
This is an important book. It is not a very good book, and neither is it a bad book, but it is definitely an important one. For the first time, the pro-nuclear lobby has nailed its colours to the mast, and fired off salvos with intent to kill. In fact, the gauntlet is thrown down with the dedication, which reads 'To Ralph Nader and all who worship the water he walks on!'. Thus the style for the book is set, and there is no respite; it is the turn of the 'antis' to be villified.

Dr. Petr Beckmann works in the Electrical Engineering Department of the University of Colorado, U.S.A. He has assembled in this book a complete defence of nuclear power, challenging the usual myths and emphasizing the dangers implicit in opting for energy sources other than nuclear power. He points out that arsenic trioxide, used as a pesticide, is 50 times more toxic than plutonium ('the most toxic substance known to man'). Similarly, caffeine is only ten times less toxic than plutonium. Again, he points out that each year's delay in commissioning a 1000 MW nuclear plant leads to 20-100 deaths among coal miners.

From the technological point of view, much of the argument in the book is difficult to refute. On many counts, nuclear power is safer than other generation systems. Its waste products attract so much interest just because they are so easily detected, but this is, in itself, an advantage. The waste is also small in volume. Beckman claims that, if all the electricity in the United States were generated by nuclear reactors, the waste would amount to the volume of an aspirin per head of population per year. Compare this with the 320 lbs of obnoxious waste produced today for each American as a result of coal-fired electricity! Reactor safety is certainly under extensive scrutiny, but, so far, there is little to indicate that a sufficiently long chain of human errors could occur in such a way as to overcome the intricate failsafe systems. I certainly share the author's conclusion: I would rather have the aspirin than the slag heap, and I would certainly prefer the nuclear reactor next door to the 2 Mt supertanker in the local docks.

The book serves admirably as a handbook for the pro-nuclear lobby. While I certainly understand the frustrations which led the author to adopt his fairly abrasive style, I trust that the debate will now be carried out in a spirit of seeking after truth rather than that of 'kick the other man hard enough and he won't get up'. This book may well jolt the senses of a few of the pseudo-environmental lobby, but the layman must be presented with reasoned argument from all sides. My feeling is that the public still respects the clean fighter.

So far, I have ignored what is an extremely serious allegation by the author. He described the anti-nuclear lobby as a new class, the 'Penthouse proletariat', whose aim is to protect their pleasant existence by ensuring that others who have not yet attained this ideal have no chance of doing so. He sees them as predominantly middle class, wealthy and with a built-in bias against science and technology because they do not understand it, their ultimate aim being power.

This may well be so in America, but is beyond my experience. It is certainly not so in Europe. There may well be many aboard the environmental bandwagon who fit in with Beckmann's description, but there are many serious-minded, sincere people who are genuinely worried by the advent of large-scale nuclear-power production. It would be a pity if the book were not read by the very people it is aimed at simply because it offends them so much.

There can be no doubt about the author's other main accusation. There is an undeniable bias amongst the press and television people against nuclear power. This is not just sensationalism, it is blatant bias. The sooner we have responsible debate in front of the public at large, the sooner we can come to a sensible decision about the role of nuclear reactors. Perhaps Petr Beckmann's book will prod the media in this direction.

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