

A Foucauldian critique of geological disposal of nuclear waste.

As expressed by international organisations such as the IAEA (2011) and OECD-NEA (1995, 2007), there is by now a strong consensus that the best waste management option (also in a moral sense) for countries with nuclear power programs is to store high-level and / or long-lived radioactive waste in suitable deep geological layers (e.g. clay, salt domes, granite,...). This international preference for geological disposal is based on a mixed deontological-consequentialist ethical argumentation, which draws upon the principles of justification, optimisation and dose limits (Gosseries 2005; Kermisch, Depaus, and Labeau 2016).

We analyse this argumentation from a Foucauldian perspective, drawing upon his central genealogical concept of 'power-knowledge' and his specific understanding of technique/technology as a form of embodied mediation between 'subjects' and 'objects' (Dorrestijn 2012). Our analysis reveals that in the course of planned nuclear waste governance activities the 'same' technology (geological disposal) actually gives rise to three different forms of subject-object constitution. In the technoscientific mediation, a subject-witness to the eternal truth of geological disposal's functioning is positioned alongside geological disposal as a technology of forgetting. In the utilitarian mediation, a subject of state reason (*raison d'état*) is positioned alongside objectified stakeholder categories and values. Finally, in the social/engineering mediation, a subject of public reason is positioned alongside geological disposal as an engineering object.

Our analysis implies that the practical implementation of geological disposal will require the strategic 'stitching together' of a number of techniques drawing from the spheres of applied science, technology and ethics. Our contribution therefore opens up an irreducibly political dimension of the question of nuclear waste governance, beyond the enclosure implied by the authoritative deontological-consequentialist ethical reasoning.

References

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