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What is meant by saying that
a controversy is socio-technical?
Against simplified views of how to
pursue democracy in technological
societies

InSOTEC

- International Socio-Technical Challenges for implementing geological disposal
 - three-year research project within the Seventh Euratom Framework Programme (FP7), started in March 2011
 - 13 partners from 11 different countries, coordinated by the University of Antwerp
 - Most of the Czech fieldwork done by Karel Svačina, to whom I am also grateful for numerous inspiring discussions
- The goal is „to generate a better understanding of the complex interplay between the technical and the social in radioactive waste management and, in particular, in the design and implementation of geological disposal“

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STS: science as politics

- Science as a collective exercise
- Science and politics interwoven
- Socio-technical controversies
- Research in the wild, non-scientific expertise and lay knowledge
- How far such this extension of politics into science go?

Following STS: democratizing expertise

- The political and legislative support... BUT:
- Too much novelty, too much technicality and organisation
 - „zapojení veřejnosti“ („plugging in the public“)
- Conflict prevention and smoothly running political machinery
 - Toward GD without conflict (Conference in 2009)
- Participation as a good in itself
 - “the participatory turn” in the nuclear sector focuses too strongly on procedural matters—on public involvement as a good in itself—while deflecting attention away from the possibilities of using participation as a more genuine means of enabling public issues and concerns to reach a higher level of articulation (Sundqvist & Elam 2010: abstract)
 - RISCOSM and its „safe space“

What is "socio-technical"?

- An approach originating in STS: problematizing the dividing line between the social and the technical realms
 - Study of socio-technical networks (ANT)
 - Complexity
 - Whenever we talk about the "technical" the "social" *is inevitably involved* in some way
- Considering the social issues alongside the technical ones
 - Political, ethical and legal contexts of technology
 - Participation
 - ... the "social" *should also be considered*
 - Desirable dialogue of activists and engineers?

Complicating things...

“We have to phase the process” (in response to objections)

Martin Kuba, Minister of Industry and Trade,
at a meeting of the Working Group (June 2012)

“We are not talking about the repository now, only about geological research.”

Jan Prachař, Director of RAWRA
at a public debate in Věžná (April 2012)

“'Phasing' in business usually signals an attempt at fraud.”

Mayor of an affected municipality
at a meeting of the Working Group (June 2012)

“Consent with geological research = consent with the repository!”

Jiří Svejkský in SOS Lubenec (2012)

Complicating things even more

“I need to know: what is it going to look like? There also needs to be a binding contract on how it will be constructed, what will be excavated, and so on.”

A mayor at a meeting of the Working Group (June 2012)

“Conclusions cannot be made until geological research is carried out, including deep boreholes at the sites” ... “The whole development is an iterative process.”

Research interview with a member of staff at RAWRA (August 2011)

Conclusions

- STS notion of the socio-technical makes us sensitive toward complexity of the situation and interventions to it
- The shifted notion of the socio-technical in the current policy discourse obscures this complexity (and the STS meaning of the concept should be defended against it)
- However, this does not imply that any separation of the "social" from the "technical" (e.g. by means of phasing) should be avoided or criticized
- Making up issues, arrangements or arguments as "social" or "technical" makes us capable to intervene (despite all complexity), make decisions and do things
- We should not only make people less blind toward the complexities of socio-technical combinations, but also toward the various ways how they, as actors of the case, practically handle and manage these complexities
- Too difficult and unrewarding task? ...

Conclusions

- Indeed, a bit frustrating, sometimes...
- But not more than cooking and caring (Annemarie Mol, 4S/EASST conference)

Thank you! Comments welcome

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