

Introduction

WHEN, IN 1952, Lucien Febvre asked me to write this book for the collection *Destins du Monde* (*World Destinies*) which he had recently founded, I had no idea what an interminable venture I was embarking upon. The idea was that I should simply provide a summary of the work that had been done on the economic history of pre-industrial Europe. However, not only did I often feel the need to go back to the sources, but I confess that the more research I did, the more disconcerted I became by direct observation of so-called economic realities, between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Simply because they did not seem to fit, or even flatly contradicted the classical and traditional theories of what was supposed to have happened: whether the theories in question were Werner Sombart's (1902, and backed up by a wealth of evidence) or Josef Kulischer's (1928); or indeed those of economists themselves, who tend to see the economy as a homogenous reality which can legitimately be taken out of context and which can, indeed must, be measured on its own, since nothing is intelligible until it has been put into statistics. According to the textbooks, the development of pre-industrial Europe (which was studied quite exclusively of the rest of the world, as if that did not exist) consisted of its gradual progress towards the rational world of the market, the firm, and capitalist investment, until the coming of the Industrial Revolution, which neatly divides human history in two.

In fact, observable reality before the nineteenth century is much more complicated than this would suggest. It is of course quite possible to trace a pattern of evolution, or rather several kinds of evolution, which may rival, assist or at times contradict one another. This amounts to saying that there were not one but several economies. The one most frequently written about is the so-called market economy, in other words the mechanisms of production and exchange linked to rural activities, to small shops and workshops, to banks, exchanges, fairs and (of course) markets. It was on these 'transparent' visible realities, and on the easily observed processes that took place within them that the language of economic science was originally founded. And as a result it was from the start confined within this privileged arena, to the exclusion of any others.

But there is another, shadowy zone, often hard to see for lack of adequate historical documents, lying underneath the market economy: this is that elementary basic activity which went on everywhere and the volume of which is truly fantastic. This rich zone, like a layer covering the earth, I have called for want of a better expression *material life* or *material civilization*. These are obviously ambiguous expressions. But I imagine that if my view of what happened in the

past is accepted, as it seems to be nowadays by certain economists for what is happening in the present, a proper term will one day be found to describe this infra-economy, the informal other half of economic activity, the world of self-sufficiency and barter of goods and services within a very small radius.

On the other hand, looking up instead of down from the vast plane of the market economy, one finds that active social hierarchies were constructed on top of it: they could manipulate exchange to their advantage and disturb the established order. In their desire to do so – which was not always consciously expressed – they created anomalies, ‘zones of turbulence’ and conducted their affairs in a very individual way. At this exalted level, a few wealthy merchants in eighteenth-century Amsterdam or sixteenth-century Genoa could throw whole sectors of the European or even world economy into confusion, from a distance. Certain groups of privileged actors were engaged in circuits and calculations that ordinary people knew nothing of. Foreign exchange for example, which was tied to distant trade movements and to the complicated arrangements for credit, was a sophisticated art, open only to a few initiates at most. To me, this second shadowy zone, hovering above the sunlit world of the market economy and constituting its upper limit so to speak, represents the favoured domain of capitalism, as we shall see. Without this zone, capitalism is unthinkable: this is where it takes up residence and prospers.

This triple division, which I gradually saw forming itself before my eyes, as the elements of observation fell into place almost of themselves, is probably what my readers will find the most controversial aspect of this book. Does it not amount to making too rigid a distinction – indeed a term by term contrast – between the market economy and capitalism? I did not myself take up this position hurriedly or without hesitation. But in the end I accepted that the market economy had, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries and indeed even earlier, been a restrictive order, and that like all restrictive orders, whether social, political or cultural, it had created an opposition, counter-forces, both above and below itself.

What I find most encouraging to my view of things is that the same schema can be used to show easily and clearly the articulations of present-day societies. The market economy still controls the great mass of transactions *that show up in the statistics*. But free competition, which is the distinctive characteristic of the market, is very far from ruling the present-day economy – as nobody would deny. Today as in the past, there is a world apart where an exceptional kind of capitalism goes on, to my mind the only *real* capitalism: today as in the past, it is multinational, a close relation of the capitalism operated by the great Indies Companies, and the monopolies of all sizes, official or unofficial, which existed then and which were exactly analogous in principle to the monopolies of today. Would we not call the Fugger or Welser firms *transnational* today, since they had interests all over Europe and had representatives both in India and Latin America? And Jacques Coeur’s business empire in the fourteenth century was as

big as the trading interests of the Netherlands in the Levant.

But the coincidences go further than this: in the wake of the economic depression following the 1973-4 crisis, we are beginning to see the development of a modern version of the non-market economy: hardly disguised forms of barter, the direct exchange of services, 'moonlighting' as it is called, plus all the various forms of homeworking and 'odd-jobs'. This layer of activity, lying below or alongside the market, has reached sufficient proportions to attract the attention of several economists: some have estimated that it may represent 30 or 40% of the gross national product, which thus lies outside all official accounting, even in industrialized countries.

So it was that a tripartite schema *became* the framework of a book which I had deliberately set out to write outside the world of theory, of all theories, and had intended to be guided by concrete observation and comparative history alone. Comparative both through time, using the language, which has never disappointed me, of the long term and the dialectic of past/present; and comparative through as wide a space as possible, since I wanted my study to cover the whole world if such a thing could be done. Well, concrete observation is still in the foreground. My purpose throughout has been to see and to let others see, by allowing what I show to speak for itself, in all the richness, complexity and heterogeneity of real life. If one could simply dissect reality and separate it into these three levels (which I regard as a useful basis for classification) history would be an exact science: which it obviously is not.

The three volumes that make up this book are entitled: *The Structures of Everyday Life: the limits of the possible*; *The Wheels of Commerce* and *The Perspective of the World*. The third is a chronological study of the forms and successive preponderant tendencies of the international economy. In a word, it is a *history*. The first two volumes are much less straightforward, and come under the heading of thematic research. The first volume (which has already been published in an earlier version) is a sort of 'weighing up of the world' as Pierre Chaunu has called it, an evaluation of the limits of what was possible in the pre-industrial world. One of these limits is the enormous place then occupied by 'material life'. The second volume, *The Wheels of Commerce*, compares the market economy and the higher activity of capitalism. It was essential to my purpose to distinguish between these two upper layers and explain them in relation to each other, both where they coincide and where they differ.

Will I be able to convince all my readers? Hardly. But at least I have found one unparalleled advantage in this dialectical approach: it has enabled me, by taking a new, and somewhat more peaceful route, to avoid and by-pass the passionate disputes which the explosive word *capitalism* always arouses. And in any case, the third volume has benefited from the explanations and discussions that have gone before: it should offend nobody.

So instead of one book, I ended up by writing three. And my determination to make this a book about the whole world gave me some work for which as a

Western historian I was unprepared, to say the least. Having lived and worked in an Islamic country (ten years in Algiers) and in America (four years in Brazil) was a great help. But for Japan, I have relied on the explanations and the private tuition of Serge Elisseff; for China I am grateful to Etienne Balazs, Jacques Gernet and Denys Lombard. Daniel Thorner, who could turn any well-motivated person into a budding specialist on India, took me in hand with his irresistible liveliness and generosity. He would turn up at my house early in the morning with bread and croissants for breakfast and books that I absolutely had to read. His name must come first in the list of people I have to thank: if I listed everyone, it would go on for ever. My pupils, lecture-audiences, colleagues and friends have all helped me. I cannot forget the filial assistance given me once again by Alberto and Branislava Tenenti; the co-operation of Michaël Keul and Jean-Jacques Hémardinquer. Marie-Thérèse Labignette assisted me in archive research and chasing bibliographical references, and Annie Duchesne in the endless labour of providing footnotes. Josiane Ochoa patiently typed various versions of the manuscript, up to ten times. Roselyne de Ayala, of Armand Colin Publishers, handled the problems of layout and publication with efficiency and punctuality. To all these immediate colleagues, I here express my more than grateful recognition. Lastly, if it had not been for Paule Braudel, who has been daily associated with my research, I should never have had the courage to rewrite the first volume and to finish the two massive tomes which complete it, or to check the logic and clarity needed for the summaries and explanations they contain. Once more we have worked side by side over a long project.

16 MARCH 1979

Preface

HERE I AM at the beginning of the first volume, and the most complicated of the three. Each chapter may not in itself seem difficult to the reader; but the complication is the insidious result of the large number of aims I have in mind, the painful uncovering of unusual themes which must all be incorporated into a coherent history, in short the difficult assembling of a number of *parahistoric* languages – demography, food, costume, lodging, technology, money, towns – which are usually kept separate from each other and which develop in the margin of traditional history. So why try to bring them together?

Essentially, in order to define the context in which pre-industrial economies operated, and to grasp it in all its richness. Can it not be said that there is a limit, a ceiling which restricts all human life, containing it within a frontier of varying outline, one which is hard to reach and harder still to cross? This is the border which in every age, even our own, separates the possible from the impossible, what can be done with a little effort from what cannot be done at all. In the past, the borderline was imposed by inadequate food supplies, a population that was too big or too small for its resources, low productivity of labour, and the as yet slow progress in controlling nature. Between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century, these constraints hardly changed at all. And men did not even explore the limits of what was possible.

It is worth insisting on this slow progress, this inertia. Overland transport, for example, very early possessed the elements which could have led to its being perfected. And indeed here and there, one finds faster speeds being reached because modern roads were built, or because vehicles carrying goods and passengers were improved, or new staging-posts established. But progress of this kind only became widespread by about 1830, that is just before the railway revolution. It was only then that overland transport by road became commonplace, regular, well-developed and finally available to the majority; so it was only then that the limits of the possible were actually reached. And this is not the only area in which backwardness persisted. In the end, the only real change, innovation and revolution along the borderline between possible and impossible came with the nineteenth century and the changed face of the world.

This gives the present book a certain unity: it is a long journey backwards from the facilities and habits of present-day life. Indeed it is a journey to another planet, another human universe. It is quite easy to imagine being transported to, say, Voltaire's house at Ferney, and talking to him for a long time without being too surprised. In the world of ideas, the men of the eighteenth century are our contemporaries: their habits of mind and their feelings are sufficiently close to

ours for us not to feel we are in a foreign country. But if the patriarch of Ferney invited us to stay with him for a few days, the details of his everyday life, even, the way he looked after himself, would greatly shock us. Between his world and ours, a great gulf would open up: lighting at night, heating, transport, food, illness, medicine. So we have to strip ourselves in imagination of all the surroundings of our own lives if we are to swim against the current of time and look for the rules which for so long locked the world into a stability which is quite hard to explain if one thinks of the fantastic change which was to follow.

In drawing up this inventory of the possible, we shall often meet what I called in the introduction 'material civilization'. For the possible does not only have an upper limit; it also has a lower limit set by the mass of that 'other half' of production which refuses to enter fully into the movement of exchange. Ever-present, all-pervasive, repetitive, material life is run according to routine: people go on sowing wheat as they always have done, planting maize as they always have done, terracing the paddy-fields as they always have done, sailing in the Red Sea as they always have done. The obstinate presence of the past greedily and steadily swallows up the fragile lifetime of men. And this layer of stagnant history is enormous: all rural life, that is 80 to 90% of the world's population, belongs to it for the most part. It would of course be very difficult to say where this leaves off and the sophisticated and agile market economy begins. There is certainly no clear demarcation line as between oil and water. It is not always possible to make a firm decision that a given actor, agent or action is on one side of the barrier or the other. And *material civilization* has to be portrayed, as I intend to portray it, alongside that *economic civilization*, if I may so call it, which co-exists with it, disturbs it and explains it *a contrario*. But that the barrier exists, and that there are enormous consequences, cannot be questioned.

This double register (economic and material) is in fact the product of a multiseular process of evolution. Material life, between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries, is the prolongation of an ancient society and economy, which are very slowly, imperceptibly being transformed; gradually and with all the success and failures such an enterprise entails, they are erecting above them a higher form of society, the full weight of which they are obliged to bear. Since the process began, there has been coexistence of the upper and lower levels, with endless variation in their respective volumes. In seventeenth-century Europe for instance, material life, the alternative economy, must have been swollen by the recession in the economy. It is certainly doing so in front of our own eyes, since the recession that began in 1973-4. So the boundary between the upper and lower storey is by nature uncertain: now one is ahead, now the other. I have known villages which were still living at the pace of the seventeenth or eighteenth century in 1929. Falling behind in this way may be deliberate or unintentional. The market economy was not strong enough before the eighteenth century to seize and mould according to its rules the great mass of the infra-economy, which was often protected by distance and isolation. Nowadays on the other

hand, if there is a substantial sector outside the 'economy' or outside the market, it is more likely to reflect a refusal from below, than negligence or inadequacy of the exchange system organized by the State or society. The result, however, is bound to be analogous in more ways than one.

In any case, the co-existence of the upper and lower levels forces upon the historian an illuminating dialectic. How can one understand the towns without understanding the countryside, money without barter, the varieties of poverty without the varieties of luxury, the white bread of the rich without the black bread of the poor?

It remains for me to justify one last choice: that of introducing everyday life, no more no less, into the domain of history. Was this useful? Or necessary? Everyday life consists of the little things one hardly notices in time and space. The more we reduce the focus of vision, the more likely we are to find ourselves in the environment of material life: the broad sweep usually corresponds to History with a capital letter, to distant trade routes, and the networks of national or urban economies. If we reduce the length of the time observed, we either have the event or the everyday happening. The event is, or is taken to be, unique; the everyday happening is repeated, and the more often it is repeated the more likely it is to become a generality or rather a structure. It pervades society at all levels, and characterises ways of being and behaving which are perpetuated through endless ages. Sometimes a few anecdotes are enough to set up a signal which points to a way of life. There is a drawing which shows Maximilian of Austria at table, in about 1513: he is putting his hand into a dish. Two centuries or so later, the Princess Palatine tells how Louis XIV, when he allowed his children to sit up to table for the first time, forbade them to eat differently from him, and in particular to eat with a fork as an over-zealous tutor had taught them. So when did Europe invent table manners? I have seen a Japanese costume of the fifteenth century; and found it very like one of the eighteenth; and a Spanish traveller once described his conversation with a Japanese diplomat who was astonished and even shocked to see Europeans appear in such very different clothing at intervals of only a few years. Is the passion for fashion a peculiarly European thing? Is it insignificant? Through little details, travellers' notes, a society stands revealed. The ways people eat, dress, or lodge, at the different levels of that society, are never a matter of indifference. And these snapshots can also point out contrasts and disparities between one society and another which are not all superficial. It is fascinating, and I do not think pointless to try and reassemble these imageries.

So I have ventured in several directions: the possible and the impossible, the ground floor and the first storey: the images of daily life. This complicated the design of the book in advance. There are simply too many things to say. How shall I begin?*

* Notes to the text are all at the end of the volume.