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## The Cold War, Decolonization, and Global Social Awakenings: Historical Intersections

Jeremi Suri

Edward Said's shadow hovers around all contemporary studies of imperialism. The late literary scholar's penetrating analyses of how condescending assumptions about the 'Orient' infected Western thought have forced scholars to meditate on the power inequalities and prejudices inscribed in the basic discourses of international relations. Western concepts like democracy, liberty, and justice are, according to Said, freighted with deep assumptions about Western superiority and Eastern subservience. Said blames intellectuals, in particular, for legitimizing imperial discourses that, in turn, legitimize imperial practices.<sup>1</sup>

Said's scholarly work, though largely focused on the nineteenth century, has enormous implications for the history of the post-1945 world. The United States, according to Said, resurrected all of the old 'Orientalist' tools in its management of a repressive Cold War empire:

[There] is a depressing sense that one has seen and read about current American policy formulations before. Each great metropolitan center that aspired to global dominance has said, and alas done, many of the same things. There is always the appeal to power and national interest in running the affairs of lesser peoples; there is the same destructive zeal when the going gets a little rough, or when natives rise up and reject a compliant and unpopular ruler who was ensnared and kept in place by the imperial power; there is the horrifically predictable disclaimer that 'we' are exceptional, not imperial, not about to repeat the mistake of earlier powers, a disclaimer that has been routinely followed by making the mistake, as witness the Vietnam and Gulf wars. Worse yet has been the amazing, if often passive, collaboration with these practices on the part of intellectuals, artists, journalists whose positions at home are progressive and full of admirable sentiments, but the opposite when it comes to what is done abroad in their name.<sup>2</sup>

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Said's powerful argument has found expression in two strands of recent scholarship on the international history of the Cold War. One group of scholars has focused on the continuities between the periods before and after 1945. They have used a combination of evidence from American foreign policy-making and non-American societies to argue that US activities followed, as Said predicted, the patterns of the old imperial powers. American anti-imperialist claims, according to this formulation, masked deeper Orientalist assumptions about racial superiority, economic dominance, and political paternalism.<sup>3</sup>

A second group of scholars has questioned the very utility of the Cold War as an analytical concept. They have pointed to the ways in which this geopolitical term privileges state actors in the United States and Europe and neglects local forces of change, many of which had little apparent connection to the basic issues and personalities of the Cold War. Historians of decolonization, in particular, have forcefully argued that resistance to empire in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Asia reflected trajectories of nationalism, social mobilization, and political organization that subverted the Cold War frame for 'high politics' during the era. Explaining decolonization in Cold War terms, according to some scholars, silences non-Western peoples and recreates the Orientalist dominance of Western elites.<sup>4</sup>

These are telling critiques of the standard scholarship on the Cold War. They de-centre the traditional narrative, they give agency to formerly neglected actors, and they add an important social and cultural dimension to the international history of the period. More significant, they challenge the core assumption of most analyses of the Cold War: that the struggle between American-dominated liberal-capitalism and Soviet-dominated communism structured relations between societies after the Second World War. New scholarship on the 'third world' gives extensive attention to ideology, but not Cold War ideology *per se*. Said has, in many ways, supplanted Woodrow Wilson and Vladimir Lenin.

Recent work to broaden the range of Cold War analysis, both in terms of geography and methodology, represents a creative response to Said-inspired criticisms. Odd Arne Westad's new book, *The Global Cold War*,<sup>5</sup> offers the most persuasive, broadly researched, and intelligently conceived volume written in this genre to date. Westad gives serious attention to the enormous scholarship on the Cold War, and he also pays heed to the criticisms raised by Said and others. *The Global Cold War* succeeds brilliantly in elaborating upon and refining an emerging body of work that interrogates the crucial historical intersections between the Cold War, decolonization, and global social awakenings.

Newly available sources from the former communist bloc — particularly the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and Fidel Castro's Cuba — reveal that these states played a deeply influential role in the process of decolonization across the globe. They did not follow the capitalist logic of market penetration, nor did they follow their own national logics of contiguous territorial expansion. (Cuba, of course, did not have a tradition of foreign expansion.) The Soviet Union, China, and Cuba sought to build friendly regimes in far away territories through extensive commitments of manpower,

materiel, and economic aid. From Vietnam to Angola, the major communist states became deeply embroiled in local politics, and often civil wars. They received little tangible return on their investments, at a time when the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba were all seriously strapped for resources at home. If anything, communist expansion in the third world created new impediments to the successful pursuit of domestic reconstruction programmes.<sup>6</sup>

The motivations and the substance of communist intervention were fundamentally conditioned by the Cold War. Competition with American and West European liberal capitalism pushed the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba to show that they could build superior systems in 'backward' lands. The leaders of communist regimes were committed to a truly revolutionary programme of transforming the globe in their respective images. Often, in fact, differences over which state embodied the 'true' communist model brought the governments into conflict with one another. The Sino-Soviet hostility of the 1960s, for example, was at least in part a struggle over which regime would lead revolutionary forces in the third world.<sup>7</sup>

The existence of a powerful and meddlesome communist alternative to capitalist expansion is an issue almost entirely neglected by the critics of Cold War scholarship cited earlier.<sup>8</sup> Like Said, those inspired by his work depict the United States as the imperialist hegemon of the post-1945 world. These authors define decolonization in opposition to an American-dominated international system. The United States might have been the most powerful international actor of the time, but the existence of major communist competitors meant that the relationship between 'first' and 'third worlds', or the 'Occident' and the 'Orient', was much more complex. Unlike most prior periods, when rival powers operated within an essentially singular system of political economy, the post-1945 period witnessed the emergence of rival powers attached to rival systems of political economy.<sup>9</sup>

Cold War bipolarity was global in scope, and it affected not only relations with foreign societies, but also basic definitions of identity for newly emerging states which had to choose, in some form, which system they would adopt. Capitalist-communist rivalries inspired revolutionary political movements, and they offered almost certain sources of foreign assistance for figures – from Fidel Castro to Ho Chi Minh to Patrice Lumumba – seeking to build new states in former colonial territories. Postcolonial regimes reflected local dynamics that preceded the Cold War, but they were also creatures of the Cold War. Castro, Ho, Lumumba, and virtually all of their counterparts, had internalized the capitalist-communist rivalry of the Cold War in the formation of their movements.<sup>10</sup> As William Duiker has shown in great detail for Ho Chi Minh, one cannot conceive of the North Vietnamese regime founded after the Second World War without the influence of Soviet and Chinese communist ideas. Moscow and Beijing were not only allies for Ho; the revolutionary discourses of those communities were essential parts of his intellectual and political biography.<sup>11</sup>

This observation applies beyond postcolonial elites. Westad's book argues forcefully that American and particularly Soviet influences radicalized citizens across the globe.<sup>12</sup> The promises of freedom and justice that dominated Cold War rhetoric delegitimized

the realities of dependence and repression experienced in many societies. Postcolonial leaders imported revolutionary rhetoric, in part, to meet the rising expectations of postcolonial citizens. In India, for example, the governing Congress Party nationalized industry and pursued a policy of import-substitution not only because these activities matched the socialist logic of the party's leaders, but also because citizens who had lived under British imperialism now believed they had a right to a more responsive national government. This was a proposition strongly reinforced by the rhetoric of both the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The post-1945 social awakening of citizens in India and other parts of the globe (including the 'first world') occurred for many reasons, but Cold War institutions were essential. Local parties receiving financial support from the superpowers, as well as universities and various cultural bodies, politicized citizens who previously had little connection to colonial politics. Public mobilization for fulfilling what Westad identifies as the rival developmental models and geopolitical imperatives of the Cold War made 'ordinary' men and women feel invested in issues of national governance as they had not been before. If the forces of modernization turned 'peasants into Frenchmen' before the First World War, the pressures of Cold War politics turned former colonial subjects into global activists at mid-century.<sup>13</sup>

Inspired in part by the United States, the global social awakenings of the Cold War enabled broad opposition to American policies. This is a point that Westad makes particularly well in his book. Growing US fears of communist expansion during the 1950s, especially in the wake of the Korean War, motivated leaders in Washington to place anti-communism ahead of anti-imperialism in the formulation of policy. Contrary to inherited American anti-imperial prejudices, this meant that the US reluctantly came to associate itself with French and British forces in places like Vietnam and Iran, for fear of watching these 'dominos' fall to communism if left to their own devices.<sup>14</sup> Borrowing from Douglas MacDonald, Westad explains that America pursued a set of reformist interventions in these areas, designed to improve ('develop' in the parlance of the time) local conditions while working within an inherited imperial framework for the short term.<sup>15</sup> This defensive position appeared pragmatic in American eyes, but it created what Westad calls 'self-inflicted isolation' of the United States from progressive forces for reform and revolution in postcolonial nations. It discredited American claims to stand for freedom and democracy, motivating local figures to look to the communist bloc for support. The Cold War made the third world appear more important to the United States, but it also made it much more difficult for third world nationalists to ally with the US government.<sup>16</sup>

The Cuban and Vietnamese popular revolutions against imperial or, in the case of Cuba, semi-imperial rule showed that a similar dynamic took shape in the Soviet bloc. Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh solicited extensive Soviet assistance to sustain their communist governments, but both figures used their support at home and the presence of alternative communist patrons, especially China, to challenge Moscow's leadership. The North Vietnamese were, perhaps, the most skilled at playing this game.

They frequently disregarded Soviet advice on their war against the American-backed regime in the south, and they manipulated the Sino-Soviet rivalry to demand more unconditional aid from both regimes. The social awakenings that bolstered nationalist figures in Cuba and Vietnam benefited from Soviet patronage during the Cold War, but they also challenged Soviet authority.<sup>17</sup>

In Angola this dynamic became most evident. Westad shows that Soviet leaders were very reluctant to intervene in this former Portuguese colony. The presence of as many as 30,000 Cuban forces, fighting alongside indigenous pro-communist rebels, greatly increased the pressure for a similar Soviet intervention. The United States also intervened in Angola, working in part through South African forces in the region. Soviet leaders felt compelled to join this civil war not out of any particular strategic interest in Angola, but because they believed that the tide of opinion in Africa, and other parts of the third world, was 'turning in our direction'. Local communist rebels were sprouting throughout the African continent, they had the support of other communist states, and it appeared incumbent on the Soviet government to offer extensive assistance if it intended to remain the acknowledged leader of the communist world. Global social awakenings of third world citizens motivated a new revolutionary optimism within the Kremlin, and they also elicited new Soviet interventions that, eventually, overtaxed Moscow's available resources.<sup>18</sup> The costly and unsuccessful Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a more extreme version of developments in Angola, with the addition of a perceived Islamic threat. Afghanistan was, perhaps, the most debilitating drain on Soviet power and credibility.<sup>19</sup>

The intersection of the Cold War, decolonization, and global social awakenings had truly devastating consequences, especially in the areas of conflict within the third world. Westad offers the most telling evidence for this conclusion in his discussion of Ethiopia during the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is a story that has received too little attention from international historians. Ethiopian students, many of whom had studied in the United States and Western Europe, radicalized the politics in their nation during the early 1970s. In the context of a severe economic downturn, connected with the global oil crisis, they pushed for democratization and an overthrow of the long-serving pro-American Emperor Haile Selassie. The students eventually radicalized elements of the military, with whom they formed a Coordinating Committee (the *Derg*) in 1974 to revolutionize society after the end of Selassie's rule. The *Derg* pushed for Soviet-style collectivization of agriculture and forced equality throughout society. Confronted by entrenched resistance and virtual civil war, Major Mengistu Haile Mariam – an army officer who had participated as one of the most radical members of the *Derg* – seized control of the regime in early 1977. He immediately initiated a brutal campaign of 'Red Terror' designed to murder all potential enemies of the regime's communist programme.

American support for the absolutist government of Selassie had contributed to the radicalism of the *Derg* and Mengistu. The revolutionaries saw no alternative to violent and rapid social transformation. They also sought extensive support from the Soviet Union out of ideological affinity, a need for foreign assistance, and a desire to build

a bulwark against US opposition. Westad recounts initial Soviet hesitancy about support for the Ethiopian revolutionaries. By the end of 1976, however, Moscow had concluded a military assistance agreement with the new regime in Addis Ababa that underwrote the 'Red Terror' at home and a bloody war against Somali forces in the disputed Ogaden territory. The Kremlin came to see Ethiopia as an important symbol of communist achievement in Africa.

Between March 1977 and May 1978 alone, the Soviet Union provided the new Ethiopian regime with approximately \$1 billion worth of military equipment – the largest Soviet foreign assistance programme, according to Westad, since the 1950s. Cuba also deployed a small contingent of troops to the region. This was a clear case where Cold War rivalries inspired a social awakening among Ethiopians that, in turn, contributed to increased superpower intervention. The explosive Ethiopian cocktail of revolutionary ideology and militarization produced its most devastating outcome in the famine of 1984–85 that killed more than a million people. This was a Cold War famine.<sup>20</sup>

Tracing the intersections of the Cold War, decolonization, and global social awakenings on Westad's model offers three conceptual insights into the international history of the post-1945 period. First, a more sophisticated and empirical approach to historical agency indicates that both intervention and resistance had complicated sources. As in Angola and Ethiopia, politically mobilized local actors often invited intervention from the superpowers. Figures like Mengistu were not naïve about the intentions of the United States and the Soviet Union, but they saw superpower intervention as an opportunity to acquire lucrative foreign support and assurances against less favourable external interference. This was the essential logic of the Cold War as it played out in the third world.

Similarly, resistance to the United States and the Soviet Union did not grow exclusively out of anti-American and anti-Soviet sources. Quite the contrary, many of the most effective critics of the superpowers emerged from Cold War institutions, especially political parties and universities. Postcolonial personalities certainly had their roots in local traditions and experiences, but they also drew on rhetoric, ideas, and resources from dominant international institutions. Decolonization was, at least in part, a product of the Cold War.

Second, the wealth of available primary source evidence from various societies reveals that postcolonial power was remarkably diffuse and multidimensional. One of the great strengths of Westad's book is his unmatched assembling of material, in countless languages, to make this point. The United States and the Soviet Union were the dominant military powers in the third world, but they also faced serious limitations on their leverage. Smaller allies, including France and Cuba, could make commitments and concentrate their resources in ways that created enormous pressure for the superpowers to act in ways they did not initially wish.<sup>21</sup> Smaller allies, especially North Vietnam, could also manipulate inner bloc rivalries, particularly between the Soviet Union and China, to acquire more from each patron than either planned to provide.

In former colonial territories, politically mobilized citizens and local leaders frequently initiated movements for change that forced external actors to reevaluate their aims and strategies. The social awakening of societies was about much more than resistance. It created a new currency of idealism and hope that attracted support not only from the downtrodden, but also from the most empowered international figures who feared their own degeneration into a sclerotic elite. Westad's book is particularly revealing in its attention to how Soviet leaders were enthralled with the revolutionary potential of third world social movements, and their value for long-term communist legitimacy.<sup>22</sup>

Third, and perhaps most important of all, attention to the formulation and implementation of policies across governments undermines the simple binaries in both standard Cold War scholarship and Said's criticisms of Orientalism. Westad's book illustrates how the Cold War played an overwhelming role in the processes of decolonization and social awakening. The Cold War transcended the US-Soviet and capitalist-communist divides in this context. It involved rivalries within blocs as well as between them. It included new commitments to economic development and human improvement, as well as the devastating spread of violence. Most significant, the Cold War connected states and societies together across the globe more than it divided them. Geographically and culturally diverse peoples saw themselves engaged in a singular struggle to define and realize the promise of freedom.

Like traditional definitions of the Cold War, Said's notion of Orientalism presumes a neat divide between the colonizers and the colonized, the West and the East. These distinctions distort the historical evidence. American and Soviet policy-makers were sincerely anti-imperial in their outlook, at least in most cases. They shared many aspirations with formerly colonized societies. Frequently, in fact, observers in Washington and Moscow invested great respect and hope in the actions of third world citizens. American and Soviet leaders were hardly free of racism, condescension, and paternalism. Nonetheless, they also displayed a remarkable inclination to hinge the future of their societies on the future of lands and peoples far away. Citizens of former colonial territories often did the same in reverse – tying their futures to an American- or Soviet-inspired model. Instead of solidifying the Orientalist divide, the post-1945 period witnessed a remarkable blurring of the lines between colonizers and colonized, as well as West and East.

The exciting and innovative international history exemplified by *The Global Cold War* raises new challenges for scholars working in this field. Integrating multiple societies and multiple layers of agency in a single narrative is a difficult, perhaps almost impossible, endeavour. Westad's book succeeds more than any other to date, but it still has rough spots. In particular, although the analysis conceptually integrates the experiences of elites and ordinary citizens across societies, the latter remain largely voiceless in the narrative. This, no doubt, reflects the paucity of available testimonies, especially for rural and illiterate populations. It also grows from the nature of a book that covers so much territory – one simply does not have the time and space to meditate on a lot of individual voices. That said, scholarship that connects the third



world with the first world must strive to describe the social milieu of both contexts more effectively. This is crucial for tracing the deep interpenetration of societies that accompanied the Cold War, decolonization, and global social awakenings.

Political economy also deserves more attention. Westad, like many other writers, throws out terms like capitalism and communism without too much meditation on what these concepts meant for the organization and allocation of resources. This is, quite obviously, a vital point for examining the formulation of foreign policy. Did the political economies of the superpowers encourage expansion in the third world for resource and market access? Did the political economies of particular states and regions create a proclivity for certain forms of decolonization? Many other scholars have, in fact, given primacy to resource access, market penetration, and regional economic determinants in their accounts of relations between the first world and the third world.<sup>23</sup> These arguments about political economy are not entirely persuasive, but they surely deserve attention, and even synthesis with other explanations.

Last, but not least, studies of the Cold War, decolonization, and global social awakenings must give attention to both ideas and interests. Westad does this in his book. Interests are always easier to trace in the documents and circumstances of a period. Ideas, however, pose more difficulty. How does one separate posturing and rationalization, even in private, from sincere motivation? How does one prove that American policy-makers were serious about anti-imperialism, even though their actions did not always match this proposition? Westad's book begins with chapters on American and Soviet ideas, respectively. The influence of these ideas is, however, sometimes lost in the avalanche of complex material provided in subsequent chapters. The same is true for third world revolutionaries who get an early chapter on their ideas, which are then lost somewhat in the larger narrative.

Historians have long struggled to connect ideas and actions. This is particularly problematic when contending with so many diverse actors in distant societies. Future studies might address this concern by paying closer attention to the language of various actors, in addition to the implementation of policy. (Westad does this to some extent, but he is a little inconsistent, especially in the second half of his book.) What are the key phrases that transfer from one social setting to another? What are the recurring silences among different actors? Questions like these will help to highlight guiding assumptions among and across diverse groups. They will protect historians against the temptation to define ideas in static terms. Following the language of actors, rather than totemic texts and symbols alone, shows how ideas travel and transmute across space and time. Redefinitions of capitalism and communism by postcolonial figures such as Ho Chi Minh and Jawaharlal Nehru are prime examples of this phenomenon. When grounded in a detailed examination of policy, discursive analysis offers a promising road for excavating the influence of ideas in international history.

Edward Said will continue to cast a long shadow over studies of imperialism, especially those focused on the interplay of ideas and interests. His work reminds readers that assumptions about culture, race, and religion are integral to relations among societies. This insight should serve as a point of departure, not a point of

closure for analysis. Exploiting the wealth of new sources available from diverse societies, scholars are beginning to recognize that the Cold War, decolonization, and global social awakenings had many complex and subtle intersections that defy easy categorization. Most important, historians are now writing narratives that interrogate the interconnection between these three crucial twentieth century trajectories. Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War* is a landmark endeavour in this direction. It is a model international history in its empirical base and its conceptualization. It is also proof that scholarly research on the Cold War has only just begun.

### Acknowledgements

My analysis in this article has benefited greatly from Odd Arne Westad's inspiring new book, as well as extensive discussions with my colleague, Steve Stern, and the excellent graduate students enrolled in the seminar we co-taught at the University of Wisconsin during the Spring 2005 semester: "The Cold War as World Histories."

### Notes

- [1] See Said, *Orientalism*; idem, *Culture and Imperialism*. For two very thoughtful assessments of Said, and his relevance for the study of international history in particular, see Rotter, "Saidism without Said"; Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 11–15, 269–76. Said's arguments were not original, and many prior scholars anticipated his criticism of Cold War scholarship. Nonetheless, Said's work crystallized a point of view, inspired many young scholars (especially in the emerging field of postcolonial studies), and transformed basic assumptions about how one should write international history.
- [2] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxiii.
- [3] For some of the best representative works in this genre see: Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*; Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*; Little, *American Orientalism*; Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC*; McCormick, *America's Half Century*.
- [4] For some of the best representative works in this genre see: Connelly, "Taking Off the Cold War Lens"; idem, *A Diplomatic Revolution*; Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*; Joseph et al., *Close Encounters of Empire*; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Chatterjee, *A Princely Impostor?*
- [5] I will not provide page numbers in my references to the book because I have only had access to a copy of the manuscript in typescript. The pagination of the published book will not match the typescript.
- [6] In addition to Westad's *Global Cold War*, see Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*; Qiang, *China and the Vietnam Wars*; Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*; Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*; idem, *Confronting Vietnam*.
- [7] On the Sino-Soviet split, see Westad, *Brothers in Arms*.
- [8] Some of the few works that give serious attention to Soviet policy in the 'third world' include: McMahon, *The Limits of Empire*; idem, *The Cold War on the Periphery*; Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*; Lerner, *The Pueblo Incident*; Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*.
- [9] Westad, *The Global Cold War* is particularly strong on this point, see chapters 1–2.
- [10] Ibid., chapters 3–4.
- [11] Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*. See also Westad, *The Global Cold War*, chapter 3.
- [12] See chapters 3 and 4, and the conclusion.

- [13] See Eugen Weber's classic book on nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Peasants into Frenchmen*. I made a similar argument about global social awakenings in my book, *Power and Protest*. See also Suri, "The Cultural Contradictions of Cold War Education." Westad's book adds important evidence for this argument from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa in particular. I am particularly grateful to Steve Stern for helping me to clarify this argument and understand its complex implications.
- [14] On this point, see Gaddis, *We Now Know*, 155–8.
- [15] MacDonald, *Adventures in Chaos*. See also Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms*; Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*.
- [16] Westad, *The Global Cold War*, chapter 4.
- [17] *Ibid.*, chapter 5.
- [18] *Ibid.*, chapters 6 and 10.
- [19] *Ibid.*, chapters 8 and 10.
- [20] *Ibid.*, chapter 7.
- [21] For two insightful studies of this dynamic in the cases of France and Cuba respectively, see Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*; Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble."
- [22] On this point, see also Gaddis, *We Now Know*, 187–8.
- [23] For representative samples of this enormous literature see: Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*; Cumings, *Parallax Visions*; Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*.

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