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978-0-521-04179-9 - The Nuclear Peninsula
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Introduction Talking nuclear

The only way to access those grids of interpretation is to attempt to 'talk nuclear' with local inhabitants and with people who work at the plant. Accordingly, I was led in the course of my researches to pay most attention to the act of speech. That is to say, I conducted the study mainly through live interviews, either with individuals or with groups, always making due allowance for the context in which the enunciative act took place. Indeed, that act must never be considered in isolation from the circumstances in which it is performed, from the place where it occurs, or from the social and professional identity of the speaker or speakers. A further characteristic is that it sets up an interaction with the interlocutor (the interviewer), locating each party within a network of relationships that itself requires decoding. Adopting this approach involves as it were taking all the material available to you and incorporating it in your analysis of a person's speech: the combinative aspect of discourse sequences, the use of certain words rather than others, the position and weight of silences, the proportions of narratable and memorisable elements in the conduct of the account, the inflections introduced by the reflexive nature of narrative exchange.

There is quite rightly a big question mark over the soundness of such an approach when the area under investigation covers everyday practices to which people resort unthinkingly and in connection with which their speech is necessarily forgetful, or when the researcher is trying to capture thoughts, feelings, and private, secret areas of behaviour that people likewise find difficult to express in speech. In my opinion, however, it is the only course.

There is also the fact that in this context your own speech as interviewer, as ostensibly impartial, neutral observer, constitutes a source of provocation, both politically and psychologically.

At la Hague, more than anywhere else in France (though this is noticeable to a greater or lesser extent in every region where high-risk establishments are located), a person conducting a study of the social and psychological implications of the installation of nuclear sites is immediately looked upon as an opponent of nuclear power. Neutrality on this point simply will not wash. The economic fortunes

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and political equilibrium of the region are bound up with the maintenance and development of its nuclear industries. Asking questions about the safety of such installations or about the whole range of problems encountered by those who live near them or work in them inspires instant distrust and puts you straight in the 'anti' bracket every time.

How do people talk about it?

It stands to reason, perhaps, that if a person is to live in conditions of tolerable moral comfort he does not wish to keep reminding himself or being reminded of the fact that he inhabits a special sort of place and works in a dangerous establishment. Naturally, no one wants to subject himself to questions on the subject. If he lives there, if he works there, it is because the risk to him is nil. Consequently, any question about danger incurred or risks run will be rejected, denied, or parried in some way. People who interview populations living in the vicinity of nuclear power stations are well aware of this phenomenon: every poll ever published shows that, the nearer people live to a nuclear power station, the more they will swear by its reliability.[1] Similarly, those who observe workers in high-risk industries are familiar with the way in which they refuse to acknowledge the dangers of their job to the point where it is hard to get them to admit to taking essential safety precautions.[2]

In the nuclear industry there is no question of anyone refusing to accept the dangers of radioactivity or of working in a radioactive environment. The effects of nuclear energy are too well-known for that. If the risk is denied or defied, it is because in this place every precaution is taken.

True, in France the civil nuclear industry is undoubtedly the most closely monitored area of industrial activity. The safety of nuclear installations and that of the people working in them and living alongside them are matters that have been taken into consideration from the outset. Furthermore, those installations are constantly being reviewed and fresh safety demands formulated. As we shall see, a combination of historical events, the prominent part played by one trade union in particular,[3] and considerations of a political nature accounts for so coherent a body of arrangements having been put in place in this domain so far as France is concerned.

At la Hague a close watch is kept on the air, the rain, the sea water, the fauna and flora, the ground water, the cows' milk, and the flesh of shellfish in the area around the plant. Samples are taken and measures implemented by the plant's own Radioprotection Department and by the Central Department for Protection Against Ionising Radiation

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(*Service central de protection contre les rayonnements ionisants* or SCPRI), which comes under the Ministry of Health, and the results are sent annually to the mayors of all the municipalities (*communes*) of the canton.

Staff at nuclear establishments undergo medical examinations at more or less frequent intervals, depending on the section of the plant they work in. No one is exempt. The results of those examinations and analyses are sent to the people concerned.

So, if every precaution has been taken, how shall a person *admit* or even *think* that he is still in any danger, and why, in any case, should he wrestle, whether actually or psychologically, with a risk that is improbable in the extreme? Certainly far less probable, at all events, than such everyday risks as driving a car, which everyone takes and thinks nothing of. This is why every question about danger incurred elicits the response that it is safer working at the plant or living nearby than getting the car out each morning.

The spoken word, in this context, becomes a vehicle for any number of ruses designed to obscure the ostensible, purported meaning of the narrative heard. Language may tell or leave untold, guide or mislead, shed light or spread confusion. Many times in such accounts what is really being said hides itself away behind words intended to mask it. A whole set of stratagems is deployed with the single aim of creating opacity and ambiguity. The end result is that what finds expression in a roundabout way is a buried request, symptomatic of an inexpressible distress.

Let us look at some examples. If you ask technicians directly about the jobs they do in the plant and about the risks to which they are exposed when entering radioactive areas or handling ionising products, they reply readily enough, it is true, but they do so in a wholly remote, impersonal way, using technical terminology in an ostensibly ‘scientific’ type of utterance very like that found in current publications dealing with this type of work. It is unusual for them to talk spontaneously about their own experience, or their apprenticeship, or any incidents in which they may have been involved. In other words, the everyday reality of their jobs seems to be something they cannot talk about, and perhaps it is. They have, as it were, a ready-made discourse for answering questions. In fact, it sometimes struck me as pointless noting down what they said, since they always handed out the same old thing. What, indeed, is the point of taking down a lesson that somebody reels off without a single mistake, that is identical to the one you can read in the official scientific brochures, and that in the circumstances merely confirmed that the people I was interviewing *knew* what they could expect?

However, if, as was invariably the case, all questions bearing

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directly on incidents that might have happened to the interviewee were parried or obscured in this way by a scientific discourse, it is reasonable to suppose that what is involved here is a way of the speaker not saying or not hearing himself say something he wishes to conceal.

Throughout this study it was as if none of the technicians I met had ever been the victim of an incident involving radioactivity. Incidents occur daily, in fact, but 'trouble' occurred only to others, never to those I was speaking to, as if for one reason or another they were unable to tell me about the *histoires* that had concerned them. Never did their words convey anything of the personal, private side of their experiences. By means of enunciative tactics of this kind the field of anxiety was continually being manipulated and reshaped.

However, in such accounts of lives spent entirely in the service of *le nucléaire*, there will sometimes be a moment of hesitation, often towards the end of the interview when the talk is more relaxed, more familiar. I am on my feet, about to leave, the tape-recorder is switched off, when the interviewee, extricating himself from his militant role or dropping his guard of scientific language, voices or rather murmurs (as if I were not there) one or two thoughts that offer a glimpse of the fear and moral anguish he keeps constantly suppressed. For instance, I recall a conversation with one technician who had worked at the plant for fifteen years, a militant trade unionist who spent more than two hours telling me about the reliability of the equipment at *his* plant and maintaining that he worked there in complete safety. Then, at the very end of our conversation, as if to redress the balance in some way after all the rationalisations, he abruptly treated me to certain confidences, as it were, about cancer, about how he might be threatened by it, and about how, should he ever contract the disease, it would prevent him from enjoying his retirement. This made him wonder whether, in the circumstances, it was necessary to spend one's entire life in the service of an industry in which worker safety could never be totally guaranteed.

Exactly the same oscillations in speech, swinging from peremptory affirmation regarding the safety of nuclear establishments to anxious questions about the risks to which those same establishments expose whole populations, are found among the people of la Hague. Take the mayor of one municipality, so fervent a supporter of the nuclear industry that the management of the plant once sent him to Japan to persuade the inhabitants of a region soon to have its own French-built reprocessing plant that living in the vicinity of such an establishment is a cinch. Nevertheless, at the end of our conversation (which he had not wanted me to record on tape), having extolled the benefits that the village communally and he personally derived from the presence

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of the plant, he broke off and was silent for a moment before resuming:

> I want the truth . . . The truth means knowing which is right: are small doses dangerous, or are they not? You have those on the one hand who would eat limpets that had been living in the pipe[4] for six months and others who wouldn't eat them for anything in the world. Who's right? Who's telling the truth? It's incredible! No one can give me an answer . . . You . . . Do you know what the truth is?[5]

I learned later that, his avowed beliefs notwithstanding, he refused to eat any fish or shellfish caught off the coasts of la Hague.

Linguistic analysis may take place at many other levels. For example, you can study the forms of communication between the management of the plant and the public. Here, people's utterances distinguish two spheres: one that *knows* (the management) and one that *does not know* (the public). Between these two worlds there is a play of forces in which it is words that take the strain. Some (those who know) declare that their words are the truth; the rest have always felt that those same words are being used to deceive, to travesty the truth. Hence this remark by one local politician: 'When "they" [he meant the management] don't want people to understand, they talk in technical terms.'

Communication between these two worlds is like nothing so much as the interplay of distorting mirrors.

Taking the words at face value

So it was the act of speech rather than direct observation (or any other method, for that matter; they are all more or less inappropriate in this kind of industrial context) that struck me as capable of providing information about this particular individual and collective experience. Speech, or perhaps I should say oral expression, with its digressions, censorships, intonations, and metaphorical substitutions (in a word, rhetoric), affords the possibility of exposing the processes of deletion, spotting defensive tactics, and generally identifying the thousand and one ways in which people seek to confound anxiety. Speech needs to be interpreted, of course, and in this case the business of interpretation consisted essentially in an attempt to take the words spoken at their face value. But it was also, on occasion, a matter of seeking an understanding beyond the words or by stopping short of the words in order to flush out the implicit meaning behind the ostensible content.

It was in fact in their changes of direction, in the flaws in their arguments, and in the interstices of their speech that our interviewees did, willy-nilly, reveal something of themselves and allow a latent anxiety to show through. To an even greater extent it was in slips,

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puns, and instances of misappropriation of vocabulary as well as in metaphor and in the workings of the imagination that one glimpsed a real anxiety that was being denied by these people in their preoccupation with going on living and working in this place without suffering too much discomfort and self-questioning.

There are of course many other areas and many other manifestations in which this suppressed anxiety may be read.

I could, for example, have directed my attention towards the frantic consumption of organised sporting or leisure activities to the point where the free time of plant employees is always full, as if they were incapable of even a few moments' relaxation, alone with themselves. Granted, the general works council of the plant has a large budget at its disposal and has been able to mount a massive cultural and sporting programme.

'You can do twenty-six different sports here . . . On top of that, the plant is building a whole sports complex just for us in one of the villages nearby!' The speaker, a young technician who had recently been taken on, was citing one of the reasons why he had moved to la Hague.

Recently the management and the various works councils have set about creating a veritable works culture that will guarantee social harmony on the shop floor and peace of mind at home.

Then, too, there is the silence in which people who work at the plant bury the jobs they do on the site and the minor incidents that sometimes occur. Husbands or fathers will never talk about what they do there, and their wives and children all say they know nothing of what happens 'up there'. Moreover, no one dares to ask, neither the men's families, nor their friends, nor their relations. It is as if everyone respected the pact of silence that those who work at the plant have unwittingly imposed. The doctors and medical auxiliaries whom I met insisted that patients of theirs from the plant never ask them about the possibility of a link between what is currently wrong with them and the work they are required to do. It is just as if, on the one side as on the other, nobody wants to know. In this context of doubt and suppressed anxiety, but also of impotence in the face of a risk that no one can put his finger on, the only realistic stance is one of silence.

The researcher also needs to be attentive to the hundred and one rumours flying about on the subject of workers at the plant or what fate has in store for those who live on the threshold of this dangerous complex, wrapping the place in a web of muttered incantations and conjurations.

I might, with the same object in view, have tried to reach a better understanding of the language of looks, the unspoken dialogue that takes place between people when a siren goes off unexpectedly or an

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unfamiliar bang is heard from the direction of the plant. Or perhaps to grasp the significance of the absence of disaster dreams. Of the people I interviewed, all but two[6] assured me that they never had such dreams, as if everyone here unconsciously forbids him or herself to dream about a nuclear apocalypse. It would have meant, of course, finding out about the sorts of screening dreams that were blocking them out. But that would have been an enormous undertaking.

I observed, rubbed shoulders with, and analysed all these manifestations, whether collective or solitary, tiny or substantial, as well as others that were sometimes silent, sometimes obtrusive. They constitute as it were parallel languages that have the effect of enriching the utterances made in direct exchanges, like so many anonymous words adding their bit to those overtly uttered, omitted, or distorted, balancing them, qualifying them, directing their drift.

All these languages, be they silent or expressed, mumbled under the breath or articulated out loud, speak with one voice of a pain that cannot be denied, a buried anguish, a happiness lost for ever.

Whom do you talk to? Whom do you listen to?

I collected these words, these utterances, these silences in two ways.

Firstly, I had one or more conversations with the people of la Hague,[7] whether residents of long standing or recent arrivals and whether they worked at the plant or not. Naturally, I also requested interviews not only with everyone occupying any kind of position at the plant (manager, personnel manager, heads of departments, engineers, technicians, trade union representatives, doctors, welfare assistants, and the like) but also with people working in other establishments, whether connected with the nuclear industry or not. Such interviews might proceed along formal lines (complete with tape-recordings) or they might be highly informal and relaxed (conversations over meals to which I was invited). Similarly, I had many conversations (some spontaneous, some by appointment) with local residents: farmers, craft tradesmen, councillors, teachers, heads, schoolchildren, and so on. Since 1983, when I first became interested in the nuclear industry, I have conducted more than 150 interviews, either alone or accompanied by a colleague.

My second approach consisted in attending the training and refresher course[8] undergone by every new recruit to the la Hague plant and repeated by every technical operator after a few years of working there. An anonymous presence among the technicians, I listened to the demonstrations, followed the explanations, and watched the films shown for our benefit by the instructors. In so doing

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I was able to grasp the way in which the scientific hierarchy interprets and presents the reality of the jobs that men and women are required to perform at la Hague on a daily basis. This gave me the opportunity of going to the sources of the technical language that was reproduced for me in the interviews and enabled me to assess the kinds of deflection, distortion, and adjustment that it undergoes in the process of solicited or spontaneous verbal exchange. Lastly I was able, through the apathy or interest shown by the trainees, to apprehend their behaviour and the way in which they think about and represent to themselves their relationship to the particular phenomenon – radioactivity – with which they were in constant contact.

Apart from the interviews with members of the plant management, which took place at the plant itself and consequently followed an agreed pattern, all the others sprang from a personal request without my exploiting any kind of official standing. It follows that a study of this type generates a spontaneous selection of the population studied because of the network of acquaintanceship that forms and fills out as the work progresses. You never visit anyone without having been recommended by other people whom you know already (in fact they may well accompany you). Of course, given this manner of proceeding, your work will resist all attempts to extract statistical representation of any sort, which may leave a question mark over any generalising interpretation (to which in any case I do not lay claim).

I saw a great many people, but I did not see everyone. The number of inhabitants or workers that I should have had to interview in order to obtain a minimum of representativeness for this milieu far exceeded the scope of the present study. Moreover, polls or brief questionnaires handled by anonymous investigators can never fill the bill when it comes to assessing everyday experience. The story of a person's life, elicited in the course of two, three, or four conversations with a trade union official, a militant ecologist, a technician at the plant, a local councillor, or a man or woman of la Hague will furnish a wealth of data that make more sense than a hundred replies to set questionnaires.

Furthermore, since in a place like la Hague the whole subject of *le nucléaire* is so provocative as to place anyone who raises it in the stereotyped 'anti-nuclear' bracket, there is inevitably something crucial about the kind of relationship that is established between interviewer and interviewee. It takes time for issues to become clarified on both sides. It takes time for the presence of the interviewer to cease to be a bone of contention and for a mutual relationship to become established in conversations solicited by him or her that will make it possible for both parties to go to the limits of what can be said. What, in such circumstances, would be the use of a remote, impersonal questionnaire?

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Working in this way, you forget the obsession with being representative; you ignore quantitative observations in the attempt to capture emotional, irrational, imaginary elements, to apprehend all manner of aspects of reality and experience that, too often, slip through the net of so-called objective observation.

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Part I

Nuclear landscapes