In his doctoral thesis, Patrick Kupper portrays the history of the failed nuclear power station Kaiseraugst (Switzerland). Until the project was finally abandoned in 1989, Kaiseraugst for almost twenty years formed the focus of Swiss disputes on nuclear energy. It not only shaped contemporary discussions on its chances and risks, but also general attitudes on modern large-scale technologies, democracy and the rule of law. In his case study, the author pursues the question how an electro-technical infrastructure project could become the focal point of discourses about common basic values of Swiss society. He also analyzes the context of these debates, the constellations of actors and their social efficacy. Based on micro-level interpretation, Kupper puts his work into context of a “triad of societal structures, actor-specific operational spaces and discursively generated and circulated interpretation levels” (p. 17). He seeks to combine technology, environmental, business, social, and cultural history in order to write “a part of the cultural history of nuclear technology” (p. 18)—an ambitious attempt the author masters throughout most of the book. In contrast to most research dealing with the history of nuclear power, Kupper does not focus on the anti-nuclear-movement. Instead, he chooses the perspective of the company "Kernkraftwerk Kaiseraugst AG” (KWK) and its predecessors, whose company archives could be drawn on for the first time. This approach allows for more comprehensive insights into the causes of failure of a technological large-scale project than the usual concentration on civil-societal opposition or the energy policy of the respective government and administration. The volume is structured chronologically. The author first describes the background of the paradigm shift in the power industry and then portrays the problems the project encountered during different phases of its history. Furthermore, systematic chapters on the opposition against nuclear energy and the role of the federal state are included.

In the early 1960s, the possibility to further satisfy Swiss energy demand with hydroelectric power reached its limits as the most productive rivers had already been equipped with power stations. In addition, conservationists’ requests had to be taken into account more and more resulting in higher costs. The state and the power companies therefore turned to nuclear power as a solution, since thermal power stations met with strong local resistance. Nuclear power, on the other hand, appeared to be progressively more economical and enjoyed broad acceptance in the framework of an evolutionary world view orientated towards technology. Still, the project Kaiseraugst, which in 1966 had been made public, encountered difficulties right from the very start. Kupper attributes these problems to the company’s erroneous notions about nuclear technology, to home-made troubles (heterogeneous partnerships between the projecting parties, national competition of energy companies for a leading role in nuclear power production), and to reasons the actors could not influence (rapid technological innovations, rise in prices on the international market for nuclear technology, and societal changes). Because of this, the project came to a standstill in 1970. Apart from the question of the cooling system, the planned power station at first did not appear to be very controversial. Only right-wing "Lebensschutz” (protection of life) organizations such as the "Weltbund zum Schutze des Lebens” without much influence on society voiced fundamental concerns. On the contrary, conservationists had demanded nuclear power stations for years to protect the last free-flowing alpine rivers from utilization for power production. Yet, by connecting the question of nuclear power stations with existing discussions on nuclear weapons, water pollution protection, and federalism, attention had been drawn to the
problems of nuclear energy as early as 1970. The
decisive change in the debate on nuclear power,
however, was its transfer into the discourse on the
environment and into the alternative culture, which
was based on a redefinition of the relationship
between humans and the environment, and was
triggered by three fundamental innovations:
thinking in complex holistic systems, a global
perspective and a changed perception of time. For
this phenomenon, Kupper coins the term "1970s
diagnosis" (pp. 131-137). In the wake of a social
orientation crisis, economic growth and
 technological progress were regarded more
critically. As an outstanding symbol of these
paradigms, nuclear energy became a focus of the
argument. It therefore changed from being a mere
 technological problem to an ecological,
economical, political, and social problem. With the
sit-in at the building site in Kaiseraugst in 1975 at
the latest, discourses and constellations of actors
had been established and split Swiss society over
the question of nuclear power in two equally strong
camps.

The opposition against nuclear technology
concentrated especially on the planned nuclear
power station Kaiseraugst as the most developed
project in the early 1970s. Apart from declining
acceptance, the venture also had to struggle against
growing costs and delays in approval procedures
due to increasing and continually changing
security requirements, since the authorities used
Kaiseraugst as a "wave-breaker" for other projects
(p. 259). Kupper demonstrates that Kaiseraugst
basically was doomed to fail in 1977 and was
only kept alive by KWK because of a mixture of
calculated optimism and the lack of alternative
courses of action. The new activation of anti-
nuclear forces, resulting from the reactor accident
in Chernobyl in 1986, finally destroyed all hope for
its realization and caused its liquidation in

In his work, Kupper is continually looking
for the experiences and expectations of the actors
in order to explain their actions. Central to his
interpretation is the concept of path dependency.
He defines events as path-dependent "if earlier
incidents decisively and lastingly shaped resource
allocations" (p. 63). This approach is promising as
it calls attention to long-range developments,
learning processes and institutional consolidation.
Still, it can also lead to historical determinism.
Therefore, to put Kupper’s results into context,
more elaborate comparisons with other Swiss
nuclear power stations successfully realized at the
same time would have been beneficial for a clearer
understanding of the factors contributing to
Kaiseraugst’s failure. However, a systematic
analysis of additional nuclear power projects
would probably have gone beyond the scope of a
doctoral thesis. Hopefully, Kupper’s informative
study will inspire further research as his work
demonstrates how important it is for an adequate
assessment of success or failure of technological
large-scale projects to not only analyze societal
opposition or political determining factors, but also
the perspective of the companies involved.
Moreover, his "1970s diagnosis" constitutes
another step towards a comprehensive explanation
of society’s re-evaluation of the relationship
between humans and the environment around
1970--one of the most central questions of
environmental history. With his book, Patrick
Kupper provides a case study both well-written
and inspiring. By analyzing sources which had not
been taken into account until now, he sheds new
light on an ostensibly well-known subject
while--with just under three hundred pages of
text--remaining commendably brief and focused.
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