

Technical democracy and nuclear waste

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On the possibilities for democratic
decision making in governing nuclear
waste



REGIMES
of
HISTORICITY

**PRESENTISM AND
EXPERIENCES
OF TIME**

**FRANÇOIS
HARTOG**

TRANSLATED BY
SASKIE BROWN

reversibility

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

TAKING EUROPEAN KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY SERIOUSLY

Report of the Expert Group on Science and Governance to the
Science, Economy and Society Directorate,
Directorate-General for Research, European Commission

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reversibility

“Regime of promise”

vs.

“Regime of experimentation”



1. Overview of the history of French nuclear waste policy

Stage 1: Irreversible geological disposal as the “best solution” (before 1990)

- How to face uncertainty? In the middle of the 1980s, geological disposal as a safe method for long-term storage of high level nuclear waste
- 3 advantages for nuclear industry
- problem: finding appropriate sites

Stage 2 : political reframing (1990-1991)

- Following the local conflicts, the issue appeared in the political scene
- The opening of a public debate
- The Act of 1991: three research avenues

Stage 3 : requirement of reversibility (since 1991)

- reversibility: possibility to revise past steps or chosen technical option
- Concerned groups constantly call for the application of this principle
- December 1998: the French Government imposes the principle of reversibility

“The condition of acceptance for decisions is related to their reversibility (...) it is crucial that future generations not be bound by decisions that have already been made and that they be in a position to change their strategy according to any technological and sociological changes that may have occurred in the meantime”

2. Regime of promise

What are the promises of the irreversible geological disposal ?

- To free oneself from technological progress
- Not transmit to future generations the burden to manage nuclear waste

“From an ethical and long-term safety perspective, final evacuation [i.e. irreversible geological disposal] will help us take responsibility more effectively towards future generations than do temporary storage solutions, which imply monitoring as well as the transfer of long-term liability for waste to future generations, and which may ultimately be neglected by tomorrow’s societies, whose stability we cannot be sure of.”

NEA (OCDE), 1995

What are the promises of the irreversible geological disposal ?

- To free oneself from technological progress
- Not transmit to future generations the burden to manage nuclear waste
- Solving the problem permanently

A way to deal with uncertainty of future

- Simplifying the future by limiting other possible worlds
- A particular conception of democracy based on delegation and trust
- open to “powerless regret”

3. Regime of experimentation

What does the principle of reversibility change?

- Almost the same technical solution
- The change: from the promise to the possibility

Another way to grasp the future

- Opening up possible words
- An iterative political process
- Distrust as democratic virtue



Counter-Democracy

POLITICS IN AN AGE OF DISTRUST

PIERRE ROSANVALLON

Translated by Arthur Goldhammer

CAMBRIDGE

CAMBRIDGE

Another way to grasp the future

- Opening up possible words
- An iterative political process
- Distrust as democratic virtue
- No promise, no regret

Concluding questions

- Is the regime of experimentation more democratic than the regime of promise?
- Is the reversibility principle taken seriously (in France) ?
- Is the solution of geological disposal the best way to to shift from a regime of promise to a regime of experimentation ?