

POLITICAL WILL

CIVIL SOCIETY, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, AND DISARMAMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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“What might bring the demise of the nuclear industry, or the breakup of the nuclear-military-industrial complex? In order to bring about a substantial change in the motion and direction of massive systems of production, such as electric light-and-power systems, a counterforce of comparable magnitude becomes imperative. Changes in circumstances comparable to those that cause the demise of organisms well adapted to, even shaping, their environment need to occur. To counter large technological systems, forces analogous to those that killed off the dinosaurs are needed. Like the dinosaurs, some technological systems have embedded in them characteristics that were taken on in times past, characteristics suited for past environments but not for the present. Because these characteristics are often embedded in the hardware of a technological system, they are especially long-lived. These anachronistic characteristics persist despite incremental changes in the environment that favour different characteristics. Only an overpowering change in environmental circumstances can kill off the new dinosaurs.” — Thomas P. Hughes¹

The kinds of questions posed by historians and critics of where our economic development path has led are notably absent from the everyday discourses of arms control and disarmament. Equally striking is the contrast between the pervasive lack of urgency on nuclear disarmament matters, both inside and outside of governments, and the rapidly accelerating pace of events of in the wider world. For the first time in the nuclear age, we are seeing a world in deepening economic crisis with no end in sight, amidst a dynamic of declining and ascending great powers of a scale and character comparable to the events that brought the great power wars of the last century. Yet in the halls of the international disarmament fora and professionalized single-issue NGOs that focus on disarmament affairs, few seem to consider any of this particularly relevant to their discussions.

The terrain upon which nuclear disarmament discourse rests is like a conference centre built on the shoulders of an awakening volcano, now being rocked by an intensifying series of tremors. There is economic

decline and political paralysis in core capitalist states that include several of the original nuclear powers, and rapid growth and starkly uneven development in post colonial and post-Communist states, several also nuclear-armed. We have seen a nuclear power catastrophe that has raised fundamental questions about the civilian applications of nuclear technology just when its advocates once more were attempting to portray its expansion as inevitable. The implications of this disaster for renewed awareness of the dangers posed by nuclear technologies are only beginning to unfold. There have been earthquakes literal and metaphorical, but none powerful enough yet to interrupt the sterile rearrangement of technical and legal proposals that substitute for meaningful progress, or the endless reiteration of aspirational catchphrases that substitute for what must be done to create the “political will” that could make meaningful disarmament progress possible. Public responses sparked directly or indirectly by the consequences of the financial cataclysm that has shaken the foundations of the global economic system have begun to emerge in many places, but so far war, militarism, and the misdirection of resources from human needs remains at most a minor thread in the new discussion. Disarmament goes largely unmentioned.

Two decades after the end of the Cold War, nuclear arsenals of civilization-destroying capacity still exist. Most disarmament advocates nonetheless treat nuclear arsenals and the immense, wealthy institutions that sustain them as if they were an anachronistic aberration, a survival from a past order of things that has no integral role in the present. In support of this view, disarmament professionals point to the fact that nuclear arsenals, while still objectively very large, are much smaller than they were during the Cold War, and also cite pronouncements of political and military leaders in the nuclear weapons states that might be read to suggest a consensus on the need for nuclear disarmament.

With a consensus on nuclear disarmament presumed and the arsenals of the two states that possess most of the world’s nuclear weapons trending downwards (however gradually), the focus of disarmament work remains largely procedural and technical, fo-

cused on legal and diplomatic measures and on means for their verification. Despite the glacial pace of disarmament progress after the immediate post Cold War period, the possibility that nuclear disarmament may have plateaued at current levels, and that this has happened for structurally significant reasons, receives little discussion. The question of how to create the “political will” necessary for disarmament, and of whether doing so might require forms of social action focused somewhere besides fora dominated by governments and professionalized, single-issue NGOs, is seldom asked, much less seriously addressed.

As the articles in this volume show, all of the nuclear weapons states are modernizing their nuclear arsenals, and some are continuing to expand them. It appears likely that smaller but still potentially world-destroying nuclear arsenals have been normalized, and are an integral part of the political and economic architecture of the global system as it now exists. Despite social and political changes of a magnitude that from the perspective of the Cold War times might have been expected to make nuclear disarmament possible, the nuclear dinosaurs appear to have adapted successfully to their new environment. The task now is to imagine conditions in which humanity can outlive them, and the means to bring those conditions about.

I believe that at present we lack adequate conceptual tools for thinking about both the dangers posed by nuclear weapons, and the kind of movements we would need to eliminate those dangers, so I can offer only some preliminary cuts through a vast and complicated terrain.

My intention here is to raise some questions about how to think about disarmament and the dangers posed by nuclear weapons anew—or perhaps, even before that, to make an argument for the necessity of doing so. I hope to spark discussion among people who care enough about nuclear disarmament to devote significant time and attention to it, but who find themselves in a time and place far removed from anything that could be called a “disarmament movement,” enmeshed in professionalized NGOs and single-issue, ameliorative forms of advocacy that seem less and less relevant in a crisis-ridden world.

FROM APOCALYPSE NOW TO APOCALYPSE REPRESSED: INTERROGATING THE PAST TO RETRIEVE THE PRESENT

“If ‘the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist,’ what are we given by those Satanic mills which are now at work, grinding out the means of human extermination? I have reached this point of thought more than once before, but have turned my head away in despair. Now, when I look at it directly, I know that the category which we need is that of ‘exterminism.’” — Edward Thompson²

In 1980, as the blocs congealed around the United States and the Soviet Union began their last great round of Cold War confrontation, Edward Thompson cautioned his colleagues on the Left that the nuclear arms race of that time had developed a singular dynamic not reducible to traditional competition among great powers, struggle among classes, or forms of militarism driven by capitalism and imperialist competition. “What,” asked Thompson,

if the object [of analysis] is irrational? What if events are being willed by no single causative historical logic (‘the increasingly aggressive military posture of world imperialism,’ etc.)—a logic which then may be analyzed in terms of origins, intentions, or goals, contradictions or conjunctures—but are simply the product of messy inertia? This inertia may have drifted down to us as a collocation of fragmented forces (political and military formations, ideological imperatives, weapons technologies): or, rather, as two antagonistic collocations of such fragments, interlocked by their oppositions? What we endure in the present is historically-formed, and to that degree subject to rational analysis: but it exists now as a critical mass on the point of irrational detonation.³

Thompson saw an arms race that had developed its own motive power, independent of the deep ideological divide between the Cold War antagonists but also reinforcing it. As the confrontation of nuclear-armed high-tech militaries spiraled onward for decades, it also placed its imprint on every aspect of the competitors, spawning leading industrial sectors, forms of culture, and forms of rule. The vast scale and scope of the arms race could not, Thompson thought, be explained by mere arms profiteering in the West or by “rational” reactions by the USSR to the Western arms buildup. Superpower elites, locked in a decades long confrontation, also had come to depend on it: “At a certain point,” he argued, “the ruling groups come to *need* perpetual war crisis, to legitimate their rule, their privileges, and priorities; to silence dissent; to exercise social discipline; and to divert attention from the manifest irrationality of the operation. They have become so habituated to this mode that they know no other way to govern.”⁴ The social impact the institutional machinery of high-tech arms racing had become so deep and pervasive that it was plausible to take the position that “the USA and the USSR do not *have* military-industrial complexes: they *are* such complexes.”⁵

One could not understand the nuclear arms race and the dangers it posed, Thompson argued, without looking to particular dynamics created by the new military technologies and the distinctive institutions that had developed around them. The immense institutions of the aerospace-nuclear establishment had, in his view, developed an autonomous internal dynamic of their own, still ill-understood but also not reducible to the economic interests and political power of the

arms makers. But Thompson viewed the Cold War, and particularly the “second Cold War” of the 1980s, as a confrontation where ideology even more than the technological and military aspects had become unmoored from any material great power conflict. “It is ideology,” he wrote, “even more than military-industrial pressures, which is the driving motor of Cold War II.... It is as if—as in the last climax of European imperialisms which led on into World War One, or as in the moment when Nazism triumphed in Germany—ideology has broken free from the existential socio-economic matrix within which it was nurtured and is no longer subject to any controls of rational self-interest.”⁶ All of this, thought Thompson, manifested a world in which the polarization between the United States and Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent the USSR-US-China triangle, constituted the “central human fracture” and the “fulcrum upon which power turns” of the era. “This is the field-of-force which engenders armies, diplomacies and ideologies, which imposes client relationships upon lesser powers and exports arms and militarisms to the periphery.”⁷

Thompson believed that the response to the Cold War confrontation needed to work both in parallel and across borders to democratize the economy and politics, while at the same time attempting to disengage subordinate states from the dynamic of the Cold War bloc system. Thompson believed that alliances with liberation movements in the post-colonial world were important, both to prevent their integration into one bloc or another and to prevent the militarization of post-colonial and post-revolutionary states. But he saw “the fracture through the heart of Europe” as being “the central locus of the opposed exterminist thrusts,” and the goal of European disarmament politics as “a counter thrust, a logic of process leading towards the dissolution of both blocs” and “the demystification of exterminism’s ideological mythology,” allowing the states and peoples of Eastern and Western Europe to regain control of their political fate.⁸ It was essential that resistance to each country’s part in the Cold War confrontation and nuclear arms racing come not from outside, “but only from within the resistance of peoples *inside each bloc*.”⁹

But so long as resistance was confined to internal, national politics, it might, Thompson thought, be able to slow the race towards catastrophe, but it would be unable to force any genuine change of course. At the same time, movements that could be portrayed by ruling elites as aiding the “enemy” cause would only reinforce the Cold War dynamic, allowing rulers on each side, in alliance with powerful military-industrial national security state complexes, to reassert ideological control and to police their respective territories. What was needed was an internationalism that rejected the ideologies of both blocs, focusing on the “imperatives of human ecological survival” and subordinating for

the moment political differences—for example, between those who were anti-capitalist and those who were not—about what a different and genuinely better future might look like. If these movements could “swing those blocs off collision-course,” Thompson believed, the blocs themselves would begin to erode, opening up the space in which a broader politics, and prospects for deeper change, in both blocs and the wider world, might open up once more.¹⁰

Thompson’s view that broad coalitions were needed to thaw the frozen politics of the Cold War confrontation did not imply, however, that a peace politics could afford to ignore the deeper social structures supporting militarism and driving conflicts among. Rather, Thompson and the wing of the peace movement he helped build tried to develop a critique with an appeal outside and beyond the orthodoxies of both East and West, seeking to disseminate truths officially unmentionable both sides of the Cold War divide:

Peace is more than the absence of war. A lasting peace only can be obtained by overcoming the various political, economic, and social causes of aggression and violence in international relations as well as in the internal affairs of states. A comprehensive democratization of states and societies would create conditions favorable to this aim. Such democratization includes the existence of a critical public which has the capacity to exercise effective control over all aspects of military and security policy.... The economic systems in East and West urgently need democratization. Social needs such as housing or work in safe and human conditions have become more important in defining economic priorities. In the West a primary task is to ensure that people are no longer marginalized by massive unemployment. In the East, decentralization of the economy is an essential task in order to make the economy more efficient and responsive to the needs of the people.¹¹

Regardless of one’s view of the role of the Western peace movements, it is evident that the collapse of one superpower protagonist, the Soviet Union, and the dissolution of the communist regimes across Eastern Europe brought with it the end of the particular nuclear danger of that time. But the elements of disarmament movements that were narrowly focused on the weapons technologies of the nuclear arms race and that saw the Cold War confrontation as its cause diminished rapidly as the Cold War wound down. Although a politics aimed at democratizing not only the politics of the East but the economics of the West may have informed and inspired core elements of Cold War disarmament movements, particularly in Europe, the broader coalitions Thompson thought imperative to counteract the Cold War exterminist dynamic failed to coalesce into a cohesive alternative political vision, instead dissolving into a political terrain of causes and identities. “Nothing is more discouraging,” wrote Thompson in 1990,

“than the failure of the Western peace movement and progressive forces to move into the spaces of opportunity which have opened; the failure to hasten on reciprocal process in the West to match the decomposition of Cold War ideological controls in the East.”¹² Those who sought to democratize the economy and to radicalize political democracy beyond plebiscitary choices among managerial elites were overwhelmed by the rising tide of neoliberal triumphalism.

FROM TERROR TO COMPLACENCY: THE UNEXAMINED AFTERLIFE OF COLD WAR NUCLEAR ARSENALS

“It is easy to believe that the nuclear age is different, that perhaps in the 1920s and 1930s people and nations raced toward air war because they were still naive about the dangers they faced or just insufficiently scared, but that nuclear energy compels a restraint and an anxiety impossible at an earlier time. The distinction has some validity, especially with regard to the United States, where the bomber’s benign properties were most widely assumed. But much evidence suggests that the fear of air war was nearly as powerful to an earlier generation as it is for today’s. Indeed, the generation between the world wars had, in the example of World War I, a more potent reminder of war’s irrationality than the nuclear generation possesses today. Their reminder had taken the real-life form of blood and death, but today, with World War II more than four decades in the past, people can be scared only by what they think may happen, not by what they vividly remember to have taken place. To regard the missile generation as the first to confront civilization’s destruction is immodest, self-indulgent, and self-defeating as well, for it leads to denial of an often instructive example and of the recognition of that heavy inheritance received from an earlier age.” — Michael S. Sherry¹³

“Where there is change, there will be struggle, by already privileged elements within societies, for control over its tempo and direction, and, above all, for the distribution of its costs and benefits. The problems of conflict and change today are essentially the same as those that confronted societies in the past; they are likely to be the same in the future.” — Sandra Halperin¹⁴

“The international atmosphere seemed calm. No foreign office expected trouble in June 1914, and public persons had been assassinated at frequent intervals for decades. In principle, nobody even minded a great power leaning heavily on a small and troublesome neighbor. Since then some five thousand books have been written to explain the apparently inexplicable: how, within a little more than five weeks of Sarajevo, Europe found itself at war.” — Eric Hobsbawm¹⁵

Having focused on the Cold War roots of the nuclear arms race largely to the exclusion of the relationship of high-technology militarism to other, perhaps more

deeply rooted social and economic dynamics, many of those who continued to work for disarmament believed that the Cold War’s end offered a significant opportunity for the elimination of nuclear arsenals. The Cold War had constituted an unprecedented division of the world into ideologically opposed blocs, accompanied by the development of equally unprecedented, permanently mobilized military-industrial establishments deploying destructive power of a scale and character that constituted a radical leap beyond anything that had gone before. There was a temptation to believe that because the extraordinary conflict had emerged together with these extraordinary weapons, the two seemingly distinctively intertwined and mutually reinforcing, that with the Cold War’s ending nuclear weapons no longer had relevance to any form of conflict. Many seemed to assume that not just *that* nuclear danger but *any* nuclear danger stemming from conflicts involving the already nuclear-armed states was a thing of the past. The threat nuclear arms continued to represent most often was represented as vestigial, a remnant of a *past* conflict, whose continued dangers were bound up in confrontations between the weapons systems themselves, rather than in the intentions and actions of elites of nuclear-armed states who might choose courses of action that resulted in wars in which nuclear weapons might be used. Much of the repertory of disarmament advocacy to this day consists of characterizing nuclear weapons as Cold War anachronisms, or as militarily useless, or both.

The immediate post-Cold War period did result in significant reductions in the number and variety of nuclear weapons, particularly those deployed by the two superpowers. Massive arsenals comprising in aggregate tens of thousands of nuclear weapons were reduced to thousands, and delivery systems to the vicinity of a thousand for each of the former Cold War adversaries. The initial waves of reductions were facilitated by the fragmentation the Soviet Union and precipitous economic decline of Russia, its nuclear-armed successor state, providing the US government and military (with domestic opposition as its main obstacle) with the opportunity to demobilize the most redundant, obsolescent, expensive, and in some instances most potentially provocative nuclear weapons systems.

That steep curve of declining stockpile numbers, however, has flattened, and shows little concrete sign of tending towards zero in the foreseeable future. We are now more than twenty years past the end of the Cold War—half the length of that era itself. The original superpower antagonists still deploy thousands of nuclear weapons, more than enough to end global civilization in a day. Six other countries deploy nuclear arsenals large enough to kill hundreds of millions and to do significant, long-lasting ecological damage. There appears little reason to believe that we are on an inexorable path towards elimination of nuclear arsenals. Rather, it

seems more likely that we are in the latter stages of the “normalization” of nuclear arsenals in a post Cold War context. Great power armed forces and their constellations of large-organization allies are busy doing other things than confronting each other’s nuclear arsenals. New kinds of permanent states of war have provided ideological rationales for national security states and immense military-industrial complexes, allowing these elements of Cold War elites to successfully sustain their wealth and power, while at the same time continuing to provide a model and a justification for similar elites to find a path to power and privilege in ascendant states.

Despite much aspirational rhetoric about disarmament from current and past political and military leaders, there is no path in view that will reduce nuclear arsenals below the level where wars involving nuclear-armed states could inflict catastrophic damage to humanity and the ecosphere in anything like the near term. To the contrary, it appears possible that barring other, far deeper changes in societies that have nuclear weapons establishments, the bottom limit for nuclear reductions may well be what their ruling elites perceive as an adequate “existential threat”—the certain ability to inflict catastrophic damage on those they see as their likely adversaries. And for elites who continue to entertain global ambitions, perhaps the damage that they believe they must be able to inflict to keep their ever-expanding “way of life” alive must be on a global scale. It may be that this is where the ultimately irrational logic of “deterrence “by threat of limitless violence converges with the irrational, limitless logic of capitalism (and perhaps of all totalizing modernist ideologies rooted in an unending effort to achieve control over nature and society by the perfection of technology). “For power left to itself can achieve nothing but more power, and violence administered for power’s (and not for law’s) sake turns into a destructive principle that will not stop until there is nothing left to violate.”¹⁶

Whatever war crises our global economic and political system generates in the next few decades we will have to face in a nuclear-armed world, barring some significant change of course. The political basis, the “political will,” for such a sea change is nowhere visible on the current political landscape. It is past time to consider once more the kinds of questions Thompson asked, to think anew about the character of the “nuclear danger” in our particular historical moment. What vast structures with an inertia of their own “may have drifted down to us as a collocation of fragmented forces (political and military formations, ideological imperatives, weapons technologies?)” What kinds of dynamics are at work today that might bring constellations of immense organizations deploying nuclear weapons into confrontations that could reach “a critical mass on the point of irrational detonation?”¹⁷

In the United States, the vast nuclear-military-industrial complex and national security state that Thomp-

son saw as a distinctive Cold War phenomenon persists. It has proved not to need an equal partner to legitimate endless arms development, global force projection, and a ceaseless search for overwhelming military dominance. After an interregnum of ideological disarray in the early 1990s, the organizations of the military-industrial complex and their allies cobbled together a new ideological narrative of terrorism and rogue states and a new kind of permanent war emergency. The 9/11 attacks coalesced and accelerated ideological, economic, and political programmes well underway in the late 1990s. These initiatives proved successful enough to bring US military spending up to and beyond average Cold War levels, to launch two wars, and to expand the already vast US permanent military presence in the oil producing regions of the Middle East and Southwest Asia. The US nuclear arsenal is smaller, but still of civilization-destroying size, the institutions they sustain and that sustain them modest only by comparison to their Cold War magnitude.

The role of nuclear weapons has changed, but the essential nature of the conflicts and potential conflicts of which they play a part has changed as well: from two status quo superpowers locked in ideological struggle on their boundaries and hinterlands to developing multi-polar great power contention—with a nuclear armed hegemonic state in economic decline, but still unmatched in military power. Yet there is little discussion of whether nuclear war was avoided during the Cold War not by luck, not by successful deterrence, not by the restraining effects of peace movements, but rather mainly because those who controlled the nuclear-armed states did not see their core interests threatened to a degree that impelled them to push war risk to, and over, the limit. The two superpowers were vast continental empires with internal hinterlands not yet fully developed, and both dominated large spheres of influence in which their interests, both economic and ideological, could be furthered. Both states, and the Soviet Union most of all, had recent memories of the carnage and devastation wrought by industrialized total warfare. Armed competition occurred mainly at the periphery of both systems without threatening either core. The collapse of the Soviet-centered system did not result from a death struggle with Western capitalism, but rather was mainly an internal affair. Large segments of the various East bloc national elites (and those in China as well) successfully preserved their privileged position by consolidating and privatizing or selling off the fruits of communist-era modernizing development, emerging as new power players inhabiting ascendant urban nodes of the global corporate capitalist metropole.

It is conceivable in this context that the existence of nuclear weapons added to, rather than reduced, the likelihood of great power war during the Cold War period. Material conflicts between competing elites remained

below the level of existential threat to either side, and the still-fresh memory of the horrors of World War II induced a degree of caution in the decision-makers. But nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them at global ranges raised the potential of a *coup de main*, destroying the adversary in one swift stroke. The appeal of this to some extreme elite elements, particularly in the United States, combined with the ideological confrontation in ways that intensified it and increased the inherent dangers of arms racing and of large, perpetually mobilized nuclear forces.

Globally, nuclear establishments and military-industrial complexes exist today in the context of (and, to a degree still inadequately understood, in the service of) an aggressive corporate capitalism that now encompasses virtually the entire planet. This particular phase of capitalism is intensely financialized at the core and export-driven in the regions of most rapid development, resulting in unevenly distributed growth and immense wealth disparities. That growth is of an unprecedented absolute magnitude, resulting as well in growing resource competition in a world in which the most easily exploited deposits of many key nonrenewable resources are nearing exhaustion and in which the disruption of existing ecosystems is threatening societal capacities to sustain production of traditional renewable resources, such as foodstuffs, while attempting to develop new ones, such as biofuels. The result is a kind of universal imperialism, with new nodes of the global capitalist metropole springing up in competition with one another within and across national boundaries. Heavily defended islands of new wealth remain immersed in a sea of poverty. Fortresses of old wealth in the core have seized control of increasing shares of national income amidst deteriorating 20th century conurbations inhabited by polyglot multitudes whose common ground appears to be a future of thwarted expectations.

It is in this broader global context that we need to view nuclear weapons, and also the integral relationship between nuclear weapons and nuclear power. Both are elements in and help to sustain a dominant 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. 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 one way for certain elites and sectors of the new middle classes to make a profitable place for themselves within the wave of corporate-capitalist globalization spanning the late 20th century, into the 21st.

The nuclear road provides elites in nuclear establishments with privileged access to their own country's resources, a development context that can be shielded from foreign competition, and forms of trade and industry that can be portrayed as increasing in importance as fossil fuels diminish. This is so whether the

intention to develop nuclear weapons is clear or is allowed to remain ambiguous. The powerful tools of nationalism and "national security" secrecy can be used to facilitate the extraction of wealth from the rest of society and prevent scrutiny of national nuclear enterprises that whether in first generation nuclear powers or post-colonial states have been rife with technical problems, corruption, and widespread, intractable environmental impacts. Nuclear technology, with its overtones of near-magical, limitless power (an image its purveyors energetically promote), casts a positive aura over other big, centralized high-tech development programmes that are profitable for elites, but have little or even negative value for much of the population in an ever more stratified world.¹⁸

Nuclear weapons and nuclear power are preeminent examples of the irrationality of the whole. Nuclear energy risks destroying society in order to power it; nuclear weapons risk destroying the people to save the state. Nuclear arsenals 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. Nonetheless, they have been celebrated by national regimes both capitalist and socialist, neo-imperialist and post-colonial, as crowning national achievements, and as supreme implements of productive and coercive power. Immense institutions and academic disciplines have been constructed to develop, deploy, and justify them, institutions which have ideological and political influence that appears to far exceed their economic and military-political role. Thus, the appeal of nuclear weapons to elites pursuing a range of political and economic development paths over the past half century suggests that nuclear abolition may require change that reaches even deeper than the institutions of global corporate capitalism.

The kind of "nuclear danger" facing us today is perhaps the inverse of that presented by the Cold War world E.P. Thompson portrayed, requiring a shift in focus for those who hope to reduce it, and to eliminate nuclear weapons. We no longer have a nuclear danger concentrated in one central conflict, its contours defined by the intertwining of an unprecedented technological and industrial arms race and an equally unprecedented ideological confrontation that divided the world. Instead, we now see nuclear weapons deployed in the more "normal" context of shifting constellations of immense corporate capitalist organizations, their interests aligning or conflicting with nation-states that deploy nuclear weapons. The prevailing opinion among those who are most visible in arms control and disarmament discourse appears to be that great power war and wars involving nuclear weapons are far less likely in this conjuncture than they were during the Cold War. Otherwise, the notion that nuclear weapons that do not exist (i.e. those that might come into the

possession of “rogue states” or “terrorists”) constitute a greater danger than thousands of nuclear weapons held at the ready by nuclear-armed states would appear absurd.¹⁹

There are two main sorts of arguments in circulation supporting the proposition that the danger today of large-scale wars among nuclear-armed states is vanishingly small. The first is that today’s “great powers” have become so economically interdependent that total wars among them would be against their interests. This notion, it should be noted, also had considerable popularity in the years immediately before World War I.²⁰ The second argument essentially is that nuclear deterrence works. One may wonder why this should be any more true now than it was during the Cold War, and why there is so little sense of urgency today about bringing nuclear arsenals down below the numbers where they can wreak catastrophic damage on humanity and the natural world.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NUCLEAR DANGER: BEYOND GUNS VS. BUTTER

“By the end of the twentieth century, the largest U.S. corporations, approximated by the Top 0.01%, have reached an unprecedented situation: their net profit share of national income hovers around record highs, and it seems that this share cannot be increased much further under the current political-economic regime.... Peering into the future, they realize that the only way to further increase their distributional power is to apply an even greater dose of violence. Yet, given the high level of force already being exerted, and given that the exertion of even greater force may bring about heightened resistance, capitalists are increasingly fearful of the backlash they are about to unleash.” — Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan²¹

What discussion there is of the “political economy” of nuclear weapons complexes and disarmament largely is limited to the profit motives and money-driven political influence of military contractors and to the impact of the allocation of government spending to the military rather than to programmes that would provide for human needs. In this latter vein the current economic crisis, and the austerity campaigns that have been a central element of the economic policy response by Western elites, have been seized upon as an opportunity to attack nuclear weapons budgets as spending on useless or obsolete Cold War weapons. There also have been renewed efforts by disarmament groups to form alliances with NGOs working to defend social welfare programmes and workplace rights and protections, emphasizing “guns vs. butter” themes. So far, however, there has been little new analysis of the relationship of nuclear arsenals and institutions to

the broader constellations of economic power associated with particular states, or of the way that the current systemic economic crisis, the first of its kind in the nuclear age, might affect the risk of war involving use of nuclear weapons.

One place to start in untangling these strands is to consider whether money cut from military budgets would indeed be spent on the development of institutions, technologies, and practices that serve the needs of the vast majority of populations either within particular states or globally. Changes in government fiscal schemes on both the revenue and expenditure sides are far more likely to be used to support the asset values and income streams of the wealthy and powerful institutions that have the preeminent say in installing and influencing governments. This is particularly visible now in the sweeping austerity programmes being imposed in varying degrees on the populations of the countries of the old capitalist core, with the top tier corporate capitalist organizations taking the opportunity of global crisis to consolidate their control over economies while rolling back welfare state programmes and regulations. In this climate, people hard pressed to sustain their individual economic existence are unlikely to see disarmament as a pressing concern. People working in organizations focused on preserving existing public goods, social services, and workers’ rights likely understand this, whether that understanding has been articulated or not. Consequently, disarmament advocacy approaches that make simple “guns vs. butter” arguments for redirection of funds spent on the military to human needs are unlikely to succeed. It will be difficult to develop broad and effective coalitions without a deeper critique of the current conjuncture, a vision of an alternative path forward that reduces the demand for weapons and military services, and a strategy for advancing along that path.

The deeper structural trends, it should be noted, were in place long before the crash of 2007–2008. In 1994, Greg Albo saw the dominant global circuit of trade and investment as leading to

an unstable vicious circle of ‘competitive austerity’: each country reduces domestic demand and adopts an export-oriented strategy of dumping its surplus production, for which there are fewer consumers in its national economy given the decrease in workers’ living standards and productivity gains all going to the capitalists, in the world market.... So long as all countries continue to pursue export-oriented strategies, which is the conventional wisdom demanded by IMF, OECD, and G7 policies and the logic of neoliberal trade policies, there seems little reason not to conclude that ‘competitive austerity’ will continue to ratchet down the living standards in *both* the North and the South.²²

Almost two decades later, this regime of “competitive austerity” is deep in crisis, likely caused in large part

by the extremes of wealth and poverty and resulting economic stagnation it has engendered. Nonetheless, most of the major economic actors seem committed to an intensification of the “competitive austerity” approach. The resulting economic and political landscape is beginning to bear some uncomfortable resemblances to the conditions that brought on the great power wars of the last century, but this time with permanently mobilized, nuclear-armed great power militaries. Widely separated historical periods cannot be easily compared, but the differences between the two conjunctures do not necessarily point in the direction of less, rather than more danger of large-scale war. Contrary to the contention that “austerity” is likely to result in significant reductions in arms expenditure and changes in total force structures that could be honestly understood as “disarmament,” these conditions appear likely to favour the continuing power of military industrial complexes (again, in the absence of more fundamental changes in the character of global economics and politics). As leading high-tech economic sectors with significant organizational alliances in governments, arms makers and military services providers are well-situated politically to continue to draw on state funds amid circumstances in which many forms of profitable high-value added global trade are disrupted. And with conflict and the potential for conflict on the rise due both to the immiseration of populations by intensifying cycles of austerity and the rapid ascendance of new economic powers, military-industrial complexes will find it relatively easy to find and to justify a continuing market for their wares.

Wars among “great powers” in such circumstances arise not as part of a rational competitive scheme, but rather when the accumulating irrationalities of a global system of competition generates conflicts both within and among states that elites find insoluble. The kinds of regimes that singly or in combination generate war crises result not from the pursuit of economic ends by carefully chosen military means, but rather from national systems themselves locked in irresolvable domestic conflicts, their elites bereft of strategies that would allow them to contain dissent while protecting their own privilege (whose legitimacy must remain beyond question). It is, as at such times in the past that, again in Thompson’s formulation, “ideology has broken free from the existential socio-economic matrix within which it was nurtured and is no longer subject to any controls of rational self-interest.”²³

Further, long-entrenched elites, blinkered in such moments by ideologies whose content and function has become more and more a one-dimensional defence of a deteriorating status quo, typically lack the intellectual tools as well as the imagination to anticipate the likely consequences of war-making, which they have come to view as just one more tool of instrumental, top-down statecraft. Gabriel Kolko notes,

All wars in the past century began with men who initiated them substituting their delusions, in which domestic political interests and personal ambitions often played a great part, for realistic evaluations of the titanic demands and consequences that modern warfare invariably imposes.... They have been oblivious of surprises and have harbored false expectations; wars almost never conform to the convenient assumptions about how long conflicts will last and their decisive political consequences.²⁴

“Those who become leaders of states,” Kolko also observed, “are ultimately conformists on most crucial issues, and individuals who evaluate information in a rational manner—and therefore frequently criticize traditional premises—are weeded out early in their careers.” Today, the same elites who assured us that the business cycle had been conquered by new improved forms of economic rationality and management, making long, deep global economic crises virtually impossible, now maintain that the rise of new economic powers and the decline of the old can be “managed” without catastrophic conflict. They also continue to believe that immense high-tech militaries ultimately backed by world-destroying nuclear arsenals are a useful tool in the repertory of “management.”

All of these factors suggest that those who pursue the prevalent incremental approaches to disarmament in nuclear-armed states may be thinking too narrowly and too small. Eliminating concrete instances of nuclear weapons complexes is a good thing, but once again must be considered in a broader context. Paring away at arsenals and infrastructure while leaving the core institutions of high-tech nuclearized militarism and the interests they serve not only untouched but largely uncriticized, with nuclear disarmament generally proceeding at a glacial pace, may do little to reduce the threat that nuclear weapons pose. This is particularly true of approaches that take on the aspect of a kind of “peer review” for military establishments, bracketing the fundamental interests and purposes militaries serve while suggesting that military budgets are better spent on some mix of capabilities that has fewer nuclear weapons but perhaps more of the most modern and sophisticated conventional forces.²⁵

This kind of approach, again, implicitly assumes that the risk of war is very low among great powers over the time it is likely to take to reduce nuclear arsenals to the point where their threat no longer is significant. In this regard it is worth considering the fact that we have not seen total war mobilization by the leading industrial powers for over half a century. We have no idea, really, what it would look like in the current conjuncture, with immense high-tech economies operating at full capacity, many millions of people added to militaries and workforces, peacetime regulations of all kinds thrown aside and top-down planning and disciplinary structures of an entire new order imposed. World War

It completely transformed the technological and organizational character of all the leading states, even leaving aside the effects of the war's destruction. In a war crisis, what marginal progress there might have been in reducing the numbers of nuclear weapons and delivery systems could be quickly swept away. If the war plans of the contending powers demanded more nuclear weapons, more nuclear weapons would be built. If the peer review-style efforts of mainstream Western arms control advocates had indeed been on target and a moderately downsized nuclear arsenal could provide an adequate ultimate threat to work most effectively in combination with a fearsome array of high-tech "conventional" weaponry, perhaps no additional nuclear weapons would be deemed necessary. The possibility that available resources and over-burdened ecosystems would not easily sustain full-scale war mobilizations by the most powerful states might make a war crisis more dangerous rather than less, intensifying resource conflicts and domestic political unrest in ways that make ruling elites even more likely to take risks.

WHERE DOES POLITICAL WILL COME FROM? SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE CRISIS OF THE NGOS

"The lowest and widest common denominator of anti-nuclearism has to be the collective moral sentiment against such life-threatening evil. But the vision of a collective and shared humanity that this arouses also has to be linked, at least in some informal and indirect sense, to a broader agenda for collective human progress in the twenty-first century. In this vital sense, it remains as true now as in the past, we must fight for more than peace. To fight successfully against nuclearism, we must fight against more than nuclearism. To fight successfully for a nuclear-free world, we have to be internationalists. And to deepen and strengthen our internationalism on this front, we will have to be internationalists on many other fronts." — Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik²⁶

When seeking to explain the perennial absence of disarmament progress in international negotiating fora, diplomats and NGO staffers alike often will cite the absence of "political will". How such political will might be created, however, is seldom seriously analyzed or discussed. In the context of interactions between the states themselves, this absence is unremarkable. States are assumed to come to the table with their "political will" largely predetermined, their diplomats acting within limits established by political processes within presumptively legitimate sovereign states. Successful rounds of diplomacy may yield confidence on a particular matter such as nuclear disarmament that prepares the ground for further progress, but the determination that further progress is desirable still occurs

within whatever political processes are decisive in the negotiating states.

Nuclear disarmament activists focus a great deal of attention on interactions among states and on the fora where they meet to negotiate (or to produce the endless appearance of negotiating) on disarmament matters. This is true not only of arms control groups with agendas largely delimited by the foreign policy goals of the states in which they are located, but of smaller NGOs dedicated to the speedy elimination of all nuclear arsenals. They do so despite the fact that international fora and interactions among states pose difficulties for social movements that ultimately have interests and goals that are not aligned with those of any state, as defined and expressed by the constellations of elites who control states.

The nature of international civil society remains problematic, in ways that pose some particular tensions for the role of international "civil society" actors in disarmament matters. The concept of civil society itself was developed in relation to the public sphere and mechanisms for the expression of public opinion and the formation of political will within nation states.²⁷ In the international arena, people and organizations who do not share common citizenship seek to influence decisions and actions of states and organizations of states whose constituent actors are governments. The actions and decisions that disarmament advocates seek to influence are core aspects of state function: the deployment of the highest levels of military force. There are good reasons why international publics, and publics not limited to those of nuclear weapons states, should have a voice in decisions about nuclear weapons and disarmament and arms control more generally. Nuclear weapons pose a threat to the future of all humanity and the ecosphere. The ways that states, and particularly the most powerful states, deploy armed force shapes the character of global society as a whole.

Nonetheless, there are reasons why a form of internationalism that seeks to directly affect interactions between states may be problematic for the development of effective movements that can help build a world in which elimination of nuclear weapons is possible. The first is that decisions about nuclear weapons policies—whether to acquire them, whether to continue to maintain and deploy them—are made within the polities of particular nation states, and direct pressure on the relevant governments can most easily be applied by domestic peace movements. But in addition, a nuclear weapons discourse focused on international fora and state interactions (such as treaties) tends to represent states as unitary actors. There are some sound reasons for this, including the fact that in many circumstances norms requiring respect for claims of national sovereignty can be invoked to defend the right to self-determination of populations as well. But in disarmament discourse, treating states as unitary actors also elides

the existence of particular constellations of organizations and interests within states that drive and benefit from pursuit of nuclear weapons, and more generally of a national technological capacity to build them.

Treating states as unitary actors manifesting the common interests of their populations is an important component of a non-proliferation and disarmament narrative that legitimizes the nuclear status quo. On the proliferation side, the pursuit of nuclear weapons is seen as a natural goal for states, because acquiring nuclear weapons is seen as a way to achieve military advantage over states without them, and then as a means of “deterring” the use of nuclear weapons by other states that possess them. The difficulty of eliminating nuclear arsenals once they exist is conceived as a technologically constructed version of the tragedy of the commons: each state’s search for greater security via acquisition of nuclear weapons leads to greater insecurity for all, but no nuclear armed state is likely to disarm unless its potential adversaries do so as well.²⁸ In the context of non-proliferation and disarmament discourse, officials of nuclear weapon states (dutifully echoed by many arms control and disarmament professionals) strive to portray the nuclear arsenals of the nuclear weapon states (at least those that are signatories of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) as the product of a long-ago original sin, regrettable in retrospect but exceeding hard to undo. This narrative is underscored by ritual denunciations of nuclear weapons by officials of nuclear-armed states as burdensome anachronisms that all hope one day to eliminate. This account of things neatly justifies the continued possession of nuclear weapons by those that have had them longest, while at the same legitimating the prevention of their acquisition by anyone else. It does nothing to explain what the stakes are for the relevant elites in nuclear weapon states that make them willing to risk the fate of their populations and of human civilization itself in a perpetual nuclear standoff, while being willing to risk very little of their own wealth and power to eliminate the dangers nuclear weapons pose.

Positing false collectivities, shared communities of interest where there are none, is a significant element of nationalist and militarist ideologies. Criticizing and breaking down such false collectivities is an essential part of peace and disarmament work. For the vast majority of us, nuclear weapons have never been “ours” in any meaningful sense. The decision to acquire them has, in every instance, been made in secret, and the institutions that have developed and expanded nuclear arsenals have everywhere been among the least transparent and subject to democratic control. The ideologies that justify militarism and the national security state in general are grounded in images of common “homelands” and “national interests” that must be defended at all costs, up to and including the risk of global annihilation. Nuclear deterrence ultimately rests on

the assumption that all inhabitants of nuclear weapons states (and even of states with the “benefit” of being under a superpower “nuclear umbrella”) have interests of a kind and magnitude that justify this dangerous gamble. In a world where both political and economic democracy is in short supply, nuclear weapons are tools in power struggles that mainly determine which fraction of global elites will be best positioned to exploit the rest of us.

Much of the work done by civil society at the international level has focused on developing mechanisms and tools to implement disarmament institutionally and technically once the requisite “political will” exists. While useful, it has not actually generated “political will”. Creating the political will for disarmament requires the construction of movements within states, particularly in states that deploy nuclear weapons or in which there are powerful elements that might wish to acquire them. Constructing movements capable of supporting the conditions for disarmament will vary depending on the role that nuclear weapons and nuclear technology plays in national economies, development discourses, and in the military and geopolitical strategies of particular national elites. As during the Cold War, the internationalist character of disarmament work will consist of finding common ground between the relevant movements in parallel on both sides of confrontations between states that involve nuclear weapons, including efforts by nuclear weapons states to prevent additional states from acquiring them. As E.P. Thompson noted, the prospects for success of such international efforts will be increased to the extent that they do not allow national elites to portray their domestic movements merely as allies of their adversaries. The task of constructing genuinely international and internationalist movements is, however, more daunting in the current conjuncture. States that possess nuclear weapons or that might be the targets of counterproliferation efforts vary far more in culture, development history, and place in the global order of things than did the countries on the two sides of the main Cold War divide, which often shared cultural and political ties only recently severed that aided international efforts on a people to people basis. The number and variety of confrontations that might emerge involving nuclear-armed states in the coming years and decades also may make the Cold War era seem both simple and stable by comparison.

The complexities of this kind of internationalism will be effaced in large part to the extent that international disarmament work remains both single-issue and focused at the upper institutional levels of both states and interstate fora. This leads to self-selection of the participants both in terms of organizations and individuals, with their commonality more a result of a screening and exclusion process imposed by the structure and location of the fora than by any au-

thetic commonality of interest among the disparate social forces international NGOs claim to represent. This can become a self-reinforcing spiral—leading to “movements” consisting mainly of clusters of NGO staff, experts, and academics that seem “international” due to the origins of their participants, but ultimately only represent tenuous constituencies in any particular country. The longer this separation from active social movements goes on, the more difficult it may be to mobilize movements within the key states to change their conduct.

On the level of everyday NGO practice, a variety of mutually reinforcing factors impede changes in work styles, much less deeper changes in approach. A number of commentators have criticized funding patterns resulting in a “foundation-NGO complex” that marginalizes voices calling for fundamental change in the distribution of wealth and power.²⁹ Campbell Craig and Jan Ruzicka recently dubbed the prosperous constellation of government organizations, academic institutions, think-tanks, and well-heeled arms control groups that cluster around the capitols of the Western nuclear weapon states the “nonproliferation complex”. They noted the success of the organizations of the “nonproliferation complex” since the Cold War in shifting attention away from the actual nuclear arsenals to those that don’t yet exist, and of the NGO elements in the complex at putting together “unthreatening programmes”—unthreatening, that is, to the continued existence of great power nuclear arsenals—“of startling cost and scope” occupying much of the publicly visible space in arms control and disarmament discourse.. “By conveying to the public in the West the message that the blame for the continuing nuclear danger lies elsewhere,” Craig and Ruzicka concluded, “the complex has cultivated the false belief that nuclear peace can be accomplished over the course of time without the need for unpleasant forms of political action, and without any sacrifice. In so doing, it has pushed to the fringes debate about what will actually have to be done if we don’t wish to live perpetually with the specter of nuclear war.”³⁰

A nuclear disarmament discourse in which discussion of the risk of great power war is pushed to the margins facilitates the slide towards a nearly exclusive focus on preventing the spread of nuclear weapons to “rogue states” and “terrorists”. It helps to legitimate an international status quo in which the continued brandishing of nuclear weapons by elites who control existing nuclear-armed states is tolerated, while the potential acquisition of nuclear weapons can be portrayed as so intolerable as to justify violation of what remains of international law, right up to the most fundamental norms against wars of aggression. Information about nuclear weapons and “intelligence” about the potential of various parties for their acquisition is arcane, largely secret, and highly susceptible to manipulation by gov-

ernments that can lay claim to having the technical means to acquire it. All of this contributes to a political climate in which accusations of nuclear weapons proliferation remain a tempting stalking horse for more mundane geopolitical agendas of great power elites.

Broader narratives that connect attacks by the foreign Other to nuclear fears further reinforce a general climate in which more militarized “security” is portrayed as the only path to safety. In the United States, even local disarmament groups, seeking ways to import a sense of urgency into local struggles against nuclear weapons facilities in a context in which the central dangers posed by existing nuclear arsenals have been suppressed and displaced, routinely invoke the risk of terrorist attack on well-defended nuclear weapons facilities deep in the North American hinterland, in places where no act of “terrorism” ever has occurred (at least since those perpetrated by foreign Others from across the Atlantic Ocean who invaded and dispossessed the original inhabitants).

The ability of an elite “nonproliferation complex” to dominate disarmament discourse, however, is only one manifestation of a broader professionalization of politics and erosion of a civil society rooted in face-to-face, human scale interactions and institutions.³¹ The oppositional political landscape in many parts of the global metropole, and particularly in the United States, is dominated by single-issue or single constituency organizations driven by professional staffs. The prevailing relationship between staff and constituency mirrors the relationship of mainstream professionals to their clients, with zealous advocacy of a particular interest taking precedence over all other concerns. All of this is reinforced not only by top-down funding but by professional norms that reward approaches that implicitly limit solutions to incremental, expert-driven adjustments to the status quo while stigmatizing any hint of analysis or action pointing towards fundamental social change as “impractical.”

The habits of mind and the nature of discourse in organizations and institutions suffused by the professional advocacy model in practice often proves incompatible with the kind of research, reflection, and discussion needed to form useful strategies for meaningful progress even on individual issues. A lack of incentives (and a broader political, economic, and career culture that provides many disincentives) to think systematically about the relationship among issues and the basic power structure of society blinds many single-issue advocates to both obstacles to progress and to what actually is necessary to build effective coalitions to overcome concentrated power and wealth. A lifetime spent proposing remedies for problems without being able to name their underlying causes largely excludes thinking more than superficially about who might be opposed to change and why, and what might be done about it. Where this mode of political action

prevails, there can be no setting of collective priorities, no meaningful discussion of the role any one issue and the particular reforms its advocates demand might play in movements for and transition to a significantly more fair, democratic, and ecologically sustainable society, no discussion across issues of sequencing or priorities.

The result of all this is a disarmament discourse in which there is little room for analysis and debate concerning the relationship between the goal of eliminating nuclear arsenals and what else might have to be changed to make that goal achievable. Governments, think tanks, and the more prestigious and visible NGOs clustered in power centres of the global metropole all are shackled one way or another to a global order of investment, production, and distribution that they prefer or feel compelled to represent as largely autonomous and unchangeable. For them, significant changes in the distribution of wealth and power are off the table. Mainstream arms control and disarmament discourse is delimited by a conceptual frame in which this is held to be not only true but self-evident. In this frame, the possibility that the entrenched inequities, pervasive absence of democracy, and ecological irrationality of the status quo might both pose insuperable obstacles to disarmament and increase the potential for wars between states already armed with nuclear weapons is exiled to the margins of thought.

One exception to this limited outlook has been work emanating from South Asia as India and Pakistan accelerated the development and deployment of nuclear arsenals in the late 1990s. The emergence of a new arms race sparked new thinking about the character of nuclear arsenals, the dangers they pose, and the reasons that ruling elites seek to develop nuclear technology and nuclear weapons. This included analysis of the relationship between the economic, ideological, and organizational strategies of nuclear institutions, together with discussion of the role that nuclear technology has played in the broader development agendas of South Asia's post-colonial elites.³² Some of this work is of a kind that has seldom been attempted with regard to the original nuclear weapons states. The growth of nuclear institutions in a development context that is both rapid and highly uneven has thrown into high relief the way relatively small fractions of societies both control the pursuit of nuclear technologies and are their primary beneficiaries. There are lessons that might be learned by considering earlier rounds of nuclear development in the light of more recent ones. So far, however, neither the emergence of new arms races nor resulting new thinking about nuclear institutions has had much effect on the nature and limits of the broader discourse about nuclear weapons, which continues to be dominated by ideas drawn from the familiar arms control and nonproliferation conceptual toolbox.

THE PATH FORWARD: REALISM FROM THE BOTTOM UP

"You cannot talk like sane men around a peace table while the atomic bomb itself is ticking beneath it. Do not treat the atomic bomb as a weapon of offense; do not treat it as an instrument of the police. Treat the bomb for what it is: the visible insanity of a civilization that has ceased to worship life and obey the laws of life." — Lewis Mumford³³

"Is this association of inordinate power and productivity with equally inordinate violence and destruction a purely accidental one?" — Lewis Mumford³⁴

The path to nuclear disarmament likely will not begin in negotiations among states, or even in the parliamentary and electoral processes of nuclear armed states. Decisions made in these venues that can be understood as firm, irreversible commitments to disarmament will come quite late in the journey, far down the road from where we are now. Once we approach the point where these decisions and negotiations truly become possible, it is quite likely that they no longer will be very difficult. The path to disarmament likely will require changes in the nuclear weapons states, and also in the global economic and political order, so profound that the reasons states threaten each other with nuclear weapons will have been eliminated.

This view encounters resistance from many disarmament advocates. One reason may be that it bears a disconcerting resemblance to one of the main tenets of the dominant arms control ideology, in which elimination of nuclear arsenals is represented as a desirable but always-distant goal. Those who rule nuclear-armed states frequently affirm their support for nuclear disarmament, but insist that they must retain their nuclear arsenals until "security issues" that threaten their "national interests" have been resolved. Ideologies that justify inequitable orders of things often contain a kernel of truth, displaced and reframed in a manner that can both reassure the privileged and convince the rest, at least to an extent sufficient, when combined some measure of coercion, to dull any impetus towards rebellion.³⁵ The prevailing ideologies of war and peace, international relations and disarmament, allow us to look anywhere for the causes of threats to peace and human survival but to the fundamental institutional arrangements of our economy and their relationship to the technologies, built world, and development path that they entail.

Here, that kernel of truth is that we live in a world still in many ways deeply divided and bristling with high-tech armaments. However, some perspectives which acknowledge this resemble each other, but in fact are directly opposed. One claims that the causes of war must be explored and revealed. The factions in society with a stake in the existing highly inequitable order of things must be named and opposed. Opposed

to this is a narrative that implicitly insists that we must accept the unfair and undemocratic nature of the existing order as given, and then uses the conflict and violence it systematically generates as an excuse to hold onto the entire apparatus of state violence which sustains that same order.

To say that progress toward nuclear disarmament requires progress towards eliminating the causes of war is not the same as saying that eliminating the causes of war is a *precondition* for nuclear disarmament. We do not have to wait until we have removed the causes of war to advocate for disarmament, or to develop the movements and social change strategies that make disarmament possible. Removing the causes of war and working for nuclear disarmament are part of the same larger project. Making the world more economically equitable lessens the danger of war. Giving all people a voice in the decisions that affect every sphere of their lives lessens the danger of war—and almost certainly increases the chances that economic life will become more fair as well. Moving towards a way of life that is consistent with the rhythms and limits of the ecosystems that sustain us likely reduces the dangers of war over the long term. Nuclear weapons and nuclear power are both leading instances of the irrationalities that result from a social world that has been constructed to concentrate power in the hands of tiny minorities, and to make it possible for them to maintain and defend their power.

But even many committed activists in the disarmament field turn away from these questions because their implications are so daunting. Meaningful progress towards nuclear disarmament may be impossible without removing, or at least sharply reducing, the likely causes of war characteristic of the development path we have taken. Chief among these are the vast inequities and drive for ever-increasing wealth and power that that has been built right into the institutional structures of the dominant form of modernity. The elites who control nuclear weapon states, already possessors of wealth on an unprecedented scale, use every means at their command to acquire yet more even amidst the deepest global economic crisis of the nuclear age, forging on inside their brightly lit office towers and luxury gated estates, impervious to the deepening poverty, hopelessness, and rage gathering outside. The prospect of great powers in transition, ascending and declining, combined with widespread political instability flowing both from stark inequality and from rapid, uneven development, threatens to bring the prospect of great power war back into the realm of undeniable possibility, eroding the officially “unthinkable” status of large scale nuclear warfare. An intensifying atmosphere of conflict and potential conflict may make disarmament a harder, not easier, sell within national, and national-ist, political discourses.

It is much easier to place all of this outside the problem, to assume that the special destructiveness of nu-

clear weapons assures that no one, really, ever will use them again in warfare intentionally, and that everyone, really, wants to get rid of them. Then one can turn back to searching for some formula, technical, legal, or diplomatic, which, once devised, will lead us inexorably to disarmament, and safety. This reflexive tendency to stay within the limits of the professional and institutional discourses as conventionally defined can be represented to others and oneself as the only “practical” choice. But in a world where the institutional machinery of both the economy and of governance most places is paralyzed or breaking down, the pragmatism of this choice hardly is self-evident.

There is not much left of a middle ground. The only alternative is to let all of this in, combining awareness of the fact that nuclear warfare risks ending us all, everything that was and could be, with the knowledge that people only can be willing to take such a risk in a society that has gone terribly wrong, that has built institutions within which people can become so far removed from the fundamentals of life on this planet as to be willing to gamble it all away. Nuclear weapons are our ultimate message to ourselves that our way of life, built on brute force, deception on a mass scale, and profligate waste, all driven by the endless race to accumulate things and power over others, must come to an end, one way or another.

There also is little time left on the planet’s ecological clock. Our current crisis is exacerbated by the approach of resource limits, most centrally for easily retrievable fossil fuels, and by ecological limits, most centrally in terms of human-induced climate change, but also in terms of widespread destruction of ecosystems that sustain many of the earth’s species as well as irreplaceable “ecological services” such as sources of fresh water.

The approach of these resource and ecological limits poses unprecedented challenges to a global economic system already in crisis. It has been contended by some analysts for a century that capitalism cannot survive without an ecological and social “outside,” a non-capitalist frontier available for relatively easy exploitation when the mechanisms of economic growth within the portions of the globe and of global society encompassed by the capitalist system grind to a halt. Today, both the so-called second world of the 20th century and most post-colonial regimes that had sought some different path have largely been incorporated into the global corporate capitalist circuit of production, investment, and trade. Despite ever more intensive commodification of the interactions and relationships of everyday life, the immense organizations that dominate the world are running out of geographical, technological, demographic, and social “fixes,” new arenas to exploit when they have exhausted the old. We need to find a way to mobilize social energies at a scale and pace previously devoted only to war to transform our built world and its workings to be ecologically sustainable.

The risks of this transition must be fairly shared, or the necessary transformation likely will be impossible. The chaos and violence resulting from incumbent elites attempting to defend existing inequities will be compounded by already unavoidable consequences of ecological decline, combined with the urgent need to shift resources into massive rebuilding or refitting everything from energy, transportation, and agricultural systems to buildings of all kinds. Further, much of the necessary transformation consists of moving away from the large-scale technologies and far-flung chains of production and distribution that incumbent elites have developed in large part as a means of cementing their power over resources and production, and hence their privileged access to wealth. The choice between retaining a global economy controlled by immense, unaccountable private institutions but somehow making it “greener,” and a radical restructuring and democratization of our economic and political systems likely is a false one, with only the latter leading to the survival of human civilization for the long term.³⁶

The process of nuclear disarmament is stuck because all global politics is stuck, unable to find peaceful means to resolve these fundamental dilemmas. Most of the world’s wealth and power has stopped at the top. The solutions on offer from elites for a global economic crisis causing widespread poverty and desperation are austerity measures designed to support the value of their assets and to further concentrate wealth and power in their own hands. One can hardly expect that in such a moment those same elites will seriously consider giving up their weapons, especially the most powerful means of destruction ever devised.

The political will to build the new international order we need, one in which disarmament will become possible, must be built from the bottom up. The path to nuclear disarmament, like the path towards progress on most things that really matter, runs in this moment through New York’s Zucotti Park and the Occupy encampments world-wide, through Cairo’s Tahrir Square and the centres of local resistance to India’s Kudankulam nuclear power project, through the growing opposition to US military outposts in South Korea and Japan, through all those places that the excluded and suppressed are gathering to find their voice and their power. It will not lead back to the halls of governments and the United Nations until much has changed. History has left the building for the streets and public squares; it is happening out beyond the security checkpoints in places where credentials are neither required nor accepted.

Movements sufficient to create the political will to eliminate the danger of nuclear weapons use, and finally the weapons themselves, will not arise from within the professional and institutional worlds of arms control and disarmament. Even the kind of debate and analysis needed to understand what must be done to create

the political conditions for disarmament have largely failed to take hold within disarmament discourses and institutions. It is a time for all of us who work not just for disarmament but for peace and justice to be looking outward: for allies, for hope, and for understanding of what must be done. Only by building a place where we can have the conversation about how to make another world possible, will we be able to start moving towards a world where nuclear weapons have no place.

NOTES

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18. For an extended version of this argument, including the strategies and alliances broader pursued by the nuclear industry in the context of the campaign for the recent US-India nuclear deal, see Andrew Lichterman and M.V. Ramana, “The U.S. India Nuclear Deal: Violating Norms, Terminating Futures,” in Ray Acheson, ed., *Beyond Arms Control: Challenges and Choices for Disarmament*, New York: Reaching Critical Will of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 2010, pp.58–70, also available at <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/books/BAC/chapter5.pdf>.
19. A typical formulation, found on the White House web site, asserted that “the gravest danger to the American people is the threat of a terrorist attack with a nuclear weapon and the spread of nuclear weapons to dangerous regimes.” “The Agenda: Foreign Policy,” http://www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/foreign_policy, accessed 25 March 2009.
20. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1975–1914*, New York: Vintage Books, 1989, p.316, discussing this themed as raised by Norman Angell (author of *The Great Illusion*) and others.
21. Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan, “The Asymptotes of Power,” February 2012, (Revised transcript of a presentation by Jonathan Nitzan, The 2nd Annual Conference of the Forum on Capital as Power, The Capitalist Mode of Power: Past, Present, Future, October 20–21, 2011, York University, Toronto), www.bnarchives.net, p.39.
22. Gregory Albo, “Competitive Austerity’ and the Impasse of Capitalist Employment Policy,” in R. Miliband and L. Panitch, eds.,

- Between Capitalism and Nationalism, Socialist Register 1994*, p.147; quoted in Sandra Halperin, *War and Social Change in Modern Europe: The Great Transformation Revisited*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p.289.
23. E.P. Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers: Writings on War, Past and Future*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, p.44.
 24. Gabriel Kolko, *Another Century of War?*, New York: The New Press, 2002, pp. 89–90.
 25. The manner in which a recent legislative initiative proposing cuts in US nuclear weapons spending is illustrative. Its lead legislative sponsor, US Representative Edward Markey of Massachusetts, told the news media that “It’s better to cut unneeded submarines than Navy SEALs and better to cut nuclear bombers than unmanned drones...Which weapons are we going to be using in the 21st century?” Joel Rubin, an official of the Ploughshares Fund, a leading US arms control NGO, thought it important to emphasize that “This is not a road map to zero weapons.” “Lawmakers Seek \$100B in U.S. Nuke Spending Cuts,” *Global Security News-wire*, 8 February 2012.
 26. Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik, *New Nukes: India, Pakistan, and Global Nuclear Disarmament*, New York: Interlink Books, 2000, p.234.
 27. For a useful discussion of the application of the concepts of civil society and the public sphere at the international level, see Nancy Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World,” *Transversal*, multilingual web journal of the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, 2007, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0605/fraser/en>.
 28. On the incoherence of Western international relations theory discourse in regard to nuclear weapons, see Itty Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy, and the Postcolonial State*, London: Zed Books, 1998, pp.14-17.
 29. See, e.g., Joan Roelofs, *Foundations and Public Policy: The Mask of Pluralism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003; and Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, *The Revolution Sill Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, Cambridge, South End Press, 2007.
 30. Campbell Craig and Jan Ruzicka, “Who’s in, who’s out?” *London Review of Books*, 23 February 2012, pp.37–38.
 31. For an exploration of how this dynamic has played out in disarmament work see Andrew Lichterman, “Nuclear Disarmament, Civil Society, and Democracy” *Disarmament Forum*, 2010, No.4, <http://www.unidir.org/pdf/articles/pdf-art3022.pdf>.
 32. See, for example, Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik, *New Nukes: India, Pakistan, and Global Nuclear Disarmament*, New York: Interlink Books, 2000; Itty Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy, and the Postcolonial State*, London: Zed Books, 1998; M.V. Ramana and C. Rammanohar Reddy, eds., *Prisoners of the Nuclear Dream*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003; Itty Abraham, ed., *South Asian Cultures of the Bomb: Atomic Public and the State in India and Pakistan*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
 33. Lewis Mumford, “Gentlemen: You Are Mad!” *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 2 March 1946.
 34. Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*, New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1970, p. 257.
 35. “It is an often-taught and often-forgotten lesson that ideology is designed to promote the human dignity and clear conscience of a given class at the same time that it discredits their adversaries; indeed, these two operations are one and the same; and as a cultural or intellectual object ideology may be defined as just such a reversible structure, a complex of ideas which appears either systematic or functional depending on the side from which it is approached.” Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974, p. 380. “Coercion does not result as much in widespread hypocrisy as in a felt need to reconcile existing contradictions, to emphasize those aspects of one’s desires that can be made compatible with the influence of coercion at the expense of those that cannot. The kind of enforced coherence which emerges may be shallow, full of holes. To the extent that coercion plays a role in resolving difficulties of meaning and desire, social life is riddled with badly kept secrets and poorly concealed incongruities. People think less clearly; their ability to confront the problem of their own existence is lessened. The moment coercion fails, crises of meaning of various kinds are ready to break out. Or rather, such moments do not result from the failure of coercion, as an effect from a cause, they are the failure of coercion.” W.M. Reddy, *Money and Liberty in Modern Europe: A Critique of Historical Understanding*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.48.
 36. See, e.g., Naomi Klein, “Capitalism vs. the Climate,” *The Nation Magazine*, November 28, 2011, www.thenation.com/article/164497/capitalism-vs-climate; John Bellamy Foster, “Capitalism and the Accumulation of Catastrophe,” *Monthly Review*, Vo.63 No.7, December 2011, p.1.