline of history in the twentieth century, *The Mediterranean* is remembered above all for its innovative approach to historical time and narrative. Its three volumes present a history of the Mediterranean at three different and accelerating temporal velocities. The higher the velocity of historical time, the more compressed the narrative period. The first volume presents a narrative of the geo-history of the Mediterranean, a description of the environment of sea, mountain and desert and the rhythms which this environment imposed on movement of goods and peoples – the summer navigation season, annual transhumance, the emergence of markets and ports. The second volume accelerates the narrative to include collective movements, above all economic, but also political and military. The third and final volume is a history of events in the Mediterranean during the epoch of Philip II, a crucial moment in the history of the sea, of Europe and indeed of world history.

Braudel unambiguously attributed the sensitivity to the diverse and superimposed speeds and rhythms of history and the narrative innovations of *The Mediterranean* to his experience in the Stalag, where he wrote the first drafts of the book which were sent with other materials to Lucien Febvre in the form of school exercise books. The general conditions of possibility for writing *The Mediterranean* were in place before the war, but the experience of confinement was crucial to its final emergence. Braudel in his autobiographical memoir 'Personal Testimony' (1972) traced the origins of his masterpiece to the general influence of the philosophy of history and historical philosophy of Henri Berr (pointing to a philosophical dimension of his work otherwise ironically disowned by him).[6] His lengthy discussion of Berr's life and work in his autobiography underlines the significance of Berr's attempt to synthesise philosophy and history, not only in his influential thesis *La Synthèse des connaissances et l'histoire: essai sur l'avenir de la philosophie* (1898) but his activity as a teacher and a founder of the journal *Revue de synthèse historique* (1900) renamed after the foundation of the friendly rival *Annales* in 1929 as *Revue de synthèse*. Braudel's long discussion of the significance of Berr for the historians of the Annales School may be read as a form of intellectual war reparation, since in so many respects the interdisciplinary aims for history entertained by Berr were taken and developed by those historians who had learnt so much from

his work and teaching but did not become disciples, namely Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and, of course, Braudel himself.

In his autobiographical memoir Braudel also emphasized the importance of his experience as a lycée teacher in Algeria between 1923 and 1932 for the insight it offered into the colonial inverse of metropolitan history as well as for its view of the Mediterranean 'from the other shore'.[7] His experience of living in a colonized Islamic mediterranean culture put in question the romantic image of the Christian Greco-Latin sea adopted by northern Europeans and perhaps – in spite of his critical insight – still shared by Braudel. He went so far as to claim that 'this spectacle, this Mediterranean perceived from the other bank, as it were "upside-down" counted for much in my vision of history'.[8] The sense that the Northern Christian orientation toward the history of Mediterranean needed to be supplemented by a Southern Islamic perspective contributed to Braudel's ambition to write a global history that would widen as far as possible the angle of perspective applied to its object. School vacations spent in the archives contributed to the formulation of a thesis project on 'Philip II, Spain and the Mediterranean' in the mid nineteen-twenties, even though after 1927 he was attracted less and less by the narrow focus on Philip II and more by the broad focus on the history of the Mediterranean itself, a change endorsed and encouraged by Lucien Febvre who encouraged his interest in the 'unofficial' Mediterranean of the Barbar pirates rather than the official Mediterranean reflected in the archives of Philip II.[9] Braudel also acknowledged the importance of Pirenne, in particular his work on the closure of the Mediterranean, which Braudel heard in Algiers in 1931. Yet the experience of prison was to catalyse all these elements and produce an original synthesis that was more than the sum of its parts.

Braudel's friendship with Febvre was cemented after a number of professional encounters in Paris by a chance meeting on a transatlantic voyage from Buenos Aires in 1937 (Braudel was returning from two years at the University of São Paulo, Febvre from a series of lectures in Argentina) – remembered as 'vingt jours de bavardage et de rires' [twenty days of talk and laughter] – which led to a close relationship between the two men and their families.[10] This friendship became important during the war and the period of Braudel's captivity between 1940–1945 first at OFLAG XIIB at Mayenne and then, from 1942 following a denunciation of his anti-Pétain and pro-Gaullist opinions, at the disciplinary camp [*Sonderlager*] OFLAG XL at Lübeck.[11] During this period of detention Braudel produced the first drafts of *The Mediterranean* and other works and lectures in the form of exercise books and sent them to Febvre for criticism and safekeeping.[12] Braudel described the work as his companion during the long years of captivity: 'It was in captivity that I wrote that enormous work that Lucien Febvre received school exercise book by school exercise book. My memory alone permitted me this *tour de force*. But, without my captivity, I would have surely written another book'.[13] While Braudel's prodigious

memory was important, it was aided by supplies of books through the Red Cross, and at OFLAG XIIB, the local library.

Prior to his captivity Braudel's project – the one that would have led to 'another book' (perhaps on banditry and piracy, traces of which remain prominent in *The Mediterranean*) might best be described as a 'counter-history' of the Mediterranean, a history of the sea 'upside-down'. However, during his captivity this project changed, retaining its original features as a 'counter-history' but intensifying them by a new and profound insight into the diversity of historical times. The experience of forced detention was crucial for the new direction taken by the project, which became a reflection on time which was at once a work of memory, a search for consolation, and above all an act of resistance.[14] Braudel subsequently recalled with obvious pleasure a meeting in Florence with 'a young Italian philosopher' who asked 'Did you write that book in prison? Oh, that's why it has always given me the impression of being a book of contemplation'. Braudel commented that his contemplation of the 'spectacle of the Mediterranean' remote in space and time from his prison was also shaped by the 'tragic times' in which he lived and by his resistance to 'all the events that fell upon us from the radio and the newspapers of our enemies, or even the news from London delivered by clandestine radios'.[15] The work thus became a monument to the experience of captivity and resistance under conditions of extreme helplessness.

After the war Braudel recovered and destroyed the notebooks sent to Febvre, reworking *The Mediterranean* for publication through a process of revision and rewriting that continued for the rest of his life. Very little of the contents of the notebooks survives except that which was reworked into the eventual work. Two exceptions are the article on the gold of the Sudan published in the Annales of 1946,[16] in memory of Marc Bloch (a prominent member of the Resistance executed by the Gestapo), and the fortuitously surviving text of some of Braudel's lectures in the camps on 'L'histoire, mesure de monde' (History: the measure of the world). The former is a counter-history of Braudel's own counter-history – it develops an economic explanation for the flourishing of the Islamic civilization of the Maghreb, but locates the reason for its success away from the sea, in and across the desert. It is thus an example of a history of the Mediterranean oriented towards the Islamic south rather than Christian north. The latter in its immediacy offers considerable insight into the environment in which *The Mediterranean* was conceived and produced. Indeed, it offers a key to understanding the innovations in historical and narrative method accomplished by Braudel.

The destruction of the more than a hundred school exercise books that were sent to Febvre makes it impossible precisely to reconstruct the compositional history of *The Mediterranean.* Yet from his correspondence during these years with his wife, Paule Braudel, and with Febvre it can be surmised that the work went through three (perhaps four) major versions. Early in 1941 Braudel wrote to his wife[17] that he had completed his first draft of the

book: 'Mon livre est achevé (1,600 pages écrites). Ouf!'.[18] His second version was written between July and September 1941; the 'definitive' version – after a period of depression and inactivity – was completed in December 1944. With each revision Braudel spoke of a gain in lucidity about his intent in the work and its architectonic or structure. In a letter to Febvre (March 1941) thanking him for his criticism of the first draft he said he was ready to move 'from a draft to a true work of history. Thanks to you. Thanks also to prison that nervous energy, makes me more lucid, allows me to meditate for a long time over an argument'.[19] He made a similar claim in a letter of 1 January 1945 – 'I believe that without prison I would never have arrived at this lucidity'.[20] The experience of prison was crucial for achieving lucidity on the aims of history and writing not only his history, but history in general.

The dates of the major revisions of the text – the periods of lucidity – coincide significantly with those of the composition and revision of the surviving notebook 'L'histoire, mesure du monde'. The notebook comprises of a transcript of lectures given to fellow inmates between August and October 1941 in OFLAG XIIB and then revised during 1944 following a period of melancholy that Braudel overcame by commencing projects such as a history of Brazil and, expressly, revising the 1941 lectures on history. This synchrony might contribute to explaining why this particular notebook was spared by Braudel from the fate of all the others. A photocopy of the notebook was in existence – testifying to its importance to Braudel, and Paule Braudel describes discovering the original in her and Braudel's library – a notebook bound in khaki with the stamp of the censor of OFLAG XL. She explains its survival in terms of sentiment, which must be true, but to this must be added the possibility that the reflections on historical method constitute an important stage in the emergence of *The Mediterranean*.

The text offers a discourse on historical method, a plea for a new history, and a refuge and observation post on events then current, ensuring that this reflection on history would itself become an historical document. In the introduction Braudel imagines the listeners to the original lectures in OFLAG XIIB reading his text, thanks them for their attention, sympathy and criticism and writes (this is 1944) that 'Like them, whatever happens, I will always remember the places we met, the discussions, the friendly faces and our lost years'.[21] The method that he begins to describe in the notebook is not only a plea for an interdisciplinary history and a new way of writing history indebted to film, but an appeal to an historical temporality beyond the level of historical events. As the measure of the world, history decides the significance of events, not the historical actors themselves or the journalists who report on them. The consolatory function of this relegation of the event in the face of the events of a victorious National Socialism is obvious, and Braudel repeats his scepticism about the significance of the daily events that assail him and his companions.

The reduction of the significance of events for historical narrative would become an important methodological aspect of *The Mediterranean*, but the reasons Braudel gives are largely philosophical. A list of contemporary events such as a speech by Winston Churchill, Roosevelt's discussion, an article published by Goebbels, the arrival of General Doolittle in Algiers and the first air raid against Tokyo etc (Braudel's examples) all lack 'coherence' – it is for historical narrative to provide the context that they all share but which is not immediately apparent. The provision of perspective requires that history adopt a series of temporal measures that go beyond the temporal limits of the discrete historical event. Such measures include the inhuman perspective of geo-history – discussed at length by Braudel and structuring the narrative of the first volume of *The Mediterranean* – to the cultural and economic and finally back to the time of the event. Braudel's insight was that all these temporalities were at work in any historical event, and that different disciplines specialize in different temporalities – geography in the long duration, economics for the middle duration. As the discipline interested in time in general, history, in Braudel's view of it, has to be interdisciplinary, combining the approaches of the different temporal frames of the other disciplines.

Braudel's initial critique of the event is framed in terms of the Bergsonian concept of duration. The latter, developed across a series of works from *Time and Free Will* (1889) through *Matter and Memory* (1896) to *Creative Evolution* (1907) understands time in terms of intensive multiplicities. For Bergson, the duration of events has no uniform intensity – one moment is never intrinsically identical in duration to another – nor, as a consequence, can a multiplicity of acts of duration necessarily and immediately add up to a coherent whole. After introducing the concept of duration, Braudel proceeds to make a fascinating analogy – anticipated by Bergson – between the temporality of duration and film narrative. Braudel compares the history of events to a film trailer: events

> give fairly precisely the impression of trailers, of those cuts from new films that are projected in the cinema to announce the programme of the coming week. However gripping they may be, these trailers never tell us the whole film, all the story (histoire). It announces, it suggests; it is for us to dream.[22]

The peculiar perspective that such a narrative suggests is confirmed by Braudel's memory of a documentary film about the First World War that he saw in America:

> A strange film on the on the long drama of the First World War. Not a single real soldier is to be seen and the few rare explosions have been organized after the event in the studios. Not even a single real combat. But the officials play their roles to life with application, except this time

> without the noise and illusions of yesterday: King George V makes five or six appearances, if I remember; Poincaré passes in a landau, William II passes three or four times in front of the companies of honour; decorated generals file past.[23]

This filmic parody of history is not far, for Braudel, from the narratives of the histories of events, a narrative, he suggests, that with its scintillating surfaces, short durations and brusque discontinuities forms the 'first history' – images prior to the application of the measure of historical reflection.

Braudel would later collaborate in making historical films, but perhaps most significant at this point is the use of cinematic narrative forms in writing history, and in his own writing of *The Mediterranean*. The narrative solution adopted in the latter uses cinematic montage techniques to convey the coincidence of different historical temporalities. The juxtaposition of deep shot and close-up, accelerated and de-accelerated narrative employed in *The Mediterranean* allows a measure to be applied to events 'that is not simply the measure of man, of the individual, but of men, of all men and the realities of their collective life'.[24] The latter measure, Braudel then explains, is the basis for a dispassionate political judgement, one that can detach itself from the 'dust of news and daily events' – thus returning to the opening scepticism regarding the bleak picture provided by the current events of 1941.

Later in the text Braudel describes the task in Bergsonian terms of providing an image for life – an image understood in terms not of a photograph but of a film whose narrative can respect the coexistence of different temporalities. Braudel now moves to systematize a little his intuition of this new history. He does so by means of a contrast of horizontal and vertical planes or sections of history. There are two horizontal planes – the surface or the history of events and deep history, that of a powerful, tectonic mass. The relationship between the two is figured as that between the movement of waves and the movement of the sea that causes them. Having made this first distinction, Braudel then reveals a number of vertical sections that comprise the categories of historical research and narrative:

> geographical facts first of all, that is to say the relations between the social and space; cultural facts relative to civilization; ethnic facts; the facts of social structure; economic facts, and finally political facts.[25]

This sectioning of history is indeed respected in *The Mediterranean* and corresponds to different temporalities of historical velocities. What is crucial for Braudel is that they are all present in different degree at all times, and the task of historical narrative, aided by the techniques of film, is to show their juxtaposition and superposition at any time. While he can imagine other systems of historical categories, the ones he has outlined are for him 'sufficient to draw an image of the world' as he was to show in *The Mediterranean*.

The remainder of 'L'histoire, mesure du monde' focuses on geo-history, and Braudel does not seem to have gone on to provide the full account of the categories of historical reason that he promised. However, this preliminary reflection on the rules of historical method permitted him to step back from the mass of material that he had accumulated and to organize it into a new form of historical narrative. The surviving notebook thus constitutes an important supplement to the notebooks that were transformed into what we know as *The Mediterranean*. It offers a key to the often puzzling narrative form of the work and locates it as a modernist text, sharing the philosophical and experiential preoccupation with the nature of temporality that is characteristic of the works of aesthetic and philosophical modernism that emerged, with their authors, from the experience of detention within a prisoner-of-war camp.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 The Geneva Conventions comprise a series of treaties concluded between 1846 and 1949, governing the treatment of soldiers and civilians under conditions of war. The original discussions, conducted under the auspices of the Red Cross, resulted in the 'Convention for the Amelioration of the Wounded in Time of War' amended in 1906. The 'Convention Relating to the Treatment of Prisoners of War' that governed the regime of the POW camps during the Second World War was agreed in 1929.

2 Walter Benjamin's enormously influential 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' should also be read as a product of the experience of internment, not as prisoner of war but as a Jewish non-French-national in France.

3 Levinas discusses his camp experience in more detail in his interviews and articles, notably in the essay 'The name of the dog', reprinted in *Difficult Freedom,* transl. Sean Hand, Baltimore, 1990, pp. 151–4.

4 Published as *La critique et la conviction: entretiens avec Francois Azouvi et Marc de Launey*, Paris 1995 (for details of his camp experience see pp. 31–5); transl. Kathleen Blaney as *Critique and Conviction. Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, 1998.

5 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéan à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris, 1949; transl. Siân Reynold, London, 1972–5.

6 The unmistakable philosophical undertow of Braudel's rooted in the influence of Bergson and Bachelard's dispute on the issue of temporality and *Lebensphilosophie* in general might account to some degree for its fascination for philosophers such as Ricoeur, who discussed it in *Time and Narrative* as well as Claude Lefort in his essay of 1952 'Histoire et sociologie dans l'oeuvre de Fernand Braudel', reprinted in Jacques Revel (ed.), *Fernand Braudel et l'histoire,* Paris, Hachette, 1999.

7 'Aussi bien, vers 1930, quand Benjamin Cremieux arrive a Alger pour y faire une conference, il télégraphie à R. Kipling: "arrivé en Algérie, je vais comprendre la France". Kipling et l'Angleterre avaient l'Inde – en bonne conscience. Et l'Inde, c'était l'explication de l'Angleterre': Fernand Braudel, *Ecrits sur l'histoire* 2*,* Paris, 1969, p. 12.

8 As previous note.

9 Nevertheless, in 1969 Braudel published a biographical study of Philip II that serves as a fascinating pendant to his illuminating 1966 study of Charles V – both republished in *Ecrits sur l'Histoire* 2.

10 Braudel wrote of this friendship 'je suis devenu plus qu'un compagnon de Lucien Febvre, un peu son fils: sa maison jurassienne du Souget est devenue ma maison, ses enfants mes enfants', *Ecrits* p. 14.

11 Paule Braudel notes that Braudel's intervention discouraging fellow inmates from offering voluntary labour to the Germans also contributed to his transfer to the disciplinary

camp whose Commandant promised that – regardless of the outcome of the war – no inmate would see their home again and which also confined the sons of Stalin and Leon Blum as hostages.

12 The fullest account of Braudel's prison experience is to be found in the 1998 introduction by his wife Paule Braudel to the Italian translation of *L'histoire, mesure du monde* (*Storia, misura del mondo,* transl. G. Z. Nesi, Bologna, 1998), of which more below.

13 As previous note, p. 14.

14 A later, extremely beautiful version of the Mediterranean project was explicitly titled *Les Mémoires de la Méditerranée*, Paris 1998.

15 As note 12, p. 15. Although in his correspondence with his wife Braudel mitigated the rigours of OFLAG XL by referring to the sense of space offered by the proximity of the Baltic and North seas evident in the sand borne by the winds, quite distinct from the inland-fortress confinement of OFLAG XIIB.

16 'Monnaies et Civilisations. De l'or du Soudan a l'argent d'amerique. Un drame mediterranéen', reprinted in *Les ambitions de l'histoire*, Editions de Fallois, Paris 1997, pp. 352–75.

17 At the end of 1941 according to Paule Braudel's introduction to the Italian translation (p. 7) but dated more precisely to 25 January 1941 in her French edition of 'L'histoire, mesure du monde' edited with Roselyne de Ayala in *Les ambitions de l'Histoire*, Paris 1997.

18 'L'histoire, mesure du monde', p. 20.

19 Cited in Paule Braudel's introduction to *Storia, misura del mondo,* p. 8.

20 Paule Braudel, introduction to *Storia, misura del mondo*.

21 'L'histoire, mesure du monde', p. 25.

22 'L'histoire, mesure du monde', p. 32.

23 'L'histoire, mesure du monde', p. 33.

24 'L'histoire, mesure du monde', p. 35.

25 'L'histoire, mesure du monde', p. 58.