

Preface

This book originated in our common interest in political movements that have developed to challenge science and technology and their policy effect. Of the many technological disputes over the past decade the nuclear debate has been the most virulent, long lasting, and significant. Opposition to nuclear energy technology has threatened government policy with crucial political, economic, and social ramifications.

As a highly polarized and dramatic issue the nuclear debate has generated a vast, almost entirely partisan, literature. Advocates intent on forcefully arguing either for or against nuclear power usually fail to examine their own assumptions or the possible implications of their arguments and proposals. By doing so, they often further mystify the political and social relationships underlying the dispute. Insofar as possible our analysis steps back from a spontaneistic approach to look critically at the various dimensions of this persistent controversy. We hope to clarify some of the ideological and political issues that have prolonged the controversy and assess its possible significance.

Comparing the French and the German situations seemed to be particularly useful. At the beginning of the 1970s both countries had a similar nuclear policy, provoking in each case a comparable massive antinuclear movement and mobilizing capacity. But whereas the movement had virtually no policy effect in France before the governmental change in spring 1981, it imposed a moratorium in Germany. To explain this difference, we adopted a contextual approach with a very broad focus. Institutional factors, administrative procedures, and historical experiences shape the strategic play of the protagonists in social conflicts. These factors differ from one country to another, and they have to be taken into account in an analysis. This creates a dilemma for the researcher. We try to maintain both a breadth of focus and analytical depth in each of the many issues that form the nuclear debate. We are aware that in several chapters our analysis is but a first step, merely an invitation for further detailed research.

Since this book was first published, political changes, especially in France, have had important implications for the nuclear debate. For this paperback edition, we have updated the final chapter to take account of these changes.

By necessity, our research approach to the nuclear debate has been eclectic. Using a wide range of research techniques, we interviewed officials and activists, participated in electoral meetings and internal discussions of antinuclear groups, collected a large number of activist brochures and books as well as official documents, and examined available statistics and survey data. The combination of inside knowledge of the two societies studied and our ethnographic material provided the necessary insight to pursue our analysis.

In interpreting the historical importance of the antinuclear movement, our reading of American, French, and German sociologists and political scientists made us aware that most macrosociological theorizing is deeply rooted in cultural and ideological traditions. After long discussions we decided to avoid a global interpretation. Nevertheless, we hope we complied with C. Wright Mills's definition of method and theory: "Methods are simply ways of asking and answering questions, with some assurance that the answers are more or less durable. Theory is simply paying close attention to the words one uses. What method and theory properly amount to is clarity of conception and ingenuity of procedure, and most important in Sociology just now, the release rather than the restriction of the sociological imagination."