

How can the social sciences help us understand the nuclear world?

International Conference

27-29 june 2012




The Fukushima catastrophe has put nuclear power back on the agenda. Praise or criticisms have been given new currency, fuelling what was termed "the impossible debate" on the legitimacy of nuclear power generation. In the 30 years after Three Miles Island, Chernobyl and Fukushima, nuclear technology itself has not fundamentally evolved, but the way societies approach it has changed, under new dominant discourses predicated on "transparency", "governance" and "sustainability". Today, faced with risk and waste management uncertainties, governments and public authorities can neither ignore the meaning and significance of nuclear for populations, nor the political and ethical dimensions of energy choices. Far from being solely a technical subject, nuclear elicits practices, behaviours, representations, regulations and issues of knowledge/power. In France, the "politicization of nuclear waste" (Barthe) from 1991 onward (and the first law on nuclear waste) has thoroughly changed the timing, scope and frame of public management. The subsequent 2006 law on "Transparency and nuclear safety" has launched a process of rethinking not only regulation of the nuclear industry, but the very way it interacts with civil society. Most nuclear countries have experienced similar legal developments that have reframed nuclear operations along the lines of "transparency" and "public engagement".

Those recent evolutions call for a reassessment of research efforts about nuclear in the humanities and the social sciences (HSS). At the same time that social science research is needed, even requested by legislators and government, research efforts are spread out and face considerable hurdles. Indeed, for the social sciences, nuclear is a difficult subject to research, one that is both attractive and repulsive. Part of the attraction comes from the continuing presence of nuclear as an object of debate in the public sphere; but nuclear is also a highly technical subject to engage with and requires a lot of knowledge and personal investment from researchers. These efforts are compounded by the necessity to avoid partisanship (or accusations of partisanship) - and this requires repeatedly specifying and justifying theoretical choices and methodological approaches. A further difficulty is the lack of funding for social science nuclear research. Exemplary in this respect is the recent call for projects by the French National Agency of Research following Fukushima. The call welcomed "analyses of the event under all aspects including the lessons to be drawn in terms of prevention - but excluding all subjects relative to nuclear industry and safety"¹. Finally, the results of social science research is always at risk of being exploited by partisan struggles or social engineering projects.

¹ <http://www.agence-nationale-recherche.fr/Flash-Japon>

However, the social sciences have engaged with many aspects of nuclear, documenting its workings and social impacts, analyzing its discursive productions and their performativity, deconstructing the diverse practices that nuclear has created. There are many analytical resources available, as shown in the sheer volume and diversity of published work on the "nuclear phenomenon". Historians have written accounts of the development of nuclear technologies and the specificities of nuclear industrial policies and decision-making. They have analyzed the ambiguous contribution of nuclear to national narratives, to state influence, to colonial policies. Monographs of individual projects and sites have emphasized the constant interplay between the civilian and the military sides of the nuclear coin. Sociologists have engaged with social postures towards nuclear and shown how nuclear had the capacity to reconfigure and structure collective action. Researchers have questioned policy making and public participation in debates over nuclear risk has been a specific standpoint of accidents and perceptions of risk. Of special representations developed by on nuclear sites (whether and the roles of associations, framing national and local sites. Along similar lines, accounts of nuclear sites,

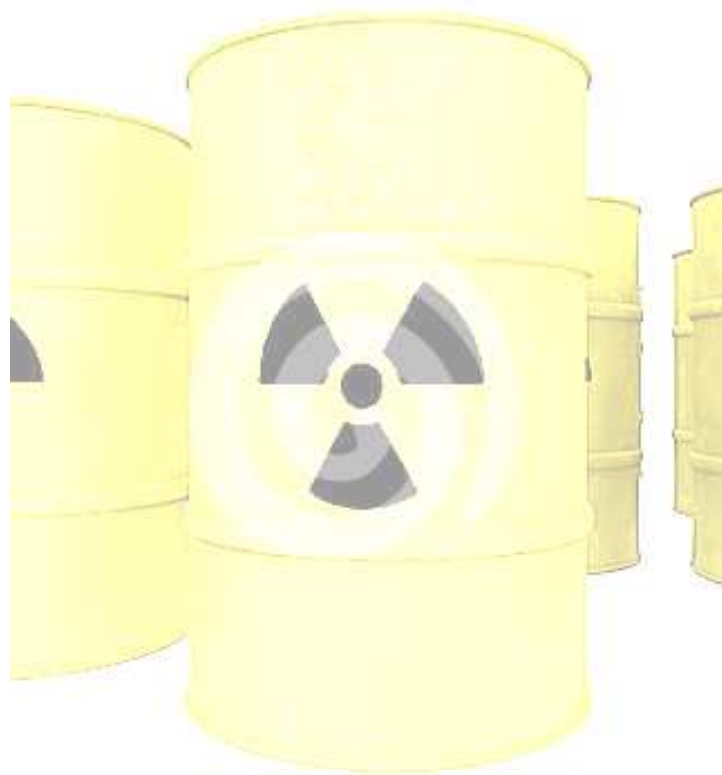


They have shown how debates on nuclear, structured by collective actions or policy initiatives, rest on highly performative discourses that work to include and exclude participants and issues. Such research contributes to the idea that nuclear is a powerful social, cultural and symbolical operator, the categories of which need to be deconstructed in order to adequately describe its effects on people and places, its specific temporalities. Geographers have focused on the spatial aspects of the nuclear industry, describing how nuclear connects sites, people, discourses and flows of matter and energy. Economists have shown that such connections are strongly predicated on money: the capital intensity and reference timeline of nuclear set it apart from other industries, giving high relevance to actuarial practices and discount rates. Political scientists have investigated the specificities of an industry that is so politically charged as to frame or change decision-making styles, questioning the very ideas of the political and of democracy. Finally, legal scholars have shown how highly specific nuclear law and jurisprudence, based upon technical norms themselves susceptible to techno-political influences, are central to the performance of the industry and at the same time open to far-ranging, and sometimes fuzzy, interpretations.

nuclear choices and projects. focus point, studied from the their consequences on popular interest have been the people living near or working permanently or temporarily) unions and collectives in debates on nuclear policy and anthropologists have written investigating workers and local

The interdisciplinary conference "**Which social science approaches for nuclear?**" seeks to reassess the relations between nuclear and social science research. It has two objectives. First, it seeks to take stock of and build on existing research by making explicit the theoretical approaches, the research methods, the difficulties met by researchers and by possibly identifying aspects of the nuclear phenomenon that may have been neglected or left out by existing research. Second, we would like to question the relevance of social science to contemporary nuclear debates and collectively delineate an agenda for future research on an international scale.

The conference welcomes papers from researchers of all disciplinary backgrounds in the humanities and the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, psychology, law, economics, geography, management, political science, philosophy, etc.), especially from those with an experience of conducting primary research on the nuclear industry. A significant amount of time will also be devoted to roundtables and discussions, and there will be a poster session.



Venue : Institut Français de l'éducation / ENSL – 19 allée de Fontenay – 69007 LYON

Dates : Wednesday 27 - Friday 29 June 2012.

Languages : French and English. Professional interpretation services will be provided.

Closing date for the call: March 30th 2012

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