

The French Annales School's approach to history.

Ahmed RENIMA.

- University of Ahmed ben-Bella; Oran 1; (Algeria).

- Email: ahm.renima99@gmail.com

Received:13/09/2024; Accepted:04/12/2024; Published:15/12/2024.

Abstract:

The new problems that have been raised again by the most who are interested in historical studies, from historians, philosophers, and thinkers, were the result of the changes in the methods and schools of historical writing since the beginning of the twentieth century. However, this century can be considered the beginning of a new form of historical thinking. And many transformations create a break with the different forms of writing and interpreting history that came before. In addition to being the scientific study of the past human events, history is known as the relationship between past phenomena, specific to the human life, the lives of societies, and individuals. For these conditions, a group of French historians created a new vision for history studies called the Annales School through an academic journal *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales*.

Keywords: Annales School; Marc Bloch; Paul Veyne; Fernand Braudel; Historiography; History of long period.

Introduction:

Paul Veyne, one of the most brilliant French historians of the twentieth century, considered what happened in this century a "leap in history." The second leap is the one through which our historians were able to embody the awareness of the historical event gradually, the event that considers everything to be indebted to history. This was the second one. As for the first leap that world history experienced, it was when we got rid of the mythological interpretation to track down the historical truth (Veyne, 1990, p. 466).

There is no great political history to be told, but rather every human action and movement has its own special and distinct significance that is an interest to the historian, as well as to all specialists in other branches of knowledge, within the humanities in general.

1- The Emergence of the Annales School:

A new approach emerged within contemporary French historical studies as a reaction to the positive school of history. The most significant of these was the Annales School (École des Annales), whose ideas initially appeared in the journal *La Revue de Synthèse* in 1920. This was followed by the journal *Annales*, which debuted in the 1930s and continues publication today. Through these publications, the ideas of this new school began to take shape and develop. This new trend de-emphasised specific events and instead focused on the very long term, shifting its focus from political life to economic activity (Bourde & Martin, 1989, p. 172).

Therefore, there was a decisive break with what they called "event history" (*histoire événementielle*), which concentrated on the short and the rapid timeframe, particularly prominent political and military events.

The Annales School's most crucial contribution appears to be its constant emphasis on establishing an epistemological approach to studying the past, contrasting it with the methods advocated by other and more flourishing scientific schools of

the time. Lucien Febvre championed this effort in his series of articles "Combats pour l'histoire" and "Battles for History" (Febvre, 1952), which later became the book of the same title. Similarly, Marc Bloch pursued it in his unfinished work (Bloch, 1953) *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*. "Apology for History or the Profession of Historian"), and Fernand Braudel, author of the monumental thesis *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* ("The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II.").

Concerning the history of the Mediterranean during the sixteenth century AD (Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 1972), this new current established new epistemological boundaries for the study of modern history, which is traditional narrative history. It embarked on the reading and the writing of history of the long term, the history of civilisations and large social groups, with their economic systems, social organisations, and collective psychologies, in a specific and studied geographical space. This school also worked to bring history closer to other human sciences. In the years 1950-1960, the supervisors of the *Annales* opened the door to historical geography, economic history, and historical demography. In the 1970s, they opened the field of history to the study of the intellectual aspects of the lives of societies. In half a century, this experience of the *Annales* was able to infuse the spirit of the "Annales" into various French historians, in addition to its spread within universities and scientific centers. It also influenced many historians abroad in Western Europe, the United States, and Latin America (Bourde & Martin, 1989, p. 172).

This school also found a wide echo in Russia, where Yuri Besmertniy says: "There are other circumstances that point to the existence of a special interest in the *Annales* in our country, represented by the rejection that suffered from it

until recently by representatives of official history in the former Soviet Union” (Bessmertny, 1992).

The arrival of the Annales School to occupy a place within the interests of Russian historians and thinkers is clear evidence of the Annales School's importance in Europe, especially since a large part of this continent was a stronghold within the dominance of the Marxist dialectical historical materialism.

2- The History between Truth and Objectivity:

All the efforts are made within the Annales School aimed undoubtedly to strive for or approach the historical truth. This goal always clashes with subjectivity, often distorting the balanced scientific historical discourse. This cannot be achieved unless a precise definition is established for each of the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity from a cognitive and methodological point of view.

History, after all, is what historians write, but its value is manifested in what the historian allows from a philosophical awareness. The search for the meanings of history and the concept of truth is the end of the adventure of both of them. History must possess truth to reach objectivity, and objectivity here may carry multiple meanings. Therefore, we must take it here from the perspective of objective epistemology. The objective is what crystallises methodological thinking and organises it, and thus, it can be interpreted (Bourde & Martin, 1989, p. 172). Paul Ricoeur adds: "We expect history to be a history of humans, and that this history of humans would be helpful to the reader who has been refined by the history of historians in building a high-level subjectivity, that is, the subjectivity of the human and not our subjectivity” (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 23).

The Annales School tried to invest everything that could be invested from sciences, knowledge, and research methods to achieve objectivity and therefore reach the truth that the natural sciences have reached. Marc Bloch, in his book "The Historian's Craft,» tried to establish the possible standards and

constants to achieve this goal. Fernand Braudel, especially in his book "The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Time of Philip II," also established a new methodology and renewed some concepts. By reconsidering time and reconsidering the longer term, giving geographical space a new place in history, and making economics a fundamental factor in directing the movement of history.³ Fernand Braudel: History and Long Period Concept.

Tells us Fernand Braudel about himself and at length in his book *Ecrits sur l'histoire* [Writings on History]. He was born in 1902 in northern France (died in Savoie in 1985). He also tells us how he spent his happiest childhood between the countryside, his birthplace, and Paris, where his father was studying, and how he obtained his teaching certificate in history. He travelled to Constantine and then to the capital of Algeria as a history teacher between 1923 and 1931. Then he moved to Brazil, where he met Claude Lévi-Strauss (Braudel, *On History*, 1980, p. 23). His many trips between the two shores of the Mediterranean, North Africa, and Southern Europe led him to discover and love this sea. This was the main factor that led him to choose the topic of his doctoral thesis on the history of the Mediterranean, which later appeared as a massive work in form and content. He also met Lucien Febvre, who became his close friend, and Marc Bloch and Henri Pirenne at the Annales School, which differed from the journal *Annales Economies. Sociétés. Civilisations* that leaned towards theory and were interested in the most abstract concepts. "With the Annales," he says, "we are on the ground, and within its pages, we speak of men in the present and the past; we follow them with their tangible problems; they are alive." (Braudel, *On History*, 1980, p. 23).

From 1939 to 1945, Braudel's imprisonment and stay in German detention camps directly led to the writing of *The Mediterranean*, where he used his exceptional memory to recall the historical documents he had studied and began work on this massive project. After his release from prison, he

made corrections and edits to what he had already written, and the book was published in 1949 in a second edition containing 1222 pages. He would say to Lucien Febvre, "Without prison, Braudel would not have been able to complete this work." In this work, Braudel tried to draw the attention of historians to a new perspective on historical issues and to break free from traditional narrative history. The Deep Feeling of "Crisis" That History Lived Through the Past Twenty or Thirty Years. (Braudel, *On History.*, 1980, p. 24).

Fernand Braudel faced harsh criticism from historians whom he described as traditional and also from the models of modern history that usually focus the description and the study on the rapid and prominent political events. He said that classical history is a narrative history that tragically tells events in the form of quick snapshots devoid of any analysis. When they turn to research the causes, they are practicing a deceptive game that is not linked to the reality of events. (Souarit, 1997).

However, history is not just major events; it is also the broad events or seemingly simple moments in the course of the grand historical development. This transformation is formed by duration and from the interpretation of modern times to the search for the dimension of space, that is, geographical time, and from fragmentation to comprehensiveness. This is what he tried to do and thus achieved the leap that created a break in historical knowledge.

3- Forms of Historical Time:

Braudel defines the meaning of history, which boils down to his saying that history is "a group of possible dates, a group of professions and viewpoints belonging to yesterday, today, and tomorrow." (Braudel, *The Dynamics of Capitalism.*, 1986, p. 3) Therefore, every historical period is a process of chronological division. This division usually reflects the direction of the reference that the historian belongs to, whether subjective or objective. Here, Braudel makes time a dimension of space and a coordinate for it and

defines historical time as "real, optional, absolute time that is characterised by relativity." It produces diverse and varied histories. (Yevut, 1991, p. 42). Therefore, he divides history into three main levels: there is a fixed history, which is the history of humankind; a very long-term history, "longue durée," that refers to Braudel's concept of long-term social structures; and then there is "conjuncture," which refers to even shorter-term events. His relationship with the ocean, a history slow in its movement and changes... Under this static history, there is a history that moves quietly, and we say with all will if the word is not distorted from its true meaning, a social history like the history of groups and gatherings. Moreover, there is the third type of historical time, which is the traditional history, if we want to call it, a history that does not have the dimension of man but the dimension of the individual, which is the event history. (Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 1972, pp. 16-17). Therefore, there is a geographical history, that is, place and nature as history, and a circumstantial history, social and civil, as well as an event history, which is the traditional political history known.

The truth is that time is one at all levels; it is the same, but it takes different forms and shapes; it can be short, long, or very long. This division is a division of simplified educational necessity. History at Braudel took civilisation as its subject, so the historical horizon was its subject. Here, he tries to use the historical method comprehensively and objectively and apply it to civilisation, which is a historical group that includes a single pattern of material and spiritual life. Its characteristic is that it is more closely linked to its geographical location. (Yevut, 1991, p. 41). Civilisation is the subject matter of history, and it has an average time because it includes events that are very old, events of average time, and other events that are short in terms of their temporal extensions.

The division presented by Braudel inevitably leads us to analyse the dialectical relationship between the three different times, that is, the levels of historical time. What are the relationships that link the three periods in terms of form and the concept of each period or period in terms of defining its meaning and function in historical time and its relationships with other periods? And in terms of content, what are the relationships between the historian who forms a discourse or epistemological space? through which he deals with the historical time to form the final formulation of history.

These historical periods are not given in advance, but the historian creates them through discourse. Thanks to the historical discourse, the relationship is determined, and the play of the simple and the complex is regulated, that is, the analysis of the long period into simple periods. This allows for the writing of multiple histories of the same history. (Yevut, 1991, p. 43).

4- Structure and Historical Time:

Through this division, Braudel has placed us in front of a new conception of historical levels. This conception arose from the analysis of the dialectical relationship between the periods and the conception of the course of history in its complex and simple form. It is therefore a structure. Leroy Ladurie said: "The book *The Mediterranean* was the first experiment in structural history." (Chaunu, 1992, p. 71).

The difference, multiplicity, and diversity of events and their adoption of any level of the three levels of historical time interprets traditional history as a long narrative interpretation. This history is of primary interest to economists because they consider economic crises to be structural crises or crises of structures. "These historical events have remained a field of hypotheses and have not been verified by experiment. They also open up horizons for broad history, since it was the structure that controlled long-term history." (Chaunu, 1992, pp. 71-72.)

According to Lévi-Strauss, in a system and within it, there is a homogeneous system between the different social classes. However, within this system, some structures become fixed and therefore hinder the movement of history. Man cannot change these structures, and so he cannot change the course of history or the human mind has transcended it, turning history into a metaphysical, subjective, or chaotic history.

At this stage, history and the historian are in a real dilemma, and in the face of inevitability, they cannot give the process another direction or direction with different dimensions. In this case, a mutation occurs, and it ends up considering the founding discourse of historians as the most complete formula for history.

Hence, Braudel's work focused on time, its geographical dimension, the long period, and ultimately the economic factor. These are the three pillars of Braudel's vision of history, which they formed after he completed his masterpiece "The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II." As his wife says, "When I was invited to explain and talk about the early beginnings of Braudel's intellectual adventure..., these beginnings were not formed in the logic of abstract theories, but they formed that thought in the irregularity of creative ideas, which formed an internal image for him..., and I say that this theory was not completed for him until much later" (Souarit, 1997).

This vision has caused a transformation in the form of history, but this form has continued to transform until today. Geography is no longer, what it used to be in the past, and the idea of the period is the most accurate idea for transforming historical time into the study of phenomena recorded in other periods, sometimes-short ones. As for the economic factor, it has not maintained its position as a strong factor in the analysis of historical studies after the 1960s.

The multiplicity of specialisations and the integration of a group of sciences, as advocated by Braudel, no longer

perform the function they used to perform due to the complexity and fragmentation of the sciences, as well as the new problems that have appeared within the society: "We live for about 25 years, a crisis whose causes we cannot exactly determine" (Braudel P., 1997, p. 84). Moreover, good communication relations no longer govern the new cognitive specialisations.

Braudel left a school that cares about historical thought, a school that consists of two different generations: a generation that supports him and defends his ideas and a generation that opposes him. However, the French philosopher Michel Foucault will work to invest in what the Annales School has done especially Braudel's work. He praises this transformation in the writing of history in the introduction to his book "The Archaeology of Knowledge" and says, "It is at this point that the project we have tried to outline in general and preliminary terms in the book "The Words and Things is determined. "And in The History of Madness and The Birth of the Clinic, it is a project in which we seek to measure the transformations that occur in general in history." (Dufay, 1995, p. 84).

There is no doubt that the French Annales School, and especially Fernand Braudel's theoretical work and major practical achievements, had a great impact on the paths of the human sciences in general and on history, its reading and interpretation in particular.

Conclusion:

The modern philosophy of history was founded through the vision of philosophers rather than historians, a vision of the concept of history and the evolution of the forms and systems of writing and possible interpretations of the events that were recorded from the human past. History was the domain of official historians in palaces and battlefields more than other classes and categories of people, even more than the prophets, sages, reformers, and thinkers. With Voltaire, Kant, Hegel, and Marx, Europe was introduced to the idea of

studying history with a "scientific" mindset in terms of construction, synthesis, criticism, and analysis. However, with the Annales School at the beginning of the 20th century, a group of historians in France established a new school of history based on the idea of including factors and elements that were absent or rejected in the process of explaining the movement of history. This new attitude was due to the development of various sciences and knowledge such as economics, mathematics, statistics, geography, geology, climatology, ecology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, demography, art, and many other sciences that contributed in one way or another to the emergence of the French Annales School. The pioneers of this school had to confront the school of materialist interpretation, or what is known as the historical dialectic as interpreted by Karl Marx and his followers. This school also tried to overcome the bourgeois interpretation of history and end the old classical metaphysical interpretations that were unable to provide reasonable and acceptable explanations after the end of the Great War in 1918.

The Annales School was completed during the second half of the twentieth century with the death of Fernand Braudel in 1985. This school left important influences on the historians of Europe and science, however few, and reached communist Moscow and liberal America as well, in addition to Europe, and spread to some Arab historians, especially Maghribians, including Manour Marouche, who died in 2024, where he presented studies on Algeria (1515-1830) in the economic sphere. Some researchers in the history of economics have replaced the historical dialectic or historical materialism with the Annales School, which adopted methods of general explanation such as mathematics and statistics in the study of economic systems and changes preserved by archival documents. One of the criticisms of thinkers and researchers on the orientations of this school is its disregard for the development of quantitative studies in the United States and Britain, which have reshaped economic, political,

and demographic research, as well as the postmodernist sensibilities. Postmodern sensitivities have also led to a delegation of trust in the school's overarching grand narratives. It has also noticeably excluded spiritual and religious influences that can or must be considered as conditions that are clearly influential in the making and interpreting of historical events.

Comments:

Leaders of Annales School:

1- Marc Bloch:

Marc Bloch (1886–1944), historian and great French resistance fighter, was shot in 1944 by the Gestapo. Bloch marked his time with his courage and commitment to resistance. As a historian, he contributed to the renewal of his own discipline by creating, with his colleague and friend Lucien Febvre, the annals of economic and social history. This new school of thought placed anthropology, the study of mentalities, economics, and society, at the heart of the research. In 1919, he was appointed lecturer of history of the Middle Ages at the Faculty of Letters of Strasbourg, then obtained the chair of history of the Middle Ages in 1927. He remained there until 1936.

Marc Bloch was born on July 6, 1886, in Lyon. He was the son of Gustave Bloch, professor of Greco-Roman history and antiquities at the Faculty of Letters of Lyon, and Sara Epstein. He studied at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris, then he entered the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1904. In 1908, he was admitted to the Aggregation of History.

In 1919, Marc Bloch was appointed lecturer of history of the Middle Ages at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Strasbourg, then obtained the chair of history of the Middle Ages in 1927. It was in Strasbourg that he met Lucien Febvre, with whom he founded the "Annales d'histoire économique et sociale" in 1929. Therefore, this "Ecole des Annales" contributes deeply to the renewal of the historical discipline by highlighting new issues: the study of mentalities, anthropology, economics, and society are now at the heart of scientific research.

His years in Strasbourg also saw the birth of most of his university work: in 1920, he published his doctoral thesis, *Kings*

and Serfs: a chapter in Capetian history, which he defended at the Sorbonne. In 1924 he published his book *Les Rois thaumaturges* and, in 1927, *Les Caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française*. In 1936, he was appointed Lecturer of Economic History at the Sorbonne, then Chair in 1938.

Mobilised on August 23, 1939, in Alsace, Marc Bloch was transferred to the North, while the first volume of *The Feudal Society* appeared. In May-June 1940, he took part in the Northern Campaign, then joined his family in the Creuse after the Armistice of 2 July. It was at this time that he published the second volume of *The Feudal Society* and wrote *The Strange Defeat*, published in 1946.

Excluded from the civil service in accordance with the decrees of 1940 on the status of Jews, he was "disqualified" for "exceptional scientific services rendered to the French State" and resumed his teaching in January 1941 at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Strasbourg in Clermont-Ferrand. But he was soon transferred to the Faculty of Letters of Montpellier (1941-1942), where he participated in the establishment of the resistance movement "Combat" and collaborated with the "Cercle de Montpellier," one of the prefigurations of the "Comité général d'études" (CGE). He also wrote a new work, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou le métier d'historien*, published in 1949. From 1943 to 1944, Marc Bloch was in Lyon. He entered the underground life and joined the movement "Franc-Tireur," of which he became a member of the national board. He set up the Liberation Committees of the region and prepared the "insurrection plan of the Lyon region." Finally, he actively contributes to the journal *Les Cahiers Politiques*, a body of the CGE in Paris. (unistra.fr/universite/notre-histoire/personnalites-prestigieuses, s.d).

Arrested by the Gestapo on 8 March 1944, he was tortured and imprisoned in Montluc prison. On 16 June, with 28 other prisoners, he was taken to Saint-Didier-de-formans, near Lyon, and shot.

2- Lucien Febvre:

Lucien Paul Victor Febvre (1878–1956). Born in Nancy, France, on July 22, 1878, he died on September 26, 1956, in the city of Saint-Amour.

He is considered the most important French historian of his generation, founding with Marc Bloch the school of Annales, which had a great impact and deeply renewing the historical approach. According to Fernand Braudel, "the greatest historian of the 20th century," In his early life, he became passionate about history, joined l'ENS in 1899 in the section of letters, and defended his thesis in 1911 on Philippe II and Franche Comté, where he highlighted the interactions between economy, society, and mental representations, a narrative approach to the study of history.

In 1911, Lucien Febvre was appointed professor of history at the Lycée Victor Hugo in Besançon. He is noted for his research and his pedagogical qualities, but he will not obtain the chair of modern history in the faculty of letters despite many supports. The minister did not grant this request and finally joined the faculty of Dijon, reluctantly leaving Franche-Comté. It should be noted that Lucien Febvre was then known as a socialist activist in Besançon between 1907 and 1912, writing about thirty articles in the weekly *Le Socialiste Comtois*, very hostile to the radicals and Clemenceau and calling for a political and social revolution. (L'historien Lucien Febvre. , 2023.

After the First World War and a stint at the University of Strasbourg in 1919, he chose to focus on research and then joined the Collège de France and the École pratique des hautes études. This erased encyclopedist and humanist formed a generation of "historians-sociologists" who gave a new direction to historiography and sat on the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation national and Directoire du Centre national de la recherche scientifique.

3- Fernad Braudel:

Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) began his career teaching in Algeria and then in Brazil. Taken prisoner in Germany during the war, he took advantage of his years of captivity to write his thesis of memory, which he supports in 1947: *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world at the time of Philip II*. Published two years later, this study was immediately noticed.

After meeting Lucien Febvre in 1937, he joined the historical school "Annales," founded in 1929. It is a question for this group of historians to go beyond event analysis to be interested in the

historical evolution over the long time and the progressive changes of the deep structures of society.

Thus, in his thesis, he is not interested in the policy of the sovereign Philip II but in a geo-history centered on the study of the Mediterranean. He develops an analysis based on the consideration of a triple temporality: the geographical time (long duration), the social time (that of the States), and the time of the event (very short but most directly accessible). He favors the study of ancient phenomena that structure society and seeks to create links between history and other disciplines such as sociology, economics, and anthropology.

He also published other studies on the birth of capitalism, including Material Civilisation, Economy, and Capitalism (15th–18th centuries) in 1979. In 1950, he replaced Lucien Febvre at the Collège de France and succeeded him after his death as director of the magazine "Annales." For more than 20 years, he enjoyed considerable power and influence in the field of history and more broadly in the social sciences. (<https://enseignants.lumni.fr/fiche-media/00000001153/fernand-braudel-et-les-differents-temps-de-l-histoire.html>, 2023).

In 1985, he entered the Académie française. He died shortly after without completing his study of the elements characterising French identity throughout history.

References:

- 1- Bessmertnyy, Yuri. "The Annales from a Moscow Perspective." *Annales ESC*, Jan/Feb., 1992, no. 1, pp. 245-259.
- 2- Bloch, Marc. (1953). *The Historian's Craft*. Tr. Peter Putnam. Vintage Books, New York.
- 3- Bourde, Guy, and HERVÉ MARTIN. (1989). *The Schools of History*. Tr. Peter Burke. Blackwell, Oxford.
- 4- Braudel, Fernand. (1980). *On History*. Tr. Sarah Matthews. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 5- Braudel, Fernand. (1986). *the Dynamics of Capitalism*. Tr. Sian Reynolds. Harper & Row, New York.
- 6- Braudel, Fernand. (1972). *the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Tr. Sian Reynolds. Harper & Row, New York.
- 7- Braudel, Paule. "How Fernand Braudel Wrote 'The Mediterranean'." *L'Histoire* no. 207 (February 1997): 84.
- 8- Chaunu, Pierre. "The Mediterranean is Braudel: An Interview." *L'Histoire* no. 157 (1992).

- 9- Dufay, François. "He Was a Writer." *In L'Histoire* no. 192 (October 1995).
- 10- Febvre, Lucien. (1952). *Combats pour l'histoire*. Armand Colin, Paris.
- 11- Ricoeur, Paul. (1965). *History and Truth*. Tr. Kathleen McLaughlin & David Pellauer. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 12- Souarit, Benamer. (1997). "History and Mutation", *course on philosophy of history*, Oran University.
- 13- Veyne, Paul. (1990). "Corpus." *In Encyclopædia Universalis*, France, vol. 11.
- 14- Yevut Salem, (1991). *Historical Time*. Beirut, Dar al-Talia.
- 15- <https://www.unistra.fr/universite/notre-histoire/personnalites-prestigieuses-1/les-autres-noms-illustres/marc-bloch-1886-1944>
- 16- L'historien Lucien Febvre. <https://maulde.blog4ever.com/l-historien-lucien-febvre>.
- 17- <https://enseignants.lumni.fr/fiche-media/00000001153/fernand-braudel-et-les-differents-temps-de-l-histoire.html>.

