



“Today the Fish, Tomorrow Us”: Anti-Reactor Activism in the Rhine Valley, 1970-1975

In September 1972 a Freiburg “Action Collaborative” circulated a flyer attacking government plans to build a nuclear reactor in the village of Breisach. According to this flyer, there was “no operating experience” for a plant of the scale planned at Breisach. Furthermore, the 155,000 cubic meters of steam that the power station would release into the atmosphere each day, the excess electricity it would produce, and the absence of coordination between French and German nuclear planners all bespoke serious problems with the project. By the end of the month, rural CDU chapters added their own concerns about the effects of steam discharge to this litany of complaints. Not only were public worries about the Breisach reactor finite and local, they also cut a broad swath across the population, from urban activists to rural conservatives.

By the mid-1970s this unlikely local alliance had grown into a regional movement; by the end of the decade, mass anti-nuclear protests were taking place regularly throughout the Federal Republic. Yet, the mass demonstrations of the late 1970s were very different from the initial protests in the Rhine valley. At decade’s end, the Rhenish alliance of farmers and Freiburgers had been replaced by a more homogenous group of youthful social activists and finite local concerns about steam discharge had given way to universal fears about nuclear radiation.

These sweeping changes in the concerns and composition of the anti-nuclear movement suggest a trio of important questions about the way that social movements grow and the relationship of the anti-nuclear movement to the changes that occurred in the West German left after 1968. First, how did grassroots opposition to reactor construction, which had dogged most every reactor project in the Federal Republic, break out of the purely local, NIMBY-ist context and become a regional project on the Upper Rhine? Second, how did this regional movement with its focus on limited problems mushroom so quickly into a national movement with universal demands? And finally, how did the national anti-nuclear movement give rise to a new political party and thus complicate the West German left?

In order to answer these questions, I will use a variety of archival sources as well as conversations with activists who took part in the anti-nuclear protests of the 1970s. Several archives, including the independent Social Movements Archive in Freiburg, the Green Party Archive in Berlin, and the Archive for Contemporary History in Zurich hold the papers of activists and anti-nuclear organizations. The Baden-Württemberg State Archives also hold many archival sources that will be significant for my project, including regional government records, state ministerial files, and the papers of key anti-nuclear activist Wilhelm Knobloch.

My research will help to describe how local activism mushroomed into a national movement and explain the connections and contradictions between anti-nuclear activism at the local and national levels. My hypothesis is that the switch from concrete local concerns to general national issues was a result of the widespread adoption of protest tactics developed by grassroots activists. While values may well have changed during the 1970s, value change did not precipitate the anti-nuclear movement and thus change West German politics. Instead, the breakthroughs achieved by Rhenish activists concerned with specific, local problems were transmitted throughout the Federal Republic, first via activist networks and eventually through the mainstream media. Excited social activists were eager to utilize the Rhenish framework for public protest outside of the Rhine valley. In order for this framework to function on the national level, however, universal concerns had to be substituted for finite demands. Thus, I would argue, it was the growth of the movement itself, not the silent shift in social values that transformed the West German left.