

Nuclear Connections

Weapons and Power in the Age of Corporate Globalization

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The nuclear disaster at Fukushima brought the dangers of nuclear technology to the center of the world's attention for a few months. Despite its immense impacts and the continuing risks posed by unstable reactors filled with melted nuclear fuel in a region prone to very large earthquakes, Fukushima already is fading into memory outside Japan. Yet the nuclear danger remains, with nuclear power and nuclear weapons among the few human creations capable of devastating large portions of the planet in short order.

Nuclear electric power generation was developed from the same technology base that created and that sustains nuclear arsenals. Most nuclear power plants have been built in countries that have nuclear weapons, or those with which the Cold War nuclear weapons states had close political ties. Over 400 nuclear power reactors continue to operate world wide, with 104 in the United States. Both the United States and Russia still possess nuclear arsenals

of a size that could annihilate humanity and irreparably damage the biosphere. France, the UK, China, Israel, India, and Pakistan possess arsenals an order of magnitude smaller, but nonetheless capable of killing a sizable portion of the human population and causing significant, long-lasting environmental damage with global effects.

Nuclear weapons and nuclear power technologies pose great dangers in themselves, and the complex of institutions that sustains and is sustained by nuclear weapons and nuclear power exemplifies key features of the global system as a whole. The regime of "security" grounded in the constant threat of annihilation signals the need for the redefinition of human security. Generating the immense amounts of energy necessary to fuel a society addicted to growth with technologies that risk destroying the homes and cities they power, and much of the natural world along with it, signals the unsustainable character of a society that places endless material accumulation above all.

New Nuclear Monuments to Power and Profit

More than two decades after the end of the Cold War, the U.S. is embarking on an ambitious program to modernize the laboratories and factories where it makes and maintains its nuclear weapons. New plants costing billions of dollars are planned or underway at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, Kansas City, Missouri, and Los Alamos, New Mexico. The facility at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), dubbed the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement facility (CMRR), typifies the operations of the out of control institutions that dominate our economy and politics. The CMRR only makes sense as part of a complex of facilities to manufacture large numbers of plutonium pits, the explosive cores of nuclear weapons. The U.S. since 1970 has been obligated by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to negotiate for the elimination of its nuclear arsenal, and existing pits will last for many decades to come—so long that plans to make more threaten to make the Treaty an empty abstraction. The CMRR has been designed to allow space for additional, unspecified nuclear activities—providing incentives for the corporate-dominated consortium that manages LANL to fill it with new tax-funded "profit centers" once built. It also will lie close to active earthquake faults whose dangers still are not fully understood.

To an unusual degree even for a military project, the collision of a constantly expanding concept with the realities of terrain and technology have led to massive cost increases—in this case, a tenfold increase before ground has been broken, with current preliminary estimates at \$4-6 billion. This will make it by far the largest government construction project in New Mexico history aside from the interstate highway system. Much of this money will flow to contractors based elsewhere, as Los Alamos is now managed by a consortium including such huge multinational nuclear industry players as Bechtel and B&W. Complex high tech military construction projects create fewer jobs per dollar than most other types of public spending, and even fewer permanent positions. The end result for New Mexico, where Los Alamos County residents have a per capita income over 4 times that of the poorest county, will be further economic stratification, and deeper entrenchment of the polarized two-tier economy increasingly characteristic of both the U.S. and the world. Building the CMRR in a time of immense unaddressed human needs and deteriorating U.S. infrastructure signifies the erosion of social solidarity and continuing consolidation of a ruling elite far more committed to rule by force than to democracy.

For more about the the CMRR and how to stop it, see the CMRR web page of the Los Alamos Study Group, Albuquerque, New Mexico, http://lasg.org/CMRR/open_page.htm

Both nuclear power and high technology weapons 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. While the polarization of wealth and power among states may have decreased, in the world's population as a whole it has not. At the top are immense organizations deploying particular combinations of technology, organizational technique, and ideology to extract a privileged wealth stream for their members from their natural and social environment. These organizations, whether "public" or "private," provide services and buy and sell mainly to each other or to "consumers" who are the upper-echelon inhabitants of those same organizations, the "new classes" of technocrats, bureaucrats, managers, and professionals who constitute the modern middle class. This dynamic 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 to stay or become stable nodes in the top-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 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 that sector 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. The powerful tools of nationalism and "national security" secrecy both 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 vision of near-magical, limitless power (an image its purveyors energetically promote), casts a positive aura over other big, centralized high-tech development programs that are profitable for elites, but have little or even negative value for much of the population in an ever more stratified world.

Finally, 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 annihilation could be imagined. We find ourselves in a conjuncture that bears unsettling resemblances to that which brought the great power wars of the last century.

Ascendant 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 is occurring in the context of equally unprecedented effects flowing from limits to key resources and to the carrying capacity of planetary ecosystems. These factors combine to generate extreme polarization of wealth and the widespread breakdown of traditional social structures. All of this is occurring within an economic framework dominated by immense capitalist firms that have gained sufficient power in much of the world to write their own rules. This has brought back another feature of the time that brought us world wars: intractable global economic crisis, with the actions essential to break the impasse thwarted by the extreme accumulation of wealth and power by elites determined to keep things as they are. 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.

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. Considering anew the role of nuclear technologies and institutions in the path that has brought us to this dangerous moment, and the particular dangers they pose under current conditions, could help us better comprehend the nature of the broader crises we face, and the kinds of solutions that we should be working towards.

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For perspectives on nuclear issues from outside the limits of Washington, DC policy debates, see:

Western States Legal Foundation, Oakland, CA

www.wslfweb.org

DisarmamentActivist, www.disarmamentactivist.org

Los Alamos Study Group, Albuquerque, NM www.lasg.org

Reaching Critical Will Project of the Women's

International League for Peace and Freedom, New York City www.reachingcriticalwill.org

United For Peace and Justice Nuclear

Disarmament/Redefining Security Working Group

unitedforpeace.org/issues/nuclear-disarmament-redefining-security

Abolition 2000 Global Network for the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons www.abolition2000.org