

***Les silences de Tchernobyl. L'avenir contaminé.* Ed. Galia Ackerman, Guillaume Grandazzi and Frédérick Lemarchand, Paris, Édition Autrement, 2006 (second revised and extended edition), 300 pp. Appendix. Maps. Bibliography. Author Biographies. €19, paperback.**

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“How does one commemorate a catastrophe that is still unfolding?” (“Comment commémorer une catastrophe en devenir?”, p. 218) Such is the question raised by Guillaume Grandazzi and Frédérick Lemarchand, sociologists of the University of Caen, in their anthology *Les silences de Chernobyl. L'avenir contaminé* (“The Silence of Chernobyl. The Contaminated Future”), first published in 2004 and revised and extended in 2006 on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster. In 16 essays, sociologists, philosophers, journalists, writers and theatre directors from France, Belarus and Ukraine grapple with this question. Contributions also include interviews with natural scientists and with Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1986. The volume provides two perspectives on the disaster: first, it reconstructs the accident and describes its medical, ecological, human and political effects and the practical attempts to deal with these effects, from the past through to the present and into future. Second, it depicts Chernobyl as a watershed moment, since it was a disaster of such magnitude that it resists comprehension (p. 10). The book is divided into four parts, exploring 1) the political management of the disaster, 2) life in the contaminated area, 3) the memory of Chernobyl, and 4) the book *Voices from Chernobyl* by Svetlana Alexievitch. Photographs, sketches from the Swiss artist Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, maps, an extensive bibliography and filmography and a short list of internet links complete the publication.

The work opens with a foreword by Grandazzi and Lemarchand. “Chernobyl changed the very nature of catastrophe [...]” (“Avec Tchernobyl, c’est la nature même de la catastrophe qui a change [...]”, p. 6), they assert, making reference to the fact that for most victims of the contamination, the disaster and its consequences were invisible. Without any direct experience of the “primal event” (“événement fondateur”, p. 6), Chernobyl really constitutes, according to them, less a discrete event in the past and more the new mode of living which it triggered: the prohibitions and rules of everyday life in the contaminated zone have themselves become the event (p. 7). But Chernobyl has not only changed the lives of millions of people, from this generation and the next, living in the contaminated areas of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. It challenges, moreover, according to Grandazzi and Lemarchand, the very existence of humanity in the nuclear age, since it evokes the risk of total destruction (p. 8). Because of this unique quality, Chernobyl has, in their opinion, a paradigmatic character for life in the “risk society” (p. 9).

In the 2006 version of the book Galia Ackerman appears as an additional co-editor. The journalist and translator visited Ukraine, Belarus and Russia several times where she interviewed dozens of people about their experiences of the Chernobyl disaster. Four of these

accounts are recounted in the book, so that her interview with Vassili Nesterenko, director of the Institute of Nuclear Physics of Minsk at the time of the Chernobyl accident, opens the first chapter. Immediately following the accident he began research into the consequences of the radioactive fallout, particularly its effect on the health of children, and founded the independent Institute of Radiation Safety BELRAD in 1990. He was, however, repeatedly put under pressure by the state authorities. Another essay by Maryvonne David-Jougneau describes the case of scientist Yury Bandazhevsky, who, as depicted by the author, was also a victim of political repression, sentenced to prison in 2001 for his research into the effects of Chernobyl on human health. The editors intend to show with these examples how the authorities and nuclear industry try to suppress information on the consequences of the accident on the population, a process described as “negationism” by Lemarchand (p. 211). With a similar theme, the essay by the Ukrainian politician and journalist Alla Yaroshinskaya discusses secret Chernobyl documents of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which she had secretly copied in the turmoil of transformation. Nesterenko and Bandazhevsky both collaborated with French organizations working on the Chernobyl issue, for example, the Commission de Recherche et d'Information Indépendantes sur la Radioactivité (Commission for Independent Research and Information on Radioactivity, CRII-Rad) and the organization Enfants de Tchernobyl Belarus (Children of Chernobyl Belarus), whose former president Michel Fernex also contributes to the publication. Fernex opens the second chapter with an explanation of the health effects of the radioactive fallout in Europe. The chapter goes on to detail life in the contaminated area and the management of the accident in the past twenty years.

The third, theoretically most developed part of the volume focuses on the memory of Chernobyl, an event which, for Grandazzi and Lemarchand, does not belong in the past but which, through its effects, determines the future. To commemorate the event, one has “to reverse the arrow of time” (“renverser la flèche du temps”, p. 9) and “to forge in present a memory of the future” (“se forger dans le présent une mémoire du future”, p. 221). Grandazzi defines the catastrophe as a historic break: Chernobyl is seen as a historical turning point after which nothing could ever be the same again. This “inaugural dimension” (p. 198) puts Chernobyl on par with Auschwitz and Hiroshima (p. 197 f.).

<sup>1</sup> One might note, however, that the editors fail to mention other major nuclear accidents such as the Three Mile Island/Harrisburg accident in 1979 in this context.

The volume's fourth chapter commences with a dialogue between the French philosopher Paul Virilio and the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievitch, author of *Voices from Chernobyl* (1997, published in U.S.A. 2005), a work assembling eyewitness accounts of Chernobyl. The interpreter in the interview was Galia Ackerman, who also translated Alexievitch's book from Russian into French. *La Supplication* (French title) raised awareness of the 1986 nuclear disaster in France and was turned into a theatre play. The play is the subject of the article by the French director Bruno Boussagol and his assistant Virginie Symaniec. In this way the book illustrates another area of cooperation between Belarusian and French Chernobyl activists. Furthermore, several French personages are contributors to this volume, for example Jean-Claude Autret, member of the Association pour le Contrôle de la Radioactivité de l'Ouest (Association for Radioactivity Control in West of France, ACRO), who supplies an essay about the work of the international programmes Ethos, Core and of

ACRO in the contaminated area. This and other French non-governmental organizations are outlined briefly in the appendix.

The book not only deals, then, with the situation in Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, it simultaneously constitutes a contribution to the French debate about the consequences of Chernobyl. The second edition includes, in this vein, an essay about “The cloud that stopped at the border” by the French journalist Jean-Michel Jacquemin-Raffestin, who has already published three books concerned with the radioactive fallout from Chernobyl on French territory. In his conclusion, Lemarchand also makes reference to the French debate. In adopting a concrete critical point of view on nuclear energy and the political as well as economic management of Chernobyl, the volume aligns itself with the victims of the disaster and has, therefore, a specific focus. In any case, the book is recommended for all those with an interest in the impact of Chernobyl on not only the contaminated area itself but on France as well.

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<sup>1</sup> See also his article “Commemorating the Chernobyl disaster: Remembering the future”. Eurozine, 2006/04/21. Electronic document, accessed 02/2011. URL: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-04-21-grandazzi-en.html>.