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Better Active than Radioactive! Anti-Nuclear Protest in 1970s France and West Germany by Andrew S. Tompkins (review)

Stephen Milder

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the "stubborn illegibility" that *Guerilla Aesthetics* unpacks might inspire future work concerned with such undead and unsettling historical trajectories, too.

Vojin Saša Vukadinović, *Center for History of Knowledge, University of Zurich & ETH Zurich*

Better Active than Radioactive! Anti-Nuclear Protest in 1970s France and West Germany. By Andrew S. Tompkins. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xv + 265. Cloth $100.00. ISBN 978-0198779056.

Until quite recently, the social movements of the 1970s had been studied almost exclusively by social scientists who zealously classified those movements in terms of the "single issue" each one addressed, and carefully compared distinct national cases. The antinuclear movement, for example, was termed a "new social movement" to emphasize its divergence from the labor movement's organizational forms and materialist motivations. As a result, the social movements of the 1970s came to be seen as disconnected from one another and narrowly focused on "quality of life" issues. In his book *Better Active than Radioactive!* Andrew Tompkins marshals evidence gathered in some seventy oral history interviews and at three dozen archives to challenge social scientists' neat classifications. He depicts 1970s activism as fluid and multivalent, but also transformative—especially for the activists themselves.

Better Active than Radioactive! tells the history of the movement against nuclear energy in France and West Germany. The introductory chapter considers the particularities of protest during the 1970s, while the sixth and final chapter addresses the antinuclear movement's legacies. In between, four thematically focused chapters draw on activists' own accounts to reconsider commonly used categories and break down the binaries between protests in France and West Germany, between urban and rural activists, between violence and nonviolence, and between local protesters and outsiders.

The chapter on transnational protest is the centerpiece of the book. By emphasizing connections between antinuclear protest in a pair of countries that use nuclear energy very differently—as of 2015, France produced 76.9 percent of its energy at nuclear power stations, while the German government had ordered its nine remaining reactors to close—Tompkins challenges the idea that these divergent trajectories reflect distinct, national antinuclear movements. But he also challenges assumptions about the ease of transnational transfer. Cooperation across borders, he shows, was frequently based on misunderstandings. In the worst cases these misunderstandings had devastating effects, as when a protester from Bremen picked up what he assumed was a tear-gas grenade lobbed by French police and lost his hand after it exploded. At other times, however, misunderstanding could be a means of introducing new

ideas, as when activist groups purposefully mistranslated texts in order to provide additional information.

Communication between urban and rural protesters was also complicated, opening new possibilities for protest even as it caused activists to rethink their presumptions about one another. Rural people were often considered provincial and small-minded, but were celebrated by some urban activists who saw country dwellers as "the authentic salt of the earth, who instinctively knew how to rebel" (126). That conception was liberating for urbanites frustrated with the political scene in their home cities. But urban activists still struggled to protest effectively in the rural spaces where nuclear reactors were built. In July 1977, when tens of thousands protested against the fast breeder reactor under construction in the hamlet of Malville, for example, a torrential rainfall caused urban activists to get lost in muddy cornfields and sodden country lanes. Rather than delaying the reactor's construction, the protest went down in infamy after "one man was killed and three others seriously wounded" (1).

Tompkins shows that, in spite of the debacle at Malville, activists did not always see violence and nonviolence as incompatible. Rather, he suggests that, by the end of the 1970s, protesters came to see the "complementarity" of violent and nonviolent tactics as the key to a "victorious" movement (195). They distinguished between effective and ineffective actions, rather than moral and immoral ones: "whether non-violent or not, [future protest] must be successful" (193), one activist explained. These findings offer a compelling alternative to established narratives, which propose that an all-encompassing debate on violence consumed—and nearly destroyed—the 1970s Left.

By presenting local protesters as a single group and sorting outsiders into three types—radical leftists, nonviolent activists, and countercultural environmentalists—Tompkins implicitly reinforces one presumption he sets out to challenge, namely that "farmers with 'not-in-my-backyard' attitudes" and "professional protesters seeking to re-enact May 1968" (29) were behind antinuclear activism. His decision to omit conservative antinuclear protesters also reinforces the presumption that only provincial locals and Leftist outsiders participated in antinuclear protest. Yet his own conversations with locals who were plugged into far-flung environmentalist networks or outsiders who traded ideologies and moved between activist organizations suggest that these categories were fluid and show that the protesters came from a wide range of backgrounds.

The concluding chapter on legacies rethinks a different sort of dichotomy, that between success and failure. Here Tompkins presents a strong case that counting the number of nuclear reactors that the movement stopped is not the best means of measuring its outcome. Instead, he emphasizes the ways individuals were affected, telling touching tales of activists who found life partners or launched their careers amidst antinuclear protests, but also stories of lives limited by activism (by West Germany's *Berufsverbot*, for example). The antinuclear movement, he fittingly concludes, was

not just about nuclear energy; it transformed many of its protagonists' lives. He also suggests that the movement "pulled politics and society closer to [its protagonists'] ideals" (230), but this seems to be a secondary claim since his focus throughout the book is on the activists themselves.

The rich stories Tompkins tells of individual activists underpin a compelling challenge to the categories deployed by previous scholars of 1970s activism. He sums this challenge up by describing the period as one of "opening" for antinuclear activists (228)—a characterization at odds with social scientists' overcategorization but also with contemporary historians' master narrative of social fragmentation. His vivid and nuanced account of the antinuclear struggle in France and West Germany make *Better Active than Radioactive!* essential reading for anyone interested in 1970s activism in Western Europe.

Stephen Milder, *University of Groningen*

Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany. By Eli Rubin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 194. Cloth $85.00. ISBN 978-0198732266.

Eli Rubin's succinct study of Marzahn, a Berlin neighborhood that became the largest prefabricated settlement in East Germany, invites readers to experience the everyday history of a planned community from perspectives alternating among its residents, its buildings, and the overarching histories in which they may be located. Evaluating the planned settlement both as a lived environment specific to the GDR and as a space constructed on the grounds of previous settlements with materials deriving in part from western nations, Rubin marks ruptures and continuities between an understudied part of the GDR and German history. The author's ambitious combination of theoretical frameworks and his clever exploration of GDR material culture after the end of the official state makes for an interesting and informative read that leaves room for further elaboration.

In five main chapters Rubin details Marzahn's construction from its blueprints up, situating the neighborhood first among colonizing movements that it reproduces and unearths, and then distinguishing its architects' modernist plans from previous plans for urban development. Marzahn was one of several prefabricated developments initiated by Erich Honecker's 1973 Housing Project, which sought to alleviate the housing shortage resulting from buildings destroyed during World War II and inadequately maintained thereafter. Although the housing units were mass-produced—meaning quality was often sacrificed for quantity—Rubin's archival research in the Deutsche Bauakademie and related offices reminds readers of the urban planners' utopian intentions. The new "Apartment Construction System 70" (34) contained not only