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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

The Cold War as a label, meaning, and referent

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the Cold War as a label, meaning, and referent in academic research. I consider how the label "the Cold War" focuses attention on the conflict between the United States and USSR and draws attention away from the Global South. I show how academics often use the category the Cold War as a diminished subtype of interstate war, with the adjective *cold* calling attention to the absence of direct military combat. I analyze the meanings and referents associated with different ways of "casing" the Cold War: a case of cold war, a case of interstate rivalry, and a case of empire building. I also examine the separate meanings of the Cold War when it is treated as a *world-historical time* versus an *event*. Using the essays in this special issue, I examine how sociologists study the Cold War as an empirical referent. I find that the cultural orientation of sociology emphasizes symbolic and performative aspects of the Cold War that are not traditionally emphasized in work on the Cold War.

Keywords: Concepts; methodology; casing; counterfactuals; Global South

Like other categories, the Cold War is constituted by three elements (Ogden and Richards 1923). First, it is the label or words, "the Cold War." The individual words "cold" and "war" are combined into a compound word, and the definite article "the" is used to signal one specific entity. Second, the Cold War is a set of meanings, ideas, and understandings that communities of language users associate with the label, the Cold War. The content of these meanings, ideas, and understandings varies across time and space. The Cold War's status as a homonym makes it almost inherently subject to miscommunication and debates over its best meaning. Third, the Cold War is a referent or empirical case in the world. It consists of a complex and vast set of entities that were arranged in certain ways in space and time. These entities include physical and material things, such as people and objects, as well as social and ideational things, such as norms and convictions. Because the referent of the Cold War consists of copious empirical stuff, the Cold War can be described only very partially and selectively. The empirical aspects of the Cold War that any scholar chooses to emphasize are inevitably theoretically and normatively driven.

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In this article, I discuss the Cold War as a label, meaning, and referent. I am especially interested in the relationships that exist between label and meaning and between meaning and referent. Regarding the label–meaning relationship, the individual words "cold" and "war" have their own meanings, and these established meanings place some constraints on the possible and actual meanings of the Cold War. Because of these constraints, I suggest that researchers should sometimes abandon the label, the Cold War, when understanding the post-World War II era. For example, they can often more usefully speak of the postwar era of superpower empire building in the Global South.

Regarding the meaning–referent relationship, any particular definition of the Cold War shapes the specific material and ideational entities in the world that literally compose the Cold War. For example, if the Cold War is defined as ending in 1990, then events after 1990 are not a part of the Cold War. Yet the meaning of the Cold War does not unilaterally determine the empirical substance of the Cold War. The empirical world also shapes the meaning of the Cold War, including how it evolves over time. This reciprocal and evolving relationship between meaning and referent occurs within the constraints imposed by the label, the Cold War. I argue that a traditional definition of the Cold War as a particular case of interstate rivalry is useful because it generates intersubjective understanding among academics and enhances overall scholarly communication. However, I also argue that this definition deemphasizes important events and processes that should be regarded as core parts of the Cold War. In particular, the traditional definition underplays processes of empire building that I believe must be at the core of a good scholarly definition of the Cold War.

I focus on the approximate meanings of the Cold War for professional scholars, including historians, political scientists, and sociologists. Ordinary citizens in places such as the United States, Cuba, Romania, West Germany, Tanzania, and Indonesia no doubt associate the concept with different experiences and events. These nonacademic understandings of the Cold War are of great sociological and historical import. But they are not the focus of this particular essay.

To discuss the Cold War as a referent, I draw on the articles in this special issue. Several of the contributors understand the Cold War as an episode of empire building, viewing processes in the Global South as constitutive of the Cold War. Several authors also adopt sociological–cultural perspectives to make sense of the Cold War as empirical referent. These authors call attention to performative, symbolic, normative, and identity-formation processes that are not traditionally foregrounded in histories of the Cold War.

The label "the Cold War"

Although the specific person who coined the term "the Cold War" can be debated (see Stephanson 1998 for a discussion), the label caught on in the 1950s and remains firmly in place today. Both its oxymoronic resonance and its connotative utility contributed to its lexical success over the years. First, it is one of many important scholarly categories whose name is built around conflicting imperatives or conceptual opposites. Some examples from the field of comparative development

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are charismatic authority, dependent development, embedded autonomy, and nonviolent revolution. The conceptual tension inherent to these categories captures a dynamic dualism and provides a basis for understanding and theorizing (Gould 1999). The generic label "cold war" is no different: it embodies an inherent tension distinctive to a state–state relationship that is neither war nor peace.

Second, the success of the Cold War as a word in the lexicon was also no doubt related to its real-world utility for the United States and the USSR. The label's connotations were useful for both superpowers. It implied the reality of a global normative order – a world culture or world society (Meyer et al. 1997; Wendt 1999) – in which the United States and USSR were not allowed to engage in a direct war with each other, but they were given much latitude for behaving as they pleased in the Global South. This state of affairs seems to have served the interests of both of the superpowers and their national citizens, who were held hostage by the other's nuclear weapons. The stakes of avoiding nuclear war were so high for the two nation-states – and indeed the world as a whole – that any framing that could contribute to not-war was potentially worthy. The phrase the Cold War became an attractive way of labeling the new rules of the game. The phrase was part of a larger effort to legitimate a new order whose heaviest costs were to be absorbed by people living outside of the United States and the USSR.

From the perspective of the Global South, the Cold War was (and is) an unfortunate term. The label assigned (and assigns) the countries of the Global South to the status of pawns in a game played by others. The actual history shows otherwise – it shows that the countries and peoples of the Global South made autonomous choices and exercised consequential agency during the Cold War. But to capture this history, academics must often turn to other categories, such as *empire*, *decolonization*, *non-alignment*, and *development*. These categories at least contextually position the Global South in ways that enable scholars to see and analyze the agency of actors in the Global South (see also Getachew 2019; Lüthi 2020). When used as a label for global politics, the Cold War almost inherently deemphasizes the Global South and its people. This semantic effect is ironic because the Global South was in many ways the center of the conflict between the West and the East. In fact, from the perspective of the great powers, it was the end of the Cold War – not the Cold War itself – that decentered the Global South by removing this region from the center of their attention and activities.

The "Cold" in the Cold War

The adjective *cold* plays a central role in the meaning of the category the Cold War. To understand this role, I consider the Cold War in relationship to the concepts of *war* and *peace*. I find that the Cold War is an example of both not-war and not-peace, but it is a better example of not-peace than not-war.

The Cold War as a diminished subtype

In academic discourse, the Cold War is rarely treated as a classic subtype of the concept *interstate war*. A classic subtype of interstate war is a concept that possesses all of the defining features of interstate war, plus at least one additional feature that

distinguishes it as a certain type of interstate war (Goertz 2006). Examples of classic subtypes of interstate war include *great power interstate war*, *two-front interstate war,* and *conventional interstate war*. These classic subtypes are situated in set-theoretic hierarchies in which the superordinate category is a set (interstate war) and the subtypes are proper subsets fully contained within this set. For example, conventional interstate war is a subset of interstate war.[1]

The Cold War is an intriguing concept in part because it is not a case of interstate war. The Cold War lacks some of the features of interstate war, as defined by mainstream international relations scholars. For example, one influential definition of interstate war is sustained, coordinated violence between two or more states (Levy and Thompson 2010: 5). The "between" component of this definition requires that the two states use their own combatants rather than proxies from other states and that the violence is reciprocated. Because the militaries of the United States and the USSR did not directly engage in sustained combat with each other, the Cold War is "less than" a full-blown instance of interstate war.[2]

With a diminished subtype (Collier and Levitsky 1997), the target category is defined by the absence of one or more of the key attributes of the superordinate category. For instance, the superordinate category could be *democracy*, defined in terms of broad civil liberties and five other components. A particular case that features all five of these other components but is missing the civil liberties component might be called an *illiberal democracy*. An illiberal democracy is "less than" a democracy because it is missing one of its key defining features – i.e., broad civil liberties. The adjective *illiberal* serves to highlight the missing attribute.[3]

With respect to the category interstate war, cold war is a diminished subtype that is missing direct state-to-state conflict. The adjective *cold* highlights this missing attribute. Under a standard definition of interstate war, the Cold War is not a member of the category because the United States and the USSR did not engage in direct and reciprocated violence against one another on their own territories using their own citizen combatants. In a dichotomous world, the Cold War has 0 percent membership in the category of war because the United States and USSR refrained from directly fighting each other. More crudely, the direct conflict between the United States and the USSR did not generate the 1,000 or more battle deaths that some scholars require for an interstate war (e.g., Small and Singer 1970).

The Cold War features most of the traits of an interstate war. It was an intensely antagonistic relationship in which massive resources were mobilized by the United States and USSR to undermine each other. These mobilizations included troops and weapons, and they occurred in many parts of the world. Millions of people died fighting in conflicts that were funded and supported by the United States and the

[1]It is worth noting that the concept *interstate war* is a classic subtype of the more general concept *war*.

[2]As an anonymous reviewer points out, however, high-ranking US military officers sometimes thought of the Cold War as a full-blown war. Again, my focus is on the meaning of the concept for academics in disciplines such as history, sociology, and political science.

[3]It bears emphasis that *democracy* and *illiberal democracy* have the same number of defining dimensions (i.e., six in this example). The only difference is that one of these attributes must be present for *democracy*, whereas this same attribute must be absent for *illiberal democracy*. It is possible that more illiberal democracies exist in the world than democracies; it depends on the distribution of civil liberties vs. not-civil liberties for cases with the other defining attributes.

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USSR during the Cold War. Yet, it is not a matter of splitting hairs to insist that this event was not an interstate war. The Cold War *caused* terrible episodes of violence, but it was not *constituted* by that violence. As Gaddis (1986) pointed out, the Cold War was a "long peace" from the perspective of stability among the great powers, with the consequence that the world was spared from nuclear holocaust.

The Cold War as not-peace

What is the relationship between the Cold War and the category *interstate peace*? Is the Cold War a diminished subtype of *interstate peace*? The category *peace* is, of course, not equivalent to the category *not-war*. Many instances of not-war (e.g., contemporary United States–Iran) lack membership in the category *peace*. Whereas *interstate war* is a temporally bounded event, *interstate peace* is an ongoing relationship between two or more states (Goertz et al. 2016). For states, the opposite of *peacetime* is *wartime* (Dudziak 2012).

The Cold War as a relationship between the United States and USSR lacks all or nearly all of the key defining attributes of interstate peace. These defining attributes are routine and extensive diplomatic coordination, major cooperative agreements, institutionalized and friendly communication, no ongoing conflict issues, and no plausible counterfactual war scenarios (Klein et al. 2008). The Cold War is a clear instance of *not-peace*. In fact, among not-war cases, the Cold War is an exemplary case of not-peace.

In sum, the Cold War is neither a war nor a peace relationship. It is a diminished subtype of *war* but not of *peace*. The Cold War is a good example of a not-peace relationship, but it is a less good example of a not-war relationship (though it is a not-war relationship). The Cold War has this status because it is closer to being a member of war than of peace.[4]

The Cold War as a not-war: Referential implications for the Global South

Like other social categories, the Cold War is not a neutral description of a mind-independent reality but rather a normative construction that helps to constitute the reality it describes (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Mahoney 2021). A crucial function of the Cold War was to frame the conflict between the United States and the USSR as a nonmilitary affair in which the two sides refrained from directly attacking one another. The category was attractive in part because it could become a self-fulfilling prophesy (Merton 1948), helping the world avoid nuclear holocaust. Conveniently, the Cold War enabled the United States and USSR to acknowledge their status as absolute enemies while prohibiting them from directly fighting each other. The Cold War became "the kind of war one has when war itself is impossible" (Stephanson 1998: 83).

[4]The clearest example of not-peace is a case of war. But among the cases that are neither war nor peace, the Cold War is a very good example of not-peace. Conversely, while the Cold War is a case of not-war, it is not close to being the best example of not-war. The clearest example of not-war is a case of peace. Among the cases of not-peace that are also not-wars, the best examples are cases that come very close to peace, which the Cold War does not.

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Yet the understanding of the Cold War as an instance of not-war had other far less laudable consequences for the real world. This understanding provided a shield under which the United States and the USSR engaged in meddling around the world that was justified under doctrines such as Containment and the Molotov Plan. The cost of avoiding nuclear holocaust included a thuggish US hegemony in Latin America, Western forbearance of Soviet totalitarianism in Eastern Europe, and interference and exploitation by both superpowers in Africa and Asia. The descriptor "the Cold War" was part of a larger project of legitimating a reality in which the United States and USSR operated with impunity in their spheres of influence and in much of the Global South.[5]

Yet the countries of the Global South were not merely passive recipients of grand plans conceived outside of their borders. In this issue, for example, Kristin Plys used a distinctively sociological approach to study the agency of actors in the Global South in (re)constructing their identities (Wendt 1999). These countries initially faced three choices: align with the United States, align with the USSR, or pursue non-alignment. On the one hand, this limited menu of choices shows how structurally constraining and determinate the Cold War era was for countries in the Global South. On the other hand, Plys shows that the limitations of these three choices generated the rise of counter-ideologies in the 1970s and 1980s, such as left-wing Maoist ideology and ring-wing Islamic ideology. By creating counter-hegemonic identities, countries in the Global South challenged the bipolar dynamics of the Cold War itself.

The essay by George Steinmetz (this issue) considers how the power constellation of the Cold War shaped social-scientific knowledge production in the Global South. Steinmetz focuses on the effects of the Cold War era on new ways of thinking about empire, colonialism, and international order. In identifying the sources of these new ideas, he develops insights about the logic of the Cold War itself and its intersection with colonialism. For example, he identifies a "unique global geopolitical assemblage after 1945" as playing a "decisive role" in the flourishing of anticolonial thought and politics in the first two decades after World War II. This assemblage was partly centered around the hegemony of the United States and USSR, which was essential for the reconsolidation of the colonial empires after 1945. The new colonial practices included anti-Communism, which became an important cause of the intellectual flowering that took place in the Global South. In turn, the new critical anticolonial thought helped to trigger anti-hegemonic movements that challenged colonialism, created new possibilities of non-alignment, and offered theoretical alternatives to the modernization theory of the West and the Soviet Marxism of the East. Steinmetz's research makes clear that the Cold War was a case of spectacular anticolonial theory building and resistance within the Global South.

Casing the Cold War I

If the Cold War is a case, what is it a case of? This question of case identification is central to theory building in the social sciences (Ragin and Becker 1992). Case

[5]This reality suggests the following more general hypothesis: weaker states are usually spared from the worst violence during hot wars among great powers, but they bear the brunt of violence during cold wars among great powers.

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identification affects the meaning of a category and the way in which it is studied. In this section, I illustrate this point by analyzing the Cold War as a case of three overarching types: cold war, interstate rivalry, and empire building. Along the way, I contrast a traditional definition of the Cold War with an alternative definition that focuses more on the Global South.

The Cold War as a cold war

Since the beginning of the Cold War, some scholars have viewed it as one instance of the general category *cold war* (e.g., McGee 1950; Whitton 1951; Brands and Gaddis 2021; Legvold 2022). The list of cold wars includes England–Spain for much of the 1500s,[6] Egypt–Saudi Arabia during the Nasser years, India–Pakistan since 2002, North Korea–South Korea after World War II, China–Taiwan after 1949, China and the Soviet Union during the Sino-Soviet split, and Iran–Israel since 1979.[7] The relationship between the Cold War and the category cold war is a prototype-category relationship. That is, the Cold War is the prototype of cold war. The prototype of a category is the most salient instance of the category; it is the category's "best example," and it has many features of interest to psychologists and cognitive scientists (Rosch 1973, 1978).

Set-theoretic analysis (e.g., Ragin 2008) offers one way of capturing the prototype status of the Cold War in relationship to the general category cold war. With this approach, as Figure 1 shows, some cases (i.e., state–state relationships) in the world are full members of the category cold war (i.e., 100 percent), some cases are not at all members (i.e., 0 percent membership), and some cases have partial membership (i.e., between 0 percent and 100 percent membership). The degree of membership of a case depends on its spatial proximity to the prototype of the category – that is, to the Cold War. In the figure, I treat the Cold War as a particular location in space. I situate other cases around this location, closer or further depending on their sematic proximity to cold war. I establish a membership boundary for cold war by drawing a closed shape surrounding this particular location. Other scholars might draw the shape in a different way, depending on their views about which cases have membership in the category.

Figure 1 includes my informal assessment of whether two states are engaged in a cold war. My assessment focuses especially on whether the two states are (1) absolutely hostile in words and deeds, and (2) not engaged in direct military combat. When using a set diagram such as Figure 1, cases can be relocated either by redrawing the boundary or by moving the cases relative to the boundary (or both). The first change (redrawing the boundary) involves reconceptualizing the category; the second change (repositioning the cases) involves reinterpreting the facts about individual cases.

[6]An anonymous reviewer notes that this rivalry is somewhat problematic because it preceded the War of the Spanish Armada, one of the great wars of the sixteenth century. The case raises the issue of how to characterize a longstanding cold war that eventually ends as a hot war. For example, if the United States and the USSR had gone to war in 1990, would the Cold War still exist?

[7]On April 13, 2024, while I was revising this essay for final publication, Iran sent missiles over Israel, threatening to turn their cold war into a hot war.

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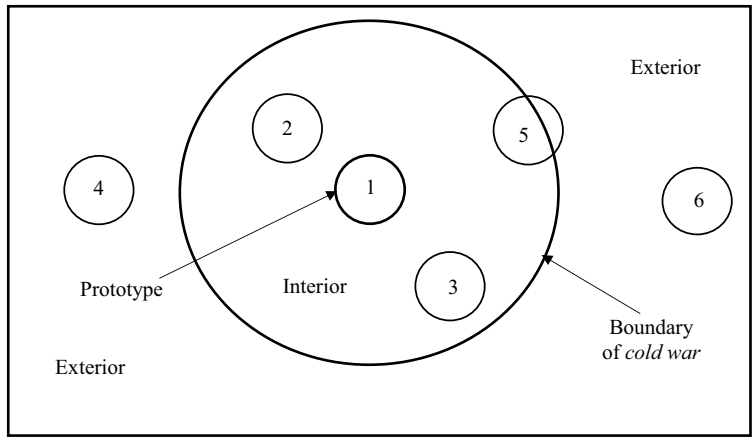


Figure 1. The US–USSR cold war as the prototype of *cold war.*
Key: 1: US–USSR cold war; 2: North–South Korea cold war; 3: India–Pakistan cold war; 4: Russia–Ukraine war; 5: Iran–Israel almost cold war; 6: US–Canada peace relations.

I prefer this set-theoretic approach because it offers a precise and formal way of constituting and describing social reality with categories (Mahoney 2021). The question of whether a state–state relationship qualifies as a cold war depends on what we (i.e., a scholarly community) mean by the label cold war. The boundaries of this category ultimately exist in the minds of the language users who employ it. Set-theoretic analysis offers a method for scholars to share publicly how they understand the category and the membership of cases within it.

The Cold War as an interstate rivalry

Rather than being a case of interstate war, the Cold War is a case of *interstate rivalry* (or *international rivalry*). Political scientists understand the category interstate rivalry as an antagonistic and competitive relationship between two states in which both sides use military threats and formulate foreign policy toward one another in military terms (e.g., Diehl and Goertz 2000: 4). With this definition, a cold war is a particular kind of interstate rivalry, one in which each side expends tremendous resources to undermine the other but is unwilling to directly fight the other. The Cold War is one of many cases of interstate rivalry, alongside both not-war cases (e.g., Israel–Egypt after 1973) and eventual war cases (e.g., Spain–England during the sixteenth century).

The Cold War was an interstate rivalry that involved the two most powerful nuclear states in the international system. The Cold War is thus a special case of *nuclear superpower interstate rivalry* (cf. Huntington and Brzezinski 1982). Although the United States was superior to the USSR on most measures of economic and military power by the 1970s (Stephanson 1998), the devastating potential of nuclear weapons arguably had the effect of equalizing capabilities between them (Waltz 1990). In addition, the Cold War involved a capitalist versus communist ideological rivalry that was fought out on a global stage between states

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with expansionary intentions. As such, the Cold War is a case of an *ideological and empire-building interstate rivalry* (e.g., Westad 2017). Furthermore, the Cold War was an interstate rivalry that began in the aftermath of World War II, forging many of its characteristics in this context and continuing until as late as December 1991, with the period up to the mid-1960s being the height of the rivalry.[8] This context was marked by the immobility of normal diplomatic channels – that is, the channels that are present during "peacetime" (Dudziak 2012). The Cold War is thus a case of a *post-World War II interstate rivalry* where the norms of peacetime no longer prevailed (Sparrow 2011).

Taken together, these components form a useful definition: the Cold War was an intense interstate rivalry between two ideologically expansionist nuclear superpowers that each sought to build global spheres of influence in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The two states involved were the liberal capitalist United States and the communist USSR, and their rivalry lasted from approximately 1947 to 1991, with less intensity after the mid-1960s.[9] This definition includes the general features of the Cold War in the first sentence and its particular historical features in the second sentence. I propose that something like this definition functions as the semantic placeholder underpinning intersubjective understanding and meaningful communication among historians and social scientists who work on the Cold War.

The Cold War as a case of empire building

The above definition of the Cold War has interstate rivalry at its core, and it treats other features such as superpower expansionism as secondary. This conceptual move is not substantively and normatively innocent. A different approach would make empire building the core of the category, moving the state–state rivalry feature into a secondary position. With compound categories, the noun is usually the primary feature and the adjective the secondary feature. Thus, the label "empire-building rivalry" could be replaced with the label "rivalrous empire building." The idea that the Cold War was a case of rivalrous empire building places the Global South at the heart of the event.

The contrast between the Cold War as a case of interstate rivalry versus the Cold War as a case of empire building is instructive. Unlike an interstate rivalry, a case of empire building emphasizes as key actors those territories where empires are being built as well as the empire builders. Empire building calls attention to objects related to the infrastructure of colonial or imperial rule (e.g., buildings for political administration and roads for moving people and goods) as well as police and military weapons. Crucially, the social rules of empire building are fundamentally different from the social rules of an interstate rivalry. The rules of empire building necessarily include modes of imperial domination and ethnoracial-based exploitation. Whereas the domination and exploitation of other countries are incidental to the concept *interstate rivalry*, these processes are basic to the meaning of *rivalrous empire building*. The shift in meaning is consistent with revisionist historical work

[8]After the Cuban missile crisis, the Cold War became a less intense rivalry under the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence and the US policy of détente.

[9]The rivalry between the United States and Russia continued after 1991.

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that stresses the importance of the Global South for international politics in the aftermath of World War II (e.g., Getachew 2019; Lüthi 2020).

If scholars treat the Cold War as a case of empire building, the United States–USSR conflict itself must be situated in the context of empire building. In this issue, Isaac Reed does so by exploring the relationship between political culture and science fiction in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Reed shows how, with the Cold War, the US project of empire building took on the idioms, tropes, and narrative scripts of science fiction novels. US political culture became "science fictionalized." Reed examines how actors who were part of the US empire building project (e.g., the RAND Corporation) found it quite appropriate and natural to see their project as analogous to space exploration. In the analogy, the empire builders become self-confident and self-important space explorers on an exciting and benevolent quest of discovery and colonization. The quest is devoid of any conflict, and the journey is limited only by environmental conditions and the physical laws of the universe. Reed's essay captures the subjectivity of unabashed empire building in one corner of the United States located at the intersection of science and fantasy.

Mushahid Hussain's (this issue) essay shows the complexity involved in treating the Cold War as a case of empire building. Hussain considers a US-sponsored development program that was implemented in the province of East Bengal, Pakistan (which became Bangladesh) during the Eisenhower administration. He considers the clash between the US Cold War policy of enhancing security through economic development versus the norms and structures of the existing rural communities. He shows that actors on the ground did not receive the program unequivocally and enthusiastically. This episode is not an instance of empire building in which the United States imposes its will as it pleases, while the local population resists as best it can. Hussain instead demonstrates that it is too simplistic to view Eisenhower's Cold War policy in Bangladesh as merely the extension of imperial will or a kind of Foucauldian disciplinary strategy. The community development projects of the United States were part of a complex conjuncture in which a US policy motivated by competing goals encountered social, cultural, economic, and political structures that were already in place in rural communities of Bangladesh.

Casing the Cold War II

In this section, I explore two more superordinate categories of which the Cold War is a member: *world-historical time* and *event*. Viewing the Cold War as a world-historical time raises questions about where to draw the boundary line for what can be rightfully regarded as a study of the Cold War. By contrast, viewing the Cold War as an event raises questions about how to divide up the Cold War so that its subparts can be analyzed.

The Cold War as a world-historical time

Scholars use – and increasingly so (Nehring 2012; Gilman 2016) – the term "Cold War" as corresponding to a particular *world-historical time* (see Skocpol 1979:

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23–24). That is, the label designates an epoch or era – a period in global history – during which the introduction of new ideas, institutions, and/or technologies enable and encourage certain outcomes, while constraining and discouraging others. Scholars signal this understanding of the Cold War by combining it with the conjunction *and*. In this special issue, for example, authors study the Cold War and science fiction, the Cold War and late colonialism, the Cold War and community development, and so on. Scholars also use Cold War as an adjective to signal its influence over a particular domain. For example, historians might analyze Cold War politics, Cold War economy, and Cold War culture. The end of the Cold War accelerated the shift of Cold War as a noun to Cold War as an adjective. Historians became less interested in the logic of the Cold War itself and more interested in grasping its consequences across diverse arenas (Gilman 2016: 507–508).

Defining the Cold War as a world-historical time makes it easy to place diverse subject matter under the umbrella of the Cold War. Yet it also raises questions of conceptual dilution. As Stephanson (1998: 83) notes, "The Cold War was not everything that happened between 1947 (or any other year) and 1990" (see also Freedman 2010: 688). Romero (2014: 687) presents the problem as a question, "Can we still constructively speak to each other, rather than past each other, if 'Cold War' grows to encompass the architecture of Hilton hotels as well as the Berlin Wall, American kitchen technology no less than American sovietology, Latin America's domestic conflicts just as much as the Kremlin's grand strategy?" To situate Romero's point in relationship to recent academic work, should scholars consider Louis Menand's (2021) magnificent book, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* as much about the Cold War as Odd Arne Westad's (2017) overview *The Cold War: A World History*? One reasonable answer is "no" if the Cold War is an event, and "yes" if the Cold War is a world-historical time.

A different possible answer is that scholars must and do retain a narrow definition of the Cold War, but they can and do simultaneously move forward with a pluralist approach in their analyses of the Cold War (Westad 2012; Romero 2014). As a matter of scholarly practice, I suspect that an austere US–USSR-oriented definition is front and center when academics make passing reference to the Cold War. This limited definition disciplines the field of Cold War studies, including Menand's (2021) book and *The Journal of Cold War Studies*. A minimal definition is even able to accommodate the vast topics covered in the massive *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Leffler and Westad 2010), given that this three-volume set concerns the perpetuating causes and consequences of the Cold War as well as the core features and logic of the phenomenon itself.

The Cold War as an event

The category *event* is one of the most basic constituents of all thinking and language (Jackendoff 1983; Gärdenfors 2020). A generic event is a period of time with crisp boundaries and a unifying principle, logic, or theme (Casati and Varzi 1999: 169–71; 2015: 3; Harré and Secord 1972: 10–13; Mandler 1984). This understanding of event differentiates it from *time period*, which may not feature a unifying principle, and

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process, which may not have a clear beginning and ending.[10] Historians and social scientists also sometimes understand event more specifically as a crucial moment or rupture that disrupts "normal times" (e.g., Sewell 1996). For many people and places of the world, the Cold War had dramatic consequences and thus qualifies as this kind of event-as-rupture.

The prototypical event in the social world is a structured whole whose parts include actors, objects, and rules. The nature of these parts and the relationships among them – including temporal relationships – define the substance of any given event (cf. Mandler 1984: 14, 76). Of the actor–object–rule triad, sociologists are especially well equipped to make sense of the hidden social rules that mark the logic of an event. With respect to the Cold War, for example, they are well positioned to notice its underlying social dynamics, including contradictions in the rule systems driving state behavior. In this special issue, Elisabeth Clemens considers what the rules of the Cold War meant for state policy in the United States. On the one hand, the United States embraced a liberal ideology that called for a minimal state and a free-market economy. On the other hand, the United States sought to enhance its own state power and (re)build states around the world. Clemens shows how reality and rhetoric moved in opposite directions during the Cold War with respect to the expansion of US government spending, programs, and projects. US policymakers spoke of a lean capitalist state, but they actually *enlarged* the state during the Cold War by supporting the GI Bill, funding higher education, and carrying out the Marshall Plan. Clemens links each of these components to a more general mechanism of "anti-statist state-building."

Like other complex events, the Cold War is constituted by various *subevents.* Scholars of an event often focus on its particular subevents. For example, some of the subevents of the Cold War discussed in this special issue are the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Algerian War, and the implementation of the Marshall Plan. These subevents and many others aggregate together to comprise the Cold War as a whole. Most subevents are not essential for the Cold War, and some of them may even be inconsistent with spirit of the Cold War. One way of thinking about the Cold War is as the totality of subevents encompassed "within" it. This approach calls attention to the heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory occurrences and happenings that undergird the Cold War as a complex phenomenon. At the same time, the approach allows analysts to bring all the parts together to form the coherent whole that is the Cold War (Leffler 2000).

Some subevents are spatiotemporal slices of the overarching event, such as the Cold War at a particular time and place. As Abbott (2001) noted, these subevents may share aspects of the overarching event in a fractal-like way. Ioana Sendroiu's (this issue) essay on the Romanian transition to communism in this issue offers a good example. Using extensive archival data, Sendroiu reveals the symbolic aspects

[10]All events are defined by unifying principles and logics, but these aspects of events are often inherently dynamic. For example, Leffler (2000: 58) encourages historians to view the Cold War as "complex interactions between a dynamic international system and its constituent units; between governments operating within that system; between peoples and their governments; between factions, parties, and interest groups." I see Leffler as working to identify the unifying but still dynamic principles that distinguish the Cold War as an event.

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through which the Romanian communists marginalized their enemies and elaborated a new understanding of the state. She shows that they created narratives of betrayal and employed the gruesome instrument of show trials to generate symbolic power. In doing so, Sendroiu provides readers with a glimpse into how an early phase of regime legitimation became the basis for the subsequent reproduction of the communist Romanian political order. Sendroiu's vision is one in which states are continuous political achievements that require an ongoing logic of regime legitimation that may be rooted in an initial episode of performative politics. The Romanian spatiotemporal slice of the Cold War thus provides important theoretical lessons, suggesting how early processes of performative legitimation can produce and then reproduce through memory and narrative a Cold War communist state.

Thus, despite their different subject matter, the analyses of Clemens and Sendroiu both show how performative legitimation was at work during the Cold War. The anti-statist rhetoric used by politicians in the United States and the betrayal narratives employed by communists in Romania are similarly political performances carried out for legitimation purposes. These performances are constitutive parts of the Cold War that a sociological approach helps scholars see.

Counterfactual Cold Wars

The Cold War is a category in which only one case in the actual world has (and ever can have) membership – that is, there is only one actual instance of the Cold War. Even so, many non-actual or counterfactual cases also have membership in this category. For example, the counterfactual case in which Khrushchev does not withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba in 1963 is a member of the category, the Cold War. In this sense, the Cold War is a general category that contains one actual case and many counterfactual cases. Moreover, because scholars do not know everything about the Cold War, they do not know which case is the actual one. For example, scholars do not know if the case in which Gorbachev had long planned to end the Cold War is the actual case or a counterfactual case.

This point is helpful for understanding how scholars can make causal inferences about a singular event such as the Cold War. One way in which they can make such inferences is by comparing the singular event to one or more similar counterfactual cases. With the Cold War, they can compare the actual Cold War to a counterfactual version of the Cold War (Goertz and Levy 2007). The counterfactual case differs from the actual case because the researcher changes a potential causal factor while leaving all else as similar to the actual world as possible. The purpose of analyzing the counterfactual case is to understand the "difference-making" effects (if any) of this particular causal factor for the outcome of interest. Does the outcome remain in place when the counterfactual change on the causal factor is introduced? For instance, English (2007) argued that the rise of Gorbachev and similar reform-minded leaders was a key cause of the end of the Cold War. To support his causal inference, English explores a counterfactual case in which Gorbachev does not rise to power. He finds that the Cold War would not have come to end under this counterfactual. He concludes that the rise of Gorbachev (and other liberal policy elites) was a necessary cause of the end of the Cold War.

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Likewise, with normative inference, counterfactual cases can be used to study the moral consequences of particular occurrences. To use counterfactual analysis in this way, the scholar asks whether a particular state of affairs was necessary for an outcome that they regard as normatively good or bad (see Hart and Honoré 1985). If the state of affairs was necessary, then its absence should remove the normatively important outcome in the counterfactual case. For example, English (2007) argued that the rise of Gorbachev was a necessary condition for the end of the Cold War, which he regards as a morally good outcome. In the absence of Gorbachev, English suggests that Soviet hardliners likely would have remained in charge, sustaining harsh totalitarianism well past 1991. While English cannot "prove" the moral argument that the end of the Cold War was normatively good for the world, he can and does use counterfactual analysis to empirically support the argument that without Gorbachev, the Cold War would have minimally lasted a great deal longer than it did. Hence, he suggests that the rise of Gorbachev was good for the world.

Counterfactual analysis need not consist of unstructured, anything-goes stories. Rather, the literature on case study methods offers many guidelines for constructing and analyzing counterfactual cases (Tetlock and Belkin 1996, Levy 2015, and Mahoney 2021: chap. 5). Methodologists have invented rules for working with these cases to make empirically grounded causal inferences.

Counterfactual analysis and normative assessment are featured in Andreas Glaeser's (this issue) analysis of the Cold War and the Cuban missile crisis. For example, he writes that, "The end result of the Cold War was that much of the Global South was thrown back decades in its efforts to attain more social justice." This assertion is rooted in a counterfactual case in which the Cold War does not occur and various social justice projects in the Global South blossom and at least partially succeed. The essay's core counterfactual case involves Khrushchev choosing not to withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba in 1963. Under this scenario, Glaeser argues, the United States most likely responds by invading Cuba in some form (e.g., an airstrike), dramatically increasing the chances of nuclear war. Consideration of the counterfactual case helps scholars appraise the normative status of the Kennedy administration's handling of the crisis. This appraisal then becomes the basis for learning lessons for the future, something that Glaeser finds did not take place with the Cuban missile crisis. He argues, counterfactually and causally, that had the United States learned the appropriate lessons from this crisis, subsequent foreign policy disasters (e.g., the Vietnam War) would have been mitigated or avoided. Hence, he concludes, counterfactually and normatively, that the US failure to learn lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis was extremely unfortunate for the world.

Conclusion

In this essay, I analyzed the category the Cold War in academic discourse and research. The category has a specific label – that is, the words, "the Cold War" – and the history of this label was touched upon lightly (see Stephanson 1998 for more). I argued that the label itself calls attention to the conflict between the superpowers and deemphasizes the superpowers' domination of the Global South. I suggested

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that this understanding was generally disempowering for the Global South. In this sense, the Cold War is problematic in its referential implications. Yet, the label is locked in within the lexicon, and alternative labels, such as the superpower empire-building era, have their own problems.

A more central focus of the essay was elucidating the scholarly meanings of the Cold War. To capture the semantics of the category, I situated it in relationship to eight superordinate categories. These eight superordinate categories are world-historical time, event, interstate war, interstate rivalry, interstate peace, empire building, cold war, and the Cold War. I argued that the empirical case or historical referent constituting the Cold War is a full member of world-historical time, event, interstate rivalry, empire building, cold war, and the Cold War. I argued that it is a diminished subtype of interstate war and a non-member or "negative case" of interstate peace.

The membership of the Cold War in world-historical time and event provides general answers for the question, "What is the Cold War a case of?" The Cold War is a case of a world-historical time and an event. To say that the Cold War is a world-historical time is to say that the Cold War represented a global context that conditioned a broad range of outcomes. This understanding of the Cold War allows analysts to treat the term as an adjective and speak intelligibly of a Cold War culture, Cold War economics, and Cold War politics. A different set of understandings emerge if the Cold War is an event. This conceptual move makes analysts apt to consider to the various subevents that aggregate together to compose the Cold War. The event-based understanding of the Cold War also directs attention to the actors, objects, and social rules that constitute the event. If the Cold War is an event, researchers view states like the USSR and China as players in a game who follow certain rules and who carry out actions in certain patterned ways. A key challenge for analysts of events (and subevents) is to identify the players, the objects, and the social rules that animate the action. The discipline of sociology, with its concern with uncovering invisible social rules, has much to contribute to the study of the Cold War as an event.

The empirical referent the Cold War is also a member of the categories cold war and the Cold War itself. I proposed that the Cold War is the prototype of the category cold war. All other cold wars are situated in relationship to this prototype. Necessarily, the empirical case of the Cold War is also a member of the category the Cold War. It is indeed its one and only historical member. Because scholars possess imperfect knowledge about the nature of this empirical referent, the category the Cold War contains different, competing versions of the Cold War. For example, the category holds a version of the Cold War in which the USSR is no longer a superpower by the 1970s and a version in which the USSR is still clearly a superpower into the 1980s. It holds a version in which the Chinese Revolution of 1949 fundamentally changed the dynamics of the US–Soviet relationship and a case in which it did not. Presumably, only one case is the actual Cold War. But because historians and other authorities disagree, further research is required to know exactly which of several possible cases is indeed this one actual case.

Despite disagreements about the correct or best meaning of the Cold War, scholars share knowledge of a standard meaning of the Cold War. The following definition tries to capture this meaning: The Cold War was an intense and enduring

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interstate rivalry (lasting from approximately 1947 to 1991, with less intensity after the mid-1960s) between two ideologically expansionist nuclear superpowers – the liberal-capitalist United States and the communist USSR – that each sought to build global spheres of influence in the aftermath of World War II. This one-sentence (albeit a long sentence) definition asserts that the Cold War was not a peaceful phenomenon but also not a war. It holds that it was mainly an ideologically driven conflict between nuclear powers that was shaped by the particular post-WWII setting in which it emerged. The definition recognizes that the Cold War was a global event that implicated much of the world.

How good is this definition of the Cold War? For scholars, definitions of categories must be judged based on their utility as well as factual accuracy, comprehensiveness, precision, normative valence, and other criteria (Gerring 1999). Formulating one, best, all-purpose definition is difficult because successes on some criteria (e.g., comprehensiveness) necessarily come at the expense of success on other criteria (e.g., parsimony). On the one hand, the definition above is useful because it enables scholars to engage in communication in which a default or background set of meanings is known by all. On the other hand, I have argued that this definition is problematic because it makes interstate rivalry the central process and reduces empire building to a secondary status.

The essays that follow offer sociological perspectives on important themes and major subevents within the Cold War. They point to the role of social relations, institutions, and network positioning in order to explain actor motivations and behaviors. They emphasize themes of power and domination as well as struggle and liberation. They call attention to the fact that the Cold War involved global empire building, and they stress that the Cold War's greatest consequences were often experienced in the Global South. Their normative orientation is critical of the non-egalitarian aspects of the Cold War. The essays expose and explicitly identify the underlying actors and rules behind outcomes such as US empire building, the suppression of anticolonial actors and ideologies, and the imposition of Soviet communism. Here, in this essay, I have sought to set the stage for these contributions by considering the Cold War to be one label with different possible meanings that are attached to various actual and counterfactual cases (and their subcases) of the Cold War.

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