Andrew Lichterman,[i] Presentation for workshop, "Looking up at the Apocalypse: Disarmament, Climate Change, and Justice," at the International Conference for a Nuclear Free, Peaceful Just, and Sustainable World, Riverside Church, New York City, May 1, 2010 [reconstructed from notes, some portions cut for time on delivery]

Superficial politics, fundamental causes: some reflections on the relationship between the movements to abolish nuclear weapons and to stop global warming

I want to begin by saying that from where I sit, our current approaches to these issues aren't working. The purpose of this workshop is to try to think about both the problems and the path to solutions in different ways. My perspective is grounded in many years of work grounded in a regional context here in the United States, mainly on nuclear abolition but on other peace and environmental issues as well.

I will start with a story.

In 1988, I was invited to appear on a panel at an event about the path to nuclear disarmament, sponsored by several arms control groups. The end of the Cold War still lay in the future—and despite its imminence, still was largely unanticipated.

Appearing on panels with arms control experts was not the kind of thing I had done up to that point. In the 1980's I mainly had been working as a kind of jack of all trades legal person for non-violent, direct action oriented grassroots groups focusing on disarmament and related issues—legal observing demonstrations and doing the post-demonstration legal work on the direct action side, but also doing environmental administrative proceedings and litigation to help stop nuclear weapons research, production, testing, and deployment, doing related freedom of information act work, and the like.

It should be noted that the part of the movement I was immersed in at the time worked to understand and explain to others the connection of nuclear weapons to other issues, ranging from the structure of the economy to the environmental effects of the military industrial complex.

I arrived at the event during the discussion segment of a previous panel. The discussion I encountered was in large part a vigorous debate about how many nuclear weapons would be too few. The people in the room were very well informed about the technical details of nuclear weapons and arms control: they were tossing around with alacrity lots of terms like "circular error probable" and "decapitating first strikes." A central concern appeared to be that if the numbers of nuclear weapons passed some lower bound —perhaps a thousand or so-- the danger of nuclear war would not decrease, but rise, because there would be an increased temptation to

destroy an opponent's arsenal with a disabling first strike. At the time, there were tens of thousands of nuclear weapons deployed.

My first response was that I felt like I had arrived in some parallel universe where people spoke a language much like mine, but which made no sense to me. If I was going to be able to make sense to this audience, I was going to have to figure out in the next few minutes why this was so.

It didn't take long for me to understand my reasons for finding the debate over whether very deep reductions in nuclear arsenals would increase the risk of nuclear war somewhat absurd. I had spent the years leading up to that moment confronting the enormous economic and political power of the U.S. nuclear weapons complex and associated elements of the broader military-industrial complex, and the way that power expressed itself right down to the structure of local communities and their politics. It seemed clear to me that we would never reach the numbers of nuclear weapons that purportedly would increase the risk of war—they were talking about somewhere between a few hundred and a thousand nuclear weapons in each superpower arsenal-- without broader social change so deep that the reasons wars between the currently nuclear-armed states might begin would also be changed in significant ways. Significant nuclear disarmament—reducing arsenals to less than civilization-destroying numbers—would require profound social transformation, especially in the leading nuclear-armed states. And as we move along the road towards that transformation, all the reasons why the wars might occur in which nuclear weapons might be used would also be changed. From my perspective, all of these people, who considered themselves the most pragmatic of experts, were having a discussion that had little connection with any actually possible future.

More than two decades later the nuclear weapons are still here, and still in potentially civilization destroying numbers. Even the complete collapse of the Soviet system—surely one kind of significant social change, removing what had been believed to be a central cause of nuclear arms racing and confrontation--was not enough to eliminate them.

And now have a flurry of rhetorical enthusiasm for disarmament, and much celebration of a U.S.-Russia treaty that will have little effect on the thousands of nuclear weapons they currently deploy, and even those effects aren't mandatory until 2017. But a few hundred nuclear weapons can destroy any country on earth, and a thousand are more could have effects that destroy much of the world's civilization, killing a significant portion of its inhabitants.

And in this year's budget request, the Obama administration, if anything, seems determined to outflank its Congressional critics to the right, proposing a 10% increase in nuclear warhead research and production funding and further increases for future years. And that's just the

Department of Energy budget. The Defense Department budget also has sizeable increases for nuclear weapons and delivery systems.

The Obama military budget also includes a ramp up of funding over the next five years for so-called "prompt global strike" weapons, which if successful would allow the United States to hit targets anywhere on earth within an hour with highly accurate conventional weapons delivered by missile. It should be noted that there are nothing but paper policy restrictions preventing the United States from using these new delivery systems technologies for nuclear weapons. Even in its conventional version, global strike underscores the aggressive global stance of the US military and its determination to maintain global military dominance., further complicating arms control efforts.

The delivery vehicle for one global strike concept was tested the week before last with a launch from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. The launch vehicle was a made from parts of MX missiles, a decommissioned nuclear-armed ICBM, another illustration of the ambiguities of arms control.

Over a decade ago , in early 1998 during the Clinton administration, a colleague and I wrote:

> It may be difficult to tell what our real markers are for progress towards nuclear disarmament if warhead numbers remain in the thousands for decades, during which the nuclear weapons states both expand their above-ground component testing and simulation capabilities and deploy refined and modernized warheads and delivery systems.[1]

These words seem self-evidently true today.

I want to turn now to the relationship between efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons.

I will start by considering a statement from a recent article by the climate scientist James Hansen advocating a carbon tax (something that I think would be a good idea, but that I also think is unlikely to be implemented in a way sufficient to reduce greenhouse gas emissions much without more significant social change). "The predominant moral issue of the 21st century,"

[1] Andrew Lichterman and Jacqueline Cabasso, "A Faustian Bargain:Why "Stockpile Stewardship" Is Incompatible with the Process of Nuclear Disarmament," Western States Legal Foundation, March 1998

Hansen wrote, "almost surely, will be climate change, comparable to Nazism faced by Churchill in the 20th century and slavery faced by Lincoln in the 19th century."[2]

Hansen's analogy, while well intentioned, does not bear close scrutiny. And further, it is the kind of analogy that obscures the questions we really need to be asking, not only about how to slow down and reverse the growth of greenhouse gas emissions, but also about how to end high tech arms racing and abolish nuclear weapons.

The Nazi regime and Atlantic slavery were social systems, one national, one international. Greenhouse gas emissions are *effects* of a social system, and a key, still inadequately examined question is whether we can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions without fundamentally changing the corporate capitalist system that now dominates the global economy.

We also must consider the extent to which the opposed systems in the Cold War shared characteristics which, from the perspective of developing a global order that is ecologically sustainable, fair, and more democratic, will need to be overcome.

For a start, all the variants of Western-style modernity view endless material growth as an unalloyed good, and for the most part view scientific and technical progress as largely a largely autonomous process.

Hansen, like most American policy analysts who are permitted visibility in the mainstream, doesn't see these as important questions; he simply assumes that they can be solved by "the market," perhaps with a little channeling from "the state." "Investment decisions," says Hansen, "are best left to the private sector. The government can provide loan guarantees for nuclear power and support development of trial carbon capture storage, but these energies must compete with energy efficiency and renewable energies in a free market."[3]

I also don't believe that nuclear weapons can be thought about usefully —or opposed effectively—at a remove from the order of things that produced them. They too are an effect of the dominant global system, and are doubly entrenched because they also are one of the means of its enforcement.

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[2] Dr. James Hansen, "Obama's Second Chance on the Predominant Moral Issue of This Century," *Huffington Post,* April 5, 2010

[3] Dr. James Hansen, "Obama's Second Chance on the Predominant Moral Issue of This Century," *Huffington Post,* April 5, 2010

Both nuclear weapons and fossil fuel consumption (the main source of greenhouse gas emissions) are effects of a social system that is premised on endless growth, that generates immense inequalities of wealth and power, and that sustains these inequalities through organized violence, deployed by states in ever more technically sophisticated forms. Both are effects of institutions and practices that appear to be quite close to fundamental features of the dominant global economic and political systems.

One would think that figuring out the extent to which this is true, and that naming and opposing the particular institutions and elements in society who benefit from this state of affairs, would be a central part of the discourse and practice of disarmament work and work on climate change. But in the United States, at least, it isn't.

We need a way of looking at the world as it now is. Our approach must acknowledge the obstacles as well as the opportunities involved in transforming the global economy and our societies if they are to become ecologically sustainable, democratic, and peaceful.

A significant part of this approach is a better understanding of the political nature of technology choices. We live in a world dominated by immense organizations that deploy particular combinations of advanced technology, bureaucratic technique, and ideology. These organizations are instrumentally rationalized both within and without. They are largely authoritarian in internal structure, and deal with the world around them instrumentally—as an environment to be controlled to the maximum extent possible in order to achieve their goals.

The main goal of these organizations is to extract a privileged wealth stream for their upper echelon inhabitants from the rest of an increasingly "globalized" economy. They also form alliances, many of them long-running, to do so. The "military industrial complex" was only the first of these to be recognized.

The legal character of these organizations varies from place to place, with the public/private boundary and the powers of large private organizations defined differently in different countries. But similar kinds of organizations-- by which I mean organizations deploying similar sets of technology and bureaucratic technique—in significant ways behave similarly whether defined as "public" or "private."

Technologies are not chosen solely because they "work" better in some abstract sense, or even because they are somehow "cheaper" in some fundamental sense related to the organization of the physical world, for example in terms of their thermodynamic efficiency. They are chosen because they work well in combination with other aspects of modern large organization

techniques to gain and sustain wealth and power for those in the upper echelons of the immense organizations that dominate every aspect of global economic and political life today.

The upper level inhabitants of these organizations constitute roughly a fifth of the world's population, and the chasm between them and the rest is growing, as that top fifth and its predatory organizations insatiably seize, consume, and degrade the land, resources, and ecosystems that all depend on.

This split, I believe, is the defining political fact of our time. It limits society's potential for adaptation to resource and ecological limits and drives the growing chaos and conflict that the dominant constellations of large organizations meet only with more militarized high-tech "security." And providing this security at every level from executive protection to high performance strike aircraft to ever more accurate long range missiles has become one of the most dependable strategies for organizational growth and profit everywhere.

It is all of this we must understand and confront. Nuclear weapons are only a leading instance, their vivid irrationality both exemplar and metaphor for the whole.

And it is this context in which nuclear power is presented—and seems almost to present itself-- as a natural part of the technological repertory for addressing the climate change crisis.

Generations of anti-nuclear activists now have made the arguments about how horribly destructive nuclear weapons are, and about how risky, technologically ecologically, and even economically, nuclear power is. But these technologies persist because they are working for someone, and in fact are working for identifiable sets of people who benefit from their presence, and who derive enough power from their presence to keep them in place.

Critics of nuclear power, for example, focus mainly on why it's a bad choice as a technology for society in general. But in doing so, they largely ignore how it can be quite a *good* choice for large organizations, combining with strategies of management, organizational alliances, and ideology to provide a strategic path to long-lasting, privileged positions in the global economy for certain very large organizations in a number of countries, and for large numbers of privileged people within those organizations.

In the broader global context, nuclear power and high technology weapons are both elements in and help to sustain a global circulation of trade and investment devoted to the production of goods and services that only a fraction of the world's population can afford to buy.

Large 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 off the land into burgeoning urban slums. Yet development efforts continue to center on energy and transportation infrastructure designed to serve global supply chains for up-market consumer goods, with urban areas world-wide competing to stay or become stable nodes in the top-tier economy. The result is a world characterized by islands of great wealth in a deepening sea of poverty.

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 for themselves a profitable place within the current wave of corporate-capitalist globalization.

The nuclear road provides them with privileged access to their own country's resources, a development context that can be shielded from foreign competition, and an entree to forms of trade that are seen 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.

In August of 1967—four months after his Beyond Vietnam speech delivered in this church, and covering some of the same themes—Martin Luther King said,

> "A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will thingify them—make them things. Therefore they will exploit them, and poor people generally, economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have foreign investments and everything else, and will have to use its military to protect them. All of these problems are tied together."[4]

King understood that slavery was an expression of the social system that was and is the Western-style modernity. And he was telling us that one of its fundamental characteristics—the treating of human beings as objects, as things to be bought, sold, and profited from—was deeply rooted, and is with us still. Equally important is the same system's reduction of the natural world to an array of things to be manipulated and controlled seen as nothing more than a source of resource inputs and profit.

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[4] Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., The Southern Christian Leadership Conference Presidential Address, August 16, 1967

Ultimately, it is these two fundamental characteristics of the economic and political system that has come to dominate the planet that we must overcome.

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