Taking on Technocracy: nuclear power in Germany, 1945 to the present

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Taking on Technocracy: nuclear power in Germany, 1945 to the present, by Dolores L. Augustine, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2018, xiii + 286 pp., $120.00/£85.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78533-645-4

Dolores L. Augustine’s new book explores the historical underpinnings of Germany’s radical 2011 decision to shut down all nuclear power plants in the country by 2022. This decision, which was supported almost unanimously by the Bundestag (the German Parliament), has popularly been interpreted as a response to the March 2011 Fukushima disaster in Japan. Augustine shows that it was much more than that, tracing in revealing detail the history of the German anti-nuclear movement.

The book starts out with a chapter outlining the rise of nuclear energy utopias and dystopias in West and East Germany during the early phases of the Cold War. The focus is here on popular culture and the radically different conditions for nuclear debates on either side of the Iron Curtain. This is followed by an account of the radically different safety regimes in the two Germanys – with scientific expertise playing a key role in both countries – and a discussion of nuclear accidents and incidents in the early nuclear age (there were a number of them on both sides of the inner-German border). A main focus here is the dominance of a technocratic culture around nuclear energy, with (pro-nuclear) scientists and other experts dominating the public and political discourse about this new energy source.

The third chapter introduces Augustine’s main interest: the emergence of ‘counter-experts’ and their role in the making of the German anti-nuclear movement. Especially from the 1970s, anti-nuclear counterexperts challenged the status of the pro-nuclear scientific experts and it was very much the mobilization of this counterexpertise that enabled German anti-nuclear activists to ‘take on technocracy’. 

The following two chapters form the centrepiece of the book as a whole. They take the form of two extremely well-researched case studies of how the German anti-nuclear movement worked in practice and how they confronted not only pro-nuclear scientists, but also political leaders at various levels and police forces. The first case deals with the now famous (in anti-nuclear circles) Wyhl nuclear power plant, which was to be built in the Rhine Valley in southwestern Germany. Protests started in earnest in 1974–1975 and in 1977 activists actually managed to stop the project. In doing so they set a powerful example for anti-nuclear movements worldwide. The second targets the Brokdorf nuclear power plant, which started to be built near Hamburg in the late 1970s. Protests here were much more violent and militant than at Wyhl. Activists managed to stop this project too,
but only temporarily, as construction continued after a few years of interruption. The chapter merges this story with an account of anti-nuclear developments elsewhere, notably at Gorleben, which was singled out in the late 1970s as a centre for nuclear waste storage and reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel.

The next two chapters explore the wider breakthrough of environmentalism in West and East Germany, in the 1980s, from a nuclear energy point of view. In West Germany opposition to nuclear energy had now become much more institutionalized, notably through the rise of the Green Party. The Social Democrats also became increasingly sceptical about nuclear energy, especially after the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. The anti-nuclear movement now also interacted closely with the peace movement, which, among other things, made it less militant. In East Germany, Chernobyl marked the real breakthrough for anti-nuclear activism, which gained momentum in the last few years of the GDR’s existence.

The final chapter of the book discusses the last 20 to 25 years of anti-nuclear activism and nuclear energy policies in reunited Germany. Following a less active phase in the early 1990s, the movement was revived in the late 1990s, now targeting not so much nuclear power plant construction (no new plants were being built), but rather transports of nuclear waste. The government found that it had to protect the trains carrying these materials through the deployment of massive police forces. With the political power shift to a red-green federal government (1998–2005) nuclear phase-out became a much discussed issue in high politics, eventually leading to a decision to phase out all nuclear energy, but only after 32 years. Only after Fukushima did the government – by now a centre-right coalition – decide on a much more radical decommissioning path.

The book will be of great value for non-German speakers interested in Germany’s long and fascinating relationship with nuclear power. It makes several important contributions. First, its inclusion of both West and East Germany throughout produces a healthy comparative perspective, forcing the reader to rethink many aspects of the countries’ nuclear histories that one might otherwise be tempted to take for granted. Secondly, Augustine navigates skilfully in the extremely complex actor landscape, with its variety of experts and counterexperts, peaceful and militant activists (and police officers), greens and leftists, protestant ministers and radical anarchists, women and men, journalists and media heads, state agencies and courts, and politicians at various geographical levels in the fragmented life-world of German politics. Thirdly, the dramatic, unpredictable career of technocracy and expertise in nuclear energy offers intriguing new insights into the politics and philosophy of knowledge in Cold War Europe.

Augustine is at her best when she lets her first-hand finds from media archives speak. Indeed, her history of German nuclear energy is very much a media history. Relying not only on newspaper archives, but also on an impressive range of TV sources, the book conveys fascinating accounts of concrete clashes over nuclear power – and it thereby deconstructs some of the more simplistic understandings of what actually happened at places such as Wyhl and Brokdorf.

A weakness of the book is, arguably, its neglect of the perspective of the nuclear energy industry itself. This is not a book for readers who are interested in conflicts over, say, competing reactor designs, technology transfer from America to Europe, or decision-making processes regarding the siting of nuclear power plants. Also, the book does not integrate its main narrative with the broader context of nuclear construction; we are not really told, for example, what the place of Wyhl and Brokdorf really was in the German nuclear programme. Hence the title of the book is somewhat misleading: this is not the
ultimate history of nuclear power in Germany, but rather a history of opposition to nuclear energy in that country. This is not to downplay the book’s importance, though.

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*Diasporas Homeland* is an excellently researched and written work with many interesting and informative things to say. However, conceptually it perhaps does not quite meet the mark (and this is a high one) that it aims for. This mark is to be ‘a new interpretation of Chinese history through diaspora moments’ (xi). Certainly we are given five admirable ‘diaspora moments’ that have impacted on China in various ways or have an interest in themselves, but that this amounts to a new interpretation of Chinese history is less apparent.

The book starts well with the important question: how did the Chinese diaspora change China? We are also given an excellent précis of the diaspora (1–2) and it is always a pleasure to read a concise summation based on obvious depth of scholarship and analysis. A number of solid points are made concerning the need to recognize the duality of the link as the diaspora creates an ancestral homeland, a diaspora that ‘pulled China’s centre of gravity outward’ as ‘mass emigration helped make modern China’ (3). I especially liked the critique of the three fields: China studies, Chinese diaspora and Chinese-American studies as needing less compartmentalization. Nevertheless the privileging of American over all other Chinese hyphenated national fields is a compartmentalization itself to be regretted.

At this point we are told that ‘diaspora moments’ are a way of both overcoming these divisions and of presenting a new way of seeing Chinese history and global history. Five moments are presented as insightful into how China has been transformed: Qing diplomacy and the coolie trade, intellectual analysis of the diaspora in South-East Asia, a Confucian revival, dealings with diaspora related women in the early PRC, and the handing of repatriated peoples leading up to the Cultural Revolution. It is worth noting that Chinese-American studies are nowhere evident here.

The most interesting are the last two ‘moments’ concerning treatment of women married to those still overseas in the 1950s, and repatriates in the early 1960s. Based on provincial archives they provide an insight into a period of Chinese history not readily accessible. Complex and inconsistent dealings with the ‘women who stayed behind’, the desire to maintain remittance flows and to implement marriage and other reforms, all clash in a drama of personal stories and resistance to change. A bumbling rather than ideological picture emerges here and also in ‘Homecoming’ where the consequences of postcolonial unrest, enforced return and efforts of reintegration unfold. Resistance to integration is high, as is fear farming, along with the familiar