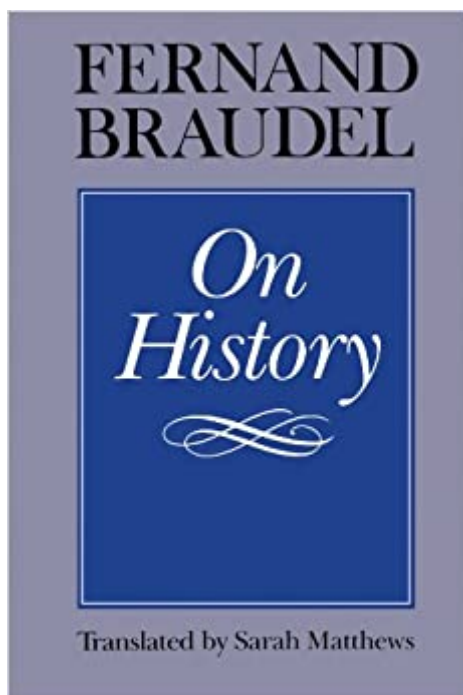


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# On History



## Synopsis

The first English translation of *Écrits sur l'histoire* "a collection of essays written over a twenty-year period following publication of Braudel's masterwork, *La Méditerranée* "On History sets forth Braudel's reflections on the intellectual framework of his historical studies. Braudel calls on the historian to penetrate beneath the surface of political events to uncover and measure the forces shaping collective existence. Cycles of production, wages and prices, grids of communication and trade, fluctuations and climate, demographic trends, popular beliefs "all of these phenomena are proper subjects of the historian's investigations. It is only through study of the *longue durée*, Braudel argues, that one can discern structure, the supports and obstacles, the limits and his experience cannot escape."The great French historian Fernand Braudel has done what only giants can: he has made Western man confront the problem of time "individual time, historical time, relative time, real time. . . . Braudel, more than any other historian, has wrestled with man's conception of time over time. . . What a magnificent fight he has fought." "Virginia Quarterly Review

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this is a text for a joint course in the philosophy of history I'm teaching. I look forward to digging into it.

Augustus said he found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble. Fernand Braudel, perhaps the single most influential historian of the 20th century, found history a matter of narrative about famous personages and left it a study of the "structures of everyday life": this selection of polemical essays explains how and why he and the historians of the *\*Annales\** school borrowed liberally from once-scorned social sciences, and expanded the scope of historical reflection to that of the *\*longue duree\**. Braudel's major work *\*The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II\** studies the Mediterranean region with a liberation from the story of nation-states which was previously unthinkable; from diet to shipping patterns, almost anything seems more important to him than the scepter. These short essays give the principles behind that book and Braudel's other massive contributions to historical science. Unlike French philosophers of his time, Braudel did not desire to appear as a self-starting genius capable of writing on everything: his historiographical suggestions are careful and modest, and a phrase which will be familiar to humanities scholars of recent vintage ("we have learned from X that...") occurs frequently in this book. His friend the sociologist Georges Gurevitch is one frequently cited as a source of inspiration, but one of the most charming essays is on a book about a dilapidated Brazilian mining town written by a "100% American" sociologist and nearly every other human science seems to Braudel a source of important tools: geography and demography are clearly major influences on his historical style. Braudel is also willing to hand out prizes to many other historians, classic and novel. If you are involved with that intellectual pastime mysteriously known simply as "theory", the non-misplaced concreteness of this will be a bit of a relief; if you are a history buff raised on a diet of hagiographic books about the Founding Fathers, best to take a "longer view" with people slightly aware of the significance of revolutions but ready to talk about something else.

Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) was a French historian and a leader of the Annales School (i.e., emphasizing social rather than political or diplomatic themes, and opposed to Marxist historiography). He wrote in the Preface to this 1969 book, "This collection did not originate with me. Two or three years ago, my Polish and then my Spanish friends decided to collect and translate the few articles and essays which I had published in the past twenty years on the nature of history. This volume is the final result." He explained, "A useful understanding has to be arrived at ... that the way to study history is to view it as a long duration, as what I have called the '*longue dur e*'... which by itself can pose all the great problems of social structures, past and present." (Pg. viii) He suggests, "There is... a history slower than the history of civilizations, a history which almost stands still, a history of man in his intimate relationship to the earth which bears and feeds him; it is a dialogue

which never stops repeating itself, which repeats itself in order to persist, which may and does change superficially, but which goes on, tenaciously, as though it were somehow beyond time's reach and ravages." (Pg. 12) He asserts, "We have already stated our mistrust of a history occupied solely with events. To be fair, though, if there is a sin in being overconcerned with events, then history, though the most obvious culprit, is not the only guilty one. All the social sciences have shared in this error." (Pg. 35) He adds, "sociology and history made up one single intellectual adventure, not two different sides of the same cloth but the very stuff of that cloth itself." (Pg. 69) He clarifies, "As far as the history of the 'longue durée' is concerned, history and sociology can hardly be said to meet, or even to rub shoulders. This would be saying too little. What they do is mingle. The 'longue durée' is the endless, inexhaustible history of structures and groups of structures. For the historian a structure is not just a thing built, put together; it also means permanence, sometimes for more than centuries." (Pg. 75) He argues, "If I stand so strongly against the ideas of Toynbee or Spengler, it is because these ideas persist in bringing humanity back to the old times... In order to accept that today's civilizations repeat the cycle of that of the Incas, or whomever, we would first have to concede that neither technology, nor economics, nor demography has any very great bearing on civilizations." (Pg. 215) Braudel's book will be of keen interest to anyone studying the philosophy of history, or historiography in general.

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