

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE WORLD

by *Fernand BRAUDEL**



The Perspective of the World is the third volume of Fernand Braudel's trilogy *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Centuries*, where the author brings a deeper perspective of the European economy, sociology and geography. A reputed French historian of the past century, Fernand Paul Braudel (1902-1985) earned a special place in the complex study of history due to the multiple and nuanced approaches of his works. The volume *The Perspective of the World* was published in 1979 with the entire trilogy, and represents an economic history of four centuries, which combines the analysis of the European time and space from a political, cultural and social

perspective. The context of the publication of the trilogy is rather complex: the Cold War was at its peak, the arms race between the United States and the USSR marked the European time and space, the war in Afghanistan was starting and the European Monetary System was being established.

The beginning of the book analyses the divisions of space and time in Europe, observing how the economy was covering the space in different ways and layers.

* *Fernand BRAUDEL, The perspective of the world, Meridiane Publishing House, 1989, Bucharest.*



Sixteenth-century Europe was, in the author's view, a world-economy near the Mediterranean Sea. The first chapter describes the Mediterranean as a united economic space during the domination of the Spanish Empire under Charles V and the Ottoman Empire before the conquest of Constantinople. The civilizations that marked the Mediterranean space at that time were the Greek submitted to the Turks, the Muslim based in Istanbul and the Christian based in Florence and Rome. In order to exist, a world-economy needed its space with boundaries that give it a sense, this space involves a centre that is a city, a dominant capitalism and a hierarchy (this space is a sum of particular economies, where only the centre is relatively rich).

According to the author, the trends of the world-economies were the following: the slowly varying space, a dominant capitalist city, the succession of the cities' supremacy, the hierarchy of its zones and its density. The variation of the space was given by the amplitude of trade for which the borders were exceeded. Passing the limits (often geographical limits such as the sea or the mountain) of an economy brought a bigger loss than the earning for which the limit is crossed. Cultural, religious or financial boundaries were surpassed by the advantages generated by commerce. In the centre of the world-economy, there was a dominant capitalist city having "satellite cities surrounding the pole, from a bigger or smaller or more or less respectful distance, associated or in complicity and rather serving their secondary role. Their activity goes hand in hand with the activity of the dominant city: they guard around it, they direct the business flow towards it, they redistribute and guide the goods that the dominant city sends to them, they hang on its credit or they bare it." (Braudel 1989, 22) The primacy of cities was a phenomenon of succession; the dominant cities did not remain permanently dominant, they substituted each other in the urban hierarchy. The more or less total urban dominations depended on the varying economic power; political power was irregular too (because money may prove stronger than it). The succession of domination reveals the weapons for domination: navigation, trade, industry, credit, political power or political violence.

The author achieved a hierarchy of the various zones from the proximity of the cities, the various zones around the center looked to the cities forming a whole, and the accumulation of resources was an important factor in the hierarchy. The economy that was superior in the hierarchy encompassed production through the control of collection, storage and organization of distribution, conducted its flow of activity especially through credits (Braudel 1989, 35). The big city was dominating its abstract field, which was a zone where fairs and villages lacked.

The spatial plan of the world-economy meant an overlapping of zones tied among each other at different levels. The three categories of areas are: a small centre, rather developed zones of secondary level and the marginal zones. The qualities and characteristics of society, economy, technique, culture and public order were



shifting from one zone to another. Neutral zones were those lying near the developed economies, but which maintained an archaic existence.

A world-economy reveals itself as a huge coverage with an infrastructure proper for its development. It has density, depth, means of defence and efficient force at its centre and at the regions around its centre. The latter may not be well connected to the decision-making centres either. The world-economy is described by the author as an order facing other orders, which is not isolated and in whose space many other entities worked together. The economic order and the international division of labour were showing, in Braudel's view, a modern age where economic priority became more and more pressing: *it oriented, troubled, and influenced other orders*.

Between the 15th and 18th centuries, the territorial state did not have the force to fill in all the social spheres, and therefore economy left it behind. England was the first European example of national economy in the 18th century, marking the moment when the territorial state became more powerful than its economy. At the beginning of the time period analyzed by Braudel, the state-cities Venice and Amsterdam, as trade cities lying at the crossroads between trade routes, were developing and thriving becoming important economic centres in the European world-economy. The monarchic order appears nearby the developed centre, an order that cannot rule without bourgeoisie, that it moderately encouraged (an example in this case would be much later France during Napoleon's rule, where Foreign Minister Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord was himself a representative of the relationship between monarchy and bourgeoisie at his time). The empire was a form of world-economy too, described by the author as an archaic organization which represented the triumph of the politics over economics.

According to Braudel, during the time of the pole-cities, society was developing slower than the economy, the fight among the social classes was a fight for priority and fast adaptation to the economic trend. Economy imposed the rhythm through the control of the tasks and of the work. But the economy was controlled by its basic needs at its turn. That is why no economic pattern completely matched everywhere, because the basic needs were different. Cultures and civilizations represent other orders as well, orders which organize the space and represent other economies. Colonialist Europe is described as an example of world-economy. A world-economy may overlap with a civilization, but not entirely. Culture competes economy in time, and religious values are at the core of each civilization.

The differences between a world-economy and a universe-civilization are shown through examples, such as Genoa and Venice versus Florence between the 13th and 15th centuries. Genoa and Venice were economic poles although their creation of culture did not mark their time, while Florence created Renaissance; in the 17th century, Amsterdam was economically triumphant, but Rome was the cultural centre of Europe. This reality of the 17th century envisaged today's case of the United



States, which is a world economic power, but not a cultural centre. The economic changes that occurred at the centre reached out to the marginal area or to the centres of other world-economies. Braudel synthesizes the economy of the 16th century by describing it as a “transmission belt”, the centre was imposing the price and created the trend in other centres in order to impose itself there as well. Such an example is 17th century Amsterdam, which was the centre of the world after the effects of the Black Plague had diminished the influence of Spain, Italy and the Mediterranean Sea, in general. Starting from 1809-1810, England had overtaken the European supremacy, and France gained its supremacy after the Napoleon was overthrown.

The second chapter analyzes the advantages that centre-cities had because they assured themselves their development through the roads, markets and money they accumulated. In today’s terms, the access road, the bank, and the coin are the facilities they were after and that created cities. Currency represents the main pillar of the European trade revolution that started in urban areas, connected by the need for exchange, defence and administration (Braudel 1989, 113). Unlike Western Europe, the East did not have such developed trade facilities, the East still had a barter economy in a time when the West already had currency and credit.

The beginning of the European world-economy was marked by two trade poles – the Netherlands and Italy, the North and the South. One cannot precisely say when exactly did the the Netherlands overtook trade supremacy in Europe, but the Hanseatic League, signed in 1396, had an essential role in the development of trade in the North Sea area. The other commercial pole, the South with Genoa, Venice and Pisa, flourished after the Crusades, which brought the Mediterranean to the attention of the traders. After that, China’s opening to the trade outside its borders brought the Black Sea to the attention of the European merchants in the XVIIIth century (Braudel 1989, 133). In the XVth century the most important trade point was in Venice, the European West depended upon it while the East was still facing invasions and could not reach the economic development of the West, so the East remained the marginal area of the European world-economy. During its best time, Venice was a labour economy dominated by money and administration, and Genoa was its competition as Europe’s financial pole and the first city that used gold for its exchange market from Anvers. The financial domination of Genoa was so powerful, that there is this idea that Italy’s unity was achieved by Genoa with the support of the Bank of Italy. Portugal, very developed at that time, suffered because it was not at the centre of the European world-economy, although it had a very developed monetary system. Lisbon remained an important trade centre, outpaced by Anvers which, in the XVIth century was reaching the peak of its capitalist development. In the XVII-th century the North overtook the European commercial power because the industrial activity of Venice was slowing down and the industries from the north starting with that of Amsterdam were thriving. The role of Genoa also decreased because the European



incapacity “to support a financial circulation that was disproportionate to the cash flow and the volume of production” (Braudel 1989, 219).

In the third chapter Amsterdam is described as the last imperialist commercial city. Having the biggest European fleet, the Low Countries gained respect during both peace and war, behaving like a true centre of a world-economy. Moreover, the ties of the Dutch with the Asian commercial routes brought them to the global commercial elite. The Dutch were thus participating to privileged exchange circuits keeping their monopole on the source of commerce and diversifying the tastes of their final clients, thus raising the demand and the offer on the market in order to finally control the price and the profit. But what brought the decline of Amsterdam as a trade pole in the XVIIIth century came from inside the Dutch society and because of the decrease of trade relations with India. The upper social classes, the financial and cultural elites, embraced the French culture and became socially and culturally estranged from the lower classes. This rift at the level of the Dutch society also produced other rifts at the level of professions and crafts, thus having a decisive impact including on the Dutch maritime power. The Dutch labour force was more expensive, more expensive than the French one, could not keep up with the active production which lacked the support to go on. From marginal zones spared by the Dutch, England and France turned into important trade centres which slowly and constantly developed at the expense of the Dutch. In the same time, the trade of the Baltic Sea region especially the Swedish trade, not as strong as the trade of Amsterdam, developed too but the Dutch competition kept it behind until the XVIIIth century. Sweden could not control the whole Baltic Sea and was not a merchandise intermediary either, that was why it could not defeat the Dutch trade. The Low Countries were enjoying the attraction of the inferior and submitted economies, the exchanges, capital and credits necessary to dominate. When England put an end to this domination in the XVIII-th century by creating its influence on the trade routes with Asia, especially with India, the British impetus could no longer be impeded by the Dutch, especially because of the internal shortcomings faced by the latter, but also because England’s public debt in the XVIIIth century was not higher than the double of its GDP and because England was constantly depleting despite all adversities. France, at its turn, took advantage more from its geographic conditions than Amsterdam and England. Moreover, France’s network of roads and rivers encouraged and unified trade and thus facilitated the flow of cash. But “the abundance of space”, as Braudel calls the vast and advantageous expanse of the French territory, after the territorial conquests impeded its economic development in the XIXth century and encouraged the emergence of two poles of power- Paris and Lyon. France was to reach the finalization of its commercial network when the telecommunication lines would know an important development, after the trend set



by the already developed United States. Then New York took the place of London and Paris as centre of a world-economy.

The author further engages in the analysis of the passing from the status of centre of a world-economy to the national markets. The development of a national economy takes place at the core or nearby the centre of a world-economy. The XVIIIth century was opposing the world-economy of Amsterdam to that of England, a city versus a state. The Industrial Revolution made the difference between states and cities even bigger. The national economy was achieved through a series of political, economic, geographic factors and was encompassing various spaces connected among them. This became the main administrative organization starting from the XVIIIth century, after the Dutch decline.

A national market means power and unity and a peasantry that produces enough to feed the cities as well is a success of the agricultural policy. Because the national market is not only a product of economy, but first of all a political product. These premises were important in Europe, but not in the United States where the foundations were laid on an urban basis. This type of development had a major role in the defence of the local colonies from the attacks of the European colonialist powers. Braudel compares the administration of the national market/economy to the accountancy of a firm. According to him, a national accountancy has three variables and three dimensions: patrimony, national income and the income per capita are the variables, and the dimensions are production, incomes and spendings. Such is the analysis at the national level that Braudel achieves for England and France as centres of world-economy of the XVIIIth century. What he meant was to analyze the factors (let us call them national accountancy factors) which contributed to the economic development that the two countries reached after the decline of Amsterdam.

Marginal zones were not thus named because of any economic delay, they were characterized by a larger freedom in comparison to the centre. Moreover, the marginal zones were the key of the access to the centre. They were not as developed as the centre, but they had a strong defensive role and they were guiding the access routes towards the centre. Braudel used the example of Lille which took advantage of its geographic positioning in order to develop its craftsmanship, its relationship with the centre and the trade with the Low Countries. The centre was described by Braudel as a prisoner of the marginal zones. But the centre was also an important factor in establishing an economic flow for the intensively circulated marginal zones had the tendency to follow the economic development of the centre.

The fifth chapter is a socio-economic analysis of the other regions of the world such as the New World, Asia, Russia, Africa and the Extreme Orient, but it also contains an emphasis on the factors that made the United States a global economic centre. Starting from the progress of the United States, the economic globalization with its centre in the United States became more and more clear.



The demographic boom and the eagerness for business from the colonies gave the United States a powerful economic boost in comparison to the economic state of Europe in the XVIIIth century. In the XVIIth century New England thrived due to its fishery businesses of the puritans who had already been named “the Dutch of America” (Braudel 1989, 41). Their businesses flourished and brought about prosperity, economic growth, demographic progress, leading to the discontent of the European economic centre because of the competition and development built across the Atlantic. The colonies were trying to become independent from the centre and conflicts emerged because Spain, France, England and the Low Countries wanted to maintain their influence over the colonies, which produced raw materials, for these colonies to remain marginal zones of the European world-economy, and the colonies wanted to use their economic advantages for their own purposes. Freedom from the European powers came sooner in the North of the New World, the South would overtake complete power later in 1940. Latin America gained independence from the Spanish and Portuguese colonizers even later, it remained a marginal zone of the European world-economy for a longer time.

At the end of the fifth chapter other regions are being analysed and compared to Europe as economic centre. Africa was a marginal zone and a strategic communication tie with India from the first colonies. Russia was a world-economy itself, an autonomous zone with its own commercial network and intense trade exchange with China, Iran and Central Asia. Once the European trade network grew, the merchandise and the European tastes were permeating Russia marking its development and its opening to new trade routes and engaging it into its own Industrial Revolution.

The Ottoman Empire, as a world-economy itself, encompassed a very large territory. The Black Sea was to the Ottoman Empire as important as India was to Spain (Braudel 1989, 126). The Black Sea was very well secured by the empire because it assured its commercial circularity, it was “indispensable to the supplying of Istanbul and to the arming of the Turkish fleets” (Braudel 1989, 136). The economic centre of the Ottoman Empire was reestablished in Istanbul around 1750, as the empire had had multiple economic centres before that (Cairo, Aleppo, Alexandria etc) because of its large territory which imposed this multipolarity. But the economy of the empire could not compete with the European world-economy.

Although the author does not mention the situation of the Romanian Principalities, we will stop at this subject in order to detail their state, as a parallel with the events that marked the European world-economy. The Romanian Principalities were lying near the Black Sea, dominated by the Ottoman Empire and frequently attacked by invading troops between the XVth and the XVIIIth centuries, the Romanian Principalities were a marginal zone of a world-economy, they do not reach the economic level they strive to. Venice, centre-city in the XVth century, had signed a peace treaty with the Ottomans in 1479 in order to be able to continue and defend its trade. In 1484



the Romanian Principalities lost two important citadels Chilia and Cetatea Albă to the Ottomans, those were two very important citadels to the Romanian defence at the Black Sea. During this time, the Romanian art and culture developed and formed a new characteristic stage even to the Romanian political and military objectives at that time. During the XVIth century the Ottoman domination in the Romanian territories grew stronger, but “the exterior commerce of the Romanian Principalities - which maintain their own customs system- is oriented especially during the second half of the XVIth century- to the Ottoman market. Romanians need to sell mostly, and generally at lower prices than those of the international markets, products such as wheat, sheep, butter, honey. Muntenia and Moldova become the supplying spot of Constantinople, the larder of the kingdom, as it was said at the time. The commercial inventory remained excess...” (Giurescu C.C. 1972). And so would remain until the XVIIIth century, to new political and economic pressures exerted by the Istanbul and the Phanariot leaders, whose reign would end a century later.

The most extended world-economy studied by the author is that of the Extreme Orient made of Islam, India and China. The Extreme Orient had a rather closed and complementary commerce, as its countries were trading among them. Asia is the fourth world-economy analyzed in the book. Asia was a more densely populated land than Europe and was supplying European markets with most of their luxury products. The Asian colossus was a coherent space due to its coin in spite of all ,indispensable assymetries’ between the centres (Surat, Bengal etc) and its marginal zones. From the beginning of the Moghul Empire in the XVIth century, the commerce of the region thrives due to crafts and intense trade with various fabrics, and its lying by the Indian Ocean made it an attractive commercial destination. But in the XVIIIth century its economy marked a downfall and India was overtaken by the British during a time when India had to face many hostile factors, such as the competition of the European merchandise, the effects of the Industrial Revolution, the interferences of foreign forces, its own capitalist organization based on castes which impeded economic development but favoured the accumulation of capital, and the despotic states that India consisted in. India did not have an industrial capitalism, but rather its own form of progress by traditional means. It was a major commercial joint without marking the centre of any world-economy, but rather by counting on its faraway commerce. India was sharing the Extreme Orient with China, the two giants were enclining the trade balance to Malacca peninsula during their flourishing times. A domination of India was impossible without Malacca, a major connection between the Pacific and the Indian oceans. And that is a reality today,too, if we observe the importance of the Malacca Strait to the global trade and defence. Controlled by the United States, this strait or better said avoiding it and the creation of an alternative route controlled by China would be the basis of the Chinese investment project from the region of the Kra Thailand canal.



At the end of the volume the author compares the Industrial Revolution to growth. Started in England in the second half of the XVIIIth century, the Industrial Revolution expressed itself as economic and social progresses. The goods on the market, technique, industries, production, all then knew the development that turned England into an economic centre that imposed the pace of growth in Europe and across the ocean, in the New World. Agriculture was the only field that could not keep up with the English demographic progress; growth needed consistency. The revolution of the cotton, iron, of the loom, of the steam machines, the successful division of labour, all contributed to the progress of the English society and economy, finalized by the faraway trade. This development attracted the hostility of other countries competing in the commercial sectors where England dominated.

Observing today's world in the terms of Fernand Braudel, we might say that the shorter terms of stability in between global crises may be indicators of the more and more frequent clashes among the centres of the actual world-economies. The Covid pandemic represents one factor of confrontation among the centres of world-economies. China's speed to announce its getting out of the pandemic was a manner to assure the continuity of its economy, in competition with that of the United States strongly damaged by the effects of the virus. Every state that was confronted to the pandemic was put in the situation to weigh and balance its healthcare challenges in order to minimize loss. Thus, the pandemic pointed out like an X-ray to the central zones, the medium zones and the marginal zones of the world as a whole, but also the relationships among them.

Without diminishing the role and amplitude of Braudel's masterpiece, we note some aspects which result from the structuralism presented by the author in the reviewed volume. The subtle, but general idea, exposed in the volume is that the international economic and political environment and the geographic determinism are the factors which prevail in the development of a state or pole-city if we are to refer to the European economy before the XVIIIth century, as Braudel studied it. We will further try to bring other perspectives as counterarguments to this thinking.

Once we look at the actual Chinese ascension, for example, from this perspective of the centre of a world-economy, we observe the manner in which it dominates certain sectors of the international trade. But the Chinese ascension takes place in spite of its geographical conditions and characteristics which are unfavourable to the economic development that China enjoys nowadays. Moreover, China's industrial products and its soft power component fill in the vacuums of political and economic power that emerged in various places of the world, by contracting time and space with the infrastructures that were built on the territories of many countries. But in the view expressed by the military strategist Edward Luttwak in *The Rise of*



China vs The Logic of Strategy, the shortcomings that China is confronted to are: the erroneous belief that the world is shaped by the Chinese ascension, premature Chinese assertiveness, the so-called 'autism' of the Chinese internal structures, the historical reminiscences of China's conduct and the resistance that many countries developed against China (Australia, Norway, Indonesia etc). Edward Luttwak opposes strategic thinking to the determinist factors proposed by Braudel. Opposite to this perspective, Braudel's structuralism would not have counted on the Chinese ascension in the given conditions, considering also its geographical characteristics, but it has been happening especially since Deng Xiaoping. Paradoxically or not, it has been happening under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.

Another approach beside the two already mentioned is studied by J.R. McNeill and William H. McNeill in their book *The Human Web*. We are not making a concept of their theory, but rather mention it as a different approach regarding the way in which economic development influenced space, time and humans in time. The two authors propose the perspective of the human web in order to explain the way how economic networks developed and created international trade as we see it today. In their view, humans generated networks, exchanges they needed, influencing time and space and contracting them for their own use. Although Braudel does analyze the influence of the networks generated by various economic contexts, they do not have priority in his view, but the capitalist structure- the coverage that evolves from urban to national and transnational through its mechanisms and subtleties. Like the approaches presented here, there are various other points of view to look at the history of the global economic system and capitalism, even under the socio-economic wrapping presented by Braudel. This shell of the economic development may well present itself under other forms than the structuralist one, even leaving aside the historic, social, economic and political phenomena generated by the pandemic.

Moreover, Braudel's approach is not singular, because the socio-economic history of capitalism was also studied by other authors. We mention here Immanuel Wallerstein, Karl Marx, Max Weber. While Karl Marx was the promoter of the economic structuralist thinking, Max Weber emphasized the role of ethics to the capitalist development. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of Braudel's book comes from the definition, hierarchization and classification of the economic cycles from the perspective of the inherent civilization and from the synthesis of the development and transformation of the world-economies from basis to top, from pole-city to developed state and transnational joint.

How are Braudel's writings relevant today then? His analysis of the historic times from the beginnings of capitalism and their impact on civilization cannot be contested. Capitalism with all its aspects cannot be put aside, just as Braudel's writings on the history of capitalism and its influence on the structures of daily



human life cannot be neglected. The depth and attention given to historic, social and economic phenomena which accompany the capitalist development make *The Perspective of the World* a genuine source of knowledge.

Conclusion

The contributions of the book to its field are remarkable. The analogy of the world's economic chronologies, the pedagogic way to emphasize the historical and economic the impact of capitalism on the human life, all these bring a particular light on economic history and transformation between the XVth and the XVIIIth century. The modern trends reached by the book are obvious, especially when we remember that the author studies capitalism from its beginnings. The circulation of resources, of humans and of money are observed by Braudel both in particular and in general, at micro- and macro-economic level, in the history that wraps them without entirely revealing their mystery, in the societies where they develop without suppression.

Which trend do we live now? This is one of the book's greatest questions. In 1979, at the end of the second volume, the author stated that the world was engaging in a crisis whose time lapse and nature were unfamiliar to him. Are the economic asymmetries between centre and marginal zones still relevant today? They certainly are, and not only them, but also the struggles among them. If we look again at the pandemic context for example, but not only in its context, we may observe the efforts that states made in order to preserve their economies, in order to have access to scarce resources because of the lack of deliveries or the lack of production. Conquering another world-economy, let us say, is more and more defined by the conquest of the space and time allocated to reach it and cross it. Mobility and knowledge continuously compete against the physical field (like land and sea) in order to become more evident in the advance of technology and virtual space. Just like during the Industrial Revolution, but in a more advanced stage, these abstract notions are trends dictated by the economic centres of the world, global waves that the medium and marginal zones are trying to keep up with. But the global interconnections that appeared in the meantime impose the need for adaptation, flexibility and mobility among the global economic centres just as among the marginal zones. The way in which China has been struggling and still struggles to assure the Covid vaccine deliveries to marginal spaces such as Africa, the focus on conflicts from marginal zones, may reveal a bigger interest for addition, for the merging of the centre with the marginal zone. If during the Cold War one spoke of spheres of influence, from Braudel's perspective we may look at today's context from the perspective of the options and struggles of the economic centres in order to mark a marginal zone where they would impose themselves and that they would merge with themselves.



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