

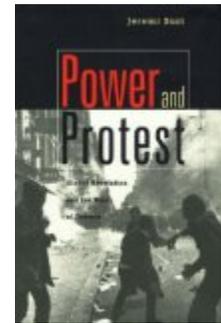
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jeremi Suri. *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. vii + 355 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01031-4; \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-01763-4.

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Published on H-Peace (September, 2003)



## The International Search For Order

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During their historic February 1972 meeting in Beijing, U.S. President Richard Nixon and Chinese Premier Mao Zedong casually observed how domestic dissent had constrained each nation in the exercise of its foreign policy. Mao complained of radical critics who opposed the drift toward amicable Sino-American relations, while Nixon bemoaned “similar problems” from the “American Left.” Both leaders, historian Jeremi Suri argues, sought while serving their respective strategic interests to “stabilize the international system and restrain domestic troublemakers” through the mechanism of détente (p. 242).

This book is not the first to argue for the mutually constitutive nature of domestic and international politics during the 1960s. Numerous historians have shown how the civil rights, anti-nuclear, and anti-war movements each shaped and were shaped in turn by relations among the great powers.[1] But *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* stakes out new ground with a transnational analysis of developments that previous historians have failed to connect: Cold War stalemate early in the decade, the emergence of educated dissident youth movements across widely divergent societies, an upsurge of global protest and activism capped by the upheavals of 1968, and the consequent emergence of détente in the decade’s succeeding years. In doing so, this ambitious and challenging work offers a glimpse of both the potential and the limits of writing international

history.

*Power and Protest* might best be viewed as a series of six interrelated essays, the first four developing the essential preconditions of the global upheavals of the late 1960s, and the last two exploring 1968 itself and the emergence and consequences of détente. Suri begins by examining superpower nuclear policy in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Both the United States and the Soviet Union sought to exploit new, more cost-effective weapons technologies, especially delivery systems, to economize on military power while freeing up resources that could be used to fund ambitious domestic and foreign development programs. But nuclear stalemate produced unintended consequences, he argues, forcing both President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Khrushchev to curtail their domestic and international ambitions and to normalize superpower relations (albeit along dangerous Cold War fault lines) in the interest of system maintenance. On the U.S. side this meant acceptance of the Berlin Wall, among other unsavory choices. “It’s not a nice very solution,” the President remarked in private, “but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war” (p. 23). The Kennedy that emerges in this account is not the somewhat reckless anti-communist of recent historiography but a pragmatist, by turns reformist and conservative as international circumstances demanded.[2] Ironically, Suri concludes, efforts to stabilize international politics mobilized dissident groups in the United States, Europe, and Asia, and criticism of “the growing gap between the ideological claims and the actual behavior” of great power leaders

(p. 43).

Dissatisfaction with the superpower status quo also spurred efforts by Charles de Gaulle and Mao Zedong to assert greater independence in foreign policymaking and restore national greatness. As subordinate states in the Cold War system (France declining and China ascending), both countries' leaders had an incentive to seek leverage outside it, strengthening their domestic power in the process. Suri deftly demonstrates how de Gaulle and Mao cultivated charismatic sources of authority in civil society to escape the constraints of both superpower rivalry and domestic bureaucracies. Each exploited what Marx characterized as the mysterious power of the executive to mobilize popular support and set themselves against the states they governed. France's withdrawal from Algeria, negotiations with Germany, veto of British membership in the European Common Market, and distancing from NATO all testify to de Gaulle's determination to reassert a leading role for Paris in European politics at the expense of the United States. Mao, reeling from the disastrous failures of the Great Leap Forward (1956-1960), sought to "circumvent established bureaucratic authority and regain revolutionary leverage" by encouraging criticism of Communist Party leaders, a process culminating in the Cultural Revolution (p. 71). It is no coincidence, then, that France and China concurrently developed an independent nuclear capability. Nor is it surprising, in this reading of the evidence, that the two powers engaged in talks in 1964 to identify areas of cooperation independent of Washington and Moscow, a development that Suri contends further destabilized the international system.

Dissatisfaction with the cynicism of Cold War politics prompted millions to engage in global political protest during the 1960s. Suri observes that each of the societies wracked by protest were marked by state-sponsored education reforms aimed at building highly trained and ideologically imbued work forces and growing populations of urban-educated youth with limited vocational opportunities. Masses of educated and discontented youth, however, while a necessary pre-condition, were insufficient to provoke the sort of upheavals that erupted in 1967-1968. Words and ideas also mattered. Iconoclastic intellectuals such as U.S. social scientist Daniel Bell, social critic Michael Harrington, French writer Herbert Marcuse, Chinese playwright Wu Han, and Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, he argues, provided the rhetorical tinder. Together, they crafted an international "language of dissent" that exposed the failures of both capitalist and communist societies and criticized leaders

for "failing to fulfill domestic promises and accomplish national goals" (p. 130). Through their writings these thinkers also reaffirmed the dignity of the individual and encouraged rebellion against established authority. It is thus ironic that Mao's China and the Cultural Revolution provided Western dissidents with a sort of counterpoint to the failures of Cold War politics.

If Bell and Harrington exposed the structural failings of American democracy and capitalism, Washington's escalating intervention in Vietnam served for millions as a symbol of American leaders' inability to match their lofty rhetoric with a moral foreign policy. Oddly, however, in a chapter entitled "The Illiberal Consequences of Liberal Empire," Suri makes his most conventional arguments. Suri contends that after World War II the United States, like the Soviet Union and China, acted in Southeast Asia not "to defend clearly identified national interests" but to assert their ideological leadership in "what appeared to be an open space." Vietnam thus became a template in the 1960s for demonstrating Washington's "well-intentioned efforts" to foster "democracy" and "development," a "reformist intervention" that devolved into a brutal war (pp. 132, 134) whose means flatly contradicted the professed goals of American officials. Suri's desire to demonstrate the reformist impulses animating the U.S. war—such as Lyndon Johnson's well documented New Deal-inspired hopes for a Mekong Valley Development Authority—leads him to downplay other factors driving American policy during the 1960s, especially the desire to maintain the credibility of U.S. commitments.[3]

By 1968 the American war in Vietnam had galvanized a massive protest movement in the United States, protests which inspired and intersected with urban upheavals in Western Europe, the Soviet bloc, China, and elsewhere. In his analysis of the global disruptions of 1968, Suri keeps his eyes firmly on the big picture of "rising expectations and attempted repressions," attributing the scope and intensity of protest everywhere to the inability of national leaders in advanced states to deliver on the promise of domestic and international progress (p. 165). At the same time, he makes a persuasive case for the importance of contingency, spontaneous mass action, and individual leadership, offering detailed accounts of events in Berkeley, Washington, Paris, Prague, Berlin, and China. Lacking common goals (other than rejection of a repressive status quo) or meaningful organizational links, participants in the protests of 1968 nonetheless viewed themselves as actors in a global drama. It is unsurprising, then, especially given the paucity of accurate reporting on the issue, that "Mao's China appeared to offer a 'new direc-

tion' for revolution in a world dominated by conservative leaders" (p. 206). But Mao's encouragement of the Cultural Revolution sparked a virtual civil war in China, as Red Guard factions assaulted the symbols of Communist Party power in an attempt to revitalize the Revolution.

Most persuasively, Suri demonstrates that world leaders also viewed themselves as victims of a global upheaval. The combined impact of these protests was "to challenge the basic authority of the modern nation-state," undermining the ability of national authorities to govern their populations. "The main front of the war," Johnson told his advisors as Washington and 120 other cities erupted in rioting following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., "is here in the United States" (p. 160). The challenge confronting nearly every world leader in the wake of such upheaval (as Charles de Gaulle's surreal flight from Paris illustrates) was to restore both personal and national authority at a time of declining legitimacy. Here Suri offers a wholly original argument, contending that policymakers on both sides of the Cold War divide sought increased international cooperation abroad to restore their authority at home, leading to *détente*. "*Détente* was, in this sense, a direct reaction to the 'global disruption' of 1968," he maintains, an attempt by Soviet, Chinese, and Western leaders to "normalize" the Cold War (p. 213).

The experience of Germany makes the point nicely. In 1963 West German Chancellor Willy Brandt and aide Egon Bahr encouraged grassroots overtures across the Berlin Wall, laying the foundations for Ostpolitik and *détente*. In 1969, however, Brandt and Bahr recoiled from the radicalism of student protestors and the disorder they bred, taking measures to bring Ostpolitik firmly under their control and subduing criticism of both U.S. and Soviet Cold War policies in an effort to dampen public expectations (pp. 221, 223). Sino-American and Soviet-American overtures reflected similar dynamics. Rather than respond directly to protestors, politicians used police forces to repress dissent, centralize political power and insulate decision making from public scrutiny, leading to widespread political disillusionment and social disengagement. (The Nixon and Kissinger of the period were men whose views on diplomacy and secrecy meshed perfectly with the times). The legacy of *détente*, Suri concludes, was profoundly conservative.

Like most works of synthesis, *Power and Protest* succeeds best when viewed as the sum of its parts. Suri has absorbed enormous bodies of literature on French, U.S., Chinese, German, and Soviet bloc history while pro-

viding a model of multi-archival and multinational research. But specialists will find in each chapter something to quibble with. His account of the U.S. anti-war movement, for example, emphasizes the catalytic role of Berkeley to the exclusion of non-elite colleges and universities where protest reflected greater class consciousness—and less concern with organic intellectuals. Likewise, Suri's concern with charismatic executive leadership—which deepens our understanding of both Mao and de Gaulle—leads him to perhaps overemphasize the role of dynamic individual (and almost always male) leadership in protest movements where both organizational resilience and spontaneous mass action (not to mention women) played indispensable parts. The book's originality, however, lies not in its rendering of 1960s nuclear policy, the protests of 1968, or *détente* *per se*, but in the connections it draws across national boundaries and among seemingly disparate social, cultural, political, and diplomatic forces to demonstrate "how policies such as *détente* evolved from truly diverse, and often unintended, influences" (p. 263).

It is perhaps unfair to fault a work as ambitious as *Power and Protest* for what it leaves out, since a truly comprehensive rendering of the subject would require a much longer book. But three points are in order. First, Suri's focus on unrest in the great powers obscures the truly global scope of protest during this period, which extended to dozens of countries, including Japan, Thailand, Senegal, Turkey, Indonesia, Bolivia, Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, India, Pakistan, and Mexico, where similar "infrastructural" conditions prevailed. By confining himself to the great powers, Suri unintentionally contributes to what scholar Tariq Ali has termed the writing of "1968" as a Western construct.<sup>[4]</sup> China thus serves as a counterpoint to protest in advanced industrial states, rather than as a bridge for understanding the roots of protest in post-colonial states for whom Beijing also served as a model of sorts, and not just for dissident youth. Acknowledgement of upheaval on this scale would necessitate a reconsideration of the sources and meaning of the dissident vocabulary protestors deployed. Did protestors in Dakar, Senegal, articulate the same complaints about state authority as did youth in Paris? How important were iconoclastic intellectuals such as Herbert Marcuse in postcolonial settings, as opposed to dissident thinkers (and sometimes government officials) such as Che Guevara or Franz Fanon?

Second, Suri also treats the upheavals of 1968 as primarily a revolt against the Cold War system of politics. But as Immanuel Wallerstein has argued, 1968 was simul-

taneously a revolt against the failures of “old left” anti-systemic movements entrenched in power in both post-colonial and advanced industrial states.[5] The unquestionable social fragmentation and political withdrawal, which Suri sees as a legacy of 1968 and *d=tente*, might thus be viewed in a slightly different light. Protestors in 1968 were certainly *na=ve* in their expectations that revolution was around the corner. But the New Social Movements emerging in the late 1960s and 1970s (witness the rise of the Greens in Germany, the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, or the contemporary anti-corporate globalization movement) were no less concerned with government policy than their predecessors. They were, however, less focused on seizing state power than in transforming political culture and the politics of everyday life, rejecting traditional organizational patterns in favor of more anti-authoritarian movements. The primary beneficiaries of such strategic choices in many countries were women and minority populations previously excluded from the dissident political process. It is far from certain that such an approach represents a strategic regression given the decline of organized labor as a political force within existing party structures in nearly every country.

Finally, *Power and Protest* pays insufficient attention to political economy. Washington’s pursuit of liberal empire through illiberal means, not to mention the protests of 1968, threatened not just Johnson’s executive authority but American economic power, as that year’s spectacular assault on the dollar made clear. Steps taken by the great powers to restore international order marched hand in hand with measures to stave off economic decline. As Nixon pursued *d=tente* he also oversaw the dismantling of the Bretton Woods economic system, dramatically accelerating the process of global economic integration. Not long after Beijing pursued *d=tente* with Washington, Deng Xiaoping rejected Maoist political economy and inaugurated China’s turn toward enmeshment in the capitalist world economy, a process which is still unfolding.

These criticisms do not fundamentally detract from the power and originality of Suri’s book, which brilliantly succeeds in explicating the roots of *d=tente* and illuminating a previously hidden meaning of the mass protests of 1968. Above all, *Power and Protest* is a pleasure to read. Suri is a gifted writer, displaying an admirable economy

of prose and a knack for moving from sweeping arguments to intimate detail without losing the flow of his argument. There are few wasted words in this book, which reduces a complicated historical narrative to a reasonable length, making it an eminently teachable text. *Power and Protest* points the way forward for aspiring practitioners of international history, while at the same time offering sobering insights into the profound divide that exists between leaders and citizens in contemporary international society.

#### Notes

[1]. Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). See also Lawrence S. Wittner’s trilogy, *One World Or None: A History of the World Disarmament Movement Through 1953* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), *Resisting the Bomb: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954-1970* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), and *Toward Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

[2]. Burton I. Kaufmann, “John F. Kennedy as World Leader: A Perspective on the Literature,” in *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941*, ed. Michael Hogan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 326-358; and Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[3]. Lloyd Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: I. R. Dee, 1995); David Ekbladh, “‘Mr. TVA’: Grass-Roots Development, David Lilienthal, and the Rise of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a Symbol for U.S. Overseas Development, 1933-1973,” *Diplomatic History* 26 (2002): pp. 335-74.

[4]. Tariq Ali and Susan Watkins, *1968: Marching in the Streets* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998).

[5]. Immanuel Wallerstein, “1968, Revolution in the World System,” in *The Essential Wallerstein* (New York: New Press, 2000), pp. 354-374.

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**Citation:** Bradley R. Simpson. Review of Suri, Jeremi, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of DÖ©tente*. H-Peace, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

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