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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Capturing the Cold War Paradox

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I welcome this special issue of *Social Science History* and its focus on the Cold War. The special issue provides a salutary response to sociology's relative disinterest in this historical phenomenon, and in events generally.

We are reminded by the special issue's editors, Ioana Sendroiu and Mitchell Stevens, of the extant conceptual social science terminology of events, conjunctures/yycles, longue durée. Their approach provides an interesting way to develop alternating visions on ruptures, rather than choosing one or another of the proffered conceptual and temporal frames. Analytical acts of specification then can capture what I would call ruptures' restless flows and shaping forms. Forms, as the various articles in the special issue identify, carried the Cold War forward in time: "Though we were investigating very different substantive domains – education, post-WW II political realignments, international development projects, imperial intellectual projects, science fiction – we came together around a shared sense that the twentieth-century Cold War deserved a head-on theoretical appraisal," as Sendroiu and Stevens (2025: 814) write in their introduction.

Importantly, this concatenation of alternating visions considers questions of temporal duration, relevance, and meaning. Indeed, we can think of the Cold War as an event, a cycle, as longue durée (as an interweaving conceptual vocabulary, it is useful also to consider the editors' terms of war, field, and empire). I think that this bit from a footnote in the Introduction (Sendroiu and Stevens 2025) gets it right:

> 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: 121–22). [So even] century-long process could be considered events inasmuch as they marked decisive breaks with previous history'" (Sewell 2005: 121).

But in spite of our best efforts to periodize, cauterize, or characterize the Cold War, it remains fundamentally a paradox, or better yet an oxymoron, in several ways, as Sendroiu and Stevens note (the terms "Cold War" and "Iron Curtain" both combine contradictory ideas). I would add that the political realignments of the Cold War provided both structural clarity to the post-WW II international state system and

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provoked a transformational rupture that has never fully formed into a coherent event.

As a realignment, the Cold War established a framework following the path of least resistance, both cognitively and geopolitically – defaulting to the gravitational pull of binarism. This is one reason why the "War on Terror" promulgated by President George W. Bush's administration in the years immediately following 9/11 could never really get traction. In politics, in academia, in journalism (among other fields), the default to binarism maintains its dominance and is readily apparent: In the November 16, 2023, issue of the *Philadelphia Inquirer,* President Joe Biden's meeting with China's President Xi Jinping was reported with the following direct quotation: "'Planet Earth is big enough for the two countries to succeed,' Xi told Biden" (Madhani et al. 2023). The same meeting and the same quotation in the *New York Times* take this two countries, one planet model to an even more extreme and explicit Cold-War type bipolar binarism: "Mr. Xi also sounded accommodating when he arrived, telling Mr. Biden, 'Planet Earth is big enough' for both superpowers" (Sanger and Rogers 2023). I note that the language of "both superpowers'" was supplied by the *The New York Times* reporters themselves.[1]

In my own research, I have been reading state documents (see, for instance, The White House [2022] for the most recent National Security Strategy Report), documents that are trying to grapple with these dilemmas. With my collaborators, John Mohr and Ronald Breiger, we've been focusing on what we call relational templates of friends, partners, adversaries, neighbors, and so forth as the foundational architecture of the *National Security Strategy Reports*; these roles and templates come into and out of focus over the course of the documents (Mohr et al. 2013). Reflecting the Cold War and the new conceptualizations model proposed by this special issue, it's interesting to examine the way that President Bill Clinton's administration's 1996 *National Security Strategy Report* text grapples with confronting a post-Cold War world in which there is no longer a clear bipolar power model (the United States and the Soviet Union), a world in which "aggressive neighbors" like Iraq threaten US "allies and friends," and a world in which security threats are more and more likely to come in the form of terrorists who "threaten innocents" than in the form of territorially aggressive states (The White House 1996: 14). The following paragraph sums up the 1996 document's sense of a restless, mutable, and unpredictable world:

> We will never know with certainty how an enemy might fight or precisely what demands might be placed on our own forces in the future. The contributions of allies or coalition partners will vary from place to place and over time. Thus, balanced U.S. forces are needed in order to provide a wide range of complementary capabilities and to cope with the unpredictable and unexpected (The White House 1996: 14).

Balance is a frail and shaky post on which to hang all this variability, uncertainty, and unpredictability.

[1]See also the work of Barbie Zelizer (2018, 2020) on the relationship between journalism and the frame of the Cold War.

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Nevertheless, five years later, in 2001, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War still provided the first and most instinctual framework for understanding historical rupture. In the *9/11 Commission Report,* the Langley F-16s circling Washington, DC, on morning of 9/11 are introduced in the following way: "First, the Langley pilots were never briefed about the reason they were scrambled. As the lead pilot explained: "I reverted to the Russian threat . . . I'm thinking cruise missile threat from the sea. You know you look down and see the Pentagon burning and I thought the bastards snuck one by us . . . [Y]ou couldn't see any airplanes, and no one told us anything" (9/11 Commission 2004: 45).

So, Cold War: past, present, future, or all of the above?

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