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An Arc of Nuclear Tensions

In the Federal Republic of Germany a village on the river Elbe, called Brokdorf, a few kilometres north of Hamburg, has become a synonym for intense and vigorous contests over nuclear energy; at Brokdorf construction of West Germany's latest nuclear power station has just begun and the police had to guard the building site against 20-30,000 demonstrators. The simple question is whether we need nuclear energy, because otherwise the lights will go out in the eighties, or not?

This question is not only being raised in the Federal Republic. In Sweden the conservatives won the election with the promise to check the further extension of nuclear power stations. In Great Britain a commission arrived at the conclusion that a further expansion of nuclear energy is to be delayed as long as possible, and the newly elected American President Jimmy Carter made an actually precise statement when he declared that the USA's dependence on nuclear energy should be kept as insignificant as possible.

Everything has begun with the oil sheikhs' "imperitence" of showing the industrialised countries the limits to their influence. The shock of quadrupled mineral oil prices enforced in these countries the construction of nuclear power stations for the generating of energy not only because now this seemed to be more economical. In addition there was the sudden awareness of the dependence on, and vulnerability through, some countries' policies. The initial euphoria about a glorious future — independent of oil, basing on growth-securing unlimited power production through atomic fission — made forget that the cardinal problems of nuclear technology are not yet solved: how safe is operational safety and where to store radio-active wastes for millennia?

In this context, but overleaping the technological problems, other important political and social questions arise immediately. The first partial problem is the question of the internal social consequences of a forced expansion of nuclear energy. In Great Britain a study has recently been published which calls attention to the fact that exactly operational safety and the safe storage of radio-active wastes require the exertions of a police state and corresponding institutions which cannot be reconciled at all with normal ideas of personal

liberty and free movement within a society. Apart from all its speculative deliberations this study at last introduces the hitherto insufficiently considered internal social component into the discussion.

The external problem is pointed out again with great insistence by the just published Third Report to the Club of Rome (Reshaping the International Order). Every country with a nuclear reactor and access to installations for the enrichment of uranium and the separation of plutonium is a potential nuclear power. If the development continues as hitherto, more than 500 reactors could be operating in 52 countries by the end of the century. And even if the countries would be wise enough not to produce nuclear weapons there will be the risk that fissionable material might fall into the hands of political extremists.

And it is here where the roots of the dispute between the USA, on the one hand, and France and the Federal Republic of Germany, on the other, about the export of nuclear technologies are to be found. Even if one believes the US Administration that with its pressure on France and West Germany it does not have so much the economic interests of its own nuclear energy industries in mind as the inherent risks, economic problems are not to be ignored. Should these smaller countries not want to rely upon the USA in this respect, they must, in view of their small markets, look for export markets in order to be able at all to construct economical reactors and cover the technological research expenditure.

With that, however, the real question arises, namely what energy consumption we require and what must necessarily be the share of nuclear power — at least for the next generation. And this finally means to ask the question which economic growth we want to acquire at which internal and global risks. Against this background the OPEC's oncoming increase in mineral oil prices has also a qualitative dimension, because any immoderation must enhance the weight of purely economic considerations of this complex problem. The interdependencies of this world could not manifest themselves more clearly than by this arc stretching from a local event in a North German village to the complex of the so-called North-South dialogue.

Otto G. Mayer