

The naming and framing of nuclear energy

by the Belgian government and the nuclear lobby: a critical
discourse analysis

What you can expect

- Nuclear situation in Belgium
 - Positioning of the study
 - The life cycle of nuclear power
 - Some results
 - Discussion
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Belgian situation

- Law on the nuclear exit of 2003: full exit by 2025
- Delay of the exit: still seven reactors operational (Doel and Tihange)
- 50% of the Belgian energy production is nuclear
- Low investments in alternative sources of energy
- Several actors plea for retreatment from the exit
- A “slow” energy pact in the making: uncertain future for the nuclear exit

Positioning the study

Questions on my mind

- Is nuclear energy really all that bad?
- Why is it important for some actors to keep nuclear energy?
- How do lobby organisations discursively position themselves in this situation?
- How does the current Belgian government react?

Theoretical permisses

- Ecological Justice
- Ideology is represented in discourse
- Discourse is a social practice and creates social practices: it is a tool for ideology
- Discourse can be deconstructed

Methodology

- Focus on the current government and prominent Belgian nuclear lobby organisations: *Electrabel, Nuclear Forum, Belgian Nuclear Society (BNS) and the Study Centre for Nuclear Energy (SCK)*
- Data-collection aimed at public information
- Focus on the necessity, cleanliness and safety of nuclear energy
- Deconstructing the discourse based on Larrain (1983)

Analytical framework: Marxism and ideology (Larrain, 1983)

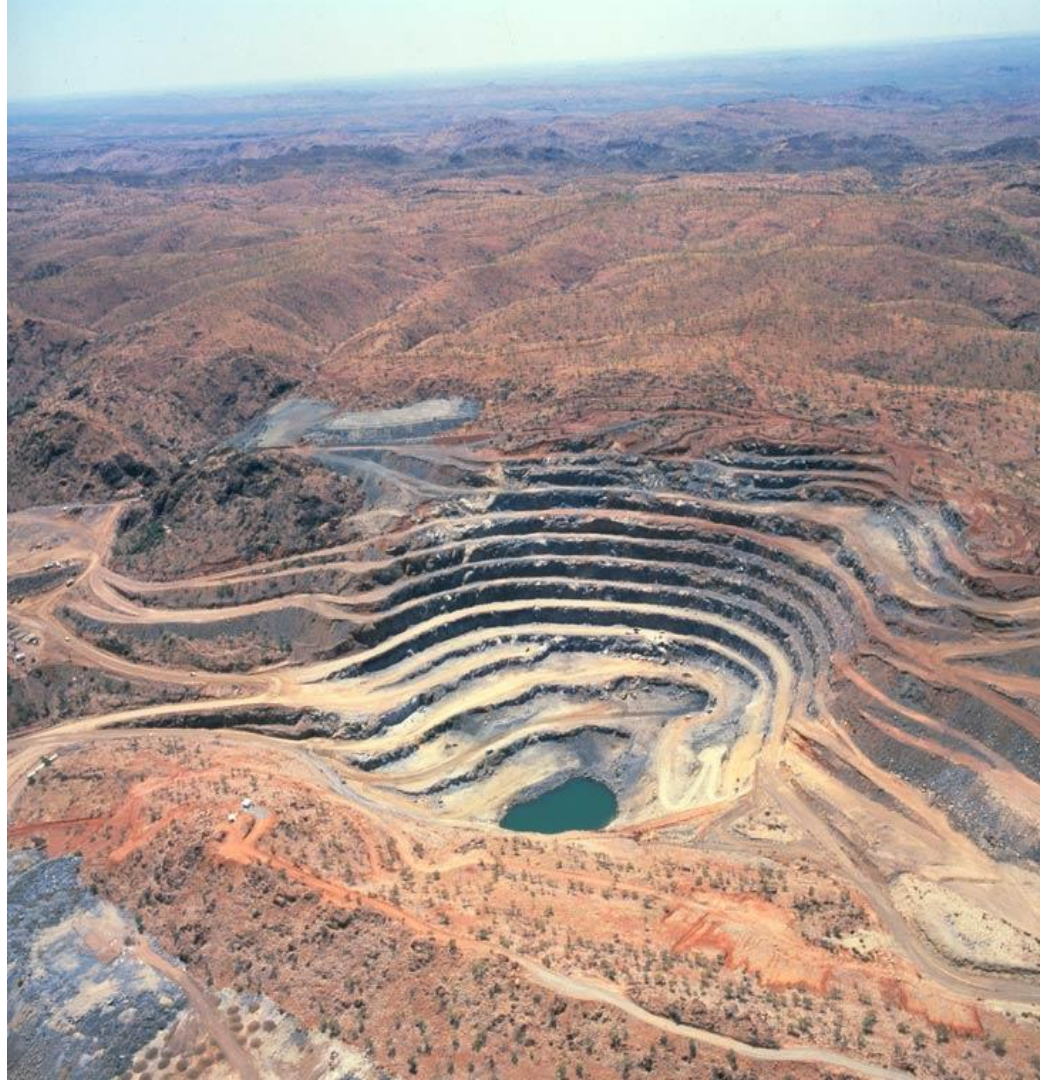
- 1) The denial of events
- 2) Misunderstanding phenomena to avoid appropriate responses
- 3) Displacing attention from one problem to another
- 4) Minimising the significance of an event

Nuclear energy, from cradle to 'grave'

Uranium mining

- Limited uranium reserves left
- Land grabbing, social conflicts and human rights violations
- Negative ecological impact
- Energy intensive
- (Radioactive) waste

Deserted uranium mine in Canada



Nuclear energy production

- Needs materials for the nuclear sites
- Needs large amounts of water
- Is vulnerable to climate change
- Risk of a nuclear accident
- Potential target for a terror attack



Nuclear site of Tihange, Belgium

Nuclear waste

- High-radioactive waste
- Risks can exist up to 10.000 years
- Decommissioning of the nuclear site
- risk of weapon proliferation
- Still no final solution



Results

Denying

→ Explicit case: flaw indications in the reactor vessels of Tihange 2 and Doel 3:

“These impurities were unjustly referred to as ‘cracks’ by the media” (Engie Electrabel, s.d., p. 13)

“Our nuclear plants pose no danger” (MR, 2016; N-VA, 2016)

→ Implicit case: uranium provisions

“Nuclear energy is a safe, stable and reliable source of energy. Uranium reserves are situated in several, mostly stable regions ... From a strategic point of view, nuclear energy is an important factor of stability and energy independence for Europe” (Belgian Nuclear Society, 2012, p. 41).

Misunderstanding

→ Claiming *facts* without actually knowing: CO₂ levels of nuclear energy and waste management

“Thanks to nuclear energy, we save an amount of CO₂ comparable to all our cars together!”
(Engie Electrabel, zd., p. 33).

“Nuclear energy emits less CO₂ than photovoltaic energy and is comparable to wind energy”
(MR, 2015)

“Repositories in clay are very well suited for a risk-free deposit during hundred of thousands of years.” (Nucleair Forum, 2017)

Displacing attention

→ Certainty of affordable electricity

“We want a realistic scenario for the nuclear exit in 2065 ... We do not want the light to go out ... We will need the nuclear plants for our supply” (Government parties, 2017)

You are wrong-informed

Opposed to what some sources might say, our nuclear plants are safe ... Unfortunately, some facts become decontextualized and this, to our regrets, generates false perceptions. This is exactly why we find it so important to, to avoid misunderstandings” Engie Electrabel, z.d, p. 2).

“27% of the Belgians think that nuclear energy has a negative impact on the environment. The reason why: insufficient knowledge about the low carbon emissions of nuclear energy and the controlled waste management” (Nuclear Forum, 2017)

Minimising

→ Nuclear waste: not present in the government discourse, minimised by the lobby

“Radioactive waste is a very minimal fraction of the total volume of waste that is produced in Belgium ... The high radioactive waste is comparable to 5 gram per person per year or the equivalent of one thimble ... This type of waste represents only 1% of the total amount of radioactive waste in Belgium.” (Engie Electrabel, z.d., p. 27-28).

Discussion

- Nuclear energy is harmful for people, animals and ecological systems
- Both lobby and state benefit economically from nuclear energy
- The government and lobby apply ideological strategies in their public discourse
- Discourse becomes practice: Belgium policy is not moving towards a nuclear exit by 2025
- State-corporate crime?

Questions?



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