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IDEAS, ACTORS AND POLITICAL PRACTICES

Anti-Nuclear Activist Circulations in 1970s Europe

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ABSTRACT

Mobilizations that seemed to have strong local roots around power-plant construction sites was one of the defining feature of the European anti-nuclear movement in the 1970s. Nevertheless, right from the first major gathering – which took place on French soil, in a town called Fessenheim, in Alsace, less than a mile from the German border – activists' aspirations to mobilize on a European scale were perceptible. Over the course of the decade, those aspirations matured, but they ran into numerous pitfalls that reined in their scope. Still, the attention that can be paid to transnational circulations and their connections with other causes does allow us to reconsider the dynamic of the European anti-nuclear movement, based in particular on recent developments in the field of historiography devoted to the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Illustration 1 : The "Nuclear Power? No Thanks" logo, created in 1975 by a Danish activist, was soon translated into many other languages and spread quickly around Europe and then the world. Source: Wikimedia Common.

On April 12, 1971, some 1,000 participants in the demonstration against the proposed construction of the Fessenheim nuclear power plant launched a wave of protest against the civilian use of atomic power.

Meticulously prepared by activists from Alsace, that first large-scale action soon led to more, especially along the Rhine Valley, where other nuclear-power-plant projects galvanized mobilization in both Germany and Switzerland. Construction sites at Wyhl (Germany) and Kaiseraugst (Switzerland) in particular, were destined to become iconic in the history of the anti-nuclear movements in their respective countries. Although France and Germany seem to have been the movement's centers of gravity, it would go on to develop essentially without exception – although with varying levels of intensity – not only in all of the countries engaged in harnessing nuclear power, but even in many of their neighbors, where the local populations were concerned about their proximity to the plants. It was in Denmark for example – which had no plans to build a nuclear power plant at the time – that the activist Anne Lund drew the smiling sun logo (ill. 1) as part of the opposition to a Swedish power plant in Bärseback. The logo would go on to be reproduced in millions of copies and to become the symbol of the anti-nuclear movement in Europe and around the world.

From Local to Transnational

The local dimension of 1970s anti-nuclear struggles is obvious. They seemed always to be rooted around proposed construction sites, and their messages were aimed at local and national authorities.

But that initial analysis also seems to be at least somewhat misleading. Right from the first major demonstration, in Fessenheim in the spring of 1971, all of the indicators of imminent trans-nationalization could be seen. First, the circulation of information: a brochure sounding the alarm that was distributed to all elected officials inaugurated a type of mobilization based on international scientific monitoring: data from American scientists, who were in the lead on the issue, appeared alongside information from their European counterparts. A second indicator can be seen in actual activists' participation: in addition to people from Alsace and representatives from many French regions, a handful of foreigners - mostly Germans, as well as some English and Americans – also participated in the demonstration. A few months later, that international contribution led to what would turn out to be a third indicator: national mobilizations joining forces. In December 1971, 47 organizations from West Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Austria, the Netherlands and Sweden attended a meeting in Strasbourg where they decided to found the first federation of European anti-nuclear committees. The federation would be administered from Vienna, Bremen and Basel. Its "birth announcement," written in the form of a warning, was aimed at new targets: institutions at the European level and even beyond. The first action confided to Swedish and German members, for instance, was scheduled for the UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in June 1972. Other initiatives followed, buoyed up either by the federalist movement or by counter-expertise. Several European and American anti-nuclear organizations were key elements at the Salzburg counter-conference in the spring of 1977. Bringing experts and activists together, it was designed as an anti-nuclear response to the AIEA conference about to be held in the same city.

The Anti-Nuclear Community Hampered by Borders

One limit to that type of mobilization was the relatively low proportion of activists who could take part, because participation required free time, the ability to travel and language skills that not everyone possessed. For

grassroots activists, the distance and the conditions in which information circulated in the 1970s dampened the enthusiasm that could be seen on the isolated occasions at which they gathered. But those initiatives acted as echo chambers and contributed to creating a sense of community, which can be seen in the specialized press that accompanied the movement. The effect was highly mobilizing at a grassroots level, as is shown, among other examples, by the huge gathering to protest Superphénix at Creys-Malville, France, near the border with Switzerland, on July 31 1977. A significant number of German, Swiss and Italian activists (approximately 3,000 out of an estimated total of 60,000) participated. But the day also revealed the limits of cooperation on the anti-nuclear side, which launched the demonstration without having unanimously adopted a strategy. What is more, the French government was extremely hostile to the idea of a united front. Embodied by the prefect of the Isère administrative district, France managed to discredit that front by explicitly comparing the presence of German activists to that of Nazi occupiers.

Multiple Connections

One distinctive feature of the anti-nuclear movement is that it worked alongside or saw itself as a continuation of other transnational causes that supplied some of their reasoning and ideas for action. That was obviously true for the protest movements against the development of nuclear weapons, which were very active in the 1950s and 1960s in England and West Germany. Most crucially, those movements brought the issue of radioactivity's intrinsic dangers to the attention of the media. Uncontrolled fallout during testing in the Pacific drew the attention of public opinion to the mutagenic effects of ionizing rays, a question that crystalized concerns at the time.

Above and beyond those fears related to the technology's effects on health, the late 1960s and early 1970s brought energy and vitality to the movement that cannot be ignored if one wishes to understand its dynamics. The anti-authoritarian dimension is patent. It is, for example, striking to observe the extent to which phenomena like conscientious objection and opposing nuclear power overlapped in the political paths of activists at the European level. A firm belief in the need to democratize the ability to get one's message heard, which was seen as being controlled by those who upheld the "technocracy," was also largely shared. Alternative news media, pirate radio stations, new labor union and libertarian experiences bloomed everywhere. The democratic challenge that managing civil nuclear infrastructure represented was also the subject of best-selling critical investigations in both France (P. Simmonot, *Les Nucléocrates*, 1978) and Germany (R. Jungk, *The Nuclear State*, 1977). And finally, the counter-cultural wave also ran through the movement continent wide, through musical phenomena like the folk-music revival whose anti-establishmentarianism could be seen in its rejection of the usual show-business circuits. Through a subtle play of scale, that revival interlocked particularly well with the anti-nuclear movement. They both had a regionalist dimension, which was reflected by traditional folk-music groups like *Le Grand Rouge,* in France's Massif Central, and folk singers like Walter Mossmann in the German-speaking zone, when they performed at the summer fêtes that were so typical of the anti-nuclear movement.

By turning that movement into an archetype of the "new social movements" in his book *Prophétie antinucléaire* (1979), the sociologist Alain Touraine offered a first analysis of it while it was still taking shape. At the time, he wanted to signify the arrival of a cultural issue on the political scene to the detriment of political struggles. Since then, the relevance of that concept has been constantly debated by both sociologists and historians. The transnational approach, kindled by the development of the field of historiography of the late 1960s-early 1970s, urges us to reconsider that dynamic within a chronological framework, and to re-evaluate what was novel and what

was “inherited” within it, in order to better understand both why it “ran out of steam” at the turn of the 1980s, and its legacy, for political ecology, in particular.

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