

Retro Book Review

***This Changes Everything* by Naomi Klein, Penguin, New York and London, 2015, 566pp, £10.99 (paperback) ISBN: 978-0-241-95618-2.**

Reviewed by Evelyn Wasdell

Naomi Klein's title states categorically that 'This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate'.

We need to remember that the work of our time is bigger than climate change. We need to be setting our sights higher and deeper. What we're really talking about, if we're honest with ourselves, is transforming everything about the way we live on this planet.

Frontispiece (Tarbotton, 2012)

This really sets the work in a larger mind-set. The complete revaluation of our economic, social and physical reality. 'This Changes Everything'.

Unfortunately, it does not. What is missing from the book – which is a very good delineation of the mind-set and effects of exploitative extraction – is any coherent idea of *why* this is happening. Naomi Klein cites examples throughout the book of indigenous societies attempting to fight back against exploitative business. The capitalist mind-set is vilified throughout the book, and protest movements – the clubbing together in what she describes as

'Blockadia' of protest movements to support each other as they try to fight a much larger organisation – are held up as a solution. However, her mind-set does not allow the intrusion of the possibility that these protest movements carry within them the very same dynamics as they are protesting about.

There appears to be an unquestionable reliance on indigenous peoples to show everyone the way out of the mess we are in. If we were to only return to a different mind-set – one that has been lost – it will help.

In many pagan societies, the earth was seen as a mother, a fertile giver of life. Nature – the soil, forest sea – was endowed with divinity, and mortals were subordinate to it. The Judeo-Christian tradition introduced a radically different concept. The earth was the creation of a monotheistic God, who after shaping it, ordered its inhabitants, in the words of Genesis: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.' The idea of dominion

could be interpreted as an invitation to use nature as a convenience. (p.74) (Sancton, 1989)

Quite apart from skipping over the ‘and replenish the earth’ command, Western thought, and in particular Judeo-Christian tradition, is deemed the cause of the problem. If only we could return to a more indigenous thought process.

Katis Cook, Mohawk midwife, summed this up:

That woman is the first environment is an original instruction. In pregnancy our bodies sustain life.... At the breast of women, the generations are nourished. From the bodies of women flows the relationship of those generations both in society and to the natural world. In this way is the earth our mother, the old people tell us. In this way, we are women are earth. (Cited at the start of Chapter 13, p. 419) (Cook, 2007)

However, as Klein herself says, her own experience of infertility, standard Western infertility treatment, naturopathic consultation, miscarriage and finally giving birth to a live child, permeates her book. It was also coloured by her initial refusal to have children, because as we were ‘headed towards a grim ecological collapse’ she was losing her own capacity to enjoy her time in nature. She referred to this perspective as ‘pre-loss’, and concluded that she was not alone, citing advertisements such as ‘see the glaciers before they melt’ as a kind of nihilistic final farewell ‘gobble it all up before it’s gone’.

This back-drop to the whole book is taken as read. However, the effects of humanity as a species spending nine months as a parasite, before being ejected from the safe holding environment – usually by a rather traumatic process – leading to a life-long post-traumatic stress syndrome being more or less ‘normal’, is never considered. So although the book is attempting to ‘change everything’, the very thing that is not changed is the learned response of humanity to its first environment.

So although various past attempts at apparent fundamental change are noted, and signs of hope that these societal changes will continue and bring

in the hoped-for conclusion, it is not at all clear what would make a difference this time around. Indeed, Klein notes that, for instance, although South Africa had defeated apartheid, it had not brought about the economic changes that were also needed. There appears to be no recognition that although 10 per cent of the world hold 90 per cent of the resources and wealth, even in the bottom 10 per cent, the top 10 per cent of that strata hold 90 per cent of that strata’s wealth. The in-built (but learned) response of ejection from the womb in conditions of high stress, low resource and rapid change being the unconscious motivator of both the exploiter and the exploited is an undiscovered key to be able to ‘change everything’.

Naomi Klein cites the Bolivian ambassador to the World Trade Organisation in Geneva in April 2009 as the point at which Klein herself stopped ‘averting her eyes’ to the climate problem and realised that ‘that climate change could become a galvanizing force for humanity, leaving us all not just safer from extreme weather, but with societies that are safer and fairer in all kinds of other ways as well.’ (p. 7) That ‘resources required to pull away from fossil fuels could pull huge swaths of humanity out of poverty, providing services now sorely lacking, from clean water to electricity.’ (p. 7) In other words, the climate crisis could be exploited by herself and others to force humanity into what they considered to be the right path – not so dissimilar to the exploitative mind-set requiring the world to work its way.

Her description of ‘pre-loss’ is a description that could be described as ‘post-loss’ recognition – the recognition that the idealised womb-world is never going to be there again. We are outside.

Food, resources and life are not going to come automatically via the umbilical cord. Neither is the waste we jettison into the umbilical cord and amnion going to be cleaned up by ‘Mother Nature’. The reality of the climate crisis – and its concurrent ecological crisis – requires that we do not return to some imagined better world, or push our current world into a path we consider is more conducive to the continuation of life on this planet. What changes everything is the recognition that the abrupt termination of humanity’s first nine months

or so has so coloured each and every human (indigenous peoples, Western peoples, ecologically aware or climate denialists – all of us) that until we really take that history on board, deal with what is past for us all, and integrate our total individual history into our conscious actions, we will be condemned to repeat on ever-larger stages that saga of exploitation and denial of reality.

Note

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