

Book Reading and Discussion Guide for Students

Gusterson, Hugh

1996 Nuclear rites: a weapons laboratory at the end of the Cold War. Berkeley: University of California Press.

In this book, Gusterson argues that in order to understand powerful political forms, it is necessary not only to understand what the ideology tell us about the nature the political world but to understand the “practices through which people are culturally re-produced by institutions and social movements so that they find particular ideologies meaningful” (Gusterson 1996: 4). Specifically, he argues that the expert scientists of the nuclear weapons industry in the US become authoritative ‘experts’ by participating in practices and discourses (about ethics, secrecy, the body and its relationship to machines, and about testing weapons) about nuclear weapons, and not only by mastering the field of physics. Gusterson concludes that America’s era of ‘technocratic militarism’ shaped the nuclear debates of the 1980s and deeply impacted US foreign and domestic policy.

This guide will help you focus your reading and discussion to understand Gusterson’s analysis, and to allow you to consider the persuasiveness of his arguments.

Chapter 2

What is Livermore and why is it interesting?

What is Livermore’s history as a place? Why is Livermore a special (maybe unusual) kind of social world?

How did the author study this place and its social world?

Chapter 3

How are weapons scientists made?

How do weapons scientists become a part of the moral world of the weapons laboratory?

How does thinking about the moral issues of weapon development become privatized?

Why are weapons scientists moral consequentialists? Why don’t nuclear weapons scientists think of themselves as war scientists?

Chapter 4

How does the laboratory’s culture of secrecy reshape the identities of people with PhDs in physics into ‘nuclear weapons scientists’?

How is getting security clearance like an initiation ritual? Why does the secrecy of the laboratory not depend on ‘secrets’ being secret? Why does the weapons laboratory depend on creating a distinction between science and love in order to function as a powerful institution?

Chapter 5

How is nuclear weapons work sustained by the way that weapons scientists think about, represent, and experience bodies (their own and other people’s)? Why is nuclear weapons science jeopardized by a shift in these ideas, representations, or experiences?

Why is it important to document what nuclear radiation does to animal and human bodies? How is the body ‘disciplined’ so that its multiple sensory experiences provide us

with singular and unified messages about the world? How are physics students taught to be physicists? What kinds of language, images, and metaphors about bodies define the 'culture of the body' in the Livermore weapons laboratory?

Chapter 6

Why should nuclear testing be understood as having as great (or greater) cultural significance than technical significance?

How do judgments about the reliability of weapons become recognized as 'authoritative'? How are scientific experiments like rituals? How do the laboratory scientists' myths about nuclear weapons confuse their work with the labor of birth (production with reproduction)?

Chapter 7

How was Livermore laboratory legitimacy as a public institution called into question in the 1980s?

Why did redefining private fears about nuclear war as 'social' problems in the 1980s create a crisis? How did the anti-nuclear movement bring together political constituencies which usually did not agree on political or social issues?

Chapter 8

How did anti-nuclear activists transform public thinking about nuclear weapons?

What is the ideological axiom of the anti-nuclear movement and how is that axiom recreated? What kind of 'experts' did this movement recruit? Why were women and children so involved in the movement? Why did getting arrested become an important ritual of the movement? How did the involvement of women and children in the anti-nuclear movement change/ reflect a change in American politics?

Chapter 1

Why should an anthropologically oriented social scientist provide a cultural analysis of the nuclear arms race?

Why are 'realist' and 'psychological' perspectives on the global arms race not sufficient to help us understand it?

Chapter 9

How did the struggle to establish a 'regime of truth' about nuclear weapons transform US domestic and foreign politics?

What is the ideological axiom of the nuclear weapons laboratory and how is that axiom recreated? What is the ideological axiom of the anti-nuclear movement and how is that axiom recreated?

Chapter 10/ Postscript

How did people who participated in Gusterson's project respond to his findings? Were any of the responses surprising to you?