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What was the Cold War? Theorizing a Medium Durée: Introduction to a special issue of Social Science History, 'What Was the Cold War?'

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Abstract

The ontological complexity of the twentieth-century Cold War motivates this special issue's investigation of how social scientists conceptualize institutional novelty and change. We begin by noting the peculiar elision of the Cold War as an explanatory mechanism in mainstream sociology, even while sociologists have theoretical tools for making sense of the phenomenon: *war*, *schema*, *field*, *world systems*, and *empire*. All are useful; none are sufficient. We locate the explanatory problem in a tension between notions of structure and event that has organized debate in historical social science for several scholarly generations, and offer a new intellectual tool – *medium durée* – as a way forward. Medium durée describes phenomena that have sufficient cohesion as ideas and relationships to endure over time, yet remain sufficiently unfixed and ambiguous as to enable multifarious action and sensemaking. Our notion of medium durée is substantially informed by the articles and commentaries assembled for this special issue, which represent three years of dialogue among the authors as well as audiences in serial panels at the 2022 and 2023 annual meetings of the Social Science History Association.

Keywords: Cold War; novelty; institutional change; medium durée

Introduction

What was the Cold War? To anyone with even a passing knowledge of twentieth-century history, it probably seems like an easy question. A Google search instantly provides a definition as "the open yet restricted rivalry that developed after World War II between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies. The Cold War was waged on political, economic, and propaganda fronts and had only limited recourse to weapons."[1] Historians and humanists routinely invoke the Cold War as a signal explanatory tool for many of the major social transformations

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[1]https://www.britannica.com/event/Cold-War. Accessed 15 October 2023.

of the twentieth century: the reconfiguration of Europe and the globe around an East/West axis of conflict (Gaddis 2006); the coalescence, swagger, and ultimate hubris of modernization as a tractable political and cultural project (Gilman 2003); and the impetus for powerful movements to both enable and delimit human liberty (Menand 2021), among many others. Given all that, the identity and facticity of the twentieth-century Cold War appear self-evident.

The decades following the close of the twentieth century have witnessed a steadily accreting library of historical scholarship linking major institutional and cultural changes to the phenomenon called the Cold War. Just in the United States, Cold War politics have been implicated in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* US Supreme Court decision on school desegregation (Dudziak 2004); the massification of postsecondary education (Kindel and Stevens 2021; Loss 2011; Rose 2018); the passage of the 1964 and 1968 Civil Rights Acts (Dudziak 2011; Skrentny 1998), the explosion of federal government science funding (Kleinman 1995; O'Mara 2004) the Interstate Highway Act of 1955 and attendant suburbanization and white flight (Avila 2014; Nall 2018); military expansion and participation in armed conflict in Asia and Latin America (Grandin 2011; Kanet 2006); omnibus federal government investment in the arts and humanities (Ansari 2018; Canning 2009); and the realignment of religious factions throughout Judeo-Christian America (Hollinger 2022; Wacker 2014). Yet the twentieth-century Cold War itself is only occasionally the locus of sociological imaginations.

The articles in this special issue grew out of a shared sense of puzzlement and possibility about this peculiar lacuna among a loose network of historical sociologists. Though we were investigating very different substantive domains – education, post-World War II political realignments, international- development and imperial intellectual projects, science fiction – we came together around a shared sense that the twentieth-century Cold War deserves a head-on theoretical appraisal. There is no doubt that Russia's initiation of violent conflict with Ukraine in 2022 figured prominently in the background of our motivation: an affirmation of the dictum that the past is never really past. So, too, was the growing historiography of theories of modernity, which has come to implicate twentieth-century academic social science itself in the machinations of Cold War politics (Abbott and Sparrow 2007; Burns 2011, 2023; Gilman 2003; Latham 2000; Isaac and Bell 2012; Steinmetz 2007; Stevens et al. 2018). Many of us also saw a good challenge in the sheer scale of the empirical puzzle. A decades-long, multi-front phenomenon that many have claimed reorganized the entire world as we know it seemed to be the ultimate case for revisiting and revising social-science theories of historical change.

That many of us are only now thinking through the Cold War, more than thirty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, says much about the development of sociology in the post-World War II years. When the Cold War as it is now commonly understood was underway, mainstream sociologists were theorizing social change as a function of long historical arcs and epochs: variably commencing in the European Renaissance, the Enlightenment, or early industrialization and rolling forward into the present, only modestly perturbed by latter-day human agency (Adams et al. 2005). In contrast with twentieth-century Marxist thought emphasizing crises and their attendant possibilities for revolution, sociology's mainstream theories of modernity emphasized a continuity and even inevitability of

change processes culminating in recognizably North American and western European versions of democratic capitalism.[2]

It is likely no coincidence that it was not until after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union that people working within North American sociology's mainstream turned their focus to social change as a function of historic events. While he was one of many, William Sewell's work in the 1990s was exemplary of this intellectual ferment. Writing at the intersection of history, political science, and sociology, Sewell published a series of agenda-setting articles on historic events (Sewell 1996a, 1996b). While this was hardly news for disciplinary historians, it represented a major challenge to sociology, with a lively and agenda-setting third wave of historical sociology (Adams et al. 2005) focusing our attention on the contingent temporality of any happening or social pattern (e.g., Abbott 2001; Carruthers 1999; Clemens 1997). Explanation in political and historical sociology has been eventful ever since.

Simultaneously, historically minded sociologists developed potent new tools for making sense of social change, borrowing liberally from adjacent intellectual neighborhoods. From social psychology, cultural sociology, and scholarship on social movements, they took the notions of *schema*, *account*, and *frame* to develop explanations centered on the importance of sensemaking and emotion in mobilizing collective action (DiMaggio 1997; Scott and Lyman 1968; Snow 2004; Snow and Benford 1992; Swidler 1986; Tilly 2008). Others elaborated on the idea of *field* to describe how social actors are constituted by, and confront each other through, game-like competitions and conflicts (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Martin 2003). Inheriting the global imaginary of world-systems theory but deploying it through a different vernacular, others leveraged critical equipment from the humanities to posit levels of empirical activity and above and before the nation-state: they used the concept of *empire* to describe how collective action has been used by dominant groups to hoard power and legitimacy across geographical space and long swaths of historical time (Go and Krause 2016; Steinmetz 2008).

The twentieth-century Cold War (hereafter "Cold War") is a phenomenon of such a scale that it would seem to warrant a tryout of all the devices in historical sociologists' explanatory toolbox. Even the most straightforward conceptualizations of the Cold War render this a tricky task. Consider the definition we offered at the beginning of this essay: *the open yet restricted rivalry that developed after World War II between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies. The Cold War was waged on political, economic, and propaganda fronts and had only limited recourse to weapons.* Whatever the Cold War was, it was paradoxical ("open yet restricted," a war "with limited recourse to weapons"); had multiple parties ("and their respective allies"); and was multifarious ("waged on political, economic and propaganda fronts"). It also has a long temporal window, typically understood to span nearly forty years, from the mid-1940s until the early 1990s. It is neither a time-delimited spectacle (the storming of the Bastille; Pearl Harbor; 9/11) nor a predictably reproducing structure like capitalism or patriarchy – or at least not exclusively one or the other of these things. It seems to encompass both kinds of phenomena that pre- and post-1990s historical sociology have sought to explain.

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[2]We thank Pierre-Christian Fink for reminding us of this.

In the remaining pages of this introduction, we pursue three tasks. First, we sketch in very broad strokes how current devices in the social science toolbox might enable us to answer our question about the Cold War's ontology. We consider the phenomenon as a *war*, a *schema* for mobilizing action, a transnational *field* of networked power relations, and a world-systems composite of projects of *empire*. In this first section, we note both the promise and the limits of any single explanatory device to contain the totality of the Cold War. We rule none of them out as useful – all of them are – even while we suggest that the empirical complexity and scale of our title phenomenon challenges social scientists to devise something more.

Second, we very briefly review historical social science's shifting perspective on social change, focusing for expediency on just three scholars: Annales School historian Fernand Braudel, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, and historian and sociologist William Sewell. Here we recognize that the major intellectual advance of understanding social change as eventful came with the still incompletely resolved challenge of specifying the ontology of events and structures.

Third, we offer an idea that may enable historical social scientists to make at least partial peace with the challenge inherent in taking on what Charles Tilly (1984) famously called big structures, large processes, and huge comparisons. Specifically, we work between the ideas of "structure" and "event" – well downstream from the Annales School's glacial *longue durée* – to theorize the *moyenne durée*, or, to embrace a playful linguistic mismatch, the medium durée. Whereas the third wave of comparative historical sociology highlights the incoherence and contingency of historical change (Clemens 2005), the Cold War shifts our understanding of historical action from shapeless and incoherent to something that at least aspires to a coherent empirical and conceptual form. The Cold War offered a promise of clarity even as the contemporaneous experience of living through it was rife with ambiguity, incoherence, and possibilities for misrecognition. By theorizing this medium durée, we seek to capture the liminal instances perched between eventfulness and stability, suggesting that much of social action and phenomeno-logical experience happens somewhere between these two poles.

As we make our way through these tasks, we liberally invoke the work of the special issue's fellow authors. Their articles – not to mention the many rich hours of dialogue and written exchange that took place among us through the issue's long gestation – are essential motivations and components of the work we have set for ourselves in these introductory pages. Read together, the articles offer a vision of what a historical social science of the medium durée might look like.

Tools at hand for explaining the Cold War

War

As James Mahoney explains in careful detail for us here, the name *Cold War* is itself a theory, a kind of explanation. Webster defines *war* as "a state of usually open and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations; a period of such armed conflict." The Cold War was a war to the extent that it involved declared (and undeclared) conflict between states, most prominently but certainly not exclusively the United States and the Soviet Union. The term war in this instance has been

broadly understood to require a modifier – "cold" – because much of the interstate conflict was through means other than military violence. The Cold War was as much a conflict about strategies of state-building, interstate status rivalries, and bids for cultural domination as it was about struggles over geographic territory. Yet the modifier "cold" also is a substantial misnomer, occluding bloody conflicts in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America that were squarely implicated in the Cold War phenomenon (Westad 2005).

Even so, calling the Cold War a war is a useful theoretical move because it gives purchase on one of the signal insights of twentieth-century social theory: that states make wars and wars make states (Tilly 1975). Waging wars requires vast resources; war makers invoke pervasive conceptions of peoplehood (ethnicity, religion, nation) to assemble and organize those resources. The conflict itself lends tangible veracity to the identities of "us," our "enemies," and their respective allies. This is the first way in which warcraft is statecraft.[3] The second way is in war's aftermath, when contested boundaries between states need to be settled and specified. The reorganization of Europe in the aftermath of World War II, the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Warsaw Pact alliances, and the divisions of Korea and Vietnam into dual states all are examples of this phenomenon.

Yet as Mahoney's essay also concedes, "war" is a limiting theory for the Cold War, even with its problematic modifying adjective. It was only partly an armed conflict about the borders and boundaries of nation-states. It also was about rival conceptions of history and modernity; variable routes out of European colonialism; and concerted efforts to transcend states and interstate conflict entirely. If it were one war, it also comprised many warlike military conflicts, taking place in every hemisphere and over a long temporal span. In these ways *war*, by itself, is insufficient for theorizing the Cold War.

Schema

The efflorescence of cultural sociology in the 1990s brought a vital new way of theorizing meaning as a mechanism in social science explanation. Sociologists elaborated a series of terms to describe the power of rhetoric and sensemaking to shape definitions of situation and to guide action, including accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968; Tilly 2008), frames (Snow 2004), and schemata (DiMaggio 1997). For our purposes here, we take schemata as a proxy for this family of explanatory tools, defined by DiMaggio (1997, 269) as "knowledge structures that represent objects and provide default assumptions about their characteristics, relationships, and entailments under conditions of incomplete information." Like the image on the box of a jigsaw puzzle, schemata provide a sense of the big picture into which a thousand little pieces might be seen as fitting together. Once a particular schema takes hold of individual or collective imaginations, it can have influence over long streams of fateful decision-making.

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[3]We write this in the weeks immediately following the October 7 attacks by Hamas on civilians in the south of Israel, and so are watching daily just how vividly declared wars strengthen the ontology of states.

Consider this excerpt from Winston Churchill's famous "iron curtain" speech, delivered strategically in Fulton, Missouri – the American heartland – on March 5, 1946.

> The United States stands at this time at the pinnacle of world power. It is a solemn moment for the American Democracy. For with primacy in power is also joined an awe-inspiring accountability to the future. If you look around you, you must feel not only the sense of duty done but also you must feel anxiety lest you fall below the level of achievement. Opportunity is here now, clear and shining for both our countries. To reject it or ignore it or fritter it away will bring upon us all the long reproaches of the after-time. It is necessary that constancy of mind, persistency of purpose, and the grand simplicity of decision shall guide and rule the conduct of the English-speaking peoples in peace as they did in war. We must, and I believe we shall, prove ourselves equal to this severe requirement.

Here, the British national leader and war hero provides a schema with which the US and its allies might assemble the puzzle pieces of the recent past into a compelling depiction of global history. The United States is at "a pinnacle of world power" and has an accountability not just to its own people or even to the mere present, but to "the English-speaking" world, and to "the future." In this and many other carefully staged political performances, leaders of what would come to be called "the West" or "the free world" fashioned "solemn" reasons for mobilizing resources for global conflict. The twentieth-century Cold War would be a war of words in no small measure because it would enable governments worldwide to make substantial commitments to state-building, a complex process elaborated beautifully in Clemens' article in this issue for the United States in the decades immediately following World War II.

Schematic aspects of the Cold War also are prominently displayed in Andreas Glaeser's and Isaac Reed's contributions to this special issue. Glaeser takes on the iterative sensemaking of the Kennedy administration's response to what would come to be known as the Cuban missile crisis, depicting the fraught contingencies of a moment in time when nuclear conflict seemed exquisitely imminent, when even the slightest variance in transnational signaling may have altered the course of history. Reed's contribution surfaces a truly fantastic strand of Cold War schematization, in prominent public texts in which scientific inquiry and science fiction were pretty much one and the same.

As we mentioned when we began, a recognition of the importance of reason-giving and storytelling in political mobilization is an important way in which attention to the Cold War has gradually moved closer to the center of the disciplinary social sciences in recent years. For example, social scientists in the United States now broadly accept that Cold War geopolitics implicated a range of stateside affairs, from civil rights legislation to freeway construction to the massification of higher education; that it shaped labor policy, cultural diplomacy, and the teaching of grade-school civics.

Yet it would clearly be limiting to think of the Cold War as only a strategy of sensemaking. The Cold War also entailed the building of entire new organizations

and institutions and rearranging relationships among existing ones. These aspects require additional ideas.

Field

To simplify a contested theoretical concept, we might define a field as a domain of social activity constituted by shared symbols, strategies of action, and linked actors (cf Bourdieu 1986; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Martin 2003). While they may be experienced as fixed at any given point in time, like all social systems they are internally dynamic and subject to reconfiguration and collapse. In other words, they are historical.

If we extend Tilly's famous dictum of wars making states, it also is the case that wars make fields. They reconfigure entire arenas of transnational conflict and collaboration, creating new rules of a game that states and other actors are obliged to play when seeking to act and mobilize others. In this sense the conclusion of World War II set the conditions for the creation of a new global political field organized around a strong East/West division, with preponderant "superpowers" on both sides of that divide. This transition from a prior, Eurocentric global order with multiple competing states was hardly automatic or obvious to those who lived through the change, as Ioana Sendroiu's article on the sensemaking of Romanian political elites in the 1940s makes clear. So, too, do the articles here by Mushahid Hussain and Kristin Plys, which document conflicts and ambiguities in political sensemaking in places far from Moscow, Washington, and Beijing. When fields change, it can be difficult to discern which part in which game one is playing, and what wise or even legitimate action might be.

World systems, empire

The major exception to our claim about the elision of the Cold War by sociologists of the prior century is the world-systems analysis of Immanuel Wallerstein (e.g., 1984), Giovanni Arrighi (e.g., 1994), and their many colleagues and students. Proudly inheriting Marxist conceptions of the material foundations of culture and politics, world-systems scholars have elaborately described and explained projects of economic domination among Global North countries. While mainstream disciplinary social science grew increasingly enamored of nation-states as coherent and formally comparable units of analysis, world-systems scholars were adamant about the global fundamentals of capitalist extraction economies: how capitalist accumulation historically has relied upon the human beings and natural resources, and therefore the domination, of the Global South. In addition to generating a rich corpus of theory and empirical scholarship, world-systems approaches laid the foundation for post-Marxist conceptions of global political economy that bracketed the nation-state in favor of translocal webs of political and economic infrastructure (e.g., Brenner 2004; Sassen 2003).

Meanwhile, a different cadre of political and economic sociologists, inspired by the cultural turn described above, made ambitious ventures into historical contexts preceding and transcending the nation-state. Pursuing fresh approaches to global processes of domination and control, they borrowed the concept of *empire* from

disciplinary historians and critical humanists to theorize how powerful systems of formal organization and discipline often transcend state boundaries (Adams 1996; Go 2011; Steinmetz 2008). This, for sociologists, is empire's defining characteristic. To borrow Nicholas Wilson's pithy definition, empire is "the process of domination beyond the boundaries of a given polity" (2013, 90). Empire's conceptual and geospatial reach allowed sociologists to escape the intellectual confines of the nation-state boundaries that often delimit the variable-driven quantitative analyses typical of the nomothetic social sciences (Steinmetz 2019; Stevens et al. 2018). It represents a major advance in transdisciplinary approaches to the study of power.

Empire is a useful and even essential tool for making sense of the Cold War because it illuminates how the actions of a metropole can shape globally dispersed complex systems. The Cold War may be regarded as a project of empire to the extent that US Congress, government agencies in Washington, and allied philanthropies would circumscribe the sovereignty of far-flung territories and nations (Go 2011; Immerwahr 2019) and, as Mushahid Hussain shows in his article here, define the shape and character of major regional development projects.

Yet the Cold War escapes the limits of even this capacious idea. This is partly because the phenomenon called the Cold War includes and commingles multiple projects of empire, whether from the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, or elsewhere. It also is because many projects associated with Cold War statecraft were linked to the erosion or collapse of earlier European empires (Getachew 2019). This multiplicity made for extraordinarily complex intellectual ferment and hybridity, as both George Steinmetz's and Kristin Plys's contributions to this issue portray.

So while legacy social science insights equip contemporary scholars to confront the twentieth-century Cold War, they stop short of enabling us to fully comprehend it. We take this as an apt opportunity for theoretical progress. In what follows, we propose that addressing the Cold War as a conceptual whole enables social scientists to revisit how large-scale social change is theorized and described.

From the Annales School to three temporalities

To situate this challenge in intellectual history, we need to go back to its roots in history and anthropology. For brevity, here we trace historical social science understandings of social change through the prism of three scholars exemplary of evolving perspectives on the topic. We start from the work of scholars in the Annales School, who dismissed historical events as a sort of foam on the surface of the much larger waves and currents of history (Braudel 1982), and advocated instead for historical analysis that pays attention to the long duration of social structures, or the *longue durée*. We continue to anthropologist Marshall Sahlins' conceptualization of events at the "conjuncture of structures," a focus on events as shapers of history that is in stark and explicit counterpoint to the Annales School. We end with William H. Sewell's (2005) conception of events at the "conjuncture of structures," which is built on an inversion of Sahlins' approach.

With Sahlins and then Sewell, conjuncture became a signal mark of contingency and change, though as we will see, there are important distinctions between their elaborations of the relationship between structure and event. But as Sahlins himself

acknowledges in a footnote to *Islands of History* (1985), conjuncture is, in fact, a term previously deployed by Fernand Braudel, an influential leader of the Annales School.[4] For Annales, conjunctures were a sort of temporal midpoint between the historical events they dismissed and the *longue durée* they preferred. Conjunctures were often cycles though not always, and they could cover "a decade, a quarter of a century" or even occasionally a "half-century" (Braudel 1982: 29). Though not enough without considering the *longue durée*, Braudel believed that conjunctural history moved explanation in the right direction, emerging as historical study when political and individual history – the stuff of events – receded from empirical and conceptual view. Braudel elaborated the three time spans as ultimately interdependent. Arguing that scholars delineate time artificially, he felt that "all fit into each other neatly and without difficulty, for they are all measured on the same scale" (Braudel 1982: 48). Though critiqued for not doing this in practice (Burke 2007; Sahlins 1991; Sewell 2005), he argued that good history was one that brought events, conjuncture, and *longue durée* together.

Yet in advocating for a history that pays attention to enduringly reproducing social structures, the Annales school went very far in dismissing events – throwing the baby out with the bathwater. A notable critic of this approach was Marshall Sahlins, who deplored the "exaggerated opposition between 'structure' and 'event'" that this engendered (1991: 293). Sahlin's own work aimed to resolve "the problem … that the one cannot be reduced to the other, the structure to the event nor vise versa, and yet each is somehow determining the other" (1991: 303).

His answer is by now well-tread scholarly terrain: while an event disrupts the going order of things, there is also "no event without system" (1991: 298). Sahlins' theory of history (1985: 145) argues, first, that we see and understand the world through pre-existing cultural categories ("the continuity of culture in action"), but second, in so doing, we engage with a world that is contingent, and that sometimes transforms our cultural categories ("risk of the categories in action"[5]). The structure of conjuncture – defined as "the way … cultural categories are actualized in a specific context through the interested action of the historic agents and the pragmatics of their interaction" (Sahlins 1991: 341) – therefore allows for a sort of synthesis, with system or structure instantiated in action, and action also totalized back into system (Sahlins 1985, 1991).

It is this general framework that William H. Sewell (2005) fruitfully deployed in his theory of eventful temporality, with two interrelated corrections. Sewell specified that structures are plural (hence "conjuncture of *structures*") and, further, that they are plural in the sense that clusters of cultural meanings are defined in local practice rather than a more global culture elaborated through semiotic relations of difference or similarity. This allows, for instance, for events to be endogenous to a given structure, or that a hierarchy of structures mediates between what is an event and

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[4]Sahlins (1985: 125) notes that he uses the term literally, as a "situation that results from a meeting of circumstances," though he helpfully provides the definition in French: "conjuncture, 'situation qui résulte d'une rencontre de circonstances'."

[5]Interestingly, this risk is both subjective and objective, "subjectively, by the people's interested uses of signs in their own projects; objectively, as meaning is risked in a cosmos fully capable of contradicting the symbolic systems that are presumed to describe it" (Sahlins 1985: 149).

what is a happening which does not transform structures (Sewell 2005). Sewell hoped that this analytical move would resolve the "often intractable" problem that "what unambiguously qualifies as a local structural transformation may actually have the effect of reproducing a structure at a higher level" (Sewell 2005: 211). In what follows, we look at how this problem becomes more profound when considering the Cold War, with implications for our understanding of historical change.

The medium Durée

At first glance, Annales' conjunctures would seem to capture the Cold War, at least in its duration. But the weight of intellectual history is such that we cannot ignore Sahlins' or Sewell's insights on how events and structures shape each other. At the same time, it is clearly awkward to think through the Cold War as any one event, even as it is also not structured in the usual sense.[6] This is why we offer medium durée as situated between event and structure – not temporally, but conceptually.

In many ways, the third wave of historical sociology was a response not only to the Annales School but also to a functionalist sociology focused on structure and reproduction (Clemens 2005). For Talcott Parsons (e.g., 1949), social action reproduces social stability, and indeed is oriented as such.[7] The critiques, meanwhile, are wide-ranging, disputing that societies, cultures, or actions can be this seamless (DiMaggio 1997; Swidler 1986). Eventually, complex but sharp oppositions emerged between stability and change, and thus between structure and event, underpinned by a renewed and sophisticated focus on agency (Clemens 2005; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Sewell 2005). Good historical sociology became eventful (Hirschman 2021).

With the medium durée, we seek to conceptualize the gaps between structure and event so as to capture instances that are both overdetermined and open. Put differently, the Cold War structured much across possibilities for action, but it did so in a specific way. Even as engagement with Cold War dynamics was generally necessary for robust action on the international arena, actions and their accounting in the vernacular of the Cold War could play out in a wide variety of ways. Because the Cold War was not settled into a stably reproducing structure, there were spaces for genuine creativity and eventfulness. But whatever overarching patterning could be glimpsed across these changes – the two hegemons and their interests, for instance – was a lodestar for other actors, even as those actors could (whether momentarily or extensively) change some of the patterns themselves. The medium durée, in other words, is eventful without resolving into structure, and it is structuring while being frequently eventful.

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[6]It is also possible that whether the Cold War qualifies as event depends on our perspective. Sewell briefly considers this with reference to Michael Mann's *The Sources of Social Power* (1986). He notes that "the temporality of the theoretical category 'event' is not self-evident but rather must be constructed theoretically in relation to the time scale of the processes being studied" (2005: 121–122). At the millennial scale of Mann's perspective, century-long process could be considered events inasmuch as they "marked decisive breaks with previous history" (Sewell 2005: 121).

[7]Meanwhile, Parsons and colleagues were responding to even earlier concerns regarding the meaninglessness of modernity (Alexander and Smith 2001).

To the extent that we want a sociology that can explain both stability and change (Clemens and Cook 1999), the medium durée captures the many liminal moments or spaces between structure and event. It allows us to pay attention, in particular, to what is structuring without being structured, and to actions that aim to remake the world as well as those that seek to bind a coherent version of it (Glaeser 2011). In this in-between, clarity can be illusory. We watch or participate in the world being made and remade, in some ways a process more confusing than during the pure contingency of phenomena such as the storming of the Bastille (Sewell 2005; see also Ermakoff 2008; Kurzman 2004). Stability is elusive, and we do not know which abeyance structures perdure, even as we must orient around them (Sendroiu 2022; Taylor 1989). The medium durée captures a social world where some parts of social life are settled and others are not, and it is not entirely clear which is which. Below, we elaborate some possible elements of this framework, building on the contributions of this special issue.

The Cold War as both eventful and structuring

Whether the Cold War was a war is, of course, open to debate, something James Mahoney's contribution also examines in detail. Beyond debates on the definition of "war," the Cold War was certainly a conflict between (at least) two superpowers that shaped possibilities and outcomes for the entire globe. The Cold War thus enables us to rethink what structural multiplicity might involve. For any given Cold War actor – certainly any political actor, and many others besides – geopolitics was patterned by conflict, and was thus exceptionally eventful both in potential and in fact.

This is the starting point of Elisabeth Clemens' contribution to this special issue. She reminds us that the Cold War was fought for a "string of claims: for religion not 'godless Communism'; for free markets rather than a centrally planned economy; for the attainment of the military supremacy necessary to meet the threat" (Clemens, this issue). Clemens argues that negotiation of these contrasts shaped how the US state expanded as the Cold War took off. Responding to a newly bipolar and conflictual state system – and anticipating crises both domestic and international – politicians expanded the US state while still maintaining a vehemently anti-statist market liberalism. This "anti-statist state-building" resulted in landmark achievements such as the G.I. Bill and the Marshall Plan – without leaving the durable administrative edifices that might otherwise have come from such monumental projects.

Political actors elsewhere also needed to work their way through the contrasts. Ioana Sendroiu takes up a parallel account of state-building in response to a world patterned by conflict on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Drawing on archival research on the beginning of the Cold War in Romania, she explains how Romanian Communists elaborated a new version of the state, with temporal and geographic narratives of the state recast to align with the USSR. Sendroiu argues that the Communists did this despite favorable geopolitical conditions. Soviet tanks in Bucharest were not deemed a guarantee of political success and so they proceeded – haphazardly and in fits-and-starts – to elaborate new narratives of the state, whether through the media, political propaganda, or trials. While in Clemens' case, we see

the US responding, reinforcing, and further elaborating their side across a series of contrasts, Romanian communists were working to detect these contrasts as they were being eventfully elaborated in the world around them, and to then translate them into their specific domestic context.

Mushahid Hussain takes us to a more distant front of the Cold War: East Pakistan in the mid-1960s, where we again see politics and policies being negotiated across the contradictions of the time. Through the prism of community development projects, Hussain shows how Pakistani elites were responding to the Cold War context – seeking to fit with and benefit from US strategic imperatives – but doing so in the specific context of post-colonial South Asia. This reconciling was far from straightforward, ultimately proving inadequate to the task of transforming rural life in East Pakistan. Hussain argues that community development neither emerged nor failed through the imposition of American imperial will, but was instead a way in which local elites navigated a confusing global order.

Spaces for creativity during the Cold War

Precisely because the Cold War offered a sort of incomplete structuring punctured by considerable eventfulness, it allowed considerable space for creativity. We see this in three contributions just discussed: Clemens shows the emergence of a novel system of governing based on "institutional sleight-of-hand," Sendroiu tracks how Romanian Communists effectively elaborated a new version of the Romanian state, and Hussain describes the emergence of community development as an institutional form at the intersection of local and geopolitical dynamics. Across these contributions, patterned actions of the Cold War took the form of novel reactions to a dynamic macrosocial context. And the always partial structuring of the Cold War made creative thought and action possible all over the place.

Both Kristin Plys and George Steinmetz draw our attention to creative reimaginings of the world that emerged at this time, products of the temporal simultaneity of Cold War and the dissolution of European empires. This confluence produced tremendous ideological efflorescence: "[o]verlaps and disjunctures among different structural logics widened the space of possibilities for thought and action concerning alternative ways of organizing geopolitics" (Steinmetz, this issue). Steinmetz's contribution tracks this efflorescence through the development of the non-aligned movement (NAM) and pan-African anticolonialism, with effects not just in post-colonial states but also the metropoles, as Steinmetz shows in the case of France.

Plys picks up the story as the NAM faltered, showing how Maoist thought became a powerful oppositional ideology. This alternative emerged, she argues, precisely because "[b]y the mid-20th century, the Cold War structured possibilities for politics everywhere" – yet neither hegemonic ideology convincingly offered solutions to the Third World's problems. In a shift also described by Hussain, emergent Cold War "development" institutions replaced direct colonial rule with economic development programs. But this evolution also involved new thinking on sovereignty and autonomy across the Global South, as states sought to limit their dependence on the US and USSR.

Limits on creativity

The incomplete structuring of a medium durée, such as the Cold War, means that actors orient themselves to patterns they make out across myriad events, but deviation is often possible, including creative rethinkings of the world, such as those elaborated by Steinmetz and Plys. Yet deviations can vary broadly in cost, underscoring our emphasis on an incomplete and occasionally incoherent structuring. Put differently, the Cold War was more structuring in some spaces (whether geographic or temporal) than in others. For instance, Steinmetz argues that the creative efflorescence of projects such as NAM ended in the mid-1960s, just as Cold War logics became more entrenched worldwide. Geopolitically, the Cold War was also in many ways more binding in its two centers – Moscow and Washington – than it was elsewhere. We see in Hussain and Sendroiu's articles that even in client states, Cold War contrasts were reinterpreted as they were transposed onto local dynamics.

Contrast this creative geopolitical efflorescence to Isaac Ariail Reed's contribution, which is squarely about creativity, but creativity as an elaboration of American hegemony. Reed surfaces the science-fictionalization of American political culture of this period, a form of sensemaking so compelling because it both reflected and extended emerging ideas of a virtuous, world-making American science. Reed reminds us to look at elites beyond realism or rationality: while institutional incentives and the pursuit of power and control are always present, sometimes they are guided or even underwritten by fantasy.

And it is precisely because of this deeply rooted US political culture – elaborated and reproduced in myriad reinforcing institutions – that Andreas Glaesersees political communities as ill-equipped to pay attention to their own "long-term collective interests." He emphasizes, instead, the breathtaking possibility that John F. Kennedy and his advisors might have taken the nuclear option during the Cuban missile crisis. Warning against not only the fog of war, but also a self-fulfilling attachment to pre-existing social scaffoldings for action, Glaeser argues for the difficulty *and* urgent importance of learning from history.

Conclusion

The idea of a medium durée captures the peculiar duality of a phenomenon such as the Cold War: the ways in which it was confusing and ambiguous, as well as deeply consequential in shaping possibilities for action throughout the world. Whereas structures such as capitalism or the patriarchy can reproduce themselves even through challenges (Chiapello and Boltanski 2018), a medium durée never quite settles into structure. Yet it is broader than the radical newness of events (Xu and Reed 2023). The medium durée offers instead a preponderant but not hegemonic motivation for collective action, one tied to fields, relationships, and material resources. It is a sort of frequently shifting but nonetheless shared conversation. A tremendous achievement as a specific though limited coherence (and therefore a specific elaboration of power relations [see Sewell 2005]), actors cannot ignore it – but they are also able to at least occasionally elaborate alternatives. Even in the echoes of the Cold War in the present, from the ongoing invasion of Ukraine to talk

of a new Cold War between the US and China, we see enduring traces of the medium durée elaborated here.

Our conception of medium durée has theoretical purchase only to the extent that it is applicable to empirical phenomena beyond the Cold War. While adjudicating this is properly left to other scholars, we do see some family resemblance between the phenomenon called Cold War and other social periods and processes that hang together in somewhat coherent wholes without becoming predictably reproducing structures – whether through master narratives, common accounts for mobilizing action, constellations of organizations, and so on. Consider, for example, the New Deal (Cohen 2008), a political project that structured policy discourse and government spending from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) first presidency through World War II, and inflected federal administrative and party politics into the 1960s; the varied discursive and organizational innovations of the 1950s forward that are pithily summarized by the term *Black Civil Rights movement* (Morris 1984); and the creature called neoliberalism, which is credited with shaping financial markets, managerial practices, national economic policy, international political relations, and individual sensemaking from the 1980s into the present (Gerstle 2022).

Of course medium durée – like structure or event – is ultimately an analytical choice. But it is a choice that allows specific affordances for paying attention to actions that aspire to coherence without fully achieving it. We suspect there may be more than a few empirical objects whose explanations warrant such a device.

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