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Andrew Tompkins, *Better Active Than Radioactive!: Anti-Nuclear Protests in 1970s France and West Germany*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. xvi + 265 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$100.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9-780191826207; ebook 0-19-877905-6.

Review by Roxanne Panchasi, Simon Fraser University.

As I was completing this review, I came across an intriguing story featured on the website of a French regional daily.<sup>[1]</sup> On 4 February 2018, an annual *concert du nouvel an* organized by anti-nuclear protesters in the area surrounding the Fessenheim power plant in Alsace had to be moved to the German side of the border. This, after the Prefect of the Haut-Rhin department banned protesters from gathering at their usual location on French soil. Apparently, the state authorities feared a confrontation between these activists and Fessenheim employees protesting an intended closure of the site that the French government announced in 2017.

I was struck by the resonance of these recent events with the themes and issues Andrew Tompkins explores in *Better Active than Radioactive!*: the transnational mobilization of anti-nuclear activists in a border region, shared ground and divergences between the French and German political, social, cultural, and legal contexts, concern over potential financial, health, and environmental consequences of the existence (or disappearance) of sites such as Fessenheim, tensions between interests local and national, and between the perspectives and actions of citizens and their respective states. As France and Germany consider in different ways the future of nuclear power in both countries, the nature and forms of change and protest within and beyond their borders remains uncertain. Tompkins' in-depth and textured analysis of anti-nuclear activism in these two Western European nations during the 1970s illuminates the complex history behind debates and struggles that persist today.

Organized thematically, the book's six chapters and conclusion offer readers a bottom-up, transnational history of anti-nuclear protest over the course of a decade. At the heart of the project are key questions that Tompkins returns to over and over in various ways: What prompted so many French and German citizens to mobilize in opposition to nuclear power during the 1970s? What drew these individuals to protest across national borders, and to forms of collaboration that often transcended their significant political and cultural differences? How, and in the face of what challenges, did these activists develop a grassroots, decentralized network of protest that transformed lives and imaginations as it sought to effect change both locally and globally?

Tompkins' responses to these questions are developed using an impressive array of historical sources that include government and diplomatic documents, print and other media, the papers of anti-nuclear groups and associations in France and Germany, and interviews the author conducted with almost 70 activists who participated in the historical events treated in the book. Ultimately, it is Tompkins' aim to move away from existing scholarly emphases on national forces, differences, and trajectories and towards a history of the complex motivations, ideals, and actions of the individuals and local groups that moved back and forth across traditional political boundaries. A transnational social history that

highlights *synchronization* rather than the *transfer* of ideas and activism (p. 8), *Better Active than Radioactive!* resists narratives of success or failure, opting instead for a closer look at extra-parliamentary politics during a decade that Tompkins situates within the broader postwar history of social movements and protest, in Europe and beyond.

Considering the roots of 1970s anti-nuclear activism and the motivations of protesters themselves, Tompkins provides an overview and analysis of the “myriad constituencies” that “ultimately coalesced into a broad critique of ‘nuclear society’” (p. 25) in this period. While some protestors and modes of activism certainly found their footing/roots in the events of 1968 in France, Germany, and elsewhere, Tompkins is careful to point out that the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s was not simply a continuation of past politics. Anti-nuclear activism was “an encompassing” rather than a “single-issue” movement and protesters from varied backgrounds often came together for different reasons (p. 30). For many local activists, material concerns formed the basis of their opposition to proposed nuclear sites. Fear and risk could be powerful motivators, but so too could anxiety about the ways new technologies might threaten traditional livelihoods. Anti-nuclear activity was, for others, tied to forms of peace activism, anti-capitalism, and/or environmentalism. Some participants in the movement held beliefs and aims that placed them on the left or far-left of the political spectrum. Others did not imagine their anti-nuclear work as part of a continuum of struggle on the road to any broader societal transformation or radical upheaval. While the anti-nuclear fit within the wider ideologies and aims of certain participants, many local/regional residents understood their political engagements in terms of a focus on the everyday undergirded by a deep sense of place.

The activist communities that came together around particular nuclear sites included those from both rural and urban contexts. Tompkins emphasizes the distinct experiences, perspectives, and approaches of “locals” and “outsiders” who worked together during individual events and campaigns, but often found their motivations, aims, and strategies at odds with one another. “Outsiders,” often city dwellers, regularly outnumbered “locals” during protests in different contexts and, according to Tompkins, this helps to explain why much of the existing scholarship emphasizes their role in the movement (p. 48). At the same time, Tompkins shows that “anti-nuclear protesters imagined, interacted with, and used the rural environment during the 1970s” (p. 114). Indeed, movement propaganda relied heavily on images of local, and specifically rural, “authenticity” in its presentation of pristine landscapes and populations facing exploitation by state and corporate forces (p.118).

Tompkins notes the different back-stories of wartime trauma and political traditions that West German and French citizens carried into their activism. Throughout the book, Tompkins challenges a number of tropes and stereotypes while taking seriously the history that reinforced the building up of perceptions over decades. Whether or not German activists were more inherently “organized” or French activists more “democratic” in expressing their rejection of state centralization by taking to the streets, these sorts of self vs. other characterizations of national political and cultural style played a role in how activists read and interacted with one another in this “melting pot” of different participants, approaches, and aims (p. 110). While his analysis does much to show that protest cultures thrived in different ways in and between France and Germany throughout the 1970s, Tompkins also acknowledges the eventual rejection of nuclear power in the German context relative to the French state’s insistence on the technology as the principal source of energy in France up to the present. The point is that none of this was “inevitable” (p. 236).

While the book’s chapters do not follow a straightforward narrative chronology and Tompkins moves to and from the discussion of different sites in West Germany and France, his focus is on key border areas. Alsace, home of Jean-Jacques Rettig, a schoolteacher Tompkins identifies as a founder of the movement in France, plays a paramount role in the study (pp. 40-41). If certain areas and figures stand out in Tompkins’ narrative, so too do crises at sites such as Fessenheim, where multiple protests took place throughout the decade (and continue, as noted above). Tompkins also highlights major protests at the West German Wyhl facility in 1975, and the eruption of violence at the Creys-Malville site in the

south of France in 1977. Weaving the first-hand accounts of his interviewees throughout his discussion of these spaces and moments, Tompkins illustrates the complexities of activist collaboration and conflict as some of the movement's critical events unfolded.

French and German, local and outsider, rural and urban, politically divergent in some ways and in solidarity in others, members of the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s returned again and again to a fundamental difference of strategy with profound moral implications: the use of violence. Exploring the perspectives of activists themselves, Tompkins surveys the range of attitudes from those who insisted on the rejection of violence at all costs, to those who believed in the commitment of force to conviction and the effectiveness of physical threats to people and property. Tompkins traces the movement's shifts to and from tactics that included mass protest, boycotts, hunger strikes, site occupations, and sabotage, refusing any easy storytelling of an escalation of violence over the course of the decade. In Tompkins' words, "[t]he history of protest in the period did not lead unambiguously towards either violence or non-violence" (p. 194).

All of this had important consequences at the time, and in the long run, for personal and political lives, and for the local and global contexts Tompkins engages. In his conclusion, Tompkins notes the significance of the formation of "Green" parties in France and West Germany, but is wary of too-easy assessments of the success or failure of the movement based on these sorts of outcomes. Just as the movement that flourished in the 1970s was more than a mere product of the upheavals of 1968, so too were its legacies far more complex than an overemphasis on institutionalized politics or changes to government policies would suggest. There are moments in these chapters when this complexity--and Tompkins' detailing (with some repetition) of characters, sites, events, and political vectors--can overwhelm the reader. At the same time, it is the very refusal of neat spatial or chronological organization that brings home the book's central claim regarding the "entangled history" (p. 9) of an "anti-nuclear movement [that] was at once deeply local and broadly global in scope" (p. 110). A significant contribution to the history of nuclear power during this pivotal decade, *Better Active than Radioactive!* is also a compelling model for how to think and do the transnational in a way that historicizes and complicates the approach itself. While readers in pursuit of the protest and political histories of France and Germany may be the most obvious audience for the book, its close examination of political solidarities, discords, and effects will prove illuminating to anyone interested in the histories of activism and social movements more broadly.

## NOTES

[1] "La manifestation devant la central a été interdite," *L'Alsace*, 4 February 2018. <http://www.lalsace.fr/haut-rhin/2018/02/04/la-manifestation-devant-la-centrale-a-ete-interdite> (accessed 5 February 2018). On the Fessenheim workers' strike, see Catherine Munsch, "Manifestation surprise des salariés de Fessenheim," *France Info*, 19 January 2018. <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/grand-est/fessenheim-manifestation-surprise-salaries-fessenheim-1404677.html> (accessed 5 February 2018).

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