

Nonviolence or nonexistence, democracy or nonexistence

Andrew Lichterman, address to Hiroshima remembrance gathering, August 5, across the street from the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Livermore, California.

Over the past year, the Occupy movement brought to the fore the inequities and irrationality of a system in which small numbers of people who control financial institutions, unaccountable to the vast majority of humanity, make decisions that affect everyone. It is a system in which the few can take immense risks from which only they will profit, while the costs of their failures are imposed upon us all.

The unfair and undemocratic nature of the financial system, however, reflects fundamental characteristics of the dominant form of economic life that extend far beyond the abstract world of money and banking. The technologies we all depend on and the built world we live in are shaped to serve the power and profit goals of the kinds of immense organizations that are successful in this highly inequitable global order. What wins out are technologies that both help to preserve that order and to secure profitable places in it for the people at the top.

Nuclear weapons and nuclear power pose great dangers in themselves. But the nuclear institutions also exemplify key features of the global system as a whole.

Both nuclear power and high technology weapons are elements in and help to sustain a global circulation of trade and investment devoted to the production of goods and services that only a fraction of the world's population can afford to buy. This system pushes much of the world's population towards the margin, with luxury crops, resource extraction, and now biofuels driving hundreds of millions of people off the land into burgeoning urban slums. Yet development efforts continue to center on centralized energy and transportation infrastructure designed to serve global supply chains for high-end consumer goods, with urban elites world-wide competing for places at the top of a starkly two tier economy.

In this kind of world, weapons and military services will be a growth industry. And nuclear technology, with its potential for the ultimate in weaponry, provides a way for the inhabitants of the nuclear sector to make a profitable place in it for themselves, often protected and subsidized by governments that either have nuclear weapons or want to preserve the option of acquiring them.

Nuclear weapons remain the only human-created force that could destroy global civilization in a day, a fact largely absent from public discussion—as if the Cold War confrontation were the only circumstance in which nuclear war could be imagined. Yet we find ourselves today in a conjuncture that bears unsettling resemblances to that which brought the great power wars of the last century. Rising economic powers are challenging those that have been dominant for a century, competing with them for resources and for preeminence in profitable products and technologies. The magnitude and pace of development of these new powers is unprecedented. And it is occurring in the context of equally unprecedented effects flowing from approaching limits to key resources and to the carrying capacity of our planet's ecosystems.

Nuclear weapons and nuclear power are preeminent examples of technologies that manifest the irrationality of the whole. Nuclear power risks destroying our communities to power them. Nuclear weapons are tools in power struggles that only determine which fraction of global elites will be best positioned to exploit the rest of us, contests in which the few seek to profit while all bear the risk.

Four decades ago in words that seem like they could have been written this morning, Martin Luther King said,

“...[We] have been forced to a point where we are going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn't force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them. Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence.”¹

Our technologies have brought us to the point where we may destroy ourselves and much of the chain of life that sustains us. We may do this quickly with nuclear weapons, or slowly just by staying on the course that those who hold power insist on -- and insist on “defending” with a spectrum of violence that extends from the midnight knock on the door through the torture chambers to the incineration of cities, lands, and peoples.

The choice we face today is not only between nonexistence and nonviolence,
but also between nonexistence and true democracy,
a full recognition of our collective vulnerability and our interdependence,
one humanity, with every voice heard equally,
one living and livable world or none.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” April 3, 1968