

# Debating the *Longue Durée*

*Has history, as a social science, become inaudible? With the exhaustion of the great paradigms and the fragmentation of research, have historians cut themselves off from their public, retreating to an internal dialogue with no resonance beyond their ivory tower? And, if this observation proved true, would it signal a crisis for the discipline? This is the premise of David Armitage and Jo Guldi's reflection in the text that opens our debate. The "crisis of history" has been a recurring theme for at least a generation. Here, however, the two authors offer a very different diagnosis from the one the *Annales* proposed in two recent editorials.<sup>1</sup> This is, in part, a matter of perspective. Armitage and Guldi's position stems explicitly and near-exclusively from North-American historiography, and especially from the major research universities in the United States, where the professional imperative to demonstrate novelty has fostered the "turns" that the authors criticize and which can sometimes appear rather removed from European historiographical practices. This situated perspective explains, perhaps, why Armitage and Guldi appear particularly sensitive to what they describe as the loss of history's influence as a discipline on society, and, more specifically, on public policy.*

*Yet in their own way, they might just be advocating another of those "turns." Is the article published here not contemporary to their *History Manifesto*, addressed to the entire community of historians?<sup>2</sup> In both texts, they call for a return to the *longue durée*, combined*

This editorial was translated from the French by Katharine Throssell and edited by Chloe Morgan and Nicolas Barreyre.

1. "Editorial," *Annales HSS* 66, no. 1 (2011): 5–7; "The *Annales*, Today and Tomorrow," *Annales HSS (English Edition)* 67, no. 3 (2012): 385–88.

2. Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), <http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org/>.

with the mobilization of new technological capacities to analyze information on a large scale, today known as “big data.” Let us say it from the outset: the *Annales* does not share their conception of the *longue durée*. In Fernand Braudel’s thinking, it served two purposes. In *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, the *longue durée* made it possible to grasp the importance of a “history in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles.”<sup>3</sup> It also encouraged an analysis of human phenomena in their own relevant temporality. As a method, the *longue durée* was therefore part of an experimental approach, weaving together different temporalities and scales. By 1958 and his famous article on the concept, Braudel’s focus had shifted significantly.<sup>4</sup> In the face of the rising tide of structuralism, the *longue durée* was a reminder of the essential historicity of social facts. In this sense it provided a programmatic horizon for the articulation of history and the other social sciences, which were more oriented toward the present. Yet it never excluded the validity of other scales of analysis, and in this respect it did not seek to oppose other approaches. In this light, the opposition constantly evoked by Armitage and Guldi between what they call the “*longue durée*” and “microhistory” seems excessively simplistic. Microhistory, in the strict sense of the term, proposes specific protocols for research that are not necessarily synonymous with a focus on short time-scales—far from it. Moreover, there exist a whole range of intermediary possibilities between the macro and the micro approaches, which Braudel in fact recommended exploring in order to recognize the complexity of histories and their temporal inscription.

However, this fundamental disagreement should not form an obstacle to debate. The *Annales* have no intention of acting as the guardians of an orthodoxy that should not exist. We are not, nor is anyone, the proprietors of a proposition that has, over the last half century, produced varied effects in a profoundly transformed historiographical landscape. On the contrary, we share the conviction that the current historiographical moment calls for an experimentation of approaches, as well as the reformulation of the links between history and the other social sciences. The deliberately polemical manifesto proposed by Armitage and Guldi has the immense advantage of offering a situated diagnosis—the “Anglo-American perspective” mentioned in the title—as a framework for its programmatic exhortation. The authors bring together historiographical considerations and a professional analysis of the discipline, emphasizing what they perceive as an increasing separation between the imperatives of research and the mission of educating the general public (with a particular interest in political institutions). It is on this ground that the *Annales* would like to situate the debate. Rather than evaluating the relevance of a “return to the *longue durée*”—however one chooses to define it—the articles in this issue discuss Armitage and Guldi’s proposal from this broader perspective: decentering historiographical points of view, bringing them into tension,

3. Fernand Braudel, preface to *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 1:20. Originally published as *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949).

4. Braudel, “History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*,” in *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 25–54. Originally published as “Histoire et sciences sociales. La longue durée,” *Annales E.S.C.* 13, no. 4 (1958): 725–53.

*and critically exploring the approaches used by historians, with the shared conviction of the need to step out of the comfort zone of each specialized subfield. We have therefore chosen to submit this text to a range of cross-analyses, from critical comments from within American historiography, such as the contribution by Lynn Hunt, to those anchored in other traditions or associated with different lines of historical inquiry that invite us to reformulate the terms of the debate itself—the Chinese example explored by Christian Lamouroux is enlightening in this respect. Some readings reexamine, in their historicity, the approaches emphasized by the authors: Francesca Trivellato looks at the *longue durée* from the background of microstoria; Claire Lemerrier reviews the promises and pitfalls of quantitative methods. The contribution by Claudia Moatti is situated on yet another terrain: she claims an explicit epistemological distance, outside the perspective adopted by the authors, to challenge the very meaning of their approach. Of course we have left the (provisional) last word to Armitage and Guldi, who respond to the comments on their proposition.*

*Most of the contributions collected here are critical. Together, they open up an international space for reflection on history, its role, and its place in the social sciences, one that takes seriously not only the circulation of knowledge and historical paradigms, but also the anchoring of different perspectives in particular historiographical traditions. However open these traditions are to one another, they seem on this occasion to remain durably distinct.*

*Les Annales*