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Jeremi Suri. *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, July 2007. 368 pp. \$27.95 (hardback). ISBN: 978-0-674-02579-0.

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Barbara Keys, Priscilla Roberts, James Sparrow, Yafeng Xia

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Review by James T. Sparrow, University of Chicago

Jeremi Suri's new biography of Henry Kissinger deepens and extends the story he began in his first book, *Power and Protest*. As he observed there, the "strains of nuclear destruction" evident by the late 1950s made the Soviet and American superpowers "at once more powerful and more constrained," producing an opening toward globalism. The Weberian cage of modern bureaucratic rationality, rigid enough when cast in Bismarck's iron, had become positively unyielding when forged of plutonium. Postwar leaders groped for ways to break this impasse, only to find themselves unable to ride the tiger of transcendent charismatic leadership for very long. Consequently, by the late 1960s great power statesmen sought discreet, stable solutions that would preserve sovereign prerogative in the face of global uprisings.¹

Enter Henry Kissinger, dauntless nuclear strategist and denizen of international back channels: "the perfect outsider for insiders who wanted to transform conventional Cold War wisdom from within." (163) No other figure more completely personified (and abetted) the momentous transformation of world politics spawned by nuclear brinksmanship and its resolution in *détente*.

*James T. Sparrow is an assistant professor in the Department of History at the University of Chicago with a Ph.D. from Brown University in 2002. His research and teaching focus on the state and social citizenship in the modern United States. His current manuscript, *Americanism and Entitlements: Authorizing Big Government in an Age of Total War*, is a history of the social politics of the national state as its foundations shifted from welfare to warfare at mid-century. He has published several articles including "Buying Our Boys Back': The Mass Foundations of Fiscal Citizenship, 1942-1954," *Journal of Policy History*, Spring 2008; "A Nation in Motion: Regional Reconfiguration and the Nationalization of American Political Culture, 1941-54," in *The End of Southern History? Integrating the Modern South and the Nation*, forthcoming; and "Hot War, Cold War: The Structures of Sociological Action, 1940-1955," co-authored with Andrew Abbott, in *Sociology in Action: The American Sociological Association Centennial History* (2007).*

¹ Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), chs. 1-2, esp. pp. 7-8, 44-5; ch. 6.

Yet “Kissinger did not transcend his times like some Olympian ‘great man,’” notwithstanding his pretensions to precisely that status. This was because “his influence came from the social margins... not from the traditional centers of ‘established’ authority.” (4-5)

Hard as it is to imagine Henry Kissinger in the role of the “Marginal Man,”² this point is central to Suri’s analysis of Kissinger as paragon of globalization. His “career, like the American Century as a whole, was not inwardly driven,” Suri argues, but was instead the product of “external” transformations attending American hegemony that allowed Kissinger to become one of its most creative exponents. (2) As he traversed the extremes of world power, he never shed the insecurity of his early tenure on its treacherous periphery. When he arrived at its center, the brand of hegemony he engineered there bore the mark of his origins. Fully half of the book is devoted to the experiences that made Kissinger into what Suri calls a “trans-Atlantic bridge figure” (55-7, 175): Jewish family life in Nazi Germany; émigré existence in Washington Heights; military service and early leadership as a governor in the American Zone of the conquered Reich; college and graduate school on the GI Bill at Harvard. The second half of the book follows Kissinger’s globe-striding ascent to power, in which he applied the lessons of his worldly, peripatetic life to policies that would shape the global order: first as nuclear strategist, then as advisor to Nelson Rockefeller, next as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State to Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, and finally, as the éminence grise of world affairs. This is biography as global history. To use the sort of Hegelian locution Herr Doktor himself might have indulged had he written his honors thesis at the end of his career instead of at its beginning, the history of Kissinger-in-the-World cannot be understood without also following the evolution of the-World-in-Kissinger.

Seen this way, Kissinger was a sort of global everyman -- or, more plausibly, a new kind of great man whose significance derived not from any exceptional character or powers of will or discernment, but from his fortuitous cosmopolitanism, which uniquely suited him to brokering power both within the society of the new hegemon and among its global contenders. Strategically located institutions and networks of influence, all bolstered and energized by America’s rise to globalism, opened at least their antechambers to Kissinger because he was the right man at the right time. Despite Suri’s clear disavowal of the “great man” approach, one puts the book down with a sense that while “Super K” may have been the vessel of greater historical forces, he was clearly also the agent of historical changes

² Robert E. Park, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man,” *American Journal of Sociology* 33.6 (May 1928): 881-893. Consider this passage: “When, however, the walls of the medieval ghetto were torn down and the Jew was permitted to participate in the cultural life of the peoples among whom he lived, there appeared a new type of personality, namely, a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples; never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now sought to find a place. He was a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused ... The autobiographies of Jewish immigrants, of which a great number have been published in America in recent years, are all different versions of the same story -- the story of the marginal man ...” (891-2)

that few figures are privileged to enact in history.³ Yet situating such a broad analytical agenda within the confines of a single life, no matter how capacious, poses limitations that are unavoidable for any biography. Though the focus on cosmopolitanism as a globalizing open sesame to international networks and institutions is insightful, providing a rich and necessary context in which to view Kissinger's career, Suri never pushes very hard on the underlying causal claims such a focus implicitly makes. Were strategic nukes or the notion of an Atlantic confederacy the kinds of ideas that could have been concocted and sold to policy-makers only by a German-Jewish refugee recently admitted as a junior member to the old boys' clubs at Harvard and Foggy Bottom? Were back channels and diplomatic shuttle routes open only to the same? Probably not. But if not, then how dispositive is Kissinger's status as a paragon of globalism?

On this question, the argument's strengths are most obvious when explaining the breakthroughs Kissinger brokered in the Middle East (Chapter 6). Kissinger's career-long yearning to replicate the Concert of Europe found its target in a settlement that sought to balance and thus contain Arab as well as Israeli designs on the region. Israelis and Arabs alike acknowledged Kissinger's in-between status as the foundation for their trust in him. Even the fundamental flaws in Kissinger's approach to the Middle East bore the distinctive mark of Kissinger's distrust of democratic forces beyond his control. His preference for order and hierarchy over social and political change, Suri convincingly shows, was the hallmark of a career forged in the mid-century crisis of democracy.⁴ Suri waxes eloquent as he concludes his study of Kissinger with a clear-sighted analysis of how the order he brokered with Sadat and others resolved the deadlock of the cold war in the Middle East in the 1970s, only to create new geopolitical conundrums that haunt us to this day. (269-74)

Kissinger's academic entrepreneurship within the cold war university also appears to have hung on his cosmopolitanism, although it is less clear how central it was to the resonance of his scholarship. His work on nuclear strategy was noted less for its originality than for its effectiveness in situating him at the center of important policy-making circles. (Although, as Suri notes in the long footnote on pp. 310-11, he was far more original than later critics admitted.) Whether the ideas in which he traded were strategic (e.g., limited war), or tactical (e.g., the battlefield use of "small" nuclear arms), they were concepts that had been developed and honed within a network of scholars and policymakers. Although the originality of Kissinger's thought is not really at stake in Suri's argument, the grounding of its success in cosmopolitanism certainly is. Suri's ample documentation and supple

³ Indeed, globalizing Kissinger appears only to enhance the explanatory power of the great man approach, whether it is embraced in name or not. This is an original move to make in today's historiography, rising as it does to the mandate to locate global, transnational and international processes in the actions of concrete historical agents. It appears to flow from Suri's neo-Weberian pursuit of charismatic leadership in the modern world of statecraft; see, e.g., *Power and Protest*, ch. 2. In *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, Suri does not invoke Weber explicitly, but he does foreground Kissinger's related preoccupation with the need for "transcendent" leaders in modern, democratic societies; e.g., see 8, 37-8, 81-2, 113-14.

⁴ Kissinger was hardly alone in his abiding concern regarding the challenge posed to liberal democracy by mass movements in an age of totalitarianism, nor was this concern restricted to German emigré intellectuals, although they clearly played a major role in articulating this problematic. See Edward A. Purcell, Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 1979).

argument convince the reader that men like Elliott at Harvard relied on Kissinger to run or shape key institutions such as the International Seminar and the Center for International Affairs precisely because he played the trans-Atlantic broker so well (116-134). But were analysts at RAND or policymakers like Paul Nitze and George Kennan persuaded (as Elliott appears to have been) that Kissinger's intellectual leadership held the key to a new kind of global hegemony? And where are the other new men of influence at Harvard (or at RAND, for that matter)? The limitations of biography leave them mostly offstage, while Suri's emphasis on Kissinger's outsider status obscures the precise nature of his access to and acceptance by policy-making insiders. When one thinks of the influence wielded by men like Hans Morgenthau and Edward Teller in shaping postwar strategy, it is clear that Suri's argument has great explanatory potential. Yet Kissinger's relationship to such figures goes largely unremarked in the book. This is unfortunate, since a more cohort-oriented analysis of Kissinger might have provided a clearer sense of just how much the globalizing Marginal Men shaped the trajectory of postwar strategy, and how much it shaped them. By the time the reader arrives at the ambiguous response of Eisenhower to Kissinger's book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* -- "interesting and worth reading at least this much of the book" (156) -- the problem of determining the direction of influence (from the global inwards or the White House outwards) becomes evident. Concluding that Kissinger's "strategic analysis was provocative and influential nonetheless" begs the question of both influence and globalization.

When it comes to the diplomacy for which Kissinger is best known -- the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the opening of China, triangular diplomacy, the SALT talks -- the evidence of globalization's impact is less direct. Suri has covered his bases here, as everywhere else in this carefully argued book. In the introduction he notes that he is less concerned with the arcana of what Kissinger accomplished than with "how the nature of global power changed during his career," and "why so many people invested this German-Jewish immigrant with so much power." (5) The simple fact of Kissinger's position of influence during the Nixon and Ford administrations fits with this broad mandate, and Suri does an outstanding job situating him within that extraordinary moment of opportunity for intellectual German Jews and other "unmelttable ethnics" demanding a place at the table of public recognition.⁵ Although here, too, the argument would have been strengthened by coverage of Kissinger's relationship with his cohort, most notably the neoconservatives who shared important aspects of Kissinger's background, yet sharply critiqued his foreign policy.⁶

Other more domestic factors also require closer attention. Take the example of Kissinger's ability to shift patrons, from Nelson Rockefeller to his nemesis, Richard Nixon, without batting an eye. Suri explores the personal dimensions of this shift, emphasizing their shared outsider mentality (an intriguing and poignant insight, esp. on 202-204), but passing quickly over the political dimensions of their alliance, which had everything to do with domestic power struggles. Given the exquisite hostility liberals and many moderates harbored toward the Nixon Administration (particularly over foreign relations) and the

⁵ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁶ Jim Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), esp. ch. 4.

fratricidal rage that rising conservatives cultivated toward Kissinger's former patron, Rockefeller, and his brand of Republicanism, it may have been that short-sighted calculations of domestic politics did far more to shape Kissinger's statecraft in Paris and elsewhere than did his globalized skill set and temperament. Globalization may have accounted for the influence of the anti-war Left, as Suri argued in *Power and Protest*,⁷ but it is unclear how it would have factored into the politically more consequential concerns of mainstream Democrats, much less those of the New Right, whose critique of détente would become a rallying point throughout the seventies, figuring centrally in Reagan's 1976 and 1980 campaigns, and influencing his nomination in the latter year.⁸ Without a close analysis of the politics of Kissinger's diplomacy, and an explicit comparison of domestic versus transnational or international factors, it is hard to evaluate precisely how heavily shaped by globalization Kissinger's pursuit of foreign relations really was during his 1970s ascendancy.

Given Kissinger's abiding faith in realpolitik, with its naturalization of national interest, one has to wonder if it wasn't the centripetal force of American nationalism, with its global ambit, that called the shots, rather than globalization. This possibility is not necessarily in conflict with Suri's framework. In *Power and Protest*, he concluded that the pressures of global dissent only served to harden the international state system in the end.⁹ Presumably other facets of globalization had similar effects. Suri indicates as much in this book, most suggestively when he observes that Kissinger was "a revolutionary strategist, but also a conservative thinker." (248) His cosmopolitan roots allowed him to pursue unconventional strategies, but his abiding commitment to realpolitik ensured these departures would always reinforce *raison d'état*. Taking on containment and other State Department shibboleths may have been audacious (though perhaps not quite a "statesman's revolution"), but never did Kissinger strike at the roots of foreign relations. He always and everywhere sought to reinforce them to serve American interests -- searching for ways to make nuclear weapons more useful despite the international rigor-mortis they induced, or acting to squelch popular movements in the Third World even when they had democratic roots. The very notion of human rights offended his sense of how the world works (and his sense of *amour-propre*) -- denying, as it did, the supreme prerogatives of sovereignty. Does this dogged, even obsessive, devotion to the revanchist vision of national interest in foreign relations square with Suri's claims for Kissinger as a paragon of globalization?

Suri's answer emerges from some of the strongest chapters of the book, covering Kissinger's early experiences in Nazi Bavaria, New Deal New York, and the U.S. Army during and after WWII. Only such a sequence of profound dislocations could have produced an historical figure as paradoxical as Kissinger. "Americanization did not erase, but in many ways heightened, his ties to his country of birth," Suri observes, and then proceeds with a revealing quote from Kissinger stating that his lifelong "emotional and

⁷ Suri, *Power and Protest*, chs. 1, 6, and passim.

⁸ Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, ch. 6, esp. 103-5.

⁹ Suri, *Power and Protest*, 263: "Détente protected a state-centered world and forestalled hopes for the creation of truly independent international authorities."

practical” connection to Germany, the land of his birth, dated “primarily from the time of occupation onward,” when he was twenty-one years old. (67) The ramifications of this understatement are substantial, and get to the heart of Suri’s claim that Kissinger’s rise within in the Army, like his later successes, depended on his “relative marginality in two societies.” (69) This marginality forged his lifelong identification with American power, even as it fundamentally complicated his sense of national identity, and thus of national interest. The seeds of postwar hegemony grew at the margins of state power as it was renegotiated in WWII -- and one of those seeds was located in the developing mind of a young Henry Kissinger. As the sociologist Robert Park wrote eighty years ago in his seminal essay on “Human Migration and the Marginal Man”:

It is in the mind of the marginal man that the conflicting cultures meet and fuse. It is, therefore, in the mind of the marginal man that the process of civilization is visibly going on, and it is in the mind of the marginal man that the process of civilization may best be studied.¹⁰

By painstakingly reconstructing Kissinger’s Jewish background as no other scholar has, Suri suggests a paradoxical link between the modern condition and the constitution of world power. If only an outsider could become the ultimate insider whose high statecraft could determine the direction of the postwar world -- and if this Marginal Man was modernity’s ultimate outsider whose non-personhood under the Nuremberg Laws was proclaimed in the archetypal state of exception -- then what does that say about the way that power worked in the American Century? Clearly, Suri persuades us, it says a great deal, especially about the ways in which American institutions of power had to democratize their mobilization (and their ideologies) of merit in order to perfect a system of realpolitik that would secure sovereign control and foreclose any democratic challenges that might threaten it. Democracy, like cold war credibility, was hollowed out from within by the effort to project its image everywhere the U.S. flag might be planted.

There is another side to Kissinger’s paradoxical character that raises questions for further research. Suri does not shrink from full disclosure of this dark side, but neither does he probe it (at least not explicitly). In order to rescue Kissinger from the unproductive binary debate that casts him alternately as villain or hero, Suri prefers an approach that seeks understanding in broad historical context, both local and global, rather than accepting the narrow confines of anachronistic moralizing. (5-6) While this is a defensible and perhaps even necessary approach to such a controversial and contemporary figure, it is not so easy to sustain a disinterested stance for very long. Despite his own best instincts even Suri succumbs to the urge to take a side, here and there. At one point in the book he feels compelled to assert that Kissinger was “not a war criminal” -- and not in some marginal aside, but as the summation of his brief for Kissinger as the author of “a statesman’s revolution.” (248) At the book’s outset he puts his intellectual commitments on the line with admirable frankness: “Good men made policy during the American Century, and Kissinger was one of them. Their accomplishments and failures were not genetic. They were rarely personal.” (7)

¹⁰ Park, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man,” 881.

Yet it is hard to see how Kissinger's most widely criticized failings can be understood outside of the very personal context Suri has so convincingly reconstructed. How was it possible for Kissinger to authorize carpet bombing in Cambodia without recalling the Nazi blitzkrieg that so often began with the bombing of civilians? How could he send aid, advisors, and all manner of support to dictatorships like the one that ruled Argentina, without having flashbacks to the formative years he spent in the Third Reich, watching neighbors and relatives disappear? When he posed for the press conference with Pinochet (241-2), didn't the click of heels and the smell of patent leather ring a bell? In short, how could Kissinger allow himself to pursue the ghost of Bismarck without remembering the fate of Bleichröder and his children?¹¹ These are questions of his memory, world-view, and motivation, not of our anachronistic righteousness. They are just as relevant to Kissinger's realpolitik as those pertaining to his feelings of being an "outsider." One does not have to equate Kissinger's most execrable deeds with fascism, nor label Kissinger a war criminal, to see how critical it is to address such questions. But they probe issues that lie several layers deeper than Kissinger or his available papers will allow scholars to penetrate -- at least while he still has a say.¹²

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¹¹ Fritz Stern, *Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder, and the Building of the German Empire* (New York: Random House, 1977), esp. 542-9.

¹² See Bruce Mazlish, *Kissinger: The European Mind in American Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 46-7 and all of ch. 8, for a probing but highly speculative exploration of this problem in relation to Kissinger's psyche.