

Question 4

“Cultures (or civilizations: the two words, whatever people say, are interchangeable in most contexts) are ways of ordering space just as economies are.”¹ With the rise of the Annales School in post-war France, the methodological diversification of historical cataloging allowed more nuanced, functional histories to explain overlooked narratives. With this paradigm shift of the entire historical discipline, new studies favor how scholars define, and examine different societies. For Fernand Braudel, an Annales School historian, the focus on the entirety of “civilization” in his work *The Perspective of the World: Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century*, underscores important functions of history that concepts, such as “society” or “regimes,” simply leave unattended. For Stephen Kotkin, and his discipline-shaking monograph *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*, these factors demonstrate the necessity of highlighting the study of civilization as a whole. By highlighting, analyzing, and interpreting the meanings of “civilization,” Braudel and Kotkin deliver investigating historians invaluable tools for the evaluation of civilization as an essential historical concept. Furthermore, by examining these factors, and the methodologies in which they are examined, the decisive cohesiveness of using civilization as an investigative tool stresses its necessity to the discipline.

When undertaking the methodological possibilities of studying civilization, Fernand Braudel ushered a paradigm shift into how historians comprehend culture, society, and economy. Throughout the third volume of his monumental work *The Perspective of the World: Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century*, the history of early European capitalism has trekked. For the investigating historian, the question arises, in what ways does this nuanced, methodological

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Perspective of the World: Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century*, trans. Sian Reynolds (London: London: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, 1984), 65.

approach benefit the historical discipline? The answer lies in Braudel's utilization of the concept of civilization in his analysis of structural foundations that governed the progression of Europe from the Middle Ages to the abstract Renaissance. Civilization, according to Braudel, however, represented something far more valuable than a specific focus on concepts like society or economics. For the Annales scholar, the necessity of mapping Europe from the pillars of these complex conceptions helped to paint a more detailed portrayal of total history.² According to Braudel, the study of civilization benchmarked culture, society, economy, and regime. In more concrete terms, Braudel declared that by studying the entirety of what constituted the definition of “civilization,” he revealed that the combination of social, economic, and political factors determined its validity and importance. Intersectional abstractions, like the concept of the economy, gave its fullest benefit to historians when studied as a part of a whole. To separate the economy, or culture, or society, from the other factors that constituted the makeup of European civilization, added little to historiographic understanding. These primary arguments underscored Braudel’s refreshing methodology. Various factors of human history needed to come together to paint a truer portrait of Europe, capitalism, and the dynamic augmentations developing within it.

Take for example Braudel’s investigation into capitalism, slavery, and the “Unexpected Rise of Portugal.”³ Braudel’s methodological focus examined that Portugal could only ascend to global domination through a variety of differing factors. The empire’s access to a plethora of seaside towns and the mercantile ambition to colonize commercial centers, like Cape Bojador, accentuate Portugal's importance within the European commercial center.⁴ For a historian examining only the economic parameters of this development, key factors of Portugal's rise remain left out of the narrative. The emphasis on civilization as a methodological device must

² Ibid, 22-27.

³ Ibid, 138-140.

⁴ Ibid, 141-143.

not be understated. Braudel argued that while the Portuguese economy did rise to economic prominence, its ascendancy relied on the contributions of other European powers. The Florentines and the Genoese bolstered the colonial abilities of Portugal by spreading the cultivation of sugar plantations into the Mediterranean.⁵ With this popularization of the plantation system, Portugal's economy boosted its ability to colonize, enslave, and spread imperial influence into regions like West Africa. Taking these factors into account, the Braudelian survey of civilization permits historians to fully comprehend the intersectional factors that allowed Europe, specifically Portugal, to prosper. While the rise of the Portuguese economy permitted its expansion, factors such as trade, the exchange of religious doctrines, and the spread of commodities, ultimately gave Portugal the ability to transform into a European power.⁶

Braudel firmly understood that the study of civilization required an investigation into the economic rise of differing nation-states. However, what separates this description from contemporary economic history? The concise answer lies in Braudel's methodology. Throughout his detailed analysis of capitalism and Europe, Braudel connects differing empires to their geopolitical locality. Whereas most economic histories survey the rise of particular government and societies, Braudel marched to a different interpretation. In fact, from the very genesis of his study, Braudel argued that Europe existed as civilization itself. The empires of Europe, such as Florence, France, and Portugal, resided on the stage of what he labels as the "world-economy."⁷ This world-economy prospered as an autonomous, self-sustaining entity that characterized the rise of Europe to global dominance. Moreover, the investigation into commercial centers of localized powers, like London in the 19th-century, offers something far more valuable than simple economic history. While economic history determines the financial

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 143-145.

⁷ Ibid, 22-30, 40-45.

fortitude of civilizations, the study of civilization as a concept fuels more crucial insight.

Braudel's methodological approach to this concept of "world-economy," highlights this critical insight. Europe, propelled by the capitalist machine, rose because of the networks and participation of trade that began to reemerge following the early-Middle Ages.

The study of civilization as a concept, therefore, underscores the importance of intersectional surveying. With the formation of these trade networks, commodities, like sugar, exemplified only one example of Braudel's argument. Ideals of Christianity, different modalities of architecture, and the gradual exchange of military technology became facets of trading that exited the economic study.⁸ So, for Braudel, and the students of the Annales School, the history of civilization as a concept allowed for a nuanced, deeper interpretation of power and influence. Within these empires and the world-economy that Braudel highlighted, capitalism existed outside of a single, monetary understanding. Rather, capitalism detailed that this socioeconomic structure needed to observe other factors, such as technological advancements and religion, to discern the full impact of this system within Europe. Studying civilization as a concept highlights singular concepts that histories, like economic study, cannot fully explain. Braudel, and his unique approach to these facets, ultimately presented this argument and augmented the discipline for the better.

Branching outside of the capitalist system of Western Europe, the survey of Stalinist Russia permits historians to determine why civilization remains an important focus for archival cataloging. For Stephen Kotkin, a Soviet historian, the focus on the mundane lives and communities within Stalin's Russia provides insight into the necessity of studying civilization as a concept. In his monograph *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*, Kotkin outlined how the ordinary Soviet citizen interpreted, interacted, and lived within this system of totalitarian

⁸ Ibid.

communism. Much like the capitalist system that Braudel investigated, Kotkin allowed his readers to fully conceptualize how the Stalinist system represented more than just the economic structure of the Revolution. An important facet of Kotkin's methodology stems from the analysis of communism throughout the Soviet Union. During the reign of the Romanov dynasty, imperial Russia trailed behind her western counterparts. The country's primary economic base relied heavily on agriculture. The production of wheat, barley, and other staple crops supported the landed aristocracy. Serfdom, in this context, outlined the social system of Tsarist Russia. The peasants laboring on these farms required the protection of their lords, and the lords required the slave labor of these serfs to maintain their economic prosperity. While other European countries, like the British empire, began to industrialize in the 18th-century, Russia refused to transition into this new system of capitalism.⁹ However, what does this history of Tsarist Russia detail about Stalinist Russia? Kotkin addressed that the implementation of socialism restructured the entire political, social, and economic system of Russia.

Take for example the transition from agriculture as the staple economic base to industry within Russian communities. Kotkin's methodology keenly focused on how the ordinary Russian transformed under Bolshevik rule. In areas like Magnitogorsk, the transformation of the populace detailed a period of extreme struggle for those becoming the proletariat factory workers. Living in "white tents," suffering piercing arctic winds coupled with terrible bedding accommodations highlights the struggle of this economic system to fully transition in such a short amount of time.¹⁰ The importance of this description of daily life must not be minimized. The analysis Kotkin proffered gives investigating historians important cues on how the study of civilization represents something more than just economy or social life. Communist sentiment

⁹ Ibid, 441-458.

¹⁰ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 238-240.

within the Stalinist system concentrated on the staunch repudiation of the capitalist system. Therefore, Kotkin's methodology delivered incredible insight into mapping out how this study differentiates from other, contemporary geopolitical surveys. Throughout the monograph, Kotkin highlighted how political ideology fuelled the transition to an industrialized state. Under Stalin, the working-class transformed from serfs to factory workers. Moreover, only exploring the economic trends of the Stalinist state leaves holes within the historiography. By focusing on the personal perception of communism, such as the experiences in the state of Magnitogorsk, academic historians witness a wide range of factors that surround communist Russia.¹¹

Unlike Braudel, who focused on a world-economy to determine the development of European nations, Kotkin's methodology looked inward in hopes of finding an explanation of Soviet civilization. When exploring Kotkin's survey into Magnitogorsk, the symbolic nature of bread underscored the typical Soviet attitude. In December 1934, the inexpensive, easily obtainable nature of this wheat product transformed into the life force of Magnitogorsk's population. As the state and privatized industry worked to ensure the basic needs of the population were met, Kotkin underscored an important question of socialism and its impacts to communism as an ideology. The efforts of "building socialism," how did politics and economics fuel the state to reject the notion of private ownership that continued to spring up across the country? Kotkin answered that the participation of the masses in the ideology of communism allowed for the socialist state to transform, and reject individualism.¹² Understanding that this system existed as a dictatorship, Kotkin highlights the massive importance of studying civilization as its own, fully-realized concept. While the economy of the socialist state did offer

¹¹ Ibid, 31-35.

¹² Ibid, 157-160.

an important role in the transformation of Soviet socioeconomics, the acceptance of this political dogma fully entrenched it as a legitimate government system.

Therefore, while many economic or social historians may focus how Stalin implemented socialism during campaigns like “The Five Year Plan,” or the creation of factories across the countryside, historians like Kotkin offer something far more compelling.¹³ Take for example the population of Magnitogorsk and their commitment to the label of socialism within daily life. As the industrialization of this region slowly phased out agricultural centers, the citizens of Magnitogorsk needed to define socialism, and their role in it, on their terms. Kotkin depicted that these citizens found identity through the labeling of various phenomena. From identifying enemies of the state to the inner workings of the “shadow economy,” Kotkin’s methodology provided an important shift in historical interpretation.¹⁴ Understanding these facets of Kotkin’s writing allow historians to perceive the importance of civilization as a monumental development in historiographical cataloging.

Both Kotkin and Braudel offered something fresh to academic history. For Kotkin, the methodological focus on how the public perceived socialism, Stalin, and the transformation of the economic landscape demonstrated that only focusing on social or economic histories of these communities leave gaps in the historiographical survey. When observing examples, such as the populations of those around the “Magnetic Mountain,” Kotkin gave an invaluable insight for understanding ordinary citizens.¹⁵ Stalinism, as Kotkin underscored throughout his monograph, refers to the multidimensional proponents of economy, society, regime, and ideology. Much like the rise of Portugal in the 15th and 16th-centuries, Stalinism required the collaboration of socioeconomic transformations. Therefore, equipping the study of civilization as an entire

¹³ Ibid, 152-167, 273.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 147-151.

concept allows historians to explore intersectional, dynamic structures that allowed for the Soviet Union to mark its place in history. By only analyzing the economic functionality of communism, historians are left determining the social receptions of its implementation. When historians focus solely on the social world, however, the importance of economic factors continue to remain unexplored. The analysis of bread, for example, in localities like Magnitogorsk, underscores that historians must examine economic, social, and ideological factors to obtain the fullest portrait of this society. Kotkin continually analyzed how the average Soviet interacted with this shift in socioeconomic structures. The emphasis on these factors, just as with Braudel's monograph, allows for a fuller understanding of culture, society, and the intimate functionality of the Soviet state.

While Braudel studied early capitalism and the "world-economy," Kotkin compiled the opposite. However, both scholars fundamentally understood an important aspect of historical study- civilization, as a concept, offers an important glimpse into the governments, economies, and regimes on which these societies existed. The use of this historical methodology allows for further analysis of these governments. Whereas the specific focus on facets, like the economy, leave out important social and political factors, the implementation of civilization history remedies these gaps. The Stalinist system, for example, required the transition to industrialization, the participation of the public in communist ideology, and the total rejection of individualism to function effectively.¹⁶ Without the combined efforts of these intersectional systems, the Stalinist system, and perhaps, the entire communist regime, would crumble. Just as societies, like Florence, required multiple structures of trade, religion, and military to transform into a Western power, the Soviet system needed these systems to prosper. When scholars, like

¹⁶ Ibid, 273-280.

Braudel or Konkin, write histories of entire civilizations, the historiographical discipline becomes more profound and complex.

The implementation of civilization as a concept within historical dialogue is an important next step in deepening our understanding of human history. While economic, social, and cultural history offers an abundance of information from new methodologies, the history of civilizations allows investigating historians to fully encapsulate the functionality of these different societies. Therefore, through the comparative study of these differing works, investigating historians become exposed to the importance of civilization, its mechanizations, and its relevant additions to historical understanding. By highlighting, analyzing, and interpreting the meanings of “civilization,” Braudel and Kotkin deliver investigating historians invaluable tools for the evaluation of civilization as an essential historical concept. Furthermore, by examining these factors, and the methodologies in which they are examined, the decisive cohesiveness of using civilization as an investigative tool stresses its necessity to the discipline.

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