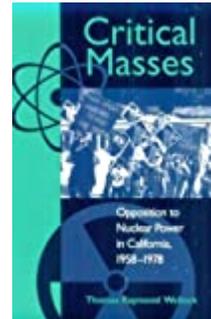


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Thomas Raymond Wellock. *Critical Masses: Opposition to Nuclear Power in California, 1958-1978.* Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. xii + 333 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-15854-5.



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Published on H-California (August, 1999)

Critical Masses offers a critical case study of the anti-nuclear movement in California in the 1960s and 1970s. It challenges the previously dominant assumption that the anti-nuclear movement played only an insignificant role in limiting the growth of nuclear power. Consistent with social historical trends in the last thirty years, author Thomas Wellock places the numerous activists, politicians, scientists, and ordinary Americans who resisted nuclear plant proliferation at the center of his story, rescuing them, as E.P. Thompson had once remarked of ordinary folk, from the “enormous condescension of history.”

Wellock’s work is powerfully informed by the earlier work of historian Samuel Hays, who posited a transformation of American values in the aftermath of World War II. An increased level of material comfort in the second half of the twentieth century caused a large segment of the American people, especially the young, well-educated and white, to shift their concerns from materialist to nonmaterialist ones. These new values focused on a number of related issues whose monetary worth was immeasurable—personal freedom, health, and a clean and scenic environment.

Wellock is careful to root his study in the political context of the time. One of the most valuable contributions of the book is its emphasis on the space created for mass popular action as a consequence of the loss of faith

in centralized federal authority—a characteristic feature of public mentality in the 1960s and 1970s. It is evident from this book that such disillusionment prevailed among citizens on both ends of the political spectrum, in reaction to the Vietnam war, Watergate, and the proliferation of the welfare state. Additionally, in California, mass resistance to federal authority was given ready institutional support at the state level, thanks to the state’s Progressive heritage and its own expansive and aggressive state government.

Critical Masses is organized chronologically around the main anti-nuclear struggles in California including the battles of Bodega Bay, Diablo Canyon and the San Joaquin Valley, as well as broader political campaigns such as the effort to pass the 1976 anti-nuclear voter initiative Proposition 15. Wellock makes it clear that each struggle produced definitive gains for the anti-nuclear movement and promoted shifts in public attitudes and state regulatory intervention that served ultimately to kill the drive for civilian nuclear power development in the Golden State.

There are several elucidating highlights to this tale. One interesting aspect of the Bodega Bay controversy was the important role played by women in this rural Sonoma County region as a consequence of their concerns over milk safety, and the effect that these con-

cerns had on the anti-nuclear position of the region's dairy farmers. This is strongly reminiscent of Katherine Philips Edson's pure milk campaign in Progressive-era California and reminds the reader of the continuing moral power, as late as the early sixties, of the popular notion of women as guardians of child and family welfare. This anecdote also helps us to perceive how anti-nuclear sentiment could stand firmly on non-radical premises, allowing it to permeate a broad social base. Also significant, and peculiar to the West Coast, was the successful effort to raise seismic fears regarding the location of the proposed Bodega Bay plant. President Kennedy's Interior Secretary Stewart Udall figured prominently in bringing this issue to the attention of the Atomic Energy Commission. A similar and later effort by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power to locate a nuclear plant in Malibu would founder around seismic safety issues.

Two other case studies provide insight into the strange bedfellows that composed the anti-nuclear movement. In 1976, Proposition 15, which would have halted nuclear plant operation and construction in California failed at the polls. Yet the movement to pass the proposition brought together some nuclear engineers who had resigned their posts at General Electric and large numbers of prosperous baby-boomers, some of whom organized themselves into the "nouveau millennialist" Creative Initiative Foundation (CIF). The CIF believed that God had called upon them to oppose nuclear power. The organization sponsored a colorful parade in Sacramento consisting of women clad in rainbow-tinted pantsuits. The marchers engaged in a "way of the light" ritual in which they accepted a covenant to usher in the new age.

The fact that at least a portion of the anti-nuclear movement consisted of soul-searching middle class professionals whose values were certainly other than ordinary makes Wellock's depiction of the struggle in the San Joaquin Valley all the more interesting. Here the campaign was fought on the individualistic, frequently racist, evangelistic, right-wing populist turf of Kern County. A powerful dose of material self-interest and histori-

cal resistance to, disdain for, and fear of the great and voracious metropolis of Los Angeles produced a strong movement against the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power's effort to build a reactor in Kern County. Here agribusinessmen and blue-collar whites joined liberal middle-class environmentalists in an astoundingly broad-based campaign. LADWP's depredations in early twentieth-century Owens Valley were not lost on Kern County residents in a battle that had many of the elements of an old-fashioned rural/urban conflict.

Ultimately, it was the ability of a wide variety of public constituencies of different classes, regions and political orientations to come together and exert pressure on state regulatory functions that broke the backs of pro-nuclear utility companies and their allies in government. Wellock, in this very well-researched, detailed and highly readable work, makes a compelling argument for the central role played by ordinary people in the successful war against nuclear power in California. His careful study of the actual constituencies of the struggle takes us beyond the aforementioned formulation of Samuel Hays to a more specific understanding of the nature of the environmental movement. Although one might long for the emergence of a popularly-held ecological ethic, as once proposed by the great Aldo Leopold, common sense suggests that broadly-based social movements must contain a powerful element of self-interest, and that "materialist" and "non-materialist" values are abstract categories that are not easily separable from one another. Wellock effectively shows us how a multiplicity of legitimate human concerns can converge in the building of a successful movement.

This book is highly recommended to anyone interested in environmental politics, recent California history, or the history of social movements. All in all, Wellock has produced an excellent and captivating piece of work.

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Citation: Philip Dreyfus. Review of Wellock, Thomas Raymond, *Critical Masses: Opposition to Nuclear Power in California, 1958-1978*. H-California, H-Net Reviews. August, 1999.

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