

Naomi Klein Breaks a Taboo

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The fact that global warming is man-made and poses a grave threat to our future is widely accepted by progressives. Yet, the most commonly proposed solutions emphasize either personal responsibility for a global emergency (buy energy-efficient light bulbs, purchase a Prius), or rely on market-based schemes like cap-and-trade. These responses are not only inadequate, says best-selling author Naomi Klein, but represent a lost opportunity to confront climate change's root cause: capitalism.

This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate, Klein's much-anticipated new book, is both surprisingly hopeful and deeply personal as she deftly weaves in her story of struggling to conceive her first child while researching the potential collapse of the natural world. In the book, Klein challenges everyone who cares about climate change to strive for a seemingly impossible redistribution of political and economic power. This, she argues, is both necessary and offers the prospect of living in a more just and humane society than the one we know today.

John Tarleton: When it comes to the climate crisis, capitalism is often the elephant in the room that goes unacknowledged. Yet you zero in on it, starting with the title of your book. Why?

Naomi Klein: I put the connection between capitalism and climate change up front because the fact that the life support systems of the planet are being destabilized is telling us that there is something fundamentally wrong with our economic system. What our economy needs to function in a capitalist system is continuous growth and continuous depletion of resources, including finite resources. What our planet needs in order to avoid catastrophic warming and other dangerous tipping points is for humans to contract our use of material resources.

The science of climate change has made this fundamental conflict blindingly obvious. By putting that conflict up front, it breaks a taboo. And sometimes when you break a taboo, there's sort of a relief in just saying it. And that's what I've found so far: This is something that people know. And it's giving permission to just name it. It's a good starting point, so now we can have a real discussion.

Why has that taboo of talking about capitalism and climate change in the same breath become so entrenched here in the United States?

I think it's primarily because capitalism is a religion in the United States. But also because the Left in the United States is extremely Keynesian, though Keynes himself questioned economic growth. But the translation of Keynesian thought we are seeing in this historical moment is a debate about the distribution of the spoils of economic growth. It's not about some of the core facts about blanket economic growth.

In the book I talk about selective de-growth. There are schools of thought on the Left that dismiss all forms of growth. What I'm talking about is managing the economy. There are parts of our economy that we want to expand that have a minimal environmental impact, such as the care-giving professions, education, the arts. Expanding those sectors creates jobs, well-being and more equal societies. At the same time we have to shrink the growth-for-growth's-sake parts of our economy, including the financial sector, which plays a large role in feeding consumption.

You say that the Left needs its own project for addressing climate change in a systematic

and transformative manner that breaks with free-market orthodoxy. What would that look like?

The industrialized nations have to start cutting their emissions by about 8 to 10 percent per year, which is incompatible with capitalism. You cannot reconcile that level of emission reduction with an economic system that needs continual growth. The only time we have seen emissions reductions on that level was during the Great Depression of the 1930s. How we transition from our current status quo sets the parameters for how we want to organize society. A healthy transition would entail huge investments in the public sphere, public transit, housing, all kinds of infrastructure and services in order to prepare for the extreme weather that's already locked in and also to lower our emissions.

Progressives should seize the reins of this project because it's an opportunity to make this transition equitable and to have a better economy on the other side. You could also allow your economy to crash and burn, which is a terrible idea and would hurt enormous numbers of people.

The latter option would make a good starting point for a Hollywood movie.

It's striking to me that when we envision the future it's just a more brutally cleaved world between haves and have-nots than the one we have now. This is so much a part of our culture that we think all we're capable of doing is becoming like the societies portrayed in *Snowpiercer*, *Elysium* or *The Hunger Games*. It's actually not controversial to say this is where we are headed. The question is, can we imagine another way of responding to crisis other than one of deepening inequality, brutal disaster capitalism and mangled techno-fixes, because that seems to be where people agree we're headed.

The alternative project you have in mind envisions a large role for the state. Yet, many on the Left have deep qualms about holding power of any kind, much less "seizing the reins," as you say, to affect systemic changes.

There has been a backlash in our generation of leftists against the centralized state socialism of previous generations. This is for obvious and understandable reasons. Since the 2008 economic crash, I see more appetite among the younger generation to engage with policy and to try to change power. You see it with the *Indignados* movement in Spain forming its own party and running in elections, in Iceland post-crisis, with outsiders going inside on their own terms. You see it at the municipal level with the minimum wage in Seattle.

Where the pendulum swung really hard against any sort of engagement with formal politics, I see it swinging back where it's like, "No, we're not going to replicate those centralized structures but things are too urgent and too dire to ignore institutions of various kinds, including lawmaking. But we're going to try to change it and build our belief in decentralization into the way we engage."

Has this approach made a significant impact anywhere on energy and climate-related policies?

A really great example is the energy transformation that has been going on in Germany. Thirty percent of the electricity produced there is now coming from renewable resources, mostly wind and solar and mostly through decentralized, community-controlled ventures of various kinds, including hundreds of energy co-ops. You also have large cities like Munich voting to reverse their electricity privatizations and become part of this energy revolution.

What's interesting about Germany is it really shows how you need strong policy to make a transition like that happen. It's not about, "Hey, let's start an energy co-op." No. That kind of fetish for very

small-scale initiatives won't get us where we need to go. What Germany has is a bold national policy. That's how you get to 30 percent renewable electricity in such a short time, and they may very well get to 50 to 60 percent by 2030. It also shows you can design smart policy to systematically decentralize.

What got you started on this book? Was there a specific moment when you realized you wanted to write a book on climate change?

I decided that I was going to immerse myself in this subject in 2009 when I was covering a U.N. antiracism conference in Geneva. An earlier conference held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2001 saw a growing debate about whether the United States and Europe should pay reparations to African nations for the harm done by the slave trade and colonialism. The issue vanished from public discussion after 9/11 and it was clear by 2009 how much ground had been lost.

At that 2009 conference I met Angélica Navarro, a trade negotiator from Bolivia who was doing some really interesting work about climate and reparations and how to really push the concept of climate debt within the U.N. climate negotiations. And I had a moment in which I realized that the science is so clear on the historical responsibility for climate change that it could be used as a tool for realizing justice goals for which social movements had been fighting for a very long time.

Your book strikes a hopeful note on what can be a grim topic.

I find it really hard to write when I feel hopeless. It took me five years to write this book in part because initially I didn't feel so hopeful. Then, there really started to be an explosion of resistance to extractive projects such as fracking and oil pipelines and coal export terminals. It's being done in a truly global and networked manner that reminds me of the early days of the so-called anti-globalization movement.

That shift made me really excited that there is a growing movement and that the book can be part of that movement. I feel like we're on the verge of a coming together of economic justice movements and a new sort of kick-ass grassroots anti-extractivism movement. When people are fighting fracking or they're fighting a big pipeline, generally they're not driven by concerns about climate, they're driven by a love of place. Often the protection of water is the primary motivation, as well as concerns about the health of their kids. But climate change definitely adds another layer of urgency to keeping carbon in the ground and not putting it into the atmosphere.

You became a parent for the first time a couple of years ago. How did that experience affect the way you see climate change? Did the prospect of dire climate change taking effect in this century cause you to be hesitant about becoming a parent?

I was 38 when I decided I wanted to have kids and to start trying. That's pretty late. I would have this conversation with my husband where I'd say that the more I read about climate change, the more I felt that having a child was condemning this kid to a Mad Maxian future of fighting with their friends for food and water. This was the sort of dystopic future that I was imagining. And I was having trouble imagining anything else.

I think that seeing some of these signs of hope were part of the process of me deciding to become a parent: being able to imagine other futures than the one playing on repeat at the moment. But I'm really wary of this sort of, "I care more about the future because I have a baby" thing. As somebody who didn't have kids for a long time and had trouble getting pregnant, I really hated when people did that, because it felt really exclusionary to me. I understand, as a parent, why people say that, because when you hear that we'll be at x degrees warmer by 2050, you can't help but do these

mental calculations of, "Okay, how old will he be then?" But I cared about the future before my son Toma was born just as some of the most caring people that I know don't have kids. So I want to be careful about that.

There's a tremendous organizing effort taking place here in New York for the People's Climate March. Why do you think this particular protest matters, and what are the chances it will have an enduring impact?

Climate change has gone from being an issue that will affect our grandchildren to a right-now issue. The difference over the past few years is that the climate movement has jettisoned its astronaut's "eye in the sky" view of a shimmering blue-and-white dot set against the darkness of space in which no people are visible, and it has come down to earth.

It's connecting with people who are driven by basic justice demands such as clean air for their kids and water they can drink. The People's Climate March will be much more diverse and it's going to be angrier than previous climate protests. That anger is a really important and powerful tool. So I think we're going to see a different kind of climate movement. It's already there. I think Seattle 1999 was a coming-out party for the global justice movement, and I think this will be a coming-out party of sorts for a new climate movement.

There have been other moments over the past two decades, from the Rio Earth Summit to Al Gore's movie to Hurricane Sandy, that have seen climate change briefly capture the public imagination only to fade out again.

In the past the climate movement was incredibly elitist. There really was a belief that you did not need a grassroots movement if you had all the celebrities and the billionaires and a former vice president like Al Gore on your side. I think that is what has made the issue so ephemeral. If your strategy is just to get a bunch of celebrities and billionaires on your side, guess what? They change their minds, and they move on to other things. *Vanity Fair* launches their annual green issue and it lasts for two years. Fashions change.

This is the first time climate change has had a grassroots movement behind it in North America. And that's what is going to give it staying power. The whole point is that it has roots now. The problem with the top-down strategy is that it has no roots. And when you don't have roots, you can blow away.

For more, see thischangeseverything.org.

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