For an “Ambitious History”  
A Reply to Our Critics

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The longue durée made its debut as a leading term of historical art in the “Débats et combats” section of the Annales in 1958. Its original impresario was, of course, Fernand Braudel, then at the height of his powers as a historian and as an academic mandarin. He introduced the longue durée into a complex drama with many protagonist-nists jostling for the limelight: structural anthropologists, economists, linguists, and journalists, among others. Historians could not assume that their status was secure in this competition. Amid the great play of forces around the human sciences in postwar France, and even in the wider world, the discipline of history had to fight for a voice and for a position. The longue durée, Braudel believed, could be the means by which history could unify the battling human sciences at a moment of accumulating crisis.¹

The longue durée had its own long history before 1958: over almost a century, the concept had appeared in French histories of property law, studies of chronic disease, and treatments of economic cycles.² Braudel successfully appropriated it for historians, and it has remained theirs ever since, though with some retreats and

rebounds, as we documented in our article. The purpose behind our essay was similar to Braudel’s: to diagnose a crisis, to find the tools to tackle it, and to suggest a mission for historians in circumstances marked by radical change. Like Braudel’s essay, our article was first and foremost “a call to discussion.” It was deliberately somewhat polemical and telegraphic but the reactions it evoked even before publication convinced us that the causes and potential solutions to history’s crisis mer-ited further investigation. For further elaboration of our arguments, with a wider range of case studies and examples, the reader should refer to our book, The History Manifesto.4

Braudel’s original essay inspired only two immediate responses in the pages of the Annales but we are fortunate to have five.5 It is a special privilege to receive such engaged and stimulating reactions from historians in a wide variety of fields and from both sides of the Atlantic. We are grateful to Lynn Hunt, Christian Lamouroux, Claire Lemercier, Claudia Moatti, and Francesca Trivellato for taking so seriously the questions we raised in our article and for their critical analyses and constructive responses. We must also express our gratitude to the editors of the Annales for coordinating this wide-ranging debate and for giving us the chance to continue the dialogue in the very same journal where, almost sixty years ago, Braudel first argued for the longue durée as historians’ peculiar contribution to solving the crisis of the human sciences. Whether this discussion will have a similarly galvanizing effect for historians today is a question we leave to readers of this dossier and of The History Manifesto.6

Our account of the “return of the longue durée” was broad in its conception of time but deliberately more modest in its coverage of space. As we argue in The History Manifesto, it might be time for historians to experiment with more generous forms of transtemporal history in the same way they have recently pursued a variety of transnational histories.7 To focus our article, we consciously limited ourselves

to writing only about those academic milieux we know best. Nonetheless, we hoped to provoke comparative responses from historians in—and from historians of—other parts of the world. That hope has certainly been met in the opening reflections of Christian Lamouroux, a distinguished historian of China who works on the Song dynasty (960–1279). In light of the self-imposed narrow parameters of our article, it is particularly gratifying that Lamouroux finds our intervention “undoubtedly most welcome” and wishes to supplement it by “broadening [our] perspective” from his position as a Sinologist. 8 It is not well enough known that Braudel and the Annales school strongly supported Chinese studies. Lamouroux offers a salutary account of their patronage of Marcel Granet, Étienne Balazs, and others. As he notes, this was surely related to Braudel’s enduring interest in the historical reconstruction of “civilizations,” those complexes of human culture that needed to be examined over the longue durée rather than simply with the “anthropological gaze” of the main challenger of history as a discipline. 9

Lamouroux is rightly aware that the concept of civilizations has now generally fallen into disrepute, not least because the significance of the longue durée can differ from place to place, making intercultural comparisons misleading and even hazardous. We intended the longue durée to offer a critical perspective on historical studies that have been more narrowly trained on shorter time-scales approximating to a human lifespan. Its return, we argued, could be a means to recover some of the future-oriented impulses that had informed Western history-writing for almost two millennia and that found a particular outlet in the early and mid-twentieth century. Yet, as Lamouroux implies, that vision of the longue durée’s reformist potential exists in tension with its more conservative, “oppressive and paralyzing,” uses in Chinese history. In this context, the necessity of “deconstructing the longue durée” may be more imperative than “reconstructing” it, in order to displace the conviction that China was an immobile civilization without a history.

Lamouroux convincingly shows how the longue durée opens up the possibility of comparisons between different communities of historians rather than the danger of domination by any one group of them. And he beautifully illustrates the interdependence of long- and short-term perspectives when it comes to studying such questions as the changing ecology of hydraulic regimes or the long-range migration of religious cults between regions. When the longue durée has been associated with studies of dynasties or civilizations, the short durée can provide a liberation that in turn permits longer interventions, such as Kenneth Pomeranz’s The Great Divergence, to emerge from more focused studies like the same author’s The Making of a Hinterland. 10 In a similar fashion, as Lamouroux also notes, a major digital

enterprise such as the China Biographical Database Project (CBDB) can facilitate interchange between the details of over 300,000 individual biographies and render large-scale developments like the spread of neo-Confucianism visible through the spatial analysis of physical and personal networks. As the examples cited by Lamouroux illustrate, the choice of time-scale does not solely depend on the problem the historian is trying to solve. It will always need to be calibrated against historiographical traditions, which differ from region to region.

The dialogue between time-scales is one way to avoid what Claire Lemercier calls the “black-and-white tone” of our text. She reads this as an opposition between the allegedly futile “musings” of short-duration history and the more serious and weighty ambitions of longue durée history directed toward publics beyond, as well as within, the academy. We should look past the somewhat prejudicial language into which Lemercier has translated our argument. The evidence she cites from French journals—including from the Annales itself—and from the different stages in an academic career—including monographs, broader teaching, and the post-doctoral habilitation accreditation as well as works of historical synthesis—adds important dimensions to our analysis. The life cycle of many historians encompasses all these forms, some of which are limited by the demands of the classroom, promotion (and even self-promotion), but all of which are directed toward different audiences. A lecture hall full of students does not have the same needs as a jury examining a thesis, nor do they make the same kind of judgments; likewise, the readership of a habilitation thesis is not the same as that for a work of general synthesis.

Our central concern remains how to restore history’s rightful place among the critical human sciences and within the public sphere: we believe that this cannot be done by writing for our peers alone. We could not endorse more strongly Lemercier’s argument for open-access publication as a vital method—though still not the only channel—to reach publics beyond the academy: it was for just this reason that we wanted The History Manifesto to be made open access on publication and to remain free for downloading thereafter. Just as importantly, we need to articulate the findings of detailed research within the context of broader arguments, wider time-scales, and even in relation to matters of public policy. In this regard, we did not so much mistranslate Braudel (as Lemercier suggests) as reappropriate his conception of the longue durée for parallel purposes, using novel methods and newly available bodies of data.

Braudel, too, wanted to address immediate pressures; he, too, was open to new techniques, including computational methods, and always sought new corpora of evidence. But this was not just to promote dialogue with his fellow historians. As he put it in the preface to *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*: “history can do more than study walled gardens. If it were otherwise, it would surely be failing in one of its most immediate tasks, which must be to relate to the painful problems of our times and to maintain contact with the youthful but imperialistic human sciences. Can there be humanism in the present ... if History is not ambitious, conscious of its duties and its immense powers?”14 We doubt that Lemercier would disagree with this. Indeed, the range of recent examples of serial history she cites in her response fulfills exactly the ambition of which Braudel spoke. Within the confines of a single article, we could hardly cover every kind of aggregative research now being conducted: Lemercier’s survey of various statistical studies, along time-scales both short and long, is a helpful supplement to our own brief account of the potential benefits of digital analysis of large textual corpora.15

We would still insist on the peculiar advantages of such analysis, most importantly the possibilities it provides for questioning periodization and its ability to demonstrate changes in the aggregate life of institutions. Distant reading in this manner does indeed have “probative purposes,” as Lemercier puts it, which in turn forces historians to question how digital archives have been compiled, with what purposes in mind and under what constraints.16 Such compilations need not be biased toward those privileged enough to have access to printing presses: social historians have long read such sources against the grain and an online collection like *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674–1913* demonstrates clearly how a massive digital corpus can correct for biases by revealing a chorus of proletarian voices.17 A parallel database on London Lives, 1690–1800 integrates almost a quarter of a million manuscript records of just the kind Lemercier applauds (as do we) in Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*—enough to fulfill her dream of a rapprochement between different kinds of sources.18 The supposed dichotomy that Lemercier attributes to us is thus without foundation. She is nonetheless correct to be concerned that distant reading might encourage naïveté, even laziness, and we concur with her warnings. Again, our aim was to encourage a critical deployment of historical methods that is always probing, diagnostic, and skeptical of its own findings. The lessons of the first wave of quantitative history

in the 1960s have been learnt. The evident failures of that moment should not drive historians back into their “walled gardens.”

Digital methods might best be considered as a new form of philology: there is no necessary connection between these approaches and an indifference to the historicity of categories. Digital analysis, using the array of tools now at our disposal, is a technique to be handled with all the scrupulous care of any historical method, as we sought to point out in our article: “Macroscopes ... act as an intellectual stimulus to making claims about the longue durée, each grounded in verifiable and comparable characterizations of place, institution, discourse, or period that the historian can weave into a richly contextualized background to support his or her archival research.” Moving back and forth between “different temporalities” and perspectives—the longue durée and the short durée, the close-up and the wide-angle shot—will always be essential. We did not suggest otherwise. We did, however, decide to apply some polemical force to reminding our colleagues of this need for dialogue and integration. Many historians seem to have forgotten the longue durée as one of the temporalities vital to historical work, perhaps because (as Braudel noted) “their preference goes instinctively toward the short term.”

The “meaning and value” of the longue durée are central concerns of Francesca Trivellato’s balanced and wide-ranging response. Like Lynn Hunt, Trivellato acknowledges the existence of a “crisis” for the humanities. This may be more visible in the United States than in France, for example, but their remarks confirm that the urgency behind our article and The History Manifesto was not misplaced. That crisis has multiple dimensions, including the disappearance of historians from the sphere of public policy and the retreat of students from our classrooms. Trivellato is surely correct in adding to our analysis factors we overlooked, among them the “mediatization of all spheres of public life” and the increasing pervasiveness of organized finance in those spheres, especially in the realm of politics.

Our colleagues in economics departments responded to these developments more nimbly than historians and, by a combination of disciplinary self-confidence, tight methodological consensus, and strong alliances with finance and public administration, have managed to secure a predominance in public debate over recent decades. According to one set of American indicators mentioned in the archives

of the *New York Times*, the ascendancy of economists over historians began even earlier than we had suspected, in the 1930s. However, the aggregate decline of historians becomes clearest from the turn of the twenty-first century. In light of this and similar data from within the academy, Trivellato shares our sense that the problem now confronting historians—at the very least, anglophone historians—is how to recover some of the prominence our profession once held while also acknowledging that we lack some of the advantages acquired by more *disciplined* disciplines such as economics. The question, then, is Lenin’s: What is to be done? We strongly urged that a return to the *longue durée* would provide a means to reinstate historians in public debate (and, by inference, bring students back into our classrooms). Trivellato notes that certain longer-*durée* narratives do, perhaps unfortunately, resonate with a wider public, notably those promoting the superiority of the West or the so-called “clash of civilizations.” These are examples of what we termed in *The History Manifesto* the “dirty” *longue durée*—that is, long-term historical accounts based on assumptions about the unchanging nature of human communities and their inevitable and repeated collisions. By contrast, Trivellato makes a strong case for short-term studies as a way of breaking up such resilient but misguided master narratives, often challenging entrenched national histories at the same time.

It would be hard to disagree with Trivellato’s examples—notably masterpieces by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Robert Paxton, Benny Morris, and Jan Gross—but we would still want to reaffirm two features we believe to be important in *longue durée* history, which can always enrich, though not replace, more focused studies of this kind. The first is the rhetorical bridge that long-range histories can build between academics and nonspecialist readers, explaining and contextualizing the larger spatial, temporal, and social context of specific periods or episodes. The other, and potentially the more critically transformative, is the bridge that they create between the past and the present, opening up the continuities and discontinuities as well as the multiple pasts that have sedimented into our own times. The lack of such bridges may be one reason students of Big History and Deep History have sought to tell histories along both archaeological and cosmological scales. Our own recommendations did not go that far, but they do appeal for the melding of short *durée* and *longue durée* and for the dialogue between past and present, all the while keeping an eye to the future.

The “meaning and value” of the *longue durée* lie in the ethical commitments informing our work as historians. The creation of history as a semi-scientific discipline over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emphasized the

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historian’s duty to the past, and often to the past alone, with presentism as one of the greatest sins a professional historian could commit.31 This also had the effect of cutting historians off from their duty to the future—a calling that had distinguished history’s task for millennia.32 To reverse some of the unintended consequences of these developments, we would endorse Trivellato’s plea for a “symbiosis” of the longue durée with other conceptions of time and urge historians to recall their overlapping commitments to the past, the present, and to the future. This is what Hayden White, almost fifty years ago, dubbed “a realistic historicism ... used to effect an ethically responsible transition from present to future.”33 Historians do have a duty to recover the past in all its distance and strangeness, but we must also ask what value such reconstructions have for multiple publics, within and beyond the academy, and what help our studies can offer as we orient ourselves toward a future clouded by the effects of climate change, economic instability, resource crises, and other challenges usually handled by national and international organizations that lack historical perspective.

How to inject history into discussions and debates on these matters remains a conundrum.34 History is a discipline that is by its nature “holist, uncertain and eclectic.”35 Trivellato wisely notes that the “methodological pluralism” of our field is both its blessing and its curse, “the heart of both the crisis and the vitality of historical writing.”36 This diversity may also be one reason historians have ceded public influence to fellow academics like economists: they prefer parsimony while we embrace profligacy, and while we offer complexity they can supply the clarity decision-makers crave. This recognition that what makes the historical profession so creative may also be a source of its malaise is at once cheering and chilling: cheering, because it suggests continuing vitality and our inoculation against instrumentality, but also potentially chilling because it portends increasing anxiety about what we call “the public future of the past.”37 What role can history and historians play in a world where short-termism is now the rule?

“None,” would appear to be Claudia Moatti’s answer to that question. When she acknowledges that the historian of the longue durée is “required to produce research that is useful, the better to teach, to respond to the demands of institutions,

or to reform society,” it is only to mock the very idea that historians might shape the future or play any role in public debate. Moatti is surely right to warn historians, like other academics, against being co-opted by the political institutions it should be their task to criticize, but that danger is hardly peculiar to students of the longue durée. She is also correct to distinguish between “vulgarization and research.” Scholarship should underpin any historian’s efforts to translate his or her knowledge into terms that broader publics might understand. However, no cordon sanitaire can prevent contemporary questions from shaping agendas for research, consciously or unconsciously. It is for just these reasons that we follow Braudel in thinking of history as a critical human science, not as the handmaiden of power or merely a form of entertainment.

Moatti’s satirical comparisons between our argument and Hollywood are misplaced, as they appear to deny any motivation for historical research other than simple curiositas. This version of art for art’s sake is a strangely backward-looking justification that those of us in parts of the world afflicted by the current crisis of the humanities can only find dangerously complacent and out of touch. Moatti assumes our argument in favor of a return to the longue durée is prescriptive, even normative. Although she professes to find our abundant citations unreflective and unpersuasive, we placed them before our readers to show that the longue durée was already undergoing a revival and that historians in multiple fields (intellectual history, religious history, environmental history, economic history, and a host of other areas) were already posing novel questions and producing critical narratives over time-spans ranging from two centuries to two millennia. Our aim was therefore descriptive: not to encourage fellow scholars to follow an as yet untrodden path, but instead to urge other practitioners—especially younger scholars—to pursue Braudel’s “ambitious history” along trails already blazed by these pioneers.

It is abundantly evident what Moatti is against. She is the enemy of positivism, scientism, and populism. Unlike Lamouroux or Lemercier, she can see no place for serial data among the sources historians might use. She is suspicious of digital methods. She appears contemptuous of anything that might indicate accessibility or relevance when it comes to historical research. Any argument or tendency she dislikes is automatically condemned as an “ideology” and peremptorily dismissed. She is also generally allergic to “big thought” of any kind. What then does Moatti favor? That is much less clear. Historians should demonstrate “critical thinking” and curiosity, blend “synchrony” and “diachrony,” exude a modest humility, and retreat from public engagement or self-promotion. It is hardly an inspiring, let alone a pragmatic strategy. Indeed, Moatti’s failure to argue positively for the critical contribution of scholarship to broader debates would prove fatal to the humanities tout court, not simply the discipline of history, in many parts of the world.

If Moatti’s response to our argument is a relaxed and bemused, “Crisis? What crisis?” Lynn Hunt’s much more productive reaction is to ask, “Crisis? Which crisis?” She shares our sense (and Trivellato’s) that history does need a positive defense at this moment and that current worries about its vitality spring from deep-seated causes. Hunt questions some of our data on the move toward short-termism. Our first figure—the Ngram on “more and more about less [and less]”—was meant to illustrate the origins of concerns about specialization, initially in the sciences, and not to show anxiety about over-specialization in history alone. However, the Ngram on the uses of “short-termism” from 1975 to 2000 published in The History Manifesto surely does track a new worry that temporal scales were shrinking. Finally, our initial analysis of the time-spans covered by doctoral dissertations in history in the United States used data that its author has since revised. The opposition between “presentism” and short-termism may also be too stark: presentism by its very nature narrows the temporal horizon to the immediate one visible from the present. Anyone currently teaching in a history department (again, at least in the anglophone world) knows that there has been a drift in student interest toward the twentieth century and away from earlier periods. That is itself a species of short-termism, and one the longue durée can help to overcome.

Hunt follows Trivellato in going beyond our perspective on the roots of the crisis to look at factors that cannot be discerned by examining the historiography alone. She is surely right to point to the decline in the number of tenured or tenure-track positions for historians (and, indeed, scholars in other fields), the rise in the number of adjunct teachers, the decline in relative compensation, and the increase in student numbers across American higher education as acute and accumulating pressures. We are not in disagreement on these points: indeed, we noted the demands of a tightening job market as one of the causes for the retreat from the longue durée, at least in the United States. Of course, “neither microhistory nor cultural history created these structural problems,” but the various factors did coincide with each other as the democratization of higher education produced more research that spoke to the concerns of formerly excluded groups. A generation of scholars raised in the era of anthropogenic climate change, accelerating inequality, and global financial instability are already setting their own research agendas, some in productive relationship with digital methods. The spectacular growth of fields such as environmental history and the history of capitalism suggest that in future we will see many more wide-ranging and longue-durée histories as a response to these crucial concerns.

In conclusion, it is worth reaffirming that although it shares many of his ambitions, our *longue durée* is not Braudel’s. It is not a “prison” or an unending cycle, an allegedly unchanging landscape or a static backdrop to other activities. It is dynamic, flexible, and above all critical in its stance toward established narratives and settled institutions. Its return is visible across multiple fields of history and it shows no signs of retreating before the multiple crises facing the humanities across the globe. If, as Hunt says, we were “right to provoke discussion about the purposes, methods, and ethics of historical research,” then we believe our efforts—and those of our distinguished interlocutors in this issue of the *Annales*—will have been worthwhile. The revenant *longue durée* alone cannot save history, and the humanities more broadly, from increasing marginalization and lack of confidence. Yet, as that connoisseur of crisis, Braudel, would surely have understood, every effort must be made to address these challenges before it is too late.

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