

# Taking part in the nuclear debate

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Participation in the nuclear energy debate takes different forms: from rallying others to take action to simply welcoming facilities in one's own region. The humanities and social sciences (HSS) have long taken an interest in the nuclear protest movement, and are increasingly examining other social and political aspects of this form of electricity generation. Whether considering the inhabitants who are obliged to incorporate this industry into their daily lives or the various stakeholders who take part in the public debate, researchers highlight a variety of perceptions of nuclear power that push the former to act or, in the case of the latter, to confront each other in the public arena.

## Promoting a controversial means of energy production

As with all scientific and technical fields, the use of nuclear power involves an appreciation of the issues that go beyond the technology itself. It is these issues – from the social to the political, the cultural and economic – that human and social scientists are wrestling with. These researchers approach nuclear energy from different periods in its history and from global or local perspectives, incorporating aspects from national or international contexts that presuppose specific nuclear-related policies, legislative and institutional frameworks.

Thus, while Germany is planning to stop its civil nuclear electricity production in 2022, France is making it a flagship of its industry and defending this strong element of its national influence and identity. Gabrielle Hecht [1] has shown how the merger of political and technological decisions, under the auspices of the CEA and EDF, has led to this French technological exception<sup>(a)</sup>. In this article, we will show how different perceptions of nuclear power continue to clash in the public domain, but are also embodied in a variety of attitudes and behaviors.

In France, perceptions of nuclear technology have changed over time. Initially it was considered a valuable and beneficial resource in health care, from the X-rays used at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the first radiology departments to the radium used to treat skin diseases. Advertising at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century promoted the health benefits of radium regenerating creams, radioactive mineral waters, or “atomic sodas”.

Later the image of nuclear power became tarnished by its military use: the explosion of two atomic bombs over the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and the fear of a new world conflict which, this time, would destroy humanity.

During the 1970s, it gradually became a subject of controversy. The dangers linked to the fuel used in nuclear power plants were exposed through protests at the sites where such operations were being carried out. Opponents raised various objections, from questioning (“all nuclear” in 1974) to the issue of dealing with the waste produced at the sites. Finally, the accidents at Chernobyl in 1986 and Fukushima in 2011 have largely revived the debate on the dangers of radioactivity and have brought home the real threat of a nuclear accident.

## From one movement to the next

The anti-nuclear movement has a unique place among the protests that emerged after May 68 (regionalist, feminist, self-management demands, etc.). HSS researchers quickly came to see it as a “new social movement”, recognizing that social conflicts no longer pitted workers against their bosses, but communities against their machines. They saw it as the beginnings of a new approach to democracy specific to a post-industrial society or as a foundational element of an environmental movement, close to political ecology.

There has been a shift in the type of opposition to nuclear power. The forms of militant action have changed from site occupations to the use of the media. In the age of globalization, activists struggle to engage with international action because of their affiliation to their respective national political contexts and their membership of more or less formalized groups [2]. However, a number of issues continue to be discussed, including long-term waste management, involving unusually long time-scales, which will affect future generations. In this context, the deep geological repository for

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long-lived waste at Bure in Meuse and Haute-Marne continues to be hotly debated, both because of the challenges it raises and because of the public policies that are emerging in a climate of great technical uncertainty<sup>(b)</sup>. The ageing of power plants and the closure of certain nuclear sites are also fueling the controversy.

These protests have often highlighted a nuclear world divided into two irreconcilable camps: those in favor of nuclear power and those opposed to it. However, the stakeholders with an interest in this source of energy are numerous: experts from nuclear institutions and organizations, technicians responsible for its exploitation or activists, citizens, etc. Each in their own way contributes to the nuclear power situation in France.

## Living near a power plant

At the local level, nuclear facilities have received a mixed welcome depending on the specific socio-historical context. In Plogoff<sup>(c)</sup>, the protests and campaigns carried out by many locals (allied with others) have made the site a symbol of the anti-nuclear struggle. At Golfech, one of the most recent power plants, the dispute was more peaceful. But the rejection or acceptance of such a project does not reflect the range of opinions. The views expressed show that protest is not the only way to show one's opposition, that an objection can be specific to the local area and that the consequences of this type of facility go beyond the simple technical aspects or the disputed risks etc.

The one constant of all the sites is a lack of discussion about nuclear power and its dangers. This public silence<sup>(d)</sup> is interpreted differently depending on the facilities considered and the interests of the authors. The anthropologist Françoise Zonabend [3] conducted a survey in La Hague (Manche), where a waste reprocessing plant is located. She tried to understand the everyday language, strategies and tactics at La Hague used to ignore what she defines as "a threat accepted and known by all" and sees in this silence a sign of denial surrounding the fear of nuclear power.

This silence can be found among the inhabitants of Braud-et-Saint-Louis [4], the village where the Blayais nuclear

power plant is located (Gironde). They view this facility not as the introduction of a sophisticated and controversial technology, but as the creation of a single industry in a rural environment, which changes their familiar surroundings and where nuclear risk is ranked among others. Residents express two distinct attitudes, held by two socially different groups of speakers. The "Disappointed" are farmers, with little to gain from an economic perspective. They express their relative frustration, feeling that they have not benefited from the nuclear power plant in a way that would compensate for the upheavals in their daily lives. The « Entrepreneurs », on the other hand, are municipal councilors with viable farms. They underline the new attractiveness of the village, highlighting the new amenities (swimming pool, multi-purpose hall, tennis courts, etc.) made possible by this facility and the financial manna that accompanies it. These two views are based on different land claims and identity concepts. The "Disappointed" claim that they belong in this area and, even if it has a negative image<sup>(e)</sup>, it gives them an identity (the only one they have) and grants them a right to the land. The "Entrepreneurs" try to escape from the initially devalued image of the region - made up in part of marshlands generally considered repellent and unfit for human habitation - and use the new community projects they have instigated to gain the social recognition they were previously denied.

## Stakeholders' involvement in the consultation process

This disparity in the ways of seeing a nuclear site and the ignorance we have about it for most nuclear sites in France partly explains the difficulties encountered by the organizations (Nuclear Safety Authority, Local Information Commission, etc.) in charge of providing nuclear information for the public, or of carrying out consultations. The public is perceived as a single homogeneous audience and this perception ignores the diversity of points of view [5]. These organizations seek to avoid the « pro » / « anti » dichotomy. Two reasons are put forward by their leaders to explain the difficulty in communication: the lack of technical knowledge in communities and their total lack of interest in the nuclear issue.

This makes it easier to understand why, in the various open discussions [6], the public is confined to the role of mere audience [7] and why newcomers to the consultation process, whether they are organizations, independent experts or regional representatives, are rarely given a central role in safety management [8]. ■

### References

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6. [www.debatpublic.fr](http://www.debatpublic.fr)
7. E. Ballan et al, in M. Revel, et al (eds.), *Le débat public: une expérience française de démocratie participative, La Découverte, Recherches (2007).*
8. G. Grandazzi in Suraud et al. op. cit.

a. See the article by H. Bercegol (p. 34).

b. Expert opinion was not unanimous, which led former Minister Nicolas Hulot to say that it was "the least bad solution".

c. This power plant project was abandoned in 1981.

d. Analyzing a silence is a real challenge for ethnologists.

e. The area around Braud-et-Saint Louis is characterized by an ecosystem made up of two complementary habitats, the marshland and the "mainland", a history marked by a major capital-intensive operation (the draining of the marshland in the 17th century) and by the social identity of its inhabitants, heavily dependent on original immigration, which made the inhabitants, the Gabayes, foreigners on Gascon soil.