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A few first thoughts about Fernand Braudel and Norman Jacobs...

There is something curious and intriguing about Braudel's massive attempt to chart the development of capitalism. While he has laid out, first in the 1375 pages of his two-volume **The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II** and then in the 1992 pages of his three volume **Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century**, a marvellous tapestry of **what** happened, there is a curious modesty concerning **why** it happened.

The deeper question Braudel is asking is, how did capitalism and modernity emerge and what has been its progress? Much of his effort is devoted to charting the history at the three famous levels he distinguished - longue duree, middling time, short time (quote). His account remains the most ambitious, learned and profound attempt at the 'total history' (quote) of a civilization ever attempted. Yet, after all the splendid enjoyment of reading it, there is an empty feeling - because nothing has been really explained. There can be little doubt that Braudel himself realizes this, as we shall see.

Braudel argues that the earlier grand theories to account for the development of 'civilization and capitalism'. While alluding to Marx on a number of occasions, and concurring with his view that feudalism paved the way for capitalism, Braudel never adopts a Marxist framework. Likewise, Max Weber is put on one side. His theory concerning protestantism and capitalism is rejected, his dating of the origins of capitalism is shown to be inaccurate, and Braudel confesses that Weber has "a subtle and confusing method of argument - which I must confess to the reader, I am as allergic as Lucien Febvre was". (Wheels, p.568) Weber's great opponent, Werner Sombart, receives equally short shrift (Wheels, p.572ff), although Braudel agrees with him, against Weber, that Florence saw the origins of capitalism. Finally, he feels that Henri Pirenne's theory 'concerning the periodization of the social history of capitalism' is "still worth some consideration" (Wheels, 478). Yet while squeezing some ideas out of Pirenne, he is also critical.

If the great figures of the past (and there are many, for instance De Tocqueville or Bloch who are not even considered, provide no answers, then what does Braudel put forward in their place. The place we would expect some answers would be in sections devoted to summaries and conclusions in the three volumes of 'Civilization and Capitalism'. The first volume has a chapter entitled 'Conclusion' which admits that there is no explanation. "Here and there I would have liked more explanation, justification and example. But books cannot be expanded to order, and to encompass all the many and varied constituents of material life would require close and systematic research, followed by much synthesis and analysis. All that is still lacking." This is certainly true, and the rest of the Conclusion does not provide any clues.

If we move to the second volume, **The Wheels of Commerce**, it is significant that after almost six hundred pages of description, there is a final section of only one and a half pages revealingly titled 'By Way of Conclusion'. This has only generalities to offer. A capitalist process only developed "out of certain economic and social conditions which either prepared or facilitated its progress". (Wheels, p.600). These are that there must be an expanding market economy - but this is a necessary and not sufficient condition. Secondly, there must be a certain kind of society, with many features including open

social mobility, a particular political character etc. Thirdly, there must be long-distance trading. This hardly moves us further on, and we turn to the third volume with a growing anxiety that no strong thesis is going to emerge.

In the foreword to the volume, we receive a warning that any kind of analytic theory to explain why European civilization emerged as it did is unlikely to be attempted. Braudel confesses that he is taking a gamble and "I have in other words abandoned myself to the march of time, with its ups and downs and its own logic...the gamble, as the reader will realize, incorporates a sizeable presumption - that is that history can offer itself both as explanation (one of the more convincing ones) and as a means of verification..." (Perspective, 17) If we turn again to the end, we have another, slightly longer, chapter entitled 'By Way of Conclusion: Past and Present'. Here he makes a number of sensible observations, noting for instance that capitalism is not simply an 'economic system', that it lies in contradiction to 'culture', that it still has a good deal of life in it and may not be in imminent danger of collapse.

We finally, after a total of nearly two thousand pages, reach 'A conclusion to end conclusions: capitalism and the market economy'. This basically argues that "there is a dialectic still very much alive between capitalism on the one hand, and its antithesis, the 'non-capitalism' of the lower level on the other hand". (p.630). In the final paragraph, he re-iterates the importance of distinguishing between the market economy and capitalism. (p.632) There is no general theory or explanation offer. We end with a whimper and not a bang.

No doubt there could be, and have been, many attempts to explain why such a magnificent and erudite set of volumes should have ended in such an absence of explanation. Some would say that the theory is there, but it is embedded in the narrative and hence we are wrong to look for detached conclusions. Others might detect this as an early recognition by Braudel that in this post-modernist age, hegemonic and general explanatory frameworks were both impossible and undesirable. Others might look at the way in which he had set up the problems and defined his terms and find the causes for the final failure. Others might argue that the intellectual effort of this grand endeavour occurred over such a long period (19 - 19)that Braudel found that theories which seemed plausible at one stage of research, no longer seemed convincing - a frequent danger in any discipline.

Whatever our explanation, it is clear that the author himself feels uncomfortable about the absence of some positive alternative theory to those which he has demolished or ignored. This is shown in a relatively unnoticed but fascinating aspect of his general explanations. Unable to find satisfaction in the great figures of the past, Adam Smith, Weber, Sombart, Pirenne and others, he turns towards the end of his most theoretical work, volume 2 of 'Civilization and Capitalism', to another author whose obscure work is hardly known today to any but specialists. This is Norman Jacobs. At the very important end of this work, Braudel devotes some eight pages to summarizing the ideas of Norman Jacobs. (Wheels, pp.585-594)

This is the only place in the more that three and a half thousand pages of his two major works, where Braudel makes a long summary of the works of a single author. He himself notes the oddity of what he is doing and apologizes for it: "Before turning to the second explanation suggested...I would like to open a long parenthesis and I hope a useful one, inspired by Norman Jacobs' book **The origin of Modern Capitalism and Eastern Asia**, published in Hong Kong in 1958." (p.585) What then does he draw

attention to?

Firstly, he summarizes Jacobs' method, which according to Braudel has three admirable features. Firstly Jacobs attempts a genuine comparative approach. Jacobs attempts a three-way comparison between Japan, China and Europe, in order to address the problem of why Japan and Europe became capitalist, and not China. Despite some faults in execution, Braudel concludes that "the comparison is interesting to follow and instructive throughout." (p.586).

Secondly, he notes that Jacobs takes a long time period, for he "does not hesitate to set side by side the **entire** history of China and Japan..."(p.586). Braudel adds that "I can only applaud him, since I have done much the same thing for Europe, frequently referring back to the great turning-point of the eleventh century or even earlier to explain developments in modern times. Jacobs follows a similar procedure..." (p.586). As Braudel writes, "Implicitly and explicitly, Norman Jacobs is thus relating the preconditions of capitalism to a very long-term evolution over many centuries; it is by accumulating the historical evidence that he prefers to let the solution emerge." (p.586).

Thirdly, Jacobs takes that 'holistic' or 'total' approach which Braudel and others of the **Annales** school had advocated so strongly. "He tackles everything: trade, property, political authority, the division of labour, social stratification and mobility, kinship, inheritance systems, the role of religion..." (p.586). Braudel continues, "The result is a lengthy and original book, which I shall summarize here in a rather subjective way, adding my own glosses and interpretations as I go along." (p.586)

What does Braudel principally comment on? Firstly, he notes that it seems that it is the State which is the chief obstacle to capitalism in China. "It could be said in conclusion that China was living under a 'totalitarian' regime..."(p.588). Thus while there was a developed market economy, capitalism could not develop. He then notes Jacobs argument linking feudal disintegration and the weakness of the State in Japan to the development of capitalism in that country. The relative weakness of the state meant that "The end result sooner or later would be a set of quasi-independent provinces, powerful, protecting their own towns, merchants, artisan professions and particular interests." (p.589) Thus, in contrast to China, Japan had a pluralistic and open system. "Simplifying, one might say that in a kind of anarchy not unlike that of the European Middle Ages, everything developed simultaneously in the diversified arena of Japan..." (p.590) Thus there developed in Japan an early form of capitalism out of a thriving market economy, a rising trade network and a relatively modest political system. "So everything conspired to produce a kind of early capitalism which was the product neither of imitation of foreigners, nor of initiatives by any religious communities..." (p.592)

While pointing to some weaknesses in Jacobs' work, for instance that he "wrongly takes it for granted that the essential features of European pre-capitalism are already known", that China and India can be lumped together, that he omits Islam, and that he makes too much of the contrast between China and Japan, Braudel basically accepts Jacobs central thesis, which is that there is some curious structural similarity between Japan and Europe. Japan, he accepts, rapidly developed a modern capitalist economy "above all perhaps, because its based its recent industrial takeoff (on the western model) on a long-standing merchant capitalism which it had patiently built by its own efforts. 'The grain was growing under the snow' for a long time - an image from a book written in 1930 by Takekoshi...". Braudel notes that Takekoshi, "was also fascinated by the economic and social similarities between Europe and Japan,

each of which had developed along its own path, by similar processes, although the results were not exactly the same." (pp.593-4) Thus, on the final page of the book, he argues that 'Capitalism could only emerge from a certain kind of society....What was required was a multiseular and general movement of society, as is proved by both Japan and Europe in their own separate ways." (pp.600-601). In fact, all three of the factors which Braudel enumerates as basic to the development of capitalism, a vigorous and expanding market economy, a particular kind of society and polity, and the development of long-distance trading, could be found in both Japan and Europe.

That Braudel should have been so very impressed by a little-known work published many years before, when he was aware of all the grand theoretical structures of the preceding two centuries is intriguing. We might wonder whether any other writer who has faced the problem of why and how capitalism and industrialism have developed has noticed the importance of Jacobs. The answer is yes.

One of the most ambitious attempts to solve the Weberian problem of the origins of a peculiar civilization in western Europe, is that of E.L.Jones in his **European Miracle**. In a curious way, Jones does the same thing as Braudel, that is to say he goes into an intriguing parenthesis on the basis of Jacobs' work, and then pulls himself back from it and proceeds in another direction. Let us examine this odd aside.

Jones argues that "The **very** long-term economic history of the world was thus acted out in Eurasia." Nevertheless, he argues that "when we come to contrast Europe and Asia, we shall deliberately exclude the tiny and exceptional economy of Japan, despite the immense interest of its later development." (157) The word 'tiny' might seem to be the reason for the exclusion, and given the considerable economic activity in Japan a rather curious one. Yet on further examination, the reason seems to be somewhat different. Jones had read Jacobs' work and in fact found that Japan did not fit into his contrast between Europe and Asia. Hence, like any anomaly, it is worth mentioning, bur rather than shake the model, it has to be put on one side.

Jones recognizes that "Japan provides, intriguingly enough, a comparison rather than a contrast with Europe." He notes that by the late Tokugawa "there had emerged an economic structure of marked urbanism, magnetization, internal trade (much of it coastal), rising agricultural productivity, and regionally patterned rural industry. This was remarkable for its outline similarity with late reindustrialize Britain. Yet there was only the slenderest connection with Europe..." (p.)

He summarizes several developments in the relations between the economy and politics which he thinks lay behind the economic dynamism, and suggests reasons for the slow growth of population. "Between 1700 and 1825, zero net population growth permitted enough capital accumulation for the country to modernize its structure in many essentials, before the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1854...We have seen that Europe undertook a similar modernization before industrializing."

Jones then suggests that "One might almost list characteristics of the Tokugawa economy as if speaking of some country in Europe, and only at the end add, 'by the way, this was Japan!'" He is obviously persuaded that "In deep-seated economic ratios and social structures Japan was a surprisingly 'western' country." Jones's views are clearly based on the work of Norman Jacobs, for he continues, "Jacobs (1958) stresses that Japan and western Europe, without a common cultural heritage,

have significant social heritages in common, whereas Japan and China, for all their common cultural heritage, do not. Jacobs' book contains a point-by-point contrast of Japanese and Chinese values and a comparison between the values of Japan and western Europe." Jones ends with a famous, or notorious, dramatically accepting the central argument of Jacobs: "Indeed, in certain respects Japan was as 'European' as if it had been towed away and anchored off the Isle of Wight."

Yet the curious possibilities this opens up are then closed off hurriedly. "We must leave these speculations aside, and in the rest of this book concentrate on the contrasting light thrown on Europe by the economic history of the larger systems of mainland Asia. The proper 'controls' on European experience are China, India and Islam. " (Jones, 159) It is as if Fleming had noticed the mould on the saucer and hurriedly washed it down the sink as too complex to contemplate.

When then is this Norman Jacobs who has so convinced such eminent world thinkers? Is there more in his book which would help us in our quest for the origins of capitalism. In the following sections I would like to expound, in a critical way, some of his arguments. Clearly only a few of the ideas contained in a very compressed and rich work can be dealt with.