A Braudelian Perspective on the Cold War

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Editor’s note: The Globality Studies Journal recognizes that English has become the lingua franca of much academic work in the global age, but not all work of interest is published in English. English pulls more and more scholarly work into its orbit; yet global history is not only debated in English. Local language publications also discuss global problems, phenomena, and processes. The following review of a Norwegian contribution is but one example of global affairs discourse outside of English. While GSJ cannot overcome the linguistic foreshortening of academic discourse, it can point to work of globality interest that is available in other languages. The journal appreciates and invites the help of its readers in that matter.

Every age has its own approach to the telling of history, both in regard to the sphere of investigation and theoretical perspective. How historians interpret and explain historical events changes continuously. However, certain interpretations are revised more quickly than others, such as events marked by intense politicizing.

The Cold War provides an excellent example of an event whose interpretive framework was suddenly transformed and circumscribed by a number of different interpretive frameworks and causal explanations. In past decades, traditionalists, revisionists, and post-revisionists have disagreed on the causes, features, advancement, and consequences of the Cold War. The most prominent issue has been the question of blame: the traditionalists blame polarization on the Soviet Union and the revisionists blame the United States. Was United States policy with regard to the Soviet Union mainly defensive or expansionist? Was the conflict primarily about power or ideology? Did foreign policy objectives stress greater security or domination? These questions are themselves highly politicized.

Oddbjørn Melle’s Supermakter og kald krig-arenaer (Superpowers and Cold War Arenas) sheds fresh light on these issues. The book is a comprehensive work with high ambitions. Melle, historian at the University College in Volda, Norway, provides a thorough thematic and chronological examination of the 50-year period of the Cold War, which he defines as the years 1941-1991, and places the period in a broader context than other scholars. Melle makes good use of the concepts of time and space. Fernand Braudel set forth three perspectives on time: the long (la longue durée), also designated as structural time, the intermediate long (histoire conjunctuelle), and the shorter, event-related perspective (histoire événementielle). Melle argues that all three of Braudel’s temporal perspectives apply to the study of the Cold War.

This is a broader and larger perspective that allows us to grasp the structural causes of the Cold War. The primary argument, demonstrated by the use of longue durée, is that the conflict represented a 50-year phase in the 500-year long process of modernization, influenced by capitalism, globalization, and most prominently Western
hegemony. The relevant actors and their strategic interests during the Cold War are discussed with the assistance of the intermediate long perspective (histoire conjuncturelle). Finally, the shorter, event-related perspective (histoire événementielle) is used to investigate individual Cold War conflicts, such as the Korean War, the Cuban missile crisis and the Vietnam War.

Melle calls attention to other dimensions as well. The two superpowers went to war in Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Some of these conflicts derived from the Cold War’s “field of force,” but were also influenced to a large degree by regional contexts and conflicts. The Middle East represents the most complex example, where superpower rivalry, especially the West’s attempt at hegemony and its need for oil, was confronted by Islamism, anti-colonialism, and nationalism.

Melle’s survey is a synthesis of considerable previous research, including a long literature list and 1700 footnotes. One chapter is devoted entirely to the historiography of the Cold War.

The main interpretive framework — modernization expressed by capitalism, globalization, and the process that allowed the West to achieve hegemony — is convincing, and Melle’s analysis of the United States is especially informative. However, by pointing to the United States as the main organizer of the conflict, Melle puts the other actor — the Soviet Union — in the shadow. He considers Soviet policy as mainly reactive and occasionally insignificant. His view of Soviet actions and policy in Eastern Europe from 1945 to 1949 is problematic. Soviet behaviour and policy in this period requires a more thorough analysis.

The author broadens our perspective on the Cold War; even so, he is, in light of the historiography on the subject, a revisionist. His work confirms how difficult it is to write political history in an apolitical form. Nevertheless, Melle’s book is a convincing example of how historians may use an extended time perspective to increase our understanding of complex social processes. We ought therefore to hope for a swift translation of Melle’s work from New Norse into English.

Note

Cecilia Notini Burch reviewed Melle’s book in the Swedish journal Historisk Tidskrift 129(4), 2009: 799–801. Her review was translated into English by Odd S. Lovoll, Professor Emeritus of History. The English translation was then revised by GSJ and approved by the author.