

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

Commentary on the book reviews

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It's for all of us to change

This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate offers a crucial and timely understanding of the systemic roots of the climate catastrophe we now face, and some tracks along which we can begin to retreat from the abyss. Klein elegantly argues her case on the basis of a wealth and variety of evidence, and with admirable coherence and grounded passion, not arrogant superiority. She spells out the dire prospects for the world if we continue to burn fossil fuels, and the forces at work to try and ensure that we do. However, she also provides reasons for slim but real and growing hope that things can change, and shows that they have indeed begun to do so.

While I understand David Kalisch's disappointment with the apparent absence of a specific 'solution' in Klein's book, which is similar to the frustration I felt with the message of the Occupy movement, it seems to me on the basis of what Klein argues that the way out or the way forward will not so much take the form of a prescribed economic system or political ideology but of a loose yet rigorous set of values and principles that honour the individual, their community and society, and recognise that the human species is an integral part of the natural world and must live in ways that respect its ecological workings. While these values are universal, exactly how they will be put into practice will need to vary from place to place, to be fully appropriate to local geography and culture.

For me, *This Changes Everything* is a masterpiece in its own terms, and one could not expect Klein to have extended the remit of her weighty tome any further. It is, however, somehow incomplete, for it lacks any reference to the crucial question of human wellbeing – a matter that lies at the heart of any discussion of the right or best way to conduct life. Moreover, the book does no more than allude to the role of material over-consumption in fomenting climate change; similarly, the need to

reduce overall demand for energy is left to one side. In fact, Klein seems to dismiss the role of individual consumers in tackling climate change and ignores the need for personal responsibility in this regard. Yes, systemic, ideological change and collective action are essential, and urgently so, if we are to stand any chance of containing climate chaos. Yet the very reason for burning all the fossil fuels that we do, and extracting all the minerals, is to meet the ever growing demand for consumer goods, novelty, convenience, ease and even luxury. It is vital that we come to understand that consuming much more than we need does not deliver wellbeing, and that the sources of wellbeing, once basic needs are met, lie elsewhere.

So, while I entirely agree with Nigel Armistead's view that a massive reduction in material consumption is a crucial factor in tackling climate change, in my own book, *Happier People Healthier Planet: How putting wellbeing first would help sustain life on Earth* (<http://happierpeoplehealthierplanet.com>), published within weeks of Klein's, I approach the issue from a different perspective, that of wellbeing; for over-consuming doesn't make us happy. Indeed, consumption is often either mindless or an attempt, consciously or unconsciously, at consolation for unhappiness. Yes, it is futile simply to tell people that they must go without all manner of goods, services and devices that they have come to consider as a right as a result of living in a culture of consumption, pressed at every turn by discourse and images that are super-saturated with expectations and invitations to consume yet more. Rather, we need to refocus on actively attending to what supports true and enduring wellbeing.

Wellbeing, the combination of feeling good and functioning well, is generated not by a high standard of living but by *non-material* assets, most notably good relationships. Also important are a sense of belonging, of autonomy, of contributing, of meaning and of purpose; contact with the natural world; and the exercise of creativity. Klein alludes tangentially to some of these when she talks of the values of those fighting for a threatened public library or park, a student movement demanding free university tuition, or an immigrant rights movement fighting for dignity (p. 61). But while in their heart of hearts most people know that 'money doesn't make us happy', our collective behaviour tells a very different story. Hypermarkets, shopping malls, retail parks and online warehouses are constantly refilled with merchandise as goods are bought round the clock, adding to our stock of possessions or replacing them with the latest version. Few are the people who would not welcome having more money to spend, however much they already have, including the richest 1% of the world's population, whose growing combined wealth, according to a recent report by Oxfam, will soon exceed that of the other 99% (<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/our-campaigns/inequality-and-poverty>). At the same time, evidence that wellbeing does not result from having more than we need has been repeatedly revealed by surveys conducted over decades that show that levels of wellbeing have not risen in parallel with the rise in affluence. For the sake of both the environment and of personal wellbeing, it is vital that it becomes properly recognised that, once we have a secure, warm/cool home, and reliable access to good food, clean water, health care and education, little more in material terms is required to underwrite a high level of wellbeing. Vital, too, that it is fully understood that, with these basic requirements in place, it is non-material assets that give rise to wellbeing.

Along with the sea change in the economic and political ideology rightly called for by Klein, we need to transform our culture into one that puts wellbeing, not

private wealth, first. Such a culture would come to see extravagant consumption as vulgar and anti-social, and would recognise social status in non-financial ways, status that is earned by conduct that benefits the common good. This is a culture, I argue, in which intrinsic values are actively cultivated. Klein points to the root of the world's malaise as extrinsic values, the valuing of wealth and public image above all else. In *Happier People Healthier Planet* I argue for developing a social culture of intrinsic values, values that prioritise activities and conditions for their inherent rather than their worldly worth, both for the sake of protecting the environment and for the sake of personal wellbeing – for people with intrinsic values have been found to be happier. Indeed, such values were amply demonstrated by the disparate collection of individuals who took part in the study I conducted of people in Britain who identified themselves to me as living satisfying lives of modest material consumption. Their stories helped to inform and illustrate the lines of enquiry I followed in writing *Happier People Healthier Planet*, which explores the origins of active preferences for living modestly, in order to develop our understanding of how willing material modesty might best be promoted. There is, I discovered in the course of my research, an important and intricate reciprocity between personal wellbeing and environmental sustainability.

While, shamefully, poverty is increasing across the globe, it is the excesses of everyday consumption by the many who have the financial leeway to make choices about how they live, what they buy and what they throw away that are the underlying cause of the warming climate. It is these that are creating the expanding market for energy and 'natural resources'. If we replaced the rapidly spreading consumer society, characterised by greed, vanity, mindless profligacy and wasteful habits, with one whose motivating force was the nurture and nourishment of personal and social wellbeing, the demand for and profitability of energy generation and extractive industries would shrink dramatically. We all need to become modest material consumers.

I do share Nigel Armistead's exasperation that only the 'converted' read about climate change. But it is hardly surprising that this should be so when many people live with short time horizons, whether due to real daily struggles that rule out the possibility of engaging proactively with the wider world, or to a lack of the kind of language use that enables a longer view to be constructed (as revealed by Basil Bernstein). Nor is it surprising when so many lack a sense of personal agency: a feeling of powerlessness cannot be reconciled with the need to take individual action in the face of the vast, intangible threat presented by climate change. But, as I discovered from some of the modest consumers I interviewed, people's values and views can change, and sometimes fast. People can be 'converted'. Conversion to a desire for material modesty or a revulsion at waste results from the crossing of a personal 'threshold of understanding'; either that buying stuff rarely increases our happiness beyond a short-lived kick; or that gross inequality or exploitation of labour is insupportable; or that deep and lasting satisfaction comes from non-material sources which we need to work on actively; or that one has some personal responsibility for the human damage being done to the natural world.

While building a social culture dominated by intrinsic values will take much more time than is available to prevent runaway climate change, and the need for 'hard' measures in terms of laws, taxes, deployment of green technology and so on is pressing, as Klein makes abundantly clear, it is nevertheless a crucial aspect of

creating the overall change of culture that Klein calls for. The reciprocity, cooperation, creativity and solidarity which she identifies as fundamental to this are more likely to be expressed in people who have developed intrinsic values than in those motivated by individualistic, grasping competitiveness. We develop our values through experience. It is therefore up to each of us to seek out for ourselves and to help others, whether in a personal or occupational capacity, to enjoy experiences that will delight, comfort, challenge and inspire: the dew drop on the spider's web, the physicality of digging the soil, the touch of the helping hand, the twinkle of stars in the night sky, the sound of singing through an open window, the joining with others in worthwhile activity. We need to experience wonder, compassion, trust, imagination and achievement in order to fulfil our individual potential. None of these experiences is dependent on money or stuff. What they do require are certain human qualities and capacities, such as attentiveness, openness, patience, perceptiveness, appreciation, courage and humour. It is modest but decent material conditions and growth in positive personal qualities and capacities for all that we need to pursue, not constant economic growth. The collective begins with the individual.