

Talk to Merrill alumni panel on "Challenges to the U.S. at the end of the Cold War." 4/24/94

Want to respond to this question in moral, maybe even theological terms, because I see it as a question of life and death for all of humanity.

This is an era of capitalist triumphalism in which the leaders of the Western World don't tire of congratulating themselves for a hard-won victory in the 75-year struggle against the Soviet Union and its allies -- a victory that was achieved by squandering our wealth and productive capacity in a successful effort to oblige them to squander theirs.

Ours is also a time in which presumably everyone in the world experiences a growing sense of fear and foreboding about the future of our relations with one another, and about our collective relationship to nature.

The triumph of capitalism was accomplished, it seems to me, by three means basically, by means of the cultivation of three arts or bodies of theory and knowledge: 1) the arts of accumulation or seeking material advantage and profit, 2) the arts of civil engineering or the physical transformation of nature through science, and 3) the arts of militarism and destruction.

All of these have been the objects of idolatry in the state religions of capitalism; young people have for five or six generations been encouraged to think of their premises as characteristic of "human nature, of their consequences as natural and inevitable, even desirable; all of these arts have relied heavily on the same quantitative and morally neutral ways of thinking; the practitioners of all of them have tended to relegate all other kinds of thinking, and especially thinking focussed on the quality or the spiritual and moral purposes of life to the realm of the "impractical." In an important sense we have hitched our national destiny to the star of these earth-shaking arts. The reformist Clinton administration has recommitted us to their cultivation. The recent history of the University of California at Santa Cruz is an eloquent, if pitifully belated, testimony to the dominance of those paradigms in our national culture.

But there is a problem with all of this, a problem of such horrific dimensions and consequences that we have so far literally not known how to think about it. And that problem is that capitalism is intrinsically destructive of both humanity and nature; and that unless its marvellous ability to organize the production of goods and services, and its less marvellous but still considerable ability to distribute those goods and services, are brought under the control of some higher authority, the jig is up.