

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MICHAEL D. MEHTA, *Risky Business: Nuclear Power and Public Protest in Canada*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2005, 128 p.

This book offers unique insight into the social construction of risk among government agencies, review boards, power companies, local communities, and activists. It engages the dilemma between increasing energy demands and the costs of pursuing them. In particular, the book weighs the ecological and social risks of nuclear power and the contention they generate.

Mehta convincingly illustrates tension between "scientific" cost assessments made by bureaucrats and power companies, prizing efficiency and development, versus real and perceived concerns by local communities. He argues that the Canadian nuclear industry is technocratic, relying exclusively on experts' specialized information, which excludes the average person from the political process managing nuclear energy.

Using southern Ontario as his case study, Mehta shows that the federal regulating agency overseeing nuclear development, the Atomic Energy Control Board (AECB), and power companies like Atomic Energy of Canada Limited and Ontario Hydro fail to recognize the legitimacy of concerns raised by the public. He also contends that many local governments are swayed by the influx of federal monies, jobs, and development associated with the nuclear industry, steering them towards policies in line with nuclear development but at odds with concerned citizens. As a result, Mehta questions the integrity of the democratic process and looks at the role activists play in mobilizing public awareness and opposition against a largely unchecked industry.

To examine the dynamics of the contention of nuclear energy in southern Ontario, Mehta conducted a participant observation study of Durham Nuclear Awareness (DNA), a local anti-nuclear organization. He also interviewed a number of its key members and even participated in the planning and unfolding of protests against the re-licensing of Ontario Hydro's nuclear reactors in the town of Pickering. Through his analysis Mehta describes a "David and Goliath" struggle, where underfunded activists turned the tables on those in power by using the same "scientific" information and legal jargon that debases public criticism to lobby against the nuclear power industry. In fact, this is the book's greatest strength.

Mehta offers a colourful description of events leading up to a focal re-licensing hearing of nuclear reactors in the region. He provides insight into critical decisions made by the group in recruiting participants for a letter writing campaign, creating information pamphlets, and choosing among potential disruptive protests. By documenting this in great detail he highlights obstacles middle-class movements face. For example, trying to find a means of demonstrating that will gain media attention but will not result in arrests. He also describes preparations for addressing public hearings and the uphill battle to get the AECB to recognize concerns over risks associated with nuclear reactors. Just to get the agency to offer public hearings the organization had to demonstrate that new risks emerged which had not already been dealt with by the regulator. Moreover, they had to show that concerns were widespread among the public. This was the impetus for the letter writing campaign. Yet, despite DNA's relative success, the regulating agency remained ambiguous over how many letters were needed to show concern or, for that matter, how they defined it in the first place. As a result, the group experienced heavy resistance to their requests for public hearings.

In the end the organization was moderately successful, though it had little direct impact on decisions made. Instead, breaches in safety reported by the media led to unprecedented delay in the licensing process. Even so, the AECB sided in favour of re-licensing, claiming that only by providing a license could it oversee and mandate what Ontario Hydro does. Nevertheless, the silver lining in DNA's struggle is that the federal regulator also decided to hold more public hearings in towns with nuclear facilities, leading to minimal but incremental change.

Despite the book's many strengths, it also has some disappointing downfalls, such as a cursory review of the social movement literature and little attempt to integrate theorizing on risk and political process with rich data on events and movement decisions. The book ends abruptly and readers are left to make these crucial connections on their own. However, Mehta makes a fine contribution to the small but growing literature on Canadian social movements.

Howard Ramos, *Dalhousie University*.