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Big Science Fiction – Discourse about nuclear fusion research in the United States

Since its beginning in the 1950s nuclear fusion research has promised an ultimate solution to the world's ever increasing energy demand and associated environmental problems. But in spite of enormous investments and continuous international cooperation civil energy production by nuclear fusion lies still in the future.

As a publicly funded Big Science project it is subject to social and political debates about the desirability of its results and the appropriateness of its costs. Arguments for and against this uncertain investment and the underlying assumptions about the imagined future and its challenges and opportunities are products of unique historical circumstances, cultural preferences and attitudes.

Drawing on a historical contextualization and comparative analysis of the discourses about nuclear fusion and its cultural representations in the United States during the Cold War era, I will show how the underlying rationale of nuclear fusion research has constantly been adapted to changing visions of the future as well as political and cultural conditions.