

## Once Firm, Then Fluid

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Cold War research has long focused on the bipolar order of East-West relations. Without calling these findings into question, we can and should however ask whether and how the bipolar pattern of order was undermined, bypassed or even dissolved during the same time.

Make no mistake: It takes two to tango. And, in this sense, the Cold War provided a striking choreography. Or, in a bit more detail: In the second half of the 20th century the constellation of the systemic conflict of East vs. West helped fashion a mighty bipolar pattern of order that both demonstrated and generated fundamental effects at levels ranging from the global to the micro-historical. Likewise, however, there can be no doubt that this description congealed into an equally mighty narrative that the protagonists of the Cold War both benefited from and helped perpetuate. Anyone vying for international power against only one rival can be relatively sure of the conflict's ground rules and behavior patterns. Propping up this certainty was more than in the interest of the US and the Soviet Union. They lived from it. Again, a tango.

Research also long followed this narrative and, using the bipolar order as its starting point, superimposed it on the interwoven East-West conflict on various levels and in various regions. Without questioning the



findings, we can and should, however, ask whether and how the bipolar pattern of order was being undermined, circumvented or even dissolved during that same time. The concrete question here is how much can we disassemble the supposition of an omnipresent Cold War without questioning its totality. If we accept that the constellation of the Cold War diffused into political thought, systems of knowledge and everyday habits, the equally evident question arises of where and how spheres of demarcation, deviation or separate existence could emerge. Regarding the conflict structure of the Cold War more subtly also requires us to reexamine both its fundamental constitution as a binary structure of superpowers and its seemingly obvious territorial, institutional and epistemic manifestations.

Making such parallelisms recognizable, distinguishable and analytically available in relation to one another requires us to borrow a certain paradigm from cultural history. It was with this in mind that the workshop ["Fenster im Kalten Krieg. Über Grenzen, Alternativen und Reichweite einer binären Ordnungsvorstellung"](#) (Windows of the Cold War: On the Borders, Alternatives and Range of the Idea of Binary Order) was held and from which we may expect more findings in the coming months. Histoire croisée should be further developed and the ["figure of the third"](#) play a role in this. The relevance of the "third" is no novelty – mythology, psychoanalysis and paired relationships have always taken their "drive" from third parties. In Cold War studies, however, the figure of the third represents a new challenge and not least the aspiration to question the self-generated research paradigm of fundamental demarcation. In this context, decentration and hybridization are no mere



phrases from cultural history. They mark instead a modern change of perspective.

What this might look like and what conceptual and theoretical fields it opens up are shown in some examples discussed at the workshop: Swiss bunker construction, for example, emerges massively and manifestly embedded in the strong [continuities of the preoccupation with security](#).

However, the Swiss bunkers can also be regarded as a space for possibilities that, following 1945, represented a near-completely conceived form of neutrality. After decades of near-unanimous support and expansion, this monolith of security began eroding in the 1980s. As the threat – encoded as a binary one – was disassembled and more complex ideas of threats were discussed within society, the protective function of the bunkers waned within the coordinates of East and West.

Similar signs of disintegration were revealed in security policy debates within civil society. The binary system of power between East and West was joined by alternative patterns of order that, however, also had a binary coding: North-South studies, [theories of interdependence](#), and globality, concepts including “collective security,” “European security” and a multipolar system of security.

Because the act of crossing borders changed the entire construct, in its rationale for action it became a historically interesting phenomenon in itself. In a further sense one could also speak of transcendence, i.e. a mode in which familiar categories identified in the basic patterns of the



Cold War suddenly came to nothing or helped point to the instruments with which old certainties were dispelled. In concrete terms this could be discussed regarding the political strategies of peripheral or nonaligned states, such as in the differing organizational development of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), a military alliance, and the trade-oriented Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN.

In them, Southeast Asian states positioned themselves not only within the coordinates of the Cold War, they also fluctuated individually in their conduct. The figure of the third appears here supposedly as a paradox, for from the late 1960s ASEAN policy concentrated on matters beyond establishing an economic region, including steps to secure the states' rule or the forging of a cultural-intellectual space. Implementing and enduring this required an explicit distancing from the familiar bloc orders, which thereby became all the more clearly contoured.

Completely different, yet exhibiting similar phenomena were the [nonaligned states](#), which developed their own agency as part of the Cold War. In the 1970s' air of capitalist criticism, states including India, Yugoslavia and Egypt manifested the North-South divide, offered their own binary-coded interpretation of the global order, yet without breaking the East-West dichotomy. Humanitarian NGOs also acted within two systems of order that, instead of clashing, operated in relation to each other: The [Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere](#) (CARE) had to both legitimize itself in the US domestically and demonstrate its non-partisan status internationally. Humanitarian work could ease social and economic pressures in weaker states; meanwhile, however, NGOs used



the constant threat presented by the Cold War to underscore their own relevance as an actor in a free, globally active “Western” civil society within the international order.

The "Third" in the logics of the Cold War was both a crossing of borders and a space for possibilities. It manifested itself in both alternative interpretations and constructed (escape) areas, in peripheral zones, in the form of terra nullius and [world heritage](#). The superpowers of the Cold War had to occupy such spaces meaningfully, for in the totally conceived Cold War there could be no "outside". Clear appropriations, whether material, ideal, discursive or performative, however, grew more difficult over time and, from the 1970s onward, had to compete with pluralist interpretations of the world. Hence, the existentially conjoined superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, had to accommodate an opposite.

The diagnosis of the loss of clarity and controllability from the 1970s onward is known, yet, with the workshop’s triangulating analyses, could also be interpreted outside the box. For we must continue to ask in what context the effects of an increasingly complex situation stood in relation to the improved instruments – theoretical, organizational and technological – of observing the world. For Cold War studies this means casting one’s gaze beyond the parochial community or (to return to our metaphor) dance to a different beat. At our disposal is a heuristically tricky yet rewarding constellation: In the Cold War, the "figure of the third" is proving to be a fluid figuration. Yet, unlike the figurative pudding, its constituent parts can certainly be nailed to the wall.



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