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978-0-521-04179-9 - The Nuclear Peninsula
Françoise Zonabend
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A quiet French country district is the site of a nuclear waste reprocessing plant. Françoise Zonabend describes the ways in which those working in the plant, and living nearby, come to terms with the risks in their daily lives. She provides a superb sociology of the nuclear work-place, with its divisions and hierarchies, and explains the often unexpected responses of the workers to the fear of irradiation and contamination. The work is described euphemistically in terms of women's tasks – cleaning, cooking, preparing a soup – but the male workers subvert this language to create a more satisfying self-image. They divide workers into the cautious *rentiers* and the bold *kamikazes*, who relish danger. By analysing work practices and the language of the work-place, the author shows how workers and locals can recognise the possibility of nuclear catastrophe while, at the same time, denying that it could ever happen to them. This is a major contribution to the anthropology of modern life.

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Translated from the French by J. A. Underwood



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Preface

Once there was a landscape ...

This book deals with the everyday lives of people who work in or live near high-risk industrial establishments. To study this subject, I took the case of the nuclear industry, centring my research on the spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plant at la Hague on the western tip of the Cotentin Peninsula in Normandy.

It was the award of a research contract by the Social Sciences Commission of the French Ministry of the Environment in 1987 that prompted me to undertake a monograph on the plant, though I had actually begun thinking about it as far back as 1980, while on a visit to the region. Struck by the beauty of this coastal landscape and the harmony and silence of its little *villages* (in Norman dialect usage, really hamlets) tucked away down leafy lanes, I decided to stop there and do some ethnographic research. I was aware from the outset of the presence, up on the plateau a mile or so inland from these untamed shores, of a nuclear facility of some kind and of the fact that a second was being built alongside the first. I had even driven along the road that borders the site. However, though I had passed quite close I had either not noticed it or not wished to notice it. Nor did the people (residents of long standing, some local councillors) whom I approached to find out whether I might come and live at la Hague ever mention it to me. The upshot was that I decided to go ahead, found a house overlooking the sea, moved in, and forgot all about the plant.

Time passed, and it was not until several months later that I thought again about the industrial buildings springing up in increasing numbers on the plateau right behind my house. That was when I became conscious of the fact that in this place two opposing worlds existed side by side. Coming and going between Paris and this spot at the back of beyond, I found that a fresh surprise greeted me on each return. Yet I never lost the sense of the perennality of my new surroundings. In the few weeks of my absence, certain areas would have changed utterly; others, by contrast, remained immutable, as if frozen in time.

Combing la Hague in search of a particular type of genealogical

x Preface

memory or in an attempt to find out how its people organised and operated their kinship networks (these being the pegs on which I intended to hang my ethnographic research), I visited house after house in the many *villages* that lie concealed in the little valleys notching the edge of the plateau. Here farmers and fishermen live by the rhythm of the seasons and the tides. In narrow streets that seem always to be deserted, between high stone walls overhung by camelias or mimosas, the only sound you hear is that of the water rushing down the gutter. A feeling of great calm descends on you in these silent hamlets. And when you enter one of the dwellings, where a wood fire burns all year round in the tall fireplace in the communal room, tended by an old woman kneeling on the stone hearth in ancestral pose, time does indeed stand still.

But walk only a few hundred yards farther and that tranquillity is shattered. Up on the plateau a broad boulevard has been carved out to ease the flow of traffic. Lorries pass at the rate of one every three minutes; private cars form a constant flood from eight in the morning till five in the evening, causing endless jams. And there, at the end of the road, looms the plant, a veritable city deposited in the middle of the countryside, ringed by a triple fence of electrified barbed wire, with a watchtower guarding the entrance. Ranged over the plateau beyond the wire is a series of concrete buildings with blank façades and, shooting skywards between the giant cranes, enormously tall chimneys with corkscrew flanges. Farther off, curious-looking high walls of concrete shafts piled one on top of another adorn the landscape between the circular domes of strange tumuli. All is noise and bustle, crashing, roaring, and confusion. These men are constructing the world's most modern nuclear plant on the biggest building site in Europe.

At first it was the juxtaposition of these dissonant spheres that I wanted to describe, the tension between these two worlds, one locked in a remote past, the other wide open to the technology of the future. How is it possible, I wanted to know, for two apparently so irreconcilable extremes to coexist in the same setting?

I also wanted to throw light, if I could, on the silences, the omissions, the memory lapses that *le nucléaire* (the conveniently concise French expression that covers every aspect of the technology based on nuclear fission; Tr.) occasions in such places – and which afflict me, too, when I am in residence at la Hague.

So I tried to find out how people behave, living alongside such high-risk establishments: do they accept them, reject them, dream about them; are they willing to talk about them? Can they in fact talk about them?

Finally, focusing on the men and women who actually work at the

plant and are daily confronted with the invisible but ubiquitous presence of radioactivity, I attempted to understand how they react to it, how they think about it, and how they experience it. What is the nature of their relationship with this energy whose dangerous effects are so unpredictable, this phenomenon that they need to make a deliberate conceptual effort to locate within their own grids of interpretation?

The research underlying the present work was done under the auspices of the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie sociale, a combined unit of the Centre national de la Recherche scientifique and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences sociales in association with the Collège de France. It was funded by the Social Sciences Commission of the Service de la Recherche des Etudes et de Traitement de l'Information sur l'Environnement, a department of the Ministry of the Environment and of Protection against Major Natural and Technological Risks. Part of it was undertaken by Pierre Paris, holder of a DEA in sociology from the University of Caen, who was particularly interested in studying the kinds of social change that have taken place in the villages. His study is entitled *Vivre l'espace à la Hague* ('La Hague as living-space').

Abbreviations

ACRO	Association pour la contrôle de la radioactivité dans l'Ouest
ANDRA	Agence nationale pour la gestion des déchets radioactif
CCPAH	Comité contre la pollution atomique dans la Hague
CEA	Commissariat à l'Énergie atomique
CFDT	Confédération française démocratique du travail
CIAT	Comité interministériel d'aménagement du territoire
COGEMA	Compagnie générale des matières nucléaires
CRILAN	Comité régional d'information et de luttes anti-nucléaires
EDF	Electricité de France
HAO	Haute Activité Oxyde
PWR	Pressurised-water reactor
SCPRI	Service centrale de protection contre les rayonnements ionisants
SGN	Saint-Gobain nucléaire, former name of the Société des Techniques nouvelles, principal contractor of the <i>Grand chantier</i>
TDA/TNA/TNDA	Travailleurs directement affectés/Travailleurs non-affectés/Travailleurs non directement affectés (en zone radioactive)
UP ₂ , UP ₃	Usines (Unités) de production de plutonium