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Interview by Rui Lopes

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Interview by Rui Lopes*

Odd Arne Westad is a historian whose work largely focuses on the Cold War as well as on Chinese and East Asian history. Among his most prominent books, he wrote *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) and *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750* (Basic Books, 2012), having also co-edited the three-volume *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). He is best known as a key voice of ‘new Cold War history’, an expanding field which, since the turn of the century, has sought to interpret the Cold War through an approach described by Westad as “multiarchival in research”, “multipolar in analysis” and “multicultural in its ability to understand different and sometimes opposing mindsets”.¹

Having studied History, Philosophy and Modern Languages at the University of Oslo and having received his PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Odd Arne Westad served for seven years as Director of Research at the Norwegian Nobel Institute. In 1998, he joined the International History Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he co-founded the journal *Cold*

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¹ O.A. Westad, «Introduction: Reviewing the Cold War», in *Reviewing Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory*, ed. O. A. Westad (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 5.

War History as well as LSE IDEAS, a centre for the research of international affairs, diplomacy and strategy. He is currently the S.T. Lee Professor of US-Asia Relations at Harvard University.

Shortly after the launch of Arne Westad's latest book, *The Cold War: A World History* (Basic Books, 2017), Rui Lopes interviewed him about the ways in which each era's external conditions affect historians and their subjects. They discussed the challenges of both engaging with the past through the lens of the present and engaging with the present through the lens of the past.

Rui Lopes (RL): *One of the aspects your work is most renowned for is shifting the paradigms of Cold War-related historiography. In particular, your book The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times crucially contributed to reframe the Cold War beyond traditional readings focused on the United States of America, the Soviet Union and Europe, arguing instead that the Global South was, in fact, a central stage of this conflict. Your latest book not only presents the Cold War as an even more encompassing phenomenon socially and geographically, but it also stretches this in time, tracing the Cold War's origins back to the turn of the twentieth century and emphasising its lingering influence in the early twenty-first century.*

Your approach raises the question of how far we can go in terms of broadening concepts and their periodisation before they lose their analytical strength. In the case of the Cold War, is there a risk of ultimately encouraging a reading of all twentieth century history through a Cold War lens, thus losing sight of all sorts of processes that were not a by-product of this conflict, even if they interacted with it?

Odd Arne Westad (OAW): That is a question I have been much preoccupied with. Some people would say that what I do in the new book is to do in terms of time the same as I did in terms of space with *The Global Cold War*. So, *The Global Cold War*, as you said, was very much about looking at the impact that the Cold War had in the Global

South and how developments – internal developments, autonomous developments – in the processes of decolonisation and colonial resistance came to influence the Cold War on a global scale. What I do in the new book is to go back to the late nineteenth century and look at the origins, particularly in an ideological context, of the divisions between socialism and capitalism, on a world scale.

Even so, I would argue that the projects are not entirely parallel. *The Global Cold War* was very much an argument about doing something that I felt had been missing in contemporary International History, which was to try to look at the global aspects of international conflict, particularly those driven by ideological issues. That book is in many ways an essay more than a comprehensive history, making that one argument that the Cold War transformed the Global South – mostly, in fact, for the worse – in the last decades up to when the Cold War as an international system collapsed. What I am trying to do in the new book is very much exploring concepts, ideas and how these developed within a twentieth century context. It is much more in way of a full history, in which the starting point is the first global capitalist crisis of the 1890s, the radicalisation of significant parts of the European labour movement and the expansion of Russia and the United States of America as transcontinental empires, and it goes all the way up to the late twentieth century and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The central argument in this book – the one that goes straight to the heart of your question – is that the Cold War did not determine everything in the twentieth century: There were lots of autonomous developments that in their origins had little to do with the Cold War: two world wars, the global depression, decolonisation, European integration, the rise of China... But all of these were influenced by the Cold War and influenced how the Cold War as an international system came to work from the mid/late 1940s on.

So that is the core here. The Cold War did not determine everything, but it influenced a lot of things. I postulate in the book that the only way we can understand the Cold War, both as an ideological conflict and as an inter-state system, is by positioning it relative to other

things that were going on in the twentieth century – not by subsuming them under a Cold War framework, but by understanding the influences that went in both directions. This is something I feel historians of the Cold War – and that includes myself – have largely failed to do up to now. We have not been able to put the Cold War into that wider framework. It has been treated as far too autonomous in terms of its own development, and I think we have lost something very significant in terms of understanding as a result of such an approach.

RL: *Another leitmotif in your work is a focus on the power of ideas and, in particular, on how ideology can materialise in international interventions – not just military interventions, but economic and diplomatic as well. Would you say you are more interested in examining how ideas have shaped the world rather than in examining how they have been shaped by material conditions – in analysing ideas as a transformative force of history more than as a product of historical evolution?*

OAW: In many ways, I start not from an idealist, but from a mildly materialist perspective. I do believe that people make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing. A significant part of those conditions in all historical situations would have to be material. So that is in a way my starting point for trying to deal with the kinds of history that I have been interested in. I think what I found in all my work – not just the work that concentrates on the Cold War, but in a broader sense – is that the power of ideas is very much connected to the degree to which they speak to the current conditions. We have plentiful examples, not least in the international history of the twentieth century, of ideas that do not develop, ideas that fail because they do not have some kind of interpretative value. They do not provide tools that are good enough for people to understand the kind of situations under which they work. That is the starting point, in a way, for looking at ideas that have had tremendous power, that have been amazing in terms of their success in inspiring people to go in particular directions,

leading to different kinds of results which the world would have been very different without.

Now, I do not find that combination – thinking about ideas in terms of how they help people explain or understand their overall conditions, including the material conditions – to be in itself an idealist approach to history. On the contrary, I find that much of the weakness, particularly in the early part of the twentieth century, in materialist approaches was that they went much too far without making these kinds of connections. Not just in History, but throughout all the social sciences (to me, Social Anthropology, in various forms, has been a very significant inspiration, as well as Historical Sociology), changes then started taking place in the 1950s and the 1960s. I thus found the tools of the trade that made it possible for me to make use of my inherent interest in political organisation and mobilisation, particularly in a colonial and postcolonial setting, in order to help me understand what these transformations were about.

That is the kind of integration that I have been looking for through my own work. I hope the new book is an example of how I make use of this in order to understand a longer time period than what I had been working on before, certainly with regard to the Cold War, in which the conflict or conflicts were driven forward by the degree to which ideas and concepts seemed to explain and give people some kind of instrument to understand the conditions under which they lived.

RL: *You have highlighted in multiple works how both your interest in the past and your perspective about it are intrinsically shaped by your relationship with the present, especially with events such as the US wars in the Middle East or the political evolution of China. Is this 'presentist' condition something that the historian should embrace or something that he or she should try to seek distance from?*

OAW: I don't believe in seeking distance from your own time. You can attempt to do that, but most historical schools in the nineteenth and

twentieth century that have tried have failed to do it, either through some form of positivist approaches to historical events – or maybe more damaging concepts – or by doing comparisons, in which you try to move out of your own time in order to validate it... These approaches have simply not worked out very well. I think a much better position is to place yourself squarely in your own time. You try to recognise and identify – not just to yourself, but also to your readers – what your prejudices are and where you do come from. For example, *The Global Cold War* was a book that would have turned out very differently if it hadn't been for it being completed in the wake of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. It is a book about interventions and, therefore, necessarily influenced by my understanding of the greatest intervention that was taking place in the time when I wrote it.

I think the main point here is about character and about honesty, to some extent. If you make clear to your readers what your starting point is – how, in a way, you are a 'presentist' historian – then you are much better off for it. Whether your readers are better off, I don't know... At least they will find it helpful, I guess, in order to understand where you are coming from. But you as a historian, in terms of how you do your craft, are much better off if you start from an understanding of how present conditions have influenced you. I would probably go as far as saying that it is almost impossible to avoid thinking about what is happening in contemporaneity when you carry out historical work, or at least I have never seen any serious leading historian who has been capable of doing it. So, for me, it is mainly about how clear you are about your starting point.

The biggest problem is if you are influenced, as most of us are, by these kinds of developments in your own time and then try to deny it terms of the output of your work. The ideal of the objectivist historian, I think, is long gone – should be long gone – but we haven't quite yet arrived at a point where historians are open about their biases and their prejudices or their political ideas. And that is what I want to move towards.

RL: *Following up on this question, how do you see that 'presentism' manifest itself in recent or current historiography?*

OAW: In many different directions, I think. For example, we started this interview by talking about the Cold War... What you find in terms of the broad historiography of the Cold War is that it has been very much influenced by contemporary politics. This field started out almost as much as a branch of Politics as a branch of History – very understandably, because the Cold War is what framed the political context, especially in the United States. And, to a remarkable degree, that has stayed with us long after the Cold War as an inter-state system has been gone. Why is that so? Probably, for two main reasons.

One is generation. The ideas that you form at a fairly early stage of your development as a historian, influenced by the political factors that shaped you then, are something that is going to stay with you for quite a long time. The generation that is slightly older than mine – certainly people who grew up in the United States, as I did not – will have a much more overtly dichotomous approach to the Cold War, whether you come from the political right or centre, or you come from the left. That is one of the challenges that is very often there. Again, I think the remedy against this – and people are perfectly capable of doing it – is something that has to do with how openly you express what your starting point is in terms of writing the kind of History that you do.

The second point – which is actually as applicable, if not even more applicable, to Europe than it is to the United States – has to do with historiographical difficulties related to the central concepts that you deal with in your work. Very often in European historiography – French and German certainly, but also British in a slightly different form – the concepts that you select are dependent on the overall approach that you have to an understanding of your own contemporary era and of what is deemed as being most significant. Let us take one field: the history of European integration. It is very clear that what you select as a conceptual framework for European integration, whether it

is as first and foremost an economic project of recovery and regeneration, whether it is as a political project of European unity after two disastrous world wars, whether it is as a reflection of the coming together of Europeans – or, to begin with, western European elites – in order to frame a kind of political agenda that goes beyond what could be offered both from below, in terms of the challenges that were there politically, but also from outside of the European centres... All of this is very much influenced by how you understand the role of the European Union today. If you do not want to be clear about it, I guess that is to a certain extent acceptable, but it makes it much more difficult for the users of History and the consumers of historical writings – the readers – to understand why you have made the kind of conceptual choices that you have made.

So, I think these are the two key challenges. The first one is in a way easier to deal with, in a generational sense, because it is a more direct and specific question of political bias. The second one is more difficult to deal with because it has to do with History at a conceptual level – the number of conceptual choices that we all make when we start thinking about the historiographical traditions that we want to be within. Both are important and both are problematic.

RL: *In public lectures, you have recently been asked to address some of the historiographical move away from a focus on the state as a key topic or agent. In this context, why have you stressed the notion of ‘bringing the state back in’?*

OAW: In the way I approach History, however way you want to characterise it – as Global History or World History or International History, meaning mainly history among a whole set of countries, not just countries as states, but also as communities – one of the biggest issues is how to deal meaningfully with the state. I think – and this is something that should come through in my work – that the only way in which you can do it is by relativizing the state. If the starting point

for your investigation is, as it has been among quite a number of my International History colleagues, that you take the state for given, then you could easily get into trouble in terms of figuring out what was going on. It is extremely important to relativize the state in terms of its significance and to always be open concerning the fact that, as the end of the Cold War shows us very clearly, non-state actors of various sorts can have a substantial impact on history, even in an inter-state – and not just a transnational – constellation.

Now, I do think that in a number of branches of History the state has probably become too little of a subject in itself. I do not mean the state as a uniform actor, but the state in terms of all of its attempts – elite attempts – at organising life for various groups of people. And I think this is a problem, because if you only want to see events, including transnational events, from outside the state, then you run the risk, not least politically, of missing out on a lot of what is actually taking place. I believe the right approach to this, at least at this particular point in time, is: 1) to relativize the state, looking at your topic from both within and outside it; 2) to think about what the hegemony of the state in the nineteenth or twentieth century history has meant – the overall outcomes of that. And then, thirdly, try to be able to think what state hegemony, both in power terms and in terms of development issues in the broad sense, has meant for people who do not find any comfort within the kind of state constructions that have been set up. Marginality and liminality are essential concepts in terms of understanding the state. And that is something that I am striving towards in my own work. I will nod in significant agreement when people talk about ‘bringing the state back in’, but this is the kind of framework in which I think the state needs to be brought back in – in a critical understanding of it, not least by, or through, people who ended up being victims of the various forms of state that have been set up.

RL: *Drawing on your own experience and on what you observe of other scholars, I would like to know your thoughts on the role of the historian as a public commentator of current affairs and, more generally, on the*

notion of Popular History – of History as something written for wider, non-academic audiences.

OAW: My sense of doing History – and it has very much to do with my own background – is that it has to have some kind of public purpose. If it doesn't, I think you might reduce the significance of what you are doing. I am not saying there is only one form of outputs in terms of historical writing that have validity or significance. I truly recognise that most of us – certainly me – when you come of age in this particular profession, you have to write in a way that is very recognisable by your peers, not least to get a job! You have to fit within a certain framework. Yet I think you should always aspire to write for more of a general audience and to engage people who may have an interest in reading about history but are not historians – who do not have an academic background, but are interested in history because it is part of themselves, it is part of who they are.

I grew up in a very working-class environment, in the sense that neither of my parents or indeed my family had any kind of academic background. Neither of my parents went to college or even to high school. And I always bear that with me, to some extent, when I think about the potential audience for the kind of stuff I am interested in writing or interested in reading. You have to try the best you can to write for people who, like my parents, would have an interest in what goes on in the world but would not necessarily think of this in the same manner or in the same directions or within the same frameworks as historians would. They are just as interested in history. Those are the kinds of people you should be quite eager to write for, if there is an opportunity. This also brings us back to what we talked about earlier on, regarding the connections between what goes on in your own time and what you write about as a historian. If you imagine your audience as being of a more general readership, it is easier to be outspoken and plain about what has inspired you to do the kind of historical projects that you undertake.

A significant part, at least to me, would be political. I had a question recently in another interview: “Does it have to be political?” And I guess the answer to that is: no, but it often is. There could be other kinds of social transformations, there could be personal experiences, there could be cultural interests and attractions that go beyond what you would normally deem ‘political’ that inspire you. However, very often I find that if you try to link your interest and your preoccupation with historical writing with what goes on in your own time, you will at least be close to some kind of political question, meaning a question of what kind of directions you want society – or not society in a broad sense, necessarily, but your own community – to go in. So there are some links there that are particularly significant.

I do find it very difficult – certainly at this stage of my career – to think about History as simply being for professionals or for people who have a particular background in History. I think language plays a role in this as well. Trying to write in a way that makes it easier for the generally informed reader to understand the kind of interpretation you want to construct – the kind of story you want to tell – is better both for your own thinking – the clarity with which you put your propositions forward – and obviously for the reader who wants to take it in.

RL: *Related to this search for a wider audience, some argue that the quest for accessibility poses challenges not only in terms of the language and concepts we use, but also in terms of the temptation to provide a more simplistic or closed narrative about events.*

OAW: This is one of the biggest challenges if you want to write for a general audience. To some extent, you have to prioritise the narrative, but you have to do so in a way that conveys your interpretation – your own take on history. I think that is possible to do, but it is hard. You have to work a great deal on doing that, particularly on catching the complexities of history and historical developments. So, when I write History in the biggest scale – for instance, in the last book or in *The*

Penguin History of the World,² which I have been involved in revising – I think the first thing to do is to try to move away from the concept of a Grand Narrative. Sometimes this is misunderstood. I find this often among students, both at Harvard and elsewhere, who think that moving away from *the* Grand Narrative is the same as moving away from narrative, which is a complete misunderstanding of where the critique of the master narrative comes from. What you have to move away from is presenting the reader with a view of history that says that only this path was possible, that there is an inner logic in terms of humankind's historical development, which only prepares us and takes us in the direction of one certain set of developments and denies the possibility of alternatives. That is where the critique of the Grand Narrative should come in and that is what I try to apply in my work – being open for alternatives, being open for different kinds of developments that could have happened. So, for instance, how do you do that when you are writing a history of the Cold War since the late nineteenth century? Well, you do it by being open in terms of trying to understand why certain things happen and why other things could have happened at the same time.

If you think about this – since I have just written about it – in terms of the 1917 Revolution in Russia, which played such an important role in the construction of the Cold War on the global scale, you have to make quite clear for your reader the contingency of many of the things that happened, not least in terms of the events in Russia, both in the spring and the autumn of 1917 – how easily things could have worked out differently. Yet you have to do it in a way that is based on the kind of historical knowledge that we have. So, could the Bolshevik coup in November of 1917 have failed? Very easily. It wouldn't have taken much for things to have moved in a different direction. Is it likely, as some historians have tried to postulate, that a very different political result would have come out of the Bolshevik victory, a Soviet Union that would have been oriented towards working with other kinds

2 J. M. Roberts and O. A. Westad, *The Penguin History of the World* [6th edition] (London: Penguin, 2014).

of states in the international system? I think the answer to that is no, because it was not what the intention was in terms of organising this particular state.

So, you have to be able to do both. You have to talk about contingency and alternatives, when they actually exist, but you also have to be brave enough to tell your reader – even if you have a suspicion this is not what she wants to hear – that certain alternatives were very unlikely. You know, it was not a given that we were going to move in one particular direction, but some of the other paths would have been unlikely in this historical setting.

RL: *But does History writing have to be narrative?*

OAW: No, I don't think History writing has to be narrative. There are many approaches to the writing of History that are meaningful. I think people can write theoretical approaches to history or write conceptual histories and comparative histories, engaging with lots of different forms of historical thinking that do not necessarily need to be narrative, even if you write for a larger audience. The narrative provides you with an ability, in most cases, to make it clearer to your audience – whoever that audience is – how you understand certain historical developments. I think that is what most historians have found out. But you can write, for instance, a much more conceptually based, ideas-oriented form of History that could enjoy a very wide readership. There are many examples of that. If you think about this in historiographical terms, in Germany and Italy you find a number of people who have been preoccupied with specific concepts and their development – how you understand everything from peace-making to architectural frameworks – and their work enjoys a large audience. This is close to something that I would like to do at some point in my career, which is to take a particular concept or a particular practice and look at it from different angles.

Now, will narrative, in terms of writing for a general audience, be the majority trend also in the future? I think that is very likely, but it

never has been – nor is it today – the only way in which you can write Popular History.

RL: *Let me finish with a question that brings together the Cold War, the use of concepts, the ‘presentist’ dimension and public discussion of international affairs. In current public discourse, mostly by journalists, but also by all sorts of analysts and politicians, we keep hearing – and I believe this is not just a recent phenomenon, although it has become especially prominent in the past few years – about a ‘new Cold War’. There is apparently a new Cold War between the US and Russia or between the US and China, or a return to the Cold War in Korea, etc. How useful is this metaphor when applied to our times, in terms of helping us or preventing us from better understanding the past and the present?*

OAW: I don’t think it is particularly helpful. I believe in calling things by a name that is meaningful and that gives us some basis for comparison or discussion in the broader political sense. The Cold War is not all conflict and not all conflict is Cold War, even though a certain generation seemed to believe that was indeed the case. Maybe two generations. The Cold War was a particular kind of highly ideologized conflict that came out of the late nineteenth century and disappeared, at least in its Capitalist vs. Socialist form, at some point during the 1980s. It is not going to be resurrected in that form. There will be collectivist challenges – at least I hope there will be collectivist-oriented challenges to capitalism as we go forward – but they will not come out within a Cold War framework. I am really sceptical of using that term for what goes on today.

It is a tricky position because there are some critics who would say that the reason why me and others do not want to do this is because we wish to provide a particular status for the conflict that we have been studying, when in reality, in terms of people’s practices – not least in the United States of America – we overlook the fact that there

are significant elements of that Cold War conflict still around. I think this is an unfair criticism. If you are a historian or any kind of thinking human being you operate by categories. You need to have a certain sense of what is what. To me, treating what is going on today in the US-Russia relationship or in the US-China relationship as a Cold War may feel satisfactory in the very limited sense of saying that what is going on is very bad and therefore it is similar to the Cold War, but it does not help us interpretatively. It does not really help us understand what is happening today.

Not all struggles for power within the international system are cold wars. In fact, if you look at it historically, as I point out in the new book, very few of them actually are. It is rare to have a bipolar or heavily ideologized political system. So I think that you have to call things by a different name – you have to be able to look at things differently. Using concepts that are not really covering what you are looking at does not help you have a critical approach to what you see.

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