

Stephen Milder. *Greening Democracy: The Anti-Nuclear Movement and Political Environmentalism in West Germany and Beyond, 1968–1983.* New Studies in European History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 300 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-13510-9.



Reviewed by Andrew S. Tompkins (University of Sheffield)

Published on H-German (August, 2020)

Commissioned by Jeremy DeWaal

Environmentalism as we know it today was born in the 1970s, an ostensibly “apolitical” issue that ultimately created an opening for *Die Grünen* (the Greens) as a new party claiming to be “neither left nor right, but ahead.” The particular salience of environmental issues in West German politics at (and since) that time owes much to the highly visible activism against nuclear energy installations that took place throughout the decade, often in places far from the city streets and university buildings usually associated with protest. In *Greening Democracy*, Stephen Milder argues that the grassroots activism of the anti-nuclear movement was responsible for a reinvigoration of West German politics.

In contrast to others who have elaborated similar narratives of liberalization or successful democratization of the Federal Republic of Germany, Milder does not frame these changes in relation to the upheavals of 1968, generational change, the taming of left-wing “terrorism,” or the professionalization of protest. Rather, he argues that grassroots activists who “simultaneously identi-

fied with the liberal democratic order and engaged in extra-parliamentary activism” changed the practices and culture of democracy as they “forced open new debates, engaged new people in politics, and confronted elected officials” (p. 6). Their ranks included not only left-wing youth (the “usual suspects” of protest) but also conservatives and older people in West Germany—as well as others beyond the country’s borders. Milder discusses entanglements with protest movements in France and Switzerland in order to enrich his narrative of West Germany’s democratic change.

The chapters are arranged chronologically, which also has the effect of moving broadly from the local and regional context (in the book’s first half) to politics at the national and European levels (in the second half). As the first chapter makes clear though, the “local” was itself already highly “transnational” within the Upper Rhine valley, where German Baden, French Alsace, and Swiss Basel meet. In the early 1970s, inhabitants of all three countries found themselves facing similar plans for nuclear power stations that each state

wanted to build along the Rhine River near Breisach, Fessenheim, and Kaiseraugst (respectively). The relative density of nuclear projects within the region, irrespective of national boundaries, was part of what made it possible for activists to move beyond “targeted anti-reactor protests” and to elaborate “more general nuclear concerns” (p. 29). However, the latter also required translation and concretization. The masses were unmoved by most arguments about the invisible threat of radiation—especially those framed in terms of purity of the German gene pool. Nuclear power took on a different significance, though, when perceived as a threat to the local agricultural economy, particularly the lucrative wine industry. Indeed, protests by Breisach’s winegrowers soon led to the West German project being moved twenty kilometers north to the town of Wyhl. As Baden’s anti-nuclear movement refocused its efforts, activists were able to profit from coalitions forged in neighboring Alsace, where nature protection, peace activism, and regionalist resentment toward centralist planners quickly coalesced around the nuclear issue.

As chapter 2 shows, anti-nuclear activists in the Upper Rhine valley soon formed an “emergent transnational community” that claimed to overcome the French-German hostilities of the past (p. 82). Local initiatives on both sides of the Rhine issued a joint statement protesting environmental threats from a chemical plant in Marckolsheim (Alsace) and the nuclear power station in Wyhl (Baden), the two sites being only a few kilometers apart. Activists in each country also gained experience with formal democracy: Alsatians were among the first in Europe to experiment with “political ecology,” supporting environmentalist candidates in local and national elections in 1973-74; in Baden, anti-nuclear activists opposed policies elaborated by the regional government in Stuttgart by trying to hold the mayor of Wyhl to account. Democratic engagements within formal structures and outside them were not mutually exclusive though. In Alsace, activists also occupied the construction site in Marckolsheim in Septem-

ber 1974 and received a delegation from the Larzac plateau in southern France, where protests against the expansion of a military base had attracted national attention in 1973-74. In Switzerland, a nonviolent action group held a “trial squat” of the Kaiseraugst construction site in December 1974.

As chapter 3 discusses, these regional protests soon spilled over into nearby Baden. In February 1975, protests in Wyhl came into the national spotlight when locals occupied the construction site of the planned power station. However, the simultaneously regional and transnational roots of the occupation went largely unrecognized in the rest of West Germany, where this seemingly novel tactic confounded police and excited observers. An initial occupation lasted only a few days before authorities cracked down hard, sending in some 600 police with water cannon and dogs to disperse about 150 occupiers, including middle-aged locals, women, and children. The police action alienated residents of this rural, politically conservative region, leading to a wave of resignations from local Christian Democratic party branches; at the same time, “police violence made the occupation legible to urban activists” (p. 104). A rally the following weekend thus attracted a much larger crowd of 28,000 people, and police quickly retreated when a group of activists reoccupied the site. National television coverage “de-provincialized the Wyhl struggle,” attracting supporters from across West Germany to the movement against nuclear energy (p. 110).

The second half of Milder’s narrative moves from the local struggles of the Upper Rhine valley to the broader conclusions that nuclear energy opponents elsewhere drew from it, shifting to different actors in each chapter. Chapter 4 looks at other local protests against nuclear energy that spread rapidly in 1975-77. The failed site occupations and sometimes violent altercations in Brokdorf (Schleswig-Holstein) are treated as the paradigm example of “bombastic” mass protests that “drew

attention away from the matter of nuclear energy and towards the repression and brutality required to defend the ‘atomic state’” (p. 140). Milder contrasts these with the “grassroots activism” that took place not only in Baden and Alsace but also in French Brittany, where a festival-like demonstration over Easter 1975 in the town of Erdeven attracted 15,000 participants, but “no site occupation was attempted, nor were strong criticisms of the state voiced” (p. 144). Site occupations, while eye-catching, were not always the most appropriate form of protest, and their success often depended on the slow, outwardly invisible work of building local support. Where local support was lacking, mass protest was no substitute: in Malville (France), a large and poorly organized demonstration in 1977 unraveled in the face of police violence, resulting in the death of one participant and the collapse of the local movement. Where protest had deeper local roots, as in the Upper Rhine valley, the long-term buildup of grassroots activism arguably led not only to successful occupations but also to more enduring, personal change among local people who “began to think of themselves as environmentalists and to act on that conviction” (p. 161).

Over the course of 1977, many activists grew weary of mass protests, particularly after a violent demonstration in Grohnde (March), the tragic death in Malville (July), and an overwhelming police deployment in Kalkar (September). Chapter 5 shows how local experiments in politics led to an electoral turn in the wake of this disenchantment. As other historians of *Die Grünen* have done, Milder examines precursors like Lower Saxony’s *Grüne Liste Umweltschutz* (founded by a relatively conservative opponent of the planned nuclear waste site in Lichtenmoor) and the Hamburg-based *Bunte Liste* (which was initially dominated by the radical-left *Kommunistischer Bund*). Rather than portraying these proto-parties as representatives of competing right- or left-wing visions of environmental politics though, Milder emphasizes how both groups brought together larger coalitions

and appealed to voters on the basis of grassroots action.

Ironically, as chapter 6 shows, the strongest impulse to federate these local and regional groups at the national level in West Germany would come through the elections to the European Parliament (EP) in 1979. In spite of the “grandiose pro-European rhetoric” and transnational solidarities of highly visible leaders like Petra Kelly and Solange Fernex, many activists treated Europe as “an end-run around domestic politics” that could send a message to Bonn or Paris (pp. 218, 205). Neither the French Greens, whose campaign was built around cooperation with local partners, nor their West German counterparts, who were keen on building a national party, won any EP seats in 1979. West German campaigners were nevertheless able to build up a national party on the backs of incremental successes in regional parliaments. In the process, “Europe fell by the wayside,” as did many pioneers of the early anti-nuclear movement who opted not to join *Die Grünen* (p. 230). However, protest and party politics continued to coexist, and Milder concludes that “the Greens widened liberal democracy,” in part by showing that “overlaps between parliament and grassroots activism were possible” (p. 236).

This is a highly readable book that connects close analysis of the early anti-nuclear movement with ambitious arguments about democracy. In particular, the story recounted here of Wyhl is attentive to subtle local dynamics well before and long after the famous site occupation. Milder discusses the motivations and deeds of local activists in the Upper Rhine valley—including in France and Switzerland—with care, making sure to include fully even those (conservative) participants whose stories sit uneasily with existing (mostly left-leaning) narratives of the movement. Protest demonstrations elsewhere, such as in Brokdorf, are treated with somewhat less nuance and there are a few inaccuracies (regarding the violence in Malville) as well as notable omissions in the dis-

cussion of French cases outside Alsace (Erdeven is nicely discussed, but Plogoff was arguably the more important case in Brittany). These examples are, however, mostly peripheral to the book's central arguments, which are focused squarely on the "greening" of democracy in West Germany.

Throughout the book, Milder stresses that anti-nuclear activism was about more than the Greens and that it did more than just bring '68ers into the fold of liberal, parliamentary democracy. These are welcome arguments, and Milder misses no opportunity to show how people of different generations and with no connection to the Left also engaged in anti-nuclear protest. The claim that their grassroots activism—and not just the political party that later emerged from it—forced changes to the culture of West German democracy has both appeal and merit, though the narrative structure of *Greening Democracy* tends to emphasize party formation as the crucial outcome. One of the book's strengths is that the author takes different activists' concerns for "democracy" seriously, exploring changing forms of political engagement at multiple levels. Milder thus succeeds not only in explaining the rise of the Greens in West Germany but also in highlighting the possibilities that were gained *and* lost during the transition from a locally anchored, transnational movement to a national political party. *Greening Democracy* is a study that deserves wide reading among scholars and students of German history, who will benefit from the connections it draws to the broader history of environmentalism in Europe and beyond.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Andrew S. Tompkins. Review of Milder, Stephen. *Greening Democracy: The Anti-Nuclear Movement and Political Environmentalism in West Germany and Beyond, 1968–1983*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. August, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50154>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.