

DID FUKUSHIMA MARK THE END OF THE “NUCLEAR RENAISSANCE”? ANALYSIS OF MEDIA DEBATES IN FINLAND, FRANCE AND THE UK

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Until 11 March 2011, nuclear power seemed to be still experiencing what some had come to call a “nuclear renaissance” – a renewed interest by governments and industry in nuclear power as a means to tackle the problems of climate change and energy security. A number of countries were planning to construct or already constructing new nuclear plants, after a pause of more than two decades in the Western countries. In Europe, Finland was at the forefront of the “renaissance”, with a parliamentary decision in 2002 to authorise nuclear new-build, soon followed by a decision by Europe’s nuclear superpower, France, to construct a new reactor in Flamanville, Normandy. In the UK, the government has taken successive steps to facilitate the construction of new nuclear plants ever since the announcement by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair in May 2006 that nuclear power was “back with vengeance”. In the US, nuclear power has been a significant element of Obama administration’s energy and climate policy, and several plants were under construction in Asia, notably in China.

The extraordinary events in Fukushima quickly and fundamentally changed the nature of the “nuclear debate”, with several countries taking steps to reassess the safety of nuclear power plants and/or revisiting their plans for new-build. The impacts of Fukushima events could be expected to turn out particularly significant in countries with far-developed new-build programmes, such as Finland and the UK, as well as countries with a strong nuclear industry and high reliance on nuclear for electricity supply – France being a case in point.

Arguably, the consequences of the current events and debates on the future of nuclear power will crucially depend on the ability of various protagonists to mobilise public opinion in support of their own positions. This in turn highlights the importance of the argumentative skills, resources and strategies deployed by the different players in the process of seeking public acceptance. This paper will examine the consequences of Fukushima events on the debates concerning nuclear power in Finland, France and the UK. The analysis draws on recent work concerning the key discursive strategies and their use in the context of different ‘state orientations’ in the three countries: ‘technology-and-industry-know-best’ in Finland, ‘government-knows-best’ in France, and ‘markets-know-best’ in the UK (Teräväinen et al. 2011). It is argued that the consequences of Fukushima will be largely determined by such historically shaped state orientations. The post-Fukushima public debate will be analysed against the background of these different orientations and national particularities, with particular attention paid to the role of experts, be they in favour and critical towards nuclear energy. In particular, the analysis seeks to explain the reasons for contrast between the relatively tame post-Fukushima discussion in Finland and the UK on the one hand and the extremely lively political and public debate in France, with the foundations of the country’s nuclear policy being seriously and widely called into question for the first time since the late 1970s.

The analysis of the debates relies on an innovative methodology of “socio-informatics”, centred around the “Prospéro” software (Chateauraynaud 2003). The method draws on the French tradition of pragmatic sociology, combines both qualitative and quantitative elements, allowing the analyst to flexibly move between close reading of an individual

text and the treatment of the entire corpus, and continuously refine the analytic framework as the work progresses. “Prospéro analysis” is particularly suitable for the following of the evolution of the debates and arguments, and the shifts and major reconfigurations of the argumentative repertoires. Instead of merely describing the arguments employed by various parties to the debate, the analysis provides a more dynamic view, demonstrating the continuous discursive reconfigurations resulting from the creative employment of the “old” arguments in new and constantly changing circumstances.

References

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Teräväinen, T., Lehtonen, M. & Martiskainen, M. 2011. Climate change, energy security, and risk – debating nuclear new build in Finland, France and the UK. *Energy Policy* 39(6): 3434-3442.