

## BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

### Capitalism versus the climate

**This changes everything: capitalism vs the climate**, by Naomi Klein, London, Allen Lane, 2014, 566 pp., £13.60 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-846-14505-6

#### Review I

Nigel Armistead

I am fed up with reading climate change books – and I’ve only read four. I’m reading the fifth at the moment: George Marshall’s *Don’t Even Think about It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, published by Bloomsbury in 2014. I’m fed up already because they are so clearly speaking only to the converted. At least Naomi Klein is adding something to the debate – documenting how capitalism is inextricably bound up with and responsible for climate change. For my money, she does a really good job of this, if you are willing to grant that Russia and China are now capitalist, too. She is particularly good on free market fundamentalism and the underlying ideology that assumes our right to exploit the earth as a resource for our own convenience, which she labels ‘extractivism’.

But then I am predisposed to agree with all this because I am a Green Party member who has voted Green for 20 years, has plenty of money, used to be a revolutionary socialist and feminist, and still calls himself spiritual and anti-materialistic. I also tend to be mean, self-righteous and puritanical, which helps.

What about the unconverted, the vast majority? They will not read this book. If they do, they will dismiss it as left-wing propaganda. George Marshall shows how we interpret climate change information through our pre-existing biases and frameworks. And I’m sure the rest of his book will continue to lay out at least 40 convincing reasons why most people find it easy to ignore climate change. For instance, a particularly telling chapter I have just read explores the pervading silence around the topic of climate change – even liberal professionals don’t want to discuss it at their dinner parties.

So will these books make any difference, except perhaps at the margins of the intellectual undecided? George Marshall is a ‘climate change communicator’ so his book may help his colleagues to brush up their communications. Naomi Klein is more of a political activist so she offers political solutions. She dismisses technological solutions in three quite amusing chapters under the heading ‘Magical Thinking’. She is particularly scathing about my favourite bogey man, Richard Branson.

Then she goes on to espouse the ‘mass movement from below’ solution, describing under the title ‘Blockadia’ various campaigns that have sprung up worldwide in the last 20 years against extractivist activities: in Greece, Britain, the Arctic, Inner Mongolia, Nigeria, Ecuador, Canada and the USA. She is especially keen on the resistance to two pipelines being proposed to transport Tar Sands oil from Alberta to Texas and from Alberta to British Columbia because this involves indigenous tribes; and indigenous tribes can claim indigenous rights over their land and have a countervailing ideology. Klein quotes Arundhati Roy:

The first step towards reimagining a world gone terribly wrong would be to stop the annihilation of those who have a different imagination – an imagination that is outside of capitalism as well as communism. An imagination which has an altogether different understanding of what constitutes happiness and fulfilment. To gain this philosophical space, it is necessary to concede some physical space for the survival of those who may look like the keepers of our past, but who may really be the guides to our future. (p. 291)

Of course, the indigenous rights are disputed by big business and governments but have been upheld in some courts and, for Klein, offer, with grass-roots support, the best hope of progress against climate change. She then lays out the arguments for ‘climate debt’, whereby the developed world should accept its responsibility for creating climate change up to now, and help the rest of the world financially to develop in a more climate-friendly way. Finally, she contrasts the ideology of extractivism with the ‘right to regenerate’ in what I find her most powerful and personal chapter.

While researching the book, Klein was trying to get pregnant but failed, despite the usual medical interventions (drugs and IVF in her case). But then she chose to step out of the stressful ‘fertility factory’ and allowed herself to relax with the help of a naturopath and a move to rural British Columbia. She eventually conceived and gave birth. She draws a parallel between her experiences and the shift in perspective needed to prevent climate change:

I started to learn that protecting and valuing the earth’s ingenious systems of reproducing life and the fertility of all its inhabitants may lie at the center of the shift in worldview that must take place if we are to move beyond extractivism. A worldview based on regeneration and renewal rather than domination and depletion. (p. 424)

So I applaud all this (as you would expect), but I return to my earlier question: will it make any difference, except at the margins of the intellectual undecided? The climate change accepters will accept her arguments and the deniers will deny them. And the rest (the vast majority) will go about their lives as usual, doing a bit of recycling because the council provides the bins. However, as Klein makes clear, the only viable solution is a whole shift of perspective, part of which is for people in the ‘developed’ world (developed only in the narrow GDP sense) to be willing to accept a decline in their levels of consumption. Apparently, 40% of carbon emissions are down to household energy – my guess is that another 40% is down to the production of consumer goodies like food, buildings, cars, TVs and other technology, while the rest is down to travel and transport (the exact details aren’t important).

Who in our society is going to give up this unconscious greed? We in the developed world are all guilty of this; unconscious because we accept it as part of

normal life, greedy because we are devouring too many of the world's resources, and the poorest and least powerful nations are suffering and will suffer most from climate change. Even Klein herself admits that she ate up the air miles in researching her book (as do most of the climate change elite in going about their campaigning).

In my day (the 1980s), the therapy world used to talk a lot about 'taking responsibility': I don't know if this notion is still fashionable – but wouldn't it be great if all of us climate change accepters walked the walk, as well as talking the talk? How many of us are prepared to forgo our cars, our foreign holidays, our upgradings, our creature comforts? Or even some of them? People like me who advocate reducing our consumption are criticized as 'wanting to take us back to the Stone Age', a pathetic slur which justifies continuing to consume as if there's no tomorrow. Or we are dismissed as self-righteous prigs, another easy way to avoid the issue.

Instead, those of us who accept the reality of climate change need to do what is necessary in our own lives and shrug off these criticisms. Calculations show that we each need to reduce our carbon footprint by 75% to reach our fair and equal share of global carbon emissions. We need to use only public transport; we need to stop upgrading and replacing all our gadgets; we need to turn the heating down to 18 degrees at the most; we need to give up our ridiculous addictions to fashion and logos and buy far fewer clothes – preferably from charity shops; we need to stop travelling the world in search of the next resort or the next thrill, often invading and exploiting the local culture; we need to make sure our savings are not invested in climate-changing stocks and shares; and we need to start giving 10% or more of our incomes to prevent climate change adversely affecting the poorest people in the world. To me, this is not hair-shirt preaching – this is the reality of climate change in the world we are supposed to share.

Are we willing to acknowledge our unconscious greed and take responsibility for it, or will we confine our empathy to our family, friends and clients? If enough of us did take such responsibility in our daily lives, we might be taken seriously by the unconverted and get the ball rolling in the developed world, where the change needs to happen.