



Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Roundtable Editor: David Painter

Roundtable Participants: Carolyn Eisenberg, Greg Grandin, T. Christopher Jespersen, David Painter

H-Diplo Roundtable Editor: George Fujii, UC Santa Barbara

Greg Grandin
New York University

On February 15, 2003, millions of people across the world took to the streets in simultaneous demonstrations to object to the United States' impending invasion of Iraq, prompting the New York Times to evoke other moments of global protest in 1848 and 1989 and to suggest that, while the Soviet Union may no longer exist, Washington still had to contend with a rival superpower: "world public opinion." Social historians easily accept the idea that mass protest, such as the kind described by the Times, affects state policy. It is an article of faith that the requirements of rule provide the traction that propels social change, for things happen—liberalism is extended, armies find new methods of fighting wars, governments enact novel ways of containing dissent, presidents propose constitutional amendments—when people act up.

Jeremi Suri's *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* seeks to bridge social and diplomatic history so as to understand how protest shapes political power and power influences protest. Focusing on the middle decades of the Cold War, Suri identifies the mobilization of the 1960s, culminating in the mass unrest of 1968, as a turning point in the long history of the nation-state. Legitimate, confident, and persuasive global leaders who ruled by cultivating the respect and consent of the governed gave way to besieged, fearful, and threatened managers. After 1968, governments began to pursue not so much a "balance of power" but what Suri calls a "balance of order," a "desperate attempt to preserve authority under siege" (216). Such a balance "emphasized stability over change, repression over reform" and sought to manipulate "political institutions to isolate and contain a variety of nontraditional challengers" (216). Detente and the normalization of relations with China, according to Suri, were part of this shift, as they created a new international order that allowed leaders to coordinate "their forces to counterbalance the sources of disorder within their societies" (216). This new order was dispassionate, drained of the idealistic and moral rhetoric that characterized the early Cold War, primarily designed to contain not nation states but dissent: "Nixon and Brezhnev pledged to cooperate closely for the sake of global stability, confining the claims of protesters and dissidents within their respective national boundaries. Instead of containing each other through threats of force, as they had since the end of World War II, the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union now colluded to contain their own citizens" (258).

Suri ambitiously aims to write a transnational history, stretching his framework to include not just the United States and Western Europe, but China, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe as well. He identifies analogous variables on both sides of the Cold War divide to make sense of 1968, such as rapid population growth, a massive post-WWII extension of higher education, and a shared sense of disillusionment, particularly among the young. *Power and Protest*, then, offers a unique way to rethink the transformation of power politics that took place midway through the Cold War, drawing provocative parallels between protest movements in Europe, China, and the United States. While some critical scholars see the Cold War as moving away from an east-west confrontation to a north-south one (that is, one aimed at controlling decolonization and containing mobilized third-world nationalist regimes), Suri suggests that the primary axis of confrontation rotated from an east-west conflict to a top-bottom one, in terms of citizens and rulers. After 1968, leaders, regardless of their ideological affiliations, began formulating repressive policies “against their constituents” (212, emphasis in original).

Suri’s argument that detente was part of a larger global reaction, a counterrevolution even, is a useful corrective to the belief that Kissinger’s diplomacy in the 1970s represented a general maturation of US foreign policy, a move away from the heated ideological fervor that roiled the early Cold War. The problem with the book, however, is its description of what elites were reacting against. Whatever the quality of the insights Suri brings to diplomatic history, his description of oppositional politics is banal and flawed.

As mentioned, Suri searches for comparable social processes in China, Russia, Europe, and the United States to account for the global mobilization of the 1960s. In addition to experiencing similar population growth and expansion of higher education, all these societies, according to Suri, came to be ruled in the early 1960s by compelling leaders who sought to transcend the paralysis of the nuclear stalemate through charisma and idealism. Kennedy offered the New Frontier, Khrushchev repudiated Stalinism and worked to revitalize state socialism, De Gaulle appealed to national grandeur, and Mao launched the anti-bureaucratic cultural revolution. Some, such as De Gaulle, Mao, and Germany’s Adenauer, tried to circumvent the monopoly on global diplomacy held by the US and the USSR through sideline negotiations. While all these attempts to inject a sense of purpose into national and international politics failed by the mid-1960s, crashing on the shoals of nuclear stalemate, superpower rivalry, and the Vietnam War, they did, according to Suri, unleash mass movements that, disillusioned by the limits of their charismatic leaders, came to challenge the legitimacy of the nation-state.

Throughout, Suri resorts to a simplistic psychologizing that, on the one hand, reduces the global crisis of the 1960s to youth revolt and, on the other, provides a naive understanding of state power and social transformation. Citing Alexis de Tocqueville, he relies heavily on theories of “rising expectations” to account for dissent, mostly by focusing on the frustration engendered by the unfulfilled idealism of charismatic leaders (93). Whatever the validity of such psychological interpretations of dissent, taken alone, they ignore the material basis of protest. The complex political history of oppositional movements, in the United States and elsewhere, is ignored wholesale. Protest here is nothing more than an amorphous rage against the machine.

In terms of US politics, perhaps Suri’s most striking omission is the complete absence of any discussion of the breakdown of the New Deal anticommunist political coalition – a coalition that

cut across the political spectrum to produce the consensus that begins Suri's narrative. Vietnam, as expected, plays a big role in Suri's account of youthful disillusionment, but there is no analysis of the specific politics that lay behind the mobilization. He ignores the conflictive relations between the anti-Stalinist and pro-Soviet left that produced the organizations associated with the New Left, including Students for a Democratic Society. Indeed, after reading *Power and Protest*, one would hardly know that there was an old left by which the New Left was measured. The socialist Norman Thomas shows up at Berkeley to lecture against the Vietnam War, Michael Harrington puts in an appearance to help the New Left create a "language of dissent," but there is no discussion of the Socialist Party's complex stance on Vietnam or that Harrington attacked the founders of SDS for being insufficiently anti-communist (in fact, there is no mention at all of the Socialist Party nor, for that matter, the Communist Party or Progressive Labor, the organization many hold responsible for the radicalization and, according to some, the destruction of SDS).

Aside from a reference to the civil rights movement of the 1950s, there is no indication that Suri is aware that a long history of mobilization in the United States contributed to the mobilization of the 1960s. He refuses to consider what it meant that Martin Luther King broke with the White House not only over Vietnam but over issues of economic justice. Suri offers only this trite, and inaccurate, statement: "King remained consistent throughout the 1960s, but the world around him changed dramatically" (182). In fact, King's thinking evolved in vital ways, as any number of accounts of the civil rights movement demonstrates. The author is so focused on the lost idealism of the young that he ignores venues other than college campuses – such as the workplace, churches, and the military -- that produced dissent. He mentions in passing that the civil rights movement "had important nonacademic origins," but doesn't explore them (94). Inner-city activism is described only in relationship to the urban riots. To the degree that he does discuss poverty it is only to suggest that writers such as Harrington and John Kenneth Galbraith contributed to liberal anxiety and provided relatively affluent students a "powerful vocabulary" in which they could express their moral disquiet (99). Concerned mostly with the disenchantment of the educated youth, *Power and Protest* overlooks how inequality, particularly as it breaks down along racial lines, contributed to the militancy of the 1960s.

The same obsession with youth mars Suri's description of May-June 1968 in France. Like many popular accounts of the uprising, he focuses nearly exclusively on student unrest in Paris, paying almost no mind to the wildcat strikes and worker councils that spread throughout France's industrialized zone. Idealism here is only a property of the comfortable youth: Suri seems perplexed that workers initially rejected a "generous offer" by the government to end their stoppages yet makes no mention of the fact that many Communist unions struck against the instructions of the Communist Party, which had infamously opposed the revolt. This was the largest general strike in French history, yet Suri describes it as a spring-break bacchanal: "many students developed romantic attachments amidst the protests . . . the whirl of the crowd whipped its participants into an orgy of love and violence" (190). In fact, throughout, Suri describes mobilization and political commitment as not about interests or even ideals in any substantive sense, but about emotions. He likens the connection between Herbert Marcuse and his readers to that of the emotive bonds between a rock and roll star and his groupies (127). In the United States, "African-American men," after King's murder, exhibited a "desire to lash out;" they "raged" and took part in a "'carnival of violence' that released pent-up anger" (183).

Such psychologizing leads the author to conflate political movements in ways that drain them of any specificity or historical meaning. Since for Suri an undifferentiated “charisma” leading to disillusionment is the motivating agent of oppositional politics, little distinction is made between the left and the right. The US New Left and New Right are equated -- both are driven by a desire for moral purpose and “criticisms of private materialism and political stagnation” (99). Mario Savio’s call to throw oneself on the “gears and upon the wheels” of “the machine” and William Buckley’s discussion about how to “fight the machine” are implicitly linked: “The political right joined the left in calls for more policy activism” (99). The right and the left in Germany and France are similarly collapsed into each other. Indeed, the whole book is structured along such nebulous comparisons – between, say Herbert Marcuse and Alexandr Solzhenitsyn or between the New Frontier and the Cultural Revolution -- that it is hard to know what to make of any of it.

Suri extends this shapeless history to his discussion of the global threat posed to the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1960s. A number of elements are notably absent in a book that purports, as its jacket proclaims, to give a “truly international perspective” on the relationship between diplomacy and protest. Suri offers mostly potted histories of mobilization in Prague, China, Russia, Germany, drawing on the most basic secondary literature. Large gaps remain. Important 1968 protest movements in Japan and Mexico are ignored, perhaps because neither country had a charismatic leader anywhere in sight and thus do not conform to Suri’s simplistic model. There is absolutely no mention of the 1970 election of Salvador Allende’s Popular Unity coalition in Chile or the emergence in Europe, particularly in Italy, of a distinct “eurocommunism,” although both movements consciously tried to steer – both politically and ideologically -- a middle course between the United States and the Soviet Union. Declassified documents make clear that Kissinger was obsessed with Chile, worried that the success of Allende would have dire repercussions not only in Italy, where the Communist Party was strong, but in Portugal, where the Communist Party was emerging as the dominant actor in the transition to a post-Salazar government.

The limits of Suri’s one-dimensional psychological framework are perhaps most apparent in a chapter titled the “illiberal consequences of liberal empire,” where he repeats as gospel the argument that US leaders, unlike the rulers of previous empires, really did desire to spread democracy throughout the world. Things of course went wrong, and illiberal consequences ensued, but the fault can not be found in the motives of either Kennedy or Johnson. Kennedy acted in South East Asia out of a “desire for new initiatives that emphasized American capabilities and ideals;” Johnson because of “his sincere urge” to do “big things” and export the New Deal agenda abroad (150). “Well-intentioned American efforts,” Suri writes, “to foster ‘development’ and ‘democracy’ in Vietnam triggered upheaval within the most developed democratic state. The nation’s failures left a deep scar on its psyche, shattering much of the optimism that underlay its liberal vision” (134).

Suri’s description of the fall from consensual Eden that produced the “social crisis of the nation state” in the mid-1960s is deeply ahistorical (211). He writes that “the legitimacy and prestige that had made the nation-state the accepted form of political organization for at least three centuries now confronted an unprecedented number of detractors. Leaders could no longer count

on persuading the population at home to support their programs,” and they had to “find new sources of power away from home.” For three hundred years? Where? The United States? With its then less than two-century long history of territorially expansion, civil war, racial oppression, and, until the 1950s, pitched labor unrest, the United States had just barely, in 1965, extended suffrage to all of its citizens. France? It was an empire until the 1960s. Russia and China? Leaving aside the question of just how legitimate and persuasive the Soviet and Maoist regimes were prior to the 1960s, both imperial Russia and China long looked beyond their borders for sources of power. This image of an autonomous nation-state that rules through the legitimate consent of its population cannot be applied to any of the societies studied by Suri, who seems to be stretching a fleeting moment of at best questionable political consensus back to time immemorial.

If *Power and Protest* is bad social and political history, it is even worse intellectual history. Suri’s discussion of the intellectual roots of the New Left focuses almost exclusively on the rock star-appeal of Herbert Marcuse. There is only a brief mention of the Frankfurt School, which he dismisses in passing as “self-proclaimed ‘critical theorists’” (122). There is no analysis of how its theorists’ engagement with Hegel and Marx was mediated through the intellectual pessimism engendered by the Holocaust. Existentialism, of course, gets mentioned in passing, with the depth of a grammar-school encyclopedia entry. Likewise, in the US, aside from a quick gloss on Daniel Bell, Harrington and Galbraith, Suri all but ignores the deeper intellectual and philosophical traditions that went into the early New Left’s attempt to create an indigenous democratic socialism; he uncritically repeats a journalist’s observation that activist students had never read John Dewey. The anticolonist writings of Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon are completely absent.

Despite his weak grip on intellectual history, Suri offers a new contribution to the origins of post-modernism: Detente caused it. Ignoring scholarship that locates the roots of post-modern thought either in the crisis that hit the Fordist global economy in the 1970s or, earlier, in the civilizational devastation of WWI, Suri believes that detente led many activist-citizens to adopt a post-modern distrust of government and turn away from political engagement, becoming, “like their parents, became mothers, fathers, and homeowners” (259). The “secret channels and intricate maneuverings of detente locked dissent out of government deliberations” (Suri does not specify when, exactly, “dissent” enjoyed privileged access to the halls of power) and stifled the idealism of the 1960s, “contributing to what many loosely call ‘post-modern’ thought Skepticism toward authority is today a global phenomenon” (259).

In fact, in his conclusion, Suri attributes a whole range of social ills to détente: it “constrained political and economic reform in the last quarter of the twentieth century,” leading, in the post-Cold War years, to a top-down, conservative globalization carried out by “opaque, elitist” international institutions “dominated by the largest states” (263). Détente “protected a state-centered world and forestalled hopes for the creation of truly independent international authorities” (263). Détente “encouraged narcissism among leaders and citizens, especially in Europe and the United States” (264). This narcissism has “infected relations among states and societies,” preventing leaders from building “popular consensus for their foreign policies,” such as the current war on terrorism. “Anger and resentment” toward these unresponsive, sequestered political elites and governments have “encouraged bursts of ‘home-grown’ violence in Europe

and North America” and “militant behavior among men and women, frequently from the Arab World, who feel dispossessed by globalization” (264). It should go without saying that such a myopic and flat notion of historical causality brushes aside whole realms of social, economic, and political behavior and relations: the crisis of Keynesianism and the ensuing global economic restructuring; growing inequality, both in the United States and throughout the world; the rise of the New Right; the dismantling of the New Deal state and its associated notions of citizenship; the emergence of the United States as the world’s lone superpower; and the further entrenchment of, to borrow Eisenhower’s phrase, a military-industrial complex, for just a few examples.

Suri misses the very point of his book. He closes with a muddled call for civic engagement, of the kind that existed before the turn away from legitimate, consensual governments that he claims existed in the early 1960s. He laments the fact that the “reformist impulse of the 1960s” has “moved from the now largely closed world of elite policy to the less political realm of culture and community” (259). Suri’s sorrow over a disenchanting world of lost idealism and purpose, of a narcissism and distrust that besets the population, echoes the lament of today’s ascendant neoconservatives. The people who took to the streets around the world in the 1960s were not demanding a restoration of elite idealism, which they rightly identified as serving to justify the ruin the United States visited on Vietnam and elsewhere. They were opposed to that brand of idealism, an idealism that viewed the world in dangerous Manichaeian terms. Their legacy is not, as Suri’s account would suggest, narcissism and disenchantment, but rather continued engagement and healthy skepticism, as demonstrated by the protesters who marched against the idealism which reportedly motivates some members of the Bush administration on February 15, 2003.

Copyright (c) 2004 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.
