

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 II

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Once every few years, Naomi Klein comes out with a new blockbuster that changes the terms of the debate about current issues of pressing concern. This new title is no different: not only does Klein revivify the climate change debate with the passionate urgency and sense of discovery that she communicates vividly, intelligently and in her typical pull-no-punches style, but she also joins up the dots between this and the previous concerns that she explored in her bestselling books *The Shock Doctrine* and *No Logo* (Klein, 2008, 2010) in fully coming to see that the problem confronting us and the planet is not just one of global warming, but is one of the very system that organizes our actions, thoughts and attitudes – namely, global capitalism.

Writing in a language that every moderately intelligent teenager and adult on the planet could get (which is exactly what is needed), she spells out in a detailed and fully researched way the deadly interlock in which we find ourselves: between a looming irreversible ecological catastrophe, supine political leadership (including Barack Obama) who are completely in thrall to corporate global commercial interests, most notably the oil lobby, and what can only be described as an out-of-control globalization process that is accelerating in its expansionism, and that has no object other than the enriching of a tiny fraction of the earth's people, whatever the consequences for everyone else and for the non-human species with whom we share(d) the planet.

It is not only this failed system, our morally bankrupt political leaders, compromised Big Green organizations who have bought into the system (at one point she details how one US green organization actually developed its own oil and gas drilling business!) and toothless climate treaties that draw Klein's ire, but also failed 'eco-warriors' like Richard Branson, whose fine talk and intentions seemingly

deserted him when the bottom line came calling. The idea that a consortium of the elite and powerful is ultimately to be trusted to look after us is one of the prevalent fantasies that Klein is swift to puncture. Klein also spears those other fond illusions that many of us hold, and which maintain what she calls ‘climate change denial’, of how the looming disaster might be, at the last moment, miraculously prevented by a sudden surge of political sanity worldwide, by the market itself working a solution, or by a last-minute geo-engineering miracle from our wonderful technology geniuses. Klein confesses to having herself been a climate change denier ‘for longer than I care to admit’ (p. 3), and this book is riveting partly at least because it reveals clearly Klein’s own waking-up process and working through of her denial process, as she shows her willingness to investigate the actual situation, in all its real and dangerous urgency.

Starting from the widely accepted scientific premise that in order to stop an irreversible process of catastrophic damage to the earth and its inhabitants, global warming needs at worst to be kept within a 2 degrees Celsius increase by 2100, Klein discovers that despite all the pious words and ‘treaties’ at international conferences, ‘2 degrees now looks like a Utopian dream’ (p. 13), and most experts now believe that we are ‘on track for a 4 degrees C warmer world by 2100’, which she quotes the UK’s own Tyndall Centre as saying ‘is incompatible with any reasonable characterization of an organized, equitable and civilized global community’ (p. 16). In case this hasn’t already got the reader’s attention, she spells out exactly what this might mean in ways that make it hard to put one’s blinkers back on again.

Further, she details that although capitalism is notoriously and shamefully good at exporting its worst consequences from the ‘core’ to the ‘periphery’ zones of the capitalist ‘world-system’ (see in particular Wallerstein, 1983, 2007), the coming climate crisis will be nothing like so containable, especially once certain ‘tipping points’ are passed. Hence the fact that the fund managers of the wealthy are already advising their clients on where to site their homes, the wisdom of added security, stockpiling and so on. Fund managers tend to be nothing if not realistic (see Klein on Jeremy Grantham, p. 233); it’s the rest of us who are kidding ourselves, and it’s Klein’s intention in this book to wake us up.

Klein then explores why in knowing what we know, we are, in effect, doing precious little about it. She examines the various theories that have been proffered, ranging from the lack of a universal governing body, our short-termism, our over-optimism (governments will come to their senses, surely?), our over-pessimism (it’s too late anyway, so let’s just enjoy it while we can) – and finds them all wanting. The big deal, as she discovers – and this is the thing that **CHANGES EVERYTHING** – is that it is the whole civilizational system that would need to change, and so climate change becomes for Klein a ‘civilizational wake-up call’, which means changing the world in very fundamental ways that most people cannot countenance: hence the epic levels of denial and/or pessimism that we see, and that Klein encounters on her journey of discovery. One of the messages that she hears from the Republicans in the USA and from climate change deniers/minimizers more generally is that climate change is being used as part of a leftist conspiracy. Therefore to defend ‘freedom’ and ‘democratic values’, the political right insists that it is necessary to keep to business-as-usual. In other words, the right actually understands what’s at stake – and that’s why they oppose it, as Klein tells us in her first chapter: ‘The right is right’.

Looking at it even more cynically, though many would say realistically, and as Klein herself has charted in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, from a purely financial point of view – and capitalism *is* a purely financial point of view – what difference would a little global warming, storming, starving, flooding make to the equation, anyway? Eco-catastrophe, like war, might actually be good for the economy! In any case, there will be aid packages from the ‘caring capitalists’ of the Northern hemisphere to the South, as there always are.

However, Klein discovers that alarming as all of this undoubtedly is, there are signs of a fight-back as she uncovers powerful and inspiring stories of resistance to the global oil interests and extractive industries, most notably in her Chapter 9, ‘Blockadia’, in which she details how community-based struggles often involving loose and unlikely combinations of indigenous peoples, local farmers and fishing folk have managed together to at least block and hinder, and sometimes to completely arrest, the development of new oil wells, pipelines, carbon-emitting factories. Notably, the notorious Keystone pipeline is becoming the site for often successful resistance in the Pacific Northwest by a loose alliance of resurgent Indian nations, local farmers and fishing folk whose livelihoods depends on clean water, plus locally based environmental groups.

Other noteworthy local victories from California to Bolivia and Ecuador to Germany and Denmark offer further glimpses of hope, showing what can be achieved by community-based alliances of disparate groupings forming around a simple and visible local environmental issue. Although some people argue that without comprehensive global action, such local victories will prove meaningless, Klein writes tellingly: ‘One battle doesn’t rob from another but rather causes battles to multiply with each act of courage’ (p. 324).

With her small army of outstanding research assistants, Klein moves on to show how it is the battle to keep lakes, rivers and streams clean that is organizing such resistance to the extractive polluters, including the mining as well as the oil industry in places like Greece, Romania and British Columbia. ‘The fight against climate change’, she writes, ‘can be abstract at times; but wherever they live, people will fight for their water. Even die for it’ (p. 347).

Hearteningly, Klein reports that activists have won fracking bans and moratoria in France, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, parts of Vermont (USA) and Quebec, and there have been victories against coal mines in Turkey, the USA and so on. In the last few years, there have been successful protests against coal-fired power plants in India and, even, promisingly in China, where the smog that affects wealthy and poor alike in the big cities has acted as a much-needed spur for conservation policies. The sea change in Chinese attitudes at governmental levels was unthinkable a few years back, and has led to highly promising climate summit talks with the USA since Klein’s book was published (see Hansen, 2014). In the same hopeful vein, Klein thinks that it is conceivable that social attitudes towards the extractive industries could change as quickly and as totally as the attitude to smoking has in recent times: ‘The eventual goal is to confer on oil companies the same status as tobacco companies’ (p. 355).

Meanwhile, in the face of these community-based victories, Klein reports that many of the Big Green organizations are finding their radicalism again, and are less inclined now than they were a decade ago to look for compromise with the extractive industries. While governments may still be in the habit of largely rolling over to do

the oil lobby's bidding, cities and towns such as those within the Transition Town movement in the UK¹ and similar projects in Germany and Scandinavia are sowing the seeds of a new grassroots pro-democracy green movement. At the same time there has arisen a campaign of real ingenuity utilizing the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary: much of the new exploration sites and pipelines for the oil companies run in or through land over which Indigenous peoples (especially in North America and Canada) have ancient but unabrogated legal rights via treaty. These rights are now being successfully used to challenge oil companies' attempts to drive, build and drill on their native lands. As non-Native activists have started to realize, the potential inherent in Indigenous rights, the possibility for protesting and preventing extractivist activity is opening up pro-democracy movements and, in some areas, a possible reconciliation of Indigenous and non-Native people.

But can it really be the case that a hotchpotch movement composed of Indigenous people, non-Native farmers and fishing folk forming a 'multitude' (see Hardt & Negri, 2011) that cuts across ethnic and class lines holds the key to saving the planet?

While Klein is clear that the whole climate change crisis is inextricably bound up with global inequalities, both historic and current, and cannot be solved without some mechanism that redresses both, she somehow steers away from addressing in a systematic way what would need to happen to solve both problems. Lacking a genuinely revolutionary perspective (and even those who have one struggle sometimes to come up with an imagined alternative to the current world-system),² she in the end disappointingly ducks out of confronting capitalism on its own terms, preferring to rest what remains of her hopes of change on the informal network of piecemeal grassroots community-based initiatives that she depicts, or on the idea that the governments of the Southern hemisphere somehow might take on the mess that the North created over the past centuries.

Thus, for instance, despite the many hopeful developments she describes, Klein goes on to show that corporate lawyers are already, of course, challenging, via Free Trade Agreements, the fracking and exploration bans and moratoria, and if/when a Republican administration gets back into office in the USA, it is very easy to foresee that controversial developments like the Keystone pipeline will go ahead at just the time when fresh scientific evidence shows that we need to leave at least 80% of known fossil fuel reserves in the ground if we are to have any chance of keeping global warming within 'acceptable' levels (Carrington, 2015).

Disturbingly and movingly, in her Chapter 13, 'The Right to Regenerate', Klein moves on to describe how oil pollution (especially BP's now infamous Deepwater Horizon and the Exxon Valdes disasters) have tragically impacted on aquatic fertility, and similarly, on land how climate change is damagingly affecting birth and survival rates in a multitude of species, hence hastening the already worrying extinction rates of species. Klein calls for us to go back to respecting the 'fertility cycle' (p. 446) as part of an alternative stewardship mind-set, which many of us who have been impacted by retreats, vision quests, ecopsychology, feminism, shamanic, nature-loving and alternative practices will no doubt be very familiar and at home with. The counterpart at national policy level: the governments of Bolivia and Ecuador have enshrined the 'rights of Mother Earth' into law (pp. 443–444). There is now an important movement in Europe to make 'ecocide' a crime.³

After a move into a more hopeful series of back-to-nature through activism, sustainability projects, and practical demonstrations of stewardship mind-sets, which

at times have the feeling within the context of the main argument of the book of a pleasant ‘vacation’, we get back, towards the end of the book, to reality with a bump. Klein reports how San Diego professor Brad Werner posted this stark question as the title of his talk at a major geophysics conference in San Francisco in 2012: ‘Is Earth f**ked?’. When pressed on this to give a simple and frank answer, he responded: ‘more or less’ (pp. 449–450). Klein then comments: ‘Put another way, only mass social movements can save us now. Because we know where the current system, left unchecked, is heading. We also know ... how that system will deal with the reality of serial climate-related disasters: with profiteering and escalating barbarism to segregate the losers from the winners’ (p. 450).

At times, the movement can feel somewhat ‘mood-disordered’, between and within chapters, from dystopian visions of the future to hope-filled stories about ‘multitude’ initiatives that somehow, while leaving the main architecture of capitalism as a world-system intact, nevertheless produce real change at both the micro and, mysteriously, the macro level. There are passages of Rousseauesque idyll and nostalgia that seem to coincide with Klein herself, as she tells us, upping sticks and moving to a stress-reduced life in the countryside, where the reader can feel a bit as if one has somehow landed in a better, brighter world, and then, as if suddenly waking up, Klein is back with a stark reality check that shatters our illusions again.⁴

But when Klein moves, towards the end of the book, to confront the reality of the global mess we are in and tries to suggest ways in which we can collectively empower the radical and fundamental alternative to business-as-usual that we so desperately need, a change that would be likely to halt extractivist thinking and activities and lead us towards a caring-for-each-other and for the planet set of mentalities, then the book, perhaps unsurprisingly but nonetheless dismayingly, starts to falter.

Having essentially diagnosed the climate change crisis as a problem of global capitalism, the solution is a lot harder to decipher.⁵ Perhaps, Klein in the end succumbs to the truth contained in the oft-quoted maxim (e.g. Fisher, 2009): ‘It is easier to envisage the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism’. The trouble is that it is precisely ‘the end of the world’ (as we know it) that we will soon be envisaging and indeed experiencing, as Klein alarmingly but presciently warns us, in this timely and vital book. Nevertheless, Naomi Klein has done us all a vital service by comprehensively spelling out the enormity of the stakes and the urgency of the situation, by updating us on the current state of the global warming crisis, and by indicating clearly what pathways of activism might still, at this late stage, head off the worst of the impending catastrophes. This is a rallying call to us all, if we haven’t already done so, to wake up before it is too late. If you read no other book this year, read this.

Notes

1. For an overview of the Transition movement and philosophy, see Quilley (2011).
2. It is not that there is a lack of alternative scenarios (e.g. Daly, 1973; Jackson, 2009; Odum & Odum, 2001), but descriptions of credible pathways from where we are now to any of these sustainable futures are notably absent.
3. See www.endecocide.org; and Eisenstein (2014).
4. For a very succinct but highly realistic and daunting summary of the current situation and future prospects, see also Rees (2014).

5. On this very point, see the recent appreciative critique of Klein's book by Sam Gindin (2015).

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