

## Better Active than Radioactive! Anti-Nuclear Protest in 1970s France and West Germany

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**Author:** Andrew S. Tompkins

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**Reviewer:** Sinead McEneaney

Andrew Tompkins' book, *Better Active than Radioactive!*, sets out to examine anti-nuclear protest in the 1970s in a comparative framework. His focus on anti-nuclear activists in France and West Germany leads him to argue that transnational cooperation and interconnection in the anti-nuclear movement was much more marked than we traditionally assume. He suggests that scholarship in this area has largely viewed opposition to civil nuclear energy through the lens of national jurisdictions, and that in doing so, we have constructed a distorted picture of anti-nuclear activism that incorrectly assumes national character, and ignores the transnational dimension of this kind of protest. Through his research, Tompkins invites us to explore a movement that transcended borders – not always with positive consequences – that were already becoming more porous through the new economic arrangements within Europe, and the reality that nuclear disaster would not respect state borders. This kind of comparative study is all too rare: through his rigorously researched book, Tompkins adds considerably to our knowledge of anti-nuclear networks, and prompts us to think more carefully about the fluidity of activist networks more generally.

The subject of anti-nuclear protest has recently received quite a lot of attention, perhaps especially since the Fukushima disaster of 2011. Tompkins' research sits alongside other recent books on similar kinds of themes, most recently Stephen Milder's *Greening Democracy: the Anti-Nuclear Movement and Political Environmentalism in West Germany and Beyond* and Eckart Conze, Martin Klimke and Jeremy Varon (eds) *Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear, and the Cold War of the 1980s*.<sup>(1)</sup> One can see from the contributions to the latter volume that scholars are starting to take the possibilities of transnational research more seriously: although the majority of the chapters remain focused on one jurisdiction (albeit sometimes in the context of a wider political geography), there are clear examples of engagement with the kind of transnational approach that Tompkins seeks to promote.

What makes Tompkins' study most compelling is that he drills down into the motivations of activists: this really is a history from below. In fact, supranational organizations like Greenpeace are barely mentioned. His portrayal of the transnational aspects of the anti-nuclear movement is shaped by the activities of the people telling the story: about halfway through the book, his discussion of 'border crossers' emphasizes that for most activists, their transnationalism was a product of the way they lived their lives, either physically as

people living on or near a political border, or psychologically, as people whose identities were bound up with their own marginalism (p. 100). So, while Tompkins follows previous scholars (most notably Dieter Rucht and Wolfgang Rüdig) in engaging in quite a detailed theoretical and technical analysis of the anatomy of social and political protest movements, he does not lose sight of the element that sets his book apart from many others: the voices of the activists that add colour and dimension to the academic narrative.

The book follows a structure that most probably reflects its original form as a doctoral dissertation. The first chapter situates anti-nuclear protest in France and West Germany as a grassroots, decentralized movement (or set of organizations loosely connected through basic ideological concerns). Tompkins' key question here is how to explain the explosion of activism around environmental matters in France and West Germany, especially in relation to civic nuclear power. The received wisdom is that anti-nuclear activism was vibrant in West Germany, where the Green movement would become an important political force by the early 1990s, but less so in France where nuclear power became an integral part of that state's energy policy. Tompkins refutes this claim: his starting point is a notorious incident in 1977 at the French town of Creys-Malville, where hundreds of West Germans joined tens of thousands of French protesters, only to be scapegoated by the media as the organizers of what turned out to be a violent demonstration. Tompkins uses the rest of the chapter to outline the different approaches of anti-nuclear dissenters, and to try to establish some baseline claims about why the movements in France and West Germany were so similar, despite key differences in ideology, methodology and political backgrounds. Instead of seeing anti-nuclear protest within a narrow, issue-led focus, he instead suggests that a clearer understanding of this transnational phenomenon can help us appreciate the wider context of grass-roots anti-establishment and extra-parliamentary protest in the West. For Tompkins, the diversity of the movement, and its lack of adherence to organizational structures made it agile, unpredictable, and ultimately durable beyond expectations.

By the second chapter, the real strength of the book begins to take shape. Tompkins has interviewed almost 70 activists for this book. Their testimony gives colour to what is otherwise a dense and detailed discussion, and chapters two through five articulate the views and experiences of a wide range of movement participants. Importantly, their accounts explode the notion that anti-nuclear protest was a 'single issue' movement. Tompkins traces its evolution from concerns about industrialization to worries about radioactivity, through to opposition to state centralization, protection of local community rights, and old resentments about job security. Politicized 'outsiders' were also significant: Tompkins broadly divides these into the anti-nuclear protesters of the 1950s, who translated their opposition to the building of military nuclear power, and the 'gauchistes' whose politics were rooted in 1968 and its aftermath. He describes the various difficulties involved in making what he calls 'this melting pot of activism' work.

Chapter three is devoted to exploring how this melting pot operated at various levels: local, regional, urban/rural, national and transnational. Not entirely abandoning the concept that all politics are local, Tompkins explores how transnational anti-nuclear activist networks had wide-ranging impact, even outside of the nuclear issue itself. He claims that activists reshaped concepts of solidarity in Europe; national boundaries were purely notional in the face of a nuclear threat which would not stop at a state border. It is not a coincidence that the four major regional hubs that Tompkins isolates are important border areas: Brittany (across the channel from the UK), Rhone-Alpes (with a Swiss border), Alsace/Baden (one of the most active areas for German-French transnational activism), and Northern Germany (with its East German border). He rightly reminds us that transnational connections were important outside of these border regions, but it is worth noting that there was a critical mass around Alsace that brought together French and German concerns. The figure of Jean-Jacques Rettig – an Alsatian schoolteacher who founded France's first anti-nuclear group in 1970 – looms large throughout this book. Opposition to the French plant at Fessenheim resulted in numerous large-scale protests through the 1970s (and the establishment of a trilingual radio station); opposition to the Wyhl plant across the border in West Germany brought thousands of protesters and occupation of the site in 1975. About 400 kilometers south, in Creys-Malville, the violent demonstrations in July 1977 mentioned above ended with police engagement, injuries, and the death of one man. Linguistic connections between Alsace, the Rhone-Alpes, and Baden Wurtemberg certainly helped the development of transnational connections.

The real texture of the oral testimony comes through in chapter four, which sets out to examine the importance of rural protest in the character of the movement. We begin to see the extent to which activists themselves perceived their place within national and international political and social contexts, and alongside larger ideological shifts, from Maoism to feminism. Important too was the exoticism of the rural; urban protesters may have been out of place in the countryside, but they elevated the concept of the rural in order to speak across jurisdictions. Farmers in Germany protesting against the installation of a nuclear facility in Brokdorf could see common cause with French farmers opposing the building of the Superphénix at Creys-Malville.

The richness of participant voice continues in chapter five, which treads a fairly well-worn path through discussions of violent or non-violent tactics. In his recent book, Stephen Milder argues that the environmental movement's real impact on democracy – what he calls the 'greening of democracy' – came when the anti-nuclear movement simultaneously embraced the liberal democratic order, while continuing to engage in extra-parliamentary agitation, both violent and non-violent. Tompkins steers clear of this kind of claim, but he does sketch out a series of approaches that employed old tactics (boycotts, hunger strikes) with newer non-violent strategies directly imported from the US Civil Rights movement and the legacy of 1968 occupations, as well as a willingness to embrace violence as both a threat and a sort of terrorism along the lines of the Baader-Meinhof group. Specific examples of protest are examined with a view to whether they were predominantly violent or non-violent, and activists themselves prove to have been much more interested in pragmatic outcomes rather than debates over tactics. Tompkins' conclusions here are unsatisfactory: violent and non-violent tactics remained in tension with each other, and there was no resolution to the 'violence debate'. It would have been useful, I think, if Tompkins had explored a bit more how this combination of approaches – what we might call participatory democracy, alongside elements of sabotage and terrorism – disrupted domestic or international politics. I acknowledge that this is not the point of the book, and may stray from the thematic treatment of areas of transnational commonality, but it does leave a discursive gap for the reader who has been primed thus far to expect a larger claim around the significance of violence or non-violence as a tactic of political or social change. The final chapter deals briefly with the establishment of green parties in France and West Germany, but there is no real resolution around the challenge to the political order itself that the anti-nuclear campaigns' tactics presented.

The book concludes by tracing the personal trajectories of activists, alongside the larger question of movement 'success.' This is quite a tricky thing to quantify: governmental policy on nuclear installations is not easily connected to the protests of activists. But as one participant said in his interview with Tompkins: 'We didn't win – but we did win, actually' (p. 232). This book is also successful, even when it doesn't entirely win. It is a triumph of archival research. It richly conveys the activist voice and experience, and in doing so provides a valuable insight into the motivations and connections between people and groups. It positions the anti-nuclear movement well within social movement theory. For Tompkins, anti-nuclear protest becomes a prism through which one can see variations in modernity, democracy, state-building, capitalism and the developments of social movements away from the model of 1960s (or more specifically in Europe, the model of 1968). His excavation of the margins is compelling: marginal activists, marginal political interests, the margins of states (those that lived in borderlands between France and Germany), those in the rural margins. The thematic structure of the book helps to arrange the material in ways that throw the transnational dimensions into sharp focus. However, it also permits repetition: we are introduced, and then re-introduced to some of the same details about activists, events and so on as the book progresses. It is dense and technical in parts. This is perhaps an unavoidable consequence of this kind of study, where the comparative framework is the driving force behind the narrative arc. But it also disrupts the story, as the reader flicks back and forth to try to put some of the details together across the boundaries of the chapters. These are details, however, and do not take away from the excellent depth and rigour of the study. Tompkins does exactly as he sets out to do: he places the focus squarely on the transnational connections between activists and activist groups, and in doing so he has made a valuable contribution not only to scholarship on the anti-nuclear movement, but also as an example of how comparative history should be undertaken.

## Notes

1. Stephen Milder, *Greening Democracy: the Anti-Nuclear Movement and Political Environmentalism in West Germany and Beyond* (Cambridge, 2017); *Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear, and the Cold War of the 1980s*, ed. Eckart Conze, Martin Klimke and Jeremy Varon (Cambridge, 2017). [Back to \(1\)](#)
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