

Thematic Section

The Enduring Power of Mass Production, Mass Consumption and Mass Destruction

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Introduction

The Brundtland Report, researched and written between 1983 and 1987, was charged with developing strategies for achieving 'sustainable development' by the year 2000. According to the report, humanity was 'changing planetary systems, fundamentally' in ways that created unprecedented 'life threatening hazards'. It called for 'a new era of economic growth ... based on policies that sustain and expand the Earth's resource base; and that the progress that some have known over the last century can be experienced by all in the years ahead'.

The report warned, however, that the effort to achieve a sustainable and more socially just future must first confront a pressing challenge: 'Perhaps the greatest threat to the Earth's environment, to sustainable

human progress, and indeed to survival is the possibility of nuclear war ... The search for a more viable future can only be meaningful in the context of a more vigorous effort to renounce and eliminate the development of means of annihilation'. Twenty-five years on, we live in the ruins of these hopes for a sustainable and fair world free from the threat of nuclear destruction.

Economy and environment

Since the Brundtland Report, there has been a new era of growth that has reshaped the world economy in many ways. But current growth patterns are neither more equitable nor sustainable than before. According to *The Economist*, the wealthiest 10 percent of people now control over 80 percent of the world's assets; the bottom 50 percent of people have 2 percent of the assets. In most parts of the world, measures of income and wealth inequalities are rising.

Natural resources are being depleted at a faster rate. The 2010 World Wildlife Fund *Living Planet Report* estimates that the global economy now consumes the annual resources of over 1.5 planets, a roughly 50 percent increase since the Brundtland Report. Similarly, the US Department of Energy's 2010 International Energy Outlook estimates the global emission of carbon dioxide in 2007 as about 30 billion tons, roughly 50 percent more than the 21 billion tons emitted in 1990. The efforts by environmental activists, bureaucrats and diplomats to manage the atmosphere and limit greenhouse gas emissions through national action and international agreements has come to naught.

The prospect is grim. In 2009, Malte Meinshausen and his colleagues suggested that capping total carbon dioxide emissions between 2000 and 2050 to 1,000 billion tons will still yield a 25 percent probability of global warming exceeding 2 degrees Celsius, widely considered to be a critical level. Even with no increase in the current rate of carbon dioxide emission, the 1,000 billion tons limit will be reached in 27 years.

Gro Harlem Brundtland, Chairperson of the commission, argued that 'Global economic expansion is the solution, not the problem'. But economic growth is making the problem of

capping emissions harder to solve. In 2007, global GDP was about US\$63 trillion, with each dollar emitting the equivalent of almost 0.5 kg of carbon dioxide. At 3 percent average annual growth, global GDP in 2050 will be US\$225 trillion. Staying below the 1,000 billion tons limit will require each dollar of GDP in 2050 to release ten times less carbon dioxide than it does it today. For comparison, carbon intensity decreased by about 25 percent between 1990 and 2007, mostly by tackling the more inefficient sectors of the economy. Such easy pickings are mostly gone.

Military threats

Efforts to end the threat of mass destruction from nuclear weapons have also failed dismally. The Brundtland Report came in the wake of acute Cold War tension between the United States and Soviet Union and mass movements against nuclear weapons. In 1986, US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Secretary-General Mikhail Gorbachev agreed on the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons; Gorbachev had proposed a plan to do so by the year 2000. Since then, the Cold War has ended, the Soviet Union has collapsed, but the weapons remain.

Today, after a string of arms control treaties, it is estimated there are over 20,000 nuclear weapons in the world, with the US and Russia holding over 95 percent of them. Almost 2,000 of the weapons held by the US and Russia are on hair-trigger alert for launch.

The future looks bleak. In his now famous 2009 Prague speech US President Barack Obama embraced the 'moral responsibility' of the United States to lead the way to 'a world without nuclear weapons'. He added, however, that 'this goal will not be reached quickly – perhaps not in my lifetime'. Since then, the goal has receded indefinitely far into the future. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said 'our goal [is] of a world someday, in some century, free of nuclear weapons'.

In keeping with what a November 2010 White House Fact Sheet called its 'extraordinary commitment to ensure the modernization of our nuclear infrastructure', the Obama administration has

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proposed spending US\$275 billion over the next two decades on upgrading US nuclear weapons, and building next-generation nuclear weapon production facilities and delivery systems. The White House said, 'This level of funding is unprecedented since the end of the Cold War'. Similarly, Russia has announced a 50-year plan to maintain and modernize its nuclear arsenals. Other nuclear-armed states no doubt will follow.

Behind the failure both of the sustainable development project and nuclear arms control lies the fact that they seek to leave intact the very structures that constitute the social, political and ideological basis for the problems they claim to address. As a result, governments seek supply-side solutions to climate change, such as capturing and burying carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels, replacing such fuels with nuclear power – disregarding its unique hazards – and, even possibly geo-engineering. Likewise, national security

managers organize to maintain nuclear weapons, to make them more accurate and less vulnerable, and in the case of the United States develop conventional 'global strike' weapons with intercontinental range.

Moving beyond management

The enduring power of capitalist mass production and mass consumption and of nuclear mass destruction cannot be managed. More radical solutions are necessary. As David Harvey argues in *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, the challenge of making a socially just and ecologically viable world is to 'grasp the nettle of endless compound capital accumulation and eventually shut it down as the prime motor of history'. The abolition of nuclear weapons will require nothing less than ending the resort to war as the final arbiter of international relations.