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COMMENT

What kind of a theory is the medium durée?

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Though I was something of a latecomer, I was grateful to be invited into this conversation at the Social Science History Association conference in late 2023, where I had the opportunity to reflect on the introduction to this special issue, which has since undergone substantial revision based on our conversation there. As an interdisciplinary scholar who straddles the fields of history, sociology, and international relations, it is especially exciting to see sociologists grappling with a topic like the Cold War – one that has received enormous attention in these other fields but has been somewhat neglected in sociological analysis. This special issue demonstrates the ways that sociologists can profitably enter into conversations in long-established historiographies and make new interventions in *both* disciplines, both in terms of what happened and in terms of how we understand it.

I want to be clear, however, that I don't think that "what happened" is the domain of historians and "how we understand it" is the world of sociologists. The acts of historical interpretation that constitute historiography are, to my mind, entirely about how new angles of vision on the familiar can help us understand it differently. Often, I would argue, the very familiarity that historians think they have – the conventional wisdoms that they argue against – is drawn from social-scientific theoretical frameworks: about dependency, about modernity, about proletarianization, about the production of knowledge, about how meanings are made and unmade, to give but a few examples. Because there is little use in telling novel particular stories whose broad general contours scholars already know, historians, like sociologists, are often also taught to think in terms of puzzles, to ask, "the conventional wisdom would lead us to believe X, so how can we explain the existence of Y?" Those puzzles are frequently set up using the (sometimes caricatured, to be sure) expectations of social theory.

The task set out here is, in some ways, the opposite: given the vastness of what scholars now know about the Cold War, the massive and still growing bodies of empirical research (to which we can now add the articles in this special issue), how should sociologists approach the Cold War from a theoretical perspective? Moving inductively from the existing literature, the editors have settled on a temporal approach, what they call a "medium durée." Drawing on concepts of structure and event derived from Braudel, Sahlins, and Sewell, the editors conceive of a medium durée as representing "the liminal moments or spaces between structure and event," a time "perched between eventfulness and stability" (Sendroiu and Stevens 2025). As they argue, "The medium durée, in other words, is eventful without resolving into

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structure, and it is structuring while being frequently eventful" (Sendroiu and Stevens 2025). With this definition, we should ask: what *kind* of a theory is the "medium durée"?

First, and perhaps most obviously, it is a temporal concept, and is thus a theory attentive to time – but one that does not seem to consider space. This is a striking choice given that probably the most important (admittedly often implicit) theorizing that has occurred among historians in the last two decades has been to shift the geographic locus and spatial scale of Cold War studies. With the publication of Westad's (2005) *The Global Cold War*, the historiography definitively moved beyond the US- and European-centered accounts that had previously defined the field. These accounts had concentrated largely on actors in Washington or Moscow with the assumption that actions and decisions undertaken there were the most causally relevant – Americans and Soviets acted; Cambodians, Congolese, and Chileans (when they entered into narratives explaining the Cold War at all) merely reacted. By asking new questions about *where* and *how* the Cold War happened, historians have not only incorporated new spaces into analyses of the Cold War, but they have also begun to reconceptualize the complex relations between centers and peripheries, moving beyond what Zophia Edwards (2020) has identified as the "diffusionist" logics that defined our prior narratives. This new spatial understanding gave rise then to a host of novel national and regional studies on the Cold War across the Third World. Vanni Pettinà (2022: 18), for example, has insisted that, in Latin America, the Cold War was defined by a set of interrelated but irreducible internal and external "fractures," conflicts in which Cold War logics were sutured to (or severed from) local and national political logics – thus understanding the Cold War across multiple spatial scales. Anchoring sociological understandings of the Cold War in a concept like the medium durée might, then, miss some of the key recent insights regarding the *spatial* relations of the conflict(s).

Second, the editors' review of how theorizing (with) the Cold War fits within the various traditions of historical sociology raises another question: can we have a theory that helps to make sense of the Cold War that elides the central issue of capitalism? The Cold War was, of course, at the most basic level, a contest between the promoters of capitalism and their Communist, socialist, and non-aligned challengers. It should come as no surprise, then, as the editors point out, that the sociologists most attentive to the dynamics of global capitalism are those who have in fact paid closest attention to the Cold War in their theorizing – particularly those engaged in World Systems analysis. The World System, after all, is a theory of the ways that the dynamics of accumulation have structured the international division of labor since the 1500s; it is thus a theory of both space *and* time. To be sure, World Systems analysis has not offered the kind of theory of the Cold War that the editors here seek; rather, it has understood the Cold War as a key factor shaping the most recent cycle of accumulation under US hegemony, providing a logic for the promotion of capitalism through which crucial contradictions in accumulation dynamics developed. For Hopkins and Wallerstein (1996: 2), for example, the Cold War was particularly key in defining the shape of the "interstate system," one of the key "vectors" of the development of the World System. Giovanni Arrighi, too, highlights the ways that the US Cold War project of global reconstruction, development, and war – what he called building a "'warfare-welfare state' on a world

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scale" (2010: 24) – was key for understanding the contradictory dynamics of the US rise to hegemony, which ultimately gave rise to its own forms of crisis. But perhaps this crisis poses a challenge to the notion of a medium durée: in their explanations, World Systems analysts emphasize a key break in the dynamics of accumulation during the crisis of the 1970s, right in the middle of the Cold War period. Can the idea of the medium durée account for this key change in the middle of the period under study – not merely *that* it happened, but *why* it happened, *when* it did? Without centering capitalism, its contradictions, and its challengers, the medium durée tells us little about the dynamics of change in which Cold War logics were implicated.

Third, I wonder about the implications of the medium durée as a category that attempts to go "beyond an opposition between structure and event" (Sendroiu and Stevens 2025). While the editors acknowledge that structures are always multiple and (with reference to Michael Mann) that structure and event are not *themselves* temporal categories, by situating the "medium durée" between them, this theory may render structures and events in a way that establishes a substantive separation that can't be sustained. If we try think along with the editors and conceptualize structure as continuity and event as change, the question we have to ask is: changing what, exactly? To answer, we should perhaps return to Sewell (2005: 100), who describes events as "that relatively rare subclass of happenings that significantly transform structures." For Sewell, (2005: 110), that is, events involve the "reconfiguration of structures by social action." Thus, events are only events, in Sewellian terms, *in relation to* structures. To use a sonic metaphor, the concept of the medium durée seems to suggest a notion of social life in which we are listening to two separate tones: the low-pitched hum of the structure, interrupted occasionally by the high-pitched squeal of the event. But in fact, if we follow Sewell's logic, the interruption of the structure by the event puts social life in a new key: after the event, we are all singing a new song. Thus, I'm not sure there can be a "liminal space" between structure and event, because, in Sewell's conception, they are inherently, irreducibly relational.

This emphasis on precisely what is changing during an event raises my final inquiry about the utility of a concept intended to help explain both continuity and change. On the one hand, the editors intend to provide us a "conceptual whole" that illuminates "how large-scale social change is theorized and described" (Sendroiu and Stevens 2025). On the other, however, they assert, "we need a sociology that can explain both stability and change" (Sendroiu and Stevens 2025). But what, exactly, can such a theory tell us? As they note, their concept will be useful only in so far as we can imagine its application to other "empirical phenomena" (Sendroiu and Stevens 2025) across time. But I wonder: can we imagine a period in history, at least since the advent of capitalism, that is *not* defined by "incomplete structuring punctuated by considerable eventfulness" (Sendroiu and Stevens 2025)? Are there periods of history in which it is *not* true that "some parts of social life are settled and others are not" (Sendroiu and Stevens 2025)? Analyzing historical change through its many complicated, contingent, consequential mechanisms is clearly the task before historical sociologists today, as set out by the editors here. But it has always been the central task, too, of the historian. This raises the question: is the medium durée just, fundamentally, a new name for history? Sewell (2005: 111) argued nearly

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20 years ago that "an eventful historical sociology would come to resemble history ever more closely." Perhaps, with the elaboration of the medium durée, we have now fulfilled that prediction.

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