

# H-Diplo ESSAY 264

Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars

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*A Bildungsroman of sorts [for H-Diplo]*

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i.

There was Vietnam, of course, but one must begin with Novaya Zemlya. It was on these remote islands in the arctic northeast of Scandinavia that, in October 1961, the Soviet Union tested the biggest nuclear device ever (before or since): a massive atmospheric blast of some hundred megatons (we were told). In reality, it seems to have been fifty plus, but even at that magnitude it was more than *fifteen hundred times* the size of the Hiroshima bomb. I followed the fallout map in the newspapers with the keenest interest. I was eleven and more than worried. I had taken to heart my father's solemn prediction that my generation would experience something vastly more devastating than his, in effect the end of the world in nuclear conflagration. A year later, the horrifying realism of that prediction became existentially plain in the Cuban Missile Crisis, the most dangerous single moment in world history (no hyperbole). To my unspeakable relief, the crisis was resolved. Indeed, it was followed by a certain stabilization in the all-important relations between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. What with hotlines and the partial test ban treaty in 1963, the fear of nuclear obliteration subsided by degrees. So, accordingly, did my conviction that I would not live to see adulthood. The Chinese 'deviation' – acquisition of the bomb in 1964, increasingly savage attacks on the Soviet position—only served to underline that there was a new normality in the relationship that really mattered. By this time, it was instead the expanding struggles in the U.S. over civil rights that came to fore, along with appalling images of burning Buddhist monks in Saigon. Something new was afoot.

ii.

Though 'Vietnam' was still largely pitched in terms of a U.S. problem in need of a brighter solution, there was a growing sense when I saw these images in *Life Magazine* (to which, for some reason, we subscribed) that this was not some standard Cold War play. For very soon, regardless of one's standpoint, Vietnam was taking on the character of a deeply Vietnamese phenomenon: South Vietnamese, North Vietnamese, revolutionary, anti-imperialist, nationalist, whatever, but without a doubt Vietnamese. Still, in a mock newspaper article in Swedish grade school, I piously predicted 'negotiations' long and hard, the governing premise being that this was ultimately a U.S. operation and problem. The American focus was deeply reinforced later when I was transplanted to a small city in northern Michigan (lower peninsula), where I spent a year as the proverbial exchange student. It was an overwhelmingly Republican place, 'decently Republican,' I hasten to add, as George Romney was a fairly liberal governor of the state. The town was also lily-white. Detroit, Motown, motor city and central source of wealth two hundred miles to the south, was in that regard very distant, something one realized forcefully in the ensuing summer when it was aflame in one of the deadliest race 'riots' of the 1960s. Race and civil rights struggles had been a strong presence in my 'American' interest; but, oddly, my actual experience in the place itself was almost as removed as the Swedish one. As a cultural and social system, 'small-town Michigan' was friendly but at the same time formidably repressive, with normative rule rendered all the more effective because it seemed 'voluntary.' At the end of the day, interrogation of the self would determine the degree of conformity to social conventions of proper appearance and behaviour. Alexis de

Tocqueville and Michel Foucault, neither of whom I had read at that point, would have recognized the procedure. It was not a surprise to me, accordingly, that the ensuing 'sixties,' civil rights and anti-war struggles notwithstanding, would take on in the U.S. the liberal and even libertarian direction it did (encapsulated in the imperative 'do your own thing').

I found myself constantly arguing Vietnam in that year (1966-67) and gradually coming to the viewpoint that there was no sensible solution but one: withdrawal. No one agreed. This was perhaps not so odd. What *was* odd to me then and now was the lack of any sustained interest in becoming better informed. The graduating males faced the draft, after all, some would serve and a few would die. Still, my views caused no ruckus, explained as they evidently were by my foreign provenance and eclipsed in any case by my varsity standing in tennis. The 'experience' yielded many lessons, but if we stoop here for heuristic reasons to writing history backwards in a teleological frame, one such pertinent aspect had to do with the Vietnamese character of 'Vietnam:' the whole endeavour made diminishing sense within 'the Cold War,' a term that was itself in the process of being discarded. Vietnam was not cold, it was not about monolithic Communism conquering the free world and the defence of the South Vietnamese regime was not that of democracy (featuring as it did for a while a figure much impressed by the disciplinary virtues of Adolf Hitler). Since then, talk of some obvious 'Cold War' has always been a red herring to me, obfuscating the essentially U.S. sources of the periodizing concept and leading to all manner of historical and ideological dead-ends. This was always a minority standpoint. Since 1991 it has really seemed a strange one.

iii.

My chief 'lesson' from a year of arguing in Michigan was however not to do with foreign relations but, more expansively, the conviction that difference must be *historical* difference somewhere, thus setting off a general pursuit of U.S. history. As with many Europeans, I had been struck by the narrow span of political views (such as 'the Cold War consensus'), behind which was to be found a certain absence, the absence of any major leftwing political party based on the labour movement. My model and norm, of course, was Europe, a conception that I should have questioned more. Once at university, then, I kept following the well-trodden European path of finding out what went wrong politically with the labour movement in the United States: the history of unionization, the untrammelled power of state and capital in combination, the ideological character of the two great (relatively speaking) moments and failures of leftwing crystalization, namely, the Socialist Party in the Progressive period and the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) in the Depression.

These investigations occupied me through my undergraduate and intermediate graduate studies in Sweden and the United Kingdom. When, fortuitously (as these developments often are), I moved on to the doctoral program at Columbia University, I had also come to end of the line as far as labour history was concerned. Systematic challenges were all but politically impossible for labour after the war, certainly after 1948; and so, by degrees, I re-orientated myself back to foreign relations and 'the Cold War.' The latter, after all, had served politically to close things up. New York, it should be noted, was in every way the anti-thesis of small-town Michigan: there were no claims whatsoever on who you were and why. This was liberating, too, from the predictability of expectations in small-town Sweden, though oddly dozens of tourists from that place overseas would turn up in New York and very much take to it, while for my Michigan counterparts the City remained (I'm guessing) a profoundly alien space.

In the late 1970s and early 80s, Columbia and its history department were in the grips of a certain malaise, having never really recuperated after the upheavals of 1968-69. As regards the department, the uprising had coincided with the premature death of the towering figure of Richard Hofstadter. It seemed an aging and dispirited outfit, excellent members notwithstanding. Change, however, was in the offing. The city bounced back with a vengeance, Columbia College became the Ivy place to be, and Eric Foner, Hofstadter's student, returned to the department, rejuvenating nineteenth-century U.S. history and beyond. The Department gradually broadened the scope of the whole field, though Foner himself always retained (as have I) a strong commitment to 'political history.'

iv.

Two residual aspects of my studies in labour history are discernible in the present context: the advent of Theory and exposure to the ‘Williams School.’ ‘Theory’ (often reified) initially took for me the form of ‘Althusserianism.’ Louis Althusser’s distinction between science and ideology, the forthright attack on official Marxism as having degenerated into ideological platitude and simple Party propaganda, opened up for elaborate (and sometimes overdone) problems of epistemology as well as complex ‘structuralist’ accounts of the state—above all, its ‘relative autonomy.’<sup>1</sup> The work of Nicos Poulantzas, whom I read in the bridge between high school and university, was here of paramount importance.<sup>2</sup> All in all, this ‘moment’ generated ‘regional’ analysis of particular apparatuses and, once Althusser himself had developed his account of how ideology actually operates, it made for much more interesting and convincing representations of the real. The vibrancy of this kind of theory faded by the latter part of the 1970s, replaced by proliferating forms of post-structuralism (also chiefly French in origin), a good deal of which I found to be of less use except in ‘technical’ terms—in ways of reading texts. Two ‘lessons’ have remained with me ever since. *First*, there was the imperative of theory in some form or other against, on the one hand, empiricist methodologies (not to be confused with the necessary ‘protocols of empirical evidence’) and, on the other, reductionism, that is, abandonment of the relative autonomy of ‘levels’ and ‘regions.’ *Second*, there was the conviction that primacy in reading the contradictions of the social formation as such lay on the level of the political. Put differently, there was no way of getting away from the importance of the state as the condensation, or at least primary articulation, of the political. As ‘theory’ increasingly turned to textual, literary and, eventually, cultural concerns, I retained therefore an allegiance to what used clumsily to be called ‘the specificity of the state,’ however much that position was ‘complicated’ productively by developments both theoretical and empirical, above all in race and gender research.

v.

Despite disciplinary skepticism of the ‘cultural turn’ (the danger being the substitution of some diffuse ‘culture’ for politics and theory), in the real world so to speak I happened to engage myself in the early and mid-1980s in the art world of New York and the concurrent debates about postmodernism, above all the conceptualization and periodizations originating with Fredric Jameson (who, in so far as one wants to invoke proper names here and the hoary aspect of ‘influence,’ has remained a friend and interlocutor throughout, along with Perry Anderson). I had always been interested in art and political art in particular, an interest intensified by seeing in high school a remarkable show in Stockholm of Soviet constructivism and the avant-garde of the 1920s before Stalinism came to reign supreme. Postmodern fixations on the surface and the image, architectural transformations of space, the advent of the simulacrum and the attacks on all ‘depth models’—Jameson provided a depth diagnosis of depthlessness if you will—formed a world, at once intellectual and starkly commercial, of the greatest interest.<sup>3</sup> This brought a firmer commitment to historical thinking (‘Always historicize!’ as Jameson’s clarion call went) amidst the postmodern intensities of the present and the surface. It also brought, to anticipate, a way of reading George Kennan’s critique of the mass culture of American capitalism, his deeply conservative distrust of individualistic

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<sup>1</sup> The central references are Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Allen Lane, 1969) and Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: New Left Books, 1970). Both works originally appeared in French in 1965. Althusser’s revised concept of ideology was advanced in the essay ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation’ which appeared in English in his *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: New Left Books, 1973). The Swedish translation, however, appeared already in 1970, two years after the French original. Poulantzas’s *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism* (London: New Left Books, 1974), still unsurpassed, was important for my understanding of the Soviet concept of fascism and, especially, the ensuing strategy of anti-fascism that was recycled (eventually) in the famous two-camp matrix from 1947 onwards.

<sup>3</sup> The immediate reference here (there are many more) is to Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,’ *New Left Review* 146 (July/August 1984), 53-92. Generally, the salient work for me was otherwise Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). As for Perry Anderson, I must note as especially formative his two volumes *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* and *Lineages of the Absolute State* (both London: New Left Books, 1974); and his subsequent *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976).

atomization.<sup>4</sup> President Ronald Reagan, meanwhile, could be grasped relatedly as postmodern pastiche (the ‘surface’ incarnate) along with his brief but powerful attempt to launch a second Cold War.

The particular setting for a good deal of these concerns was my editorial work throughout the 1980s for and in *Social Text*. After a couple of lively years as a member of *Radical History Review*, I joined the newly founded *Social Text* collective and came to spend an inordinate amount of time on it (for which read: ‘not finishing my dissertation’). The journal was interdisciplinary or rather nondisciplinary; and while it recognized the importance of ‘culture,’ it also explicitly posited that the text was not only a text but irrevocably ‘social,’ hence requiring a proper account of that sphere. The experience proved most stimulating, a kind of parallel graduate school spilling into my first years of teaching (first at excellent Rutgers with Warren Kimball and Lloyd Gardner, then back to Columbia). One particular form, or ‘sub-genre,’ that I developed was ‘the serious interview’—attempts at sustained, probing exchanges with individuals I happened to find interesting, ranging from friends such as Jameson and Cornel West, to Alec Nove (economic historian of the Soviet Union), Dario Fo and Franca Rame (literature and theater), Barbara Kruger and David Hockney (artists), Boris Kagarlitsky (Soviet dissident). These ‘works,’ sometimes in collaboration, often required a lot of preparation and editing, an investment not always obvious in the end. Eventually, I gave it up (there remains an unpublished and, as I recall, quite candid conversation with Richard Rorty in some drawer or other). Eventually, in the early 1990s, I also left *Social Text*—I had lost an internal conflict over organization and direction, the kind of clash which journals of this sort are, or were, often prone.

vi.

Three concrete effects did follow for my historical practice after ‘theory’—beyond the disinclination (*pace* the brief here) to consider that practice ‘a craft’ to be learnt in apprenticeship, though one recalls that the great historian who named that ‘craft’ also articulated the concept of feudalism.<sup>5</sup> The first effect had to do with objects of inquiry, or the ‘problematics,’ the formation of a certain set of questions into a conceptual frame of explicit and implicit terms. My tendency was (and is) to develop a second-order analysis of a given politically charged analysis into a history of concepts, productive concepts (and here the work of Reinhart Koselleck and the German school of *Begriffsgeschichte* became quite significant).<sup>6</sup> What, in short, are the conceptual conditions of possibility for an object of policy to be grasped as such? The second effect had to do with the methodological problem of reading and systematizing sources. If a text has no definite meaning (famously, we must ‘produce’ it, to be judged accordingly), it cannot *easily* be reduced and added up in a pile of similarly reduced sources and so turned into an account of what actually happened. Yet history as an intellectual mode of production relies precisely on large numbers of documents, archivally excavated, summarized, ordered into a narrative of ‘what happened.’ Historians generally do not have the luxury of armchair reflection on a single text or two (say, thirty-six pages of Ludwig Wittgenstein). I myself have always felt this to be a predicament and an inhibition. Third and finally, analytical pursuit of analyses often led me

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<sup>4</sup>Kennan critique of mass culture in the U.S. (and the West) is everywhere from beginning to end but a representative sample may be found in Melvin J. Lasky’s interesting ‘A Conversation with Kennan,’ *Encounter*, 78 (March 1960), 46-57.

<sup>5</sup>Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (with overtones of ‘vocation’ - ‘métier’ in the French original and ‘Beruf’ in the German translation) appeared in English in 1953 (New York: Vintage Press) and currently in print, as indeed it remains outstandingly useful. His classic *Feudal Society* was published in two volumes by Routledge & Kegan Paul in London 1961. Bloch, a founder of the Annales School with its interdisciplinary approach to history, was quite aware that the historian’s craft was not *reducible* to a craft in the simple sense of an artisanal route from apprenticeship to mastery. Still, given the absence of any canon of theory, the discipline does tend to distill its core to a matter of *method*, pre-eminently source criticism.

<sup>6</sup>Koselleck’s project (a collective one) is embodied in the great reference work on ‘foundational concepts’: *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (seven volumes, Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1972-1992). For his own specific version, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), republished by Columbia University Press in 2004.

astray insofar as I tended to superimpose on the given actors systematic concerns that were soon revealed not to exist or to exist only in very rudimentary form.

vii.

Two examples of this last feature will suffice. ‘The New Deal,’ as a period, political project, and systemic effect is notoriously difficult to determine; and, in examining the CPUSA in the Depression decade, I was curious as to how, at the level of theory, the Party managed that difficulty. Alas, it didn’t. At first, the New Deal was ‘social fascism’ in the making; then, after a fairly brief interval, it became the dominant element in a posited U.S. version of the Popular Front. In neither of these two main periods did the Party ever seriously consider (I found to my dismay and boredom) the implications for how one was to grasp the Capitalist state. Indeed, there was nothing much at all that measured up to the exacting standards of Althusserian theory or any other theory for that matter. What was being peddled instead was pure ideology. This ‘discovery’ was neither empirically telling nor, on reflection, any great surprise. I still think it was a good exercise in scholarly patience to go through every Party publication of the period. At the end, too, I had gained a concrete sense for the logic—and it was a logic—of Soviet anti-fascism, the matrix of the latter 1930s that would come to govern Moscow’s postwar conception of the Cold War and the United States.

The other example, closer to present concerns, is to do with the State Department in the immediate postwar period. As labour history came to an ‘end’ for me with the Thirties, I gravitated back, as mentioned, to an erstwhile interest in the ‘breaks’ of U.S. foreign relations (typically understood in epistemological terms), the decisive moment of which seemed evidently to be the Cold War and its famous ‘origins.’ Here was another problem of periodization, a political project to be determined, questions of knowledge and what counted as knowledge (a problematic now tinged, but only tinged, with a certain post-Althusserian element of Foucault)—a combination of the history of foundational concepts and the traditional, constitutive concerns of ‘diplomatic history’ with decisions, actions, non-actions, interests, policies, in a realm of relative geopolitical privacy. Pure Cold War thought and policy appeared to inscribe the world in altogether too simple a way from the standpoint of prudent self-interest—that ‘interest’ alternatively being the diversified conception articulated by the critical Kennan, who emerged from 1948 and onwards. I had read the classic first volume of Kennan’s *Memoirs*, wherein was advanced a far more intelligent and realistic way of promoting U.S. interests (I thought) than the rigid binaries that actually came to rule.<sup>7</sup> One way of pursuing this both historically and analytically would then be to see how ‘neutrality’ was played out amidst the U.S. polarity of ‘either/or,’ more precisely how it worked in the case of Swedish neutrality. After some preliminary work, however, I was kindly informed by Geir Lundestad that he had just finished a book, an excellent one as I soon found out, on that very subject, albeit in a larger Scandinavian frame.<sup>8</sup> (Why, one wonders in passing, the veritable Nordic bevy of historians of U.S. foreign relations? Then, again, there is also the Italian anomaly). I realized in fact that Lundestad had saved me a lot of pointless work as the conundrum, conceptual and political, that I had posited did not really amount to much: the binary, despite intermittent noise about neutral immorality, was conveniently and pragmatically put aside when push came to shove. Bureaucratically, meanwhile, the decisional tracks were often difficult to follow in the State Department (unlike, say, those at the Foreign Office in London); and there was surprisingly little by way of sustained reflection on the wider and deeper implications of Cold War polarity.

The State Department and the CPUSA, then, turned out to be similarly short on proper thinking, so to speak. Kennan, in a way, had led me astray. His was a unique level of analytical rigour, albeit issued in the name of conservative hostility to theory. As he was also in charge for a brief but crucial moment, the solution for me at that stage was obvious: forget the Whole in favour of the Particular, the latter being Kennan himself. This proved congenial and invigorating. He (and his texts) have been essential for me ever since.

<sup>7</sup> George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967). It remains one of the great works of auto-biography.

<sup>8</sup> Geir Lundestad, *America, Scandinavia, and the Cold War, 1945-1959* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

After two studies (the Communist Party and the State Department) in theoretical ‘overkill,’ theory became more a matter of how one is to think any given historical problem in the first place, indeed under what conditions it can actually become a problem of that specific order. The objects of inquiry, however, remained ‘foundational concepts’ in the realm of the political, concepts that form fields of related terms and so generate borders, inside/outside distinctions, potential for action of one kind rather than another. My engagement with Kennan was informed by that way of thinking: following, logics (or antinomies) that in his case often led to interesting dead ends or at any rate to places in which he didn’t necessarily want to find himself. An essential concern from this moment is thus ‘the Cold War,’ its ramifications, its boundaries, its periodization, its politics, its very status as a concept. More particularly, it was ‘the Cold War’ deployed as a ‘concept of political combat.’ As it turned out, the ur-text for me here, amidst all the controversies over ‘revisionism,’ was Walter Lippmann’s transformative critique of Kennan in the fall of 1947; but before I say a word about that, I must retrace the lineage further back to William Appleman Williams. I first discovered Williams and his circle while doing undergraduate labour history and trying to get a handle on state formation in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. At that stage, it was the concept of ‘corporate liberalism’ in the context of Progressivism that demanded attention—James Weinstein and Gabriel Kolko more immediately than Williams. Given the Althusserian onslaught on economism and reductionism, it was a fraught approach as far as I was concerned (as my first undergraduate paper had shown, very much to my own satisfaction, that whereas Charles Beard was an economic determinist, Karl Marx was not). Still, it had to be recognized that the ‘relative autonomy’ of the state in the U.S. appeared to be practically nil and that even the ensuing reformism amounted to less than met the eye. To that extent, the critique of liberalism was right, though it exaggerated the cleverness of ‘reform.’ Meanwhile, the transition to ‘corporate’ capitalism famously signified in Williams’s periodization the advent of ‘the open door,’ an aggressive market conception of interest (the most probing account of this in its domestic context was to be found—eventually—in the work of his inventive student Martin Sklar.)<sup>9</sup> Williams himself, curiously, was really an idealist, philosophically as well as politically, deep down espousing a strong utopian streak and ironically ending his days in a position—communitarian regionalism for lack of a better word—quite close to Kennan’s. The outstanding historians following him (Lloyd Gardner, Walter LaFeber and Thomas McCormick) were in that regard closer in orientation to other Wisconsin historians such as Fred Harvey Harrington. Deep and abiding respect for Williams, at any rate, was coupled for me with a critique of his key concept of *Weltanschauung* (which he had picked up with typical flair—a theoretical impulse if you will—from Karl Mannheim and Georg Lukacs, beyond them Wilhelm Dilthey and beyond him probably G. W. F. Hegel and ‘objective idealism’): every aspect of the social totality is here expressive of an inner principle (say, ‘the open door’) and so the ideological achieves inherent material status, thus allowing in a single stroke the elimination of the usual problem of ‘the importance and efficacy of what is said.’ In the end, however, it was the political critique of Cold War thought that I brought with me from Williams. And I always thought he was right to call (somewhere) Kennan the first revisionist.

That uproarious, intensely political ‘debate’ about revisionism that had played out in the profession within the wider domestic breakdown over Vietnam and its aftermath, had subsided by the late 1980s but was replaced by no obvious new focus or frame. Fragmentation within the discipline (and a palpable loss of energy in the subfield itself) took place against

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<sup>9</sup> Beyond his famous work *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publ. 1959), Williams’s most sustained work—not least in regard to the ‘open door’ as a periodizing device—is *The Contours of American History* (Cleveland: World Publ. 1961). Norton republished it in 1988, Verso in 2011 (with an introduction by Greg Grandin). See also Lloyd Gardner, ed. *Redefining the Past: Essays in Diplomatic History in honor of William Appleman Williams* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1986); and Paul Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, *William Appleman Williams: The Tragedy of Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Martin Sklar in his graduate days coined the term ‘corporate liberalism,’ and his important *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) is directly linked to Williams’s work—and vice versa one might add as Williams early on learnt more than one thing from Sklar. By the 1990s, however, Sklar was on the verge of migrating to the right (which he imagined as the de facto left), a shift that would ultimately land him in a political space of spectacular weirdness.

the rapid, world-historical changes of geopolitics: the Iranian Revolution, Ronald Reagan/Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, the unification of Germany, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the first Gulf War—the erasure, in short, of the basic structure of the postwar era. The momentous events generated a sense of the ‘end,’ as it was undeniably the end of the order centered around the relationship between the U.S. and the USSR. And so it became convenient and natural to refer to that end as the end of ‘the Cold War.’ I disagreed. To me, it was historically wrong—recall 1963 – and, in any case, suspect as it accepted *de facto* Reagan’s ideological critique of the preceding detente of the 1970s, the thesis that the Cold War never ended, as witnessed by the world-conquering desires and expansionism by the Soviets. The blindingly obvious end was being defined by the end in turn of the Soviet Union, it was but a short step to imagine the beginning of the ‘period’ too as a result of the very existence of that power: NSC-68 redux.

I’m exaggerating slightly. The preponderant view here was not full-fledged Reaganism but some version of the ‘mutuality thesis,’ that is, the commonsensical observation that the Cold War was a period of extreme tension between ‘the two superpowers’ that ended when there was only one. There was actually not much interest in beginnings any longer and the end itself was still beyond our archival restrictions. Instead, the subfield filled in the blanks in what was now an open-ended map of possible topics that could be a function of, or related to, some generalized period world history called ‘the Cold War,’ which was global and conceptually unlimited. In this moment of radical change, however, I revisited the historiography of the earlier polemics about structure and origins. I also began to think in a more sustained way about the specifics of the Cold War as a periodizing device, what kind of narratives and analyses it encouraged and what kind it closed down.

x.

The decisive point of departure here was, again, Lippmann’s critique of the X-Article, which launched for the public ‘the Cold War’ as a term, offering, in a double irony, a probing diagnosis without actually discussing the name he had just given it.<sup>10</sup> I shan’t reiterate the particulars but the reference needs to be mentioned because Lippmann’s intervention has served throughout as an elucidating source. Lippmann’s realist critique centered on Kennan’s incommensurability thesis: the lurking notion that somehow Moscow and Washington could not deal with one another because their conceptual schemes were different and, more fundamentally, because the Soviet one did not permit proper deals, defined as the regime was by fanatical, deadly expansionism. On the contrary, says Lippmann, the Soviets can see the same formations of power as can we and the question of bargaining is real and urgent and quite likely in our interest. Lippmann’s critique, then, is derived *in the last analysis* from a certain conceptual error he detected on the part of Kennan (and the U.S). Notably, the decisive aspect is the spotting of a policy mistake and not, as one might think, a diagnosis of ‘mutuality’ as such, the characterization, say, of a symmetrical situation, a condition, a predicament of deadlock. Nevertheless, even such ‘mutuality’ was inadmissible in the refracted version of Kennan’s account that emerged as official U.S. policy: ‘the Cold War’ becomes an inherent feature of the Soviet Union itself, in effect the (totalitarian) dissolution of the very distinction between war and peace, where only the superior, preventive power of the United States on a global scale could keep the war cold as opposed to hot. QED. After 1947, Kennan himself readjusted *de facto* to Lippmann’s Realist argument. Indeed, this move brought a more radical break with Cold War thinking than the Atlanticist pundit himself would ever muster—or wanted to muster. (Kennan’s continued willingness at this point—1948—to play dirty ‘below’ the level of outright conflict should not conceal his basic willingness, too, to ‘deal’ with Moscow.)

The asymmetric logic of the Cold War project was a productive one. As Paul Nitze, the presiding spirit of NSC-68, lucidly saw, there were *no intrinsic limits* to what one might want to do and the capacity was readily at hand. The rigid axiomatic opened up for flexible action on a global scale, the primary object of which was really the ordering of the ‘non-totalitarian’

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Lippmann, *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper, 1947). The articles collected here appeared in the fall of 1947 under the general rubric ‘The Cold War’ but the term is nowhere explicated. The target, of course, was the X-Article.

world. That action was of course in turn to be lodged in the ever-expanding executive branch, thus overcoming the problems of political rule in a decentered system of class and state.

xi.

It seemed important to me, in any event, to insist on the U.S. pedigree of this frame and to identify its political ramifications though there was, too, an element of unease in the policymaking outfits about the term itself (as Peter Slezkine's forthcoming study of the companion concept of 'the free world' will show).<sup>11</sup> For the image, the dangerous image, of 'mutuality' always hovered in the background: 'it takes two to tango,' war involves two sides and, who knows, identity might well be hiding somewhere in the process. This feature was indeed embryonically present in the various scientific and quasi-scientific discourses (from cybernetics to rational choice theory) that would come to center on 'the nuclear game,' famously culminating of course in Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD)—the explicit naming of mutuality in 1962. Hence it seemed to me also essential to insist that 'the Cold War' lost its logic once mutuality was not only a subterranean streak but a dominant (to use an old Althusserianism). If one looks not to the chill factor but the absence of outright war, the project permits a whole range of possible 'levels' and actions within the constitutive, dominant frame, each of which may have its own temporal and spatial character and dynamic. Just as there is no 'declaration of war,' there is no 'peace,' only recognition and mutuality. And mutuality was precisely what the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated with the greatest existential clarity. Thence recognition became the order of the day, recognition not of 'friendliness' certainly but of the *conclusive* need to manage the adversarial relations, overdetermined in the last instance as they were by the nuclear balance of terror. The most acute antagonism in geopolitics, meanwhile, turned out to be between the People's Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. That antagonism itself undermined any 'systemic' argument (the Cold War as socio-economic incompatibility), as did, further down the line, the quasi-alliance between Washington and the still exceedingly radical Maoist regime in Beijing.

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I made this argument about periodization on several occasions (to the point of being repetitive and getting bored with myself). One such 'attempt,' however, deserves a word here. In late spring 1996, H-Diplo published in two installments my 'Fourteen Notes on the Very Idea of a Cold War.'<sup>12</sup> The format of these 'notes' was a bit unusual. The article was too long (in those days) to appear as a single text, hence the dual publication; and the notes themselves consisted of mini-essays on various figures (e.g. Hegel, Clausewitz, Lippmann, Don Juan Manuel, Augustine, Marx, Franklin Roosevelt, Hobbes, Koselleck, John le Carré, James Bond and so on) who might serve as references for a reflection of that conventional polarity of war and peace within which any delineation of 'the Cold War' as a periodizing concept must begin. For one thing, what sort of peace, if any, did it postulate? I borrowed the title, tongue in cheek, from Donald Davidson's celebrated essay 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,' though a 'note' on his attack on conceptual relativism would have worked both for and against my argument. The originating agent behind these 'Notes' was John Lewis Gaddis. Gaddis had been instrumental in creating H-Diplo but like me he was finding it (mid-1990s) a bit disappointing, foregrounding as it then often did trivia and unproductive polemics. He suggested (if memory serves) that I write something substantial for the network; and so, quite hastily, I rattled off the 'Notes.' It may not have been what Gaddis had had in mind but it was certainly different in scope from the usual fare. The response was deafening silence. Odd form and content doubtless played a role here but H-Diplo at that time was the site of much opinion so the non-reaction still surprised me.

xii.

The periodizing case had already been lost of course—a more fundamental reason perhaps for the lack of response. Something world-historical plainly happened in 1989-1991 and the easiest way to characterize that was by reference to 'the Cold War' and its 'ending.' Bookends thus in place, the term became a cliché, achieving reified solidity so to speak, at the

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Slezkine's work is tentatively called *Free World: The Creation of a U.S. Global Order*.

<sup>12</sup> It can be found here: <https://issforum.org/essays/PDF/stephanson-14notes.pdf>

same time as it opened up, within the uncertain but capacious demarcations, for studies of this and that and the other (many of them worthwhile). Latterly, there has been slipshod reference to sundry ‘new cold wars,’ as though it were a transhistorical phenomenon on a par with, say, ‘war.’ The best one can hope for, meanwhile, is the concession that, yes, *sensu stricto*, the ‘Cold War’ could be seen as a phase within the larger and longer Cold War. Indeed, we may now three decades after its putative ‘end’ be on the verge of recasting the massive break (and ‘the Cold War’ along with it) as a subordinate moment in the whole ‘postwar’ period of some seventy years that might then be called the ‘Liberal World Order,’ that is, the period of the U.S. hegemony (terminology subject to debate) when ‘leadership’ was properly and ‘indispensably’ asserted and there was progress abroad, deplorable mistakes such as Vietnam notwithstanding, all, of course, in the sharpest contrast to the phantasmagoria on display in the present White House. It is not a great leap of the imagination to see in this a liberal reworking of the very old mythologies of Manifest Destiny, a nicer version of the ephemeral, supremacist pitch of Bush the Younger which in turn, to my considerable surprise, had resurrected what I thought I had laid to rest in the mid-1990s as an outdated tradition, what with ‘more and better globalization’ under the banner of the Treasury and Wall Street. I should have known better.

It would be tidy to depict this foray into the genre of ‘U.S. in the World,’ the designation about to replace the hopelessly quaint ‘diplomatic history,’ as a judicious and clear-eyed move on my part to go with the flow. Alas, it was a commission and a surprise at that. The brevity required—in an empirical account coupled with analytical care—was salutary. ‘Manifest Destiny,’ part and parcel of that nebulous complex often assembled under the misleading umbrella term ‘American exceptionalism,’ permitted a reflection on the religious (more precisely protestant) aspects of how some crucial moments of expansion in the United States were thought and imagined—‘destiny’ as both fate and destination, time and space. I have had more than one occasion since then to rethink the matter and not only because of the unexpected ‘resurrection’ of the trope. There was the distinction, for instance, between the mission and the messianic: always in some sense ‘missionary,’ the United States as the proverbial beacon or bringer of the good news only intermittently escalated matters into the realm of the messianic, the role of actual (secular) salvation. Throughout, however, when things came to a head, there remained the axiom of political culture, the irreducible conviction, that there was and is no way to think about the United States without stipulating that world history depends on its whereabouts, that the United States is *the* world-historical nation. The United States is the World but the World is not the United States and in that gap lies a sizeable space for potential action.

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