The year 1960, when sociologist Talcott Parsons wrote about industrial productivity, was an especially inopportune time to celebrate global harmony. Cold War crises brewed around the world that year: the
superpower conflict over Berlin was accelerating; Soviet pilots shot down an American spy plane, scuttling a superpower summit in Austria; planning for an American-backed invasion of Cuba neared completion; and Mao Zedong’s China squared off against the USSR. With such events transpiring all around him, how could Parsons describe an “almost world-wide consensus” about anything?

The juxtaposition of Parsons’s consensus and Cold War crises provides important lessons for scholars interpreting the Cold War. Historians have, for many years, described the Cold War as a political and ideological battle manifested in episodic superpower crises. Political conflicts have defined the Cold War in monographs, textbooks, and the popular imagination for so long...

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