



Book Review — What Could Change Everything?

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This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate.

Naomi Klein (Toronto). New York: Simon & Schuster, Nov 2014, 566p, \$30.

This very readable and fact-laden book is something else! The reviewer in The New York Times Book Review (9 Nov 2014) calls it “a book of such ambition and consequence that it is almost unreviewable,” concluding that it is “the most momentous and contentious environmental book since **Silent Spring**.” It is included in the Book Review’s roundup of “100 Notable Books of 2014” (half of which are fiction and poetry, with only seven books devoted to current affairs), along with Henry Kissinger’s **World Order**, which doesn’t mention climate change at all. In contrast, the economist reviewer in Canada’s Financial Post awards it his “Worst Book of the Year” prize, considered as a “masterpiece of fiction.” In other words, like the 1972 **Limits to Growth**, it is controversial.

Klein’s basic argument inverts the theme of her previous book, **The Shock Doctrine**, a strikingly original thesis that corporate interests have systematically exploited various forms of crisis over the past four decades so as to “ram through policies that enrich a small elite.” But now, she writes, we are increasingly faced with the crisis of climate change, a “people’s shock” which “could become a galvanizing force for humanity,” pulling huge numbers of people out of poverty and providing services now sorely lacking—a vision of the future in which we collectively use the crisis to leap somewhere that seems better than where we are.

“Climate change has never received the crisis treatment from our leaders, despite the fact that it carries the risk of destroying lives on a vastly greater scale than collapsed banks or collapsed buildings.” (p.6) It is a crisis worthy of Marshall Plan levels of response. *“The thing about a crisis this big, this all-encompassing, is that it changes everything. It changes what we can do, what we can hope for, what we can demand from ourselves and our leaders. It means there is a whole lot of stuff that we have been told is inevitable that simply cannot stand. And it means that a whole lot of stuff we have been told is impossible has to start happening right away.”* (p.28)

1. Bad Ideas and Good Directions

Chapters in the first two parts of Klein’s book go into considerable detail about “how free market fundamentalism helped overheat the planet.” Topics include the climate change denial movement (notably the Heartland Institute in Chicago; also the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, Competitive Enterprise Institute, Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, etc.), the “warped values” fueling both disaster denialism and disaster capitalism, how trade deals trump climate concerns, cheap labor and dirty energy as “a package deal,”

economic austerity impediments to much-needed rebuilding and reinventing of the public sphere, neglected finance options to prepare for the coming storms (closing tax havens, a financial transactions tax, a 1% billionaires tax, slashing military budgets, a carbon tax, phasing out fossil fuel subsidies), the neglected potential for green job creation, the virtue of decentralized control over energy, agroecology as a key tool for emission reduction, protesting the Keystone XL pipeline, overreliance on dirty extraction, use of scarce water by the extraction industries, political timidity of the mainstream environmental movement, the disastrous merger of big business and the mainstream “Big Green” (critical comments on the Nature Conservancy, Environmental Defense Fund, and others “who claim climate change requires only minor tweaks to business-as-usual”), the “scam magnet” attraction of carbon offset projects to “carbon cowboys,” why “green billionaires” such as Richard Branson won’t save us (they make “splashy entrances, with more schemes to rebrand capitalism”), the promise of geoengineering as “our culture’s most powerful form of magical thinking,” and geoengineering as shock doctrine (in the desperation of a true crisis, all kinds of sensible opposition melts away and all manner of high-risk behaviors seem acceptable; “geoengineering will certainly monsterize the planet”).

2. The Promise of “Blockadia”

“Blockadia,” first coined by the direct-action Tar Sands Blockade in 2012, which challenged Keystone construction in East Texas, “is not a specific location on a map but rather a roving transnational conflict zone that is cropping up with increasing frequency and intensity.” (p.294) Resistance to high-risk extreme extraction by mining and fossil fuel companies is building a global grassroots network to stop “real climate crimes in progress.” In contrast to Obama’s “All of the Above” energy policy, Blockadia is responding with a tough philosophy that might be described as “None of the Below”—rather than digging up poisons from the deep, we should power our lives from the abundant energies on our planet’s surface.

Additional topics include “the power of this ferocious love” that is underestimated by the resource companies, the extreme rootlessness of the culture of fossil fuel extraction (contrasted to ties to the land, especially strong in Indigenous communities), the wave of global victories against coal, pressure for a more sustainable development path in China, the divestment movement for public interest institutions to sell financial holdings in fossil companies, collusion between corporations and the Canadian government, how the exercise of Indigenous peoples’ rights has played a central role in the current wave of fossil fuel resistance (it may now be the most powerful barrier to protect us from a future of climate chaos), and positive and concrete alternatives to dirty development as the most powerful lever for change.

“Only mass social movements can save us now,” along the lines of the abolition movement and the civil rights movement--some countervailing power to block the road while clearing some alternative pathways to safer destinations. “If that happens, well, it changes everything.” (p.450)

3. A Spirited Conclusion

“Mass resistance movements have grabbed the wheel before and could very well do so again.” But we must reckon with the fact that lowering global emissions in line with climate

scientists' urgent warnings demands changes of a daunting speed and scale. "Meeting science-based targets will mean forcing some of the most profitable companies on the planet to forfeit trillions of dollars of future earnings by leaving the vast majority of proven fossil fuel reserves in the ground. It will also require coming up with trillions more to pay for zero-carbon, disaster-ready social transformation." (p.452) Economic demands for basic public services that work and for decent housing are nothing less than the unfinished business

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of the most powerful liberation movement of the past two centuries. The massive global investments required to respond to the climate threat—"a Marshall Plan for the Earth"—offer a chance to get it right this time. "Climate change can be the force—the grand push—that will bring together all of these still living movements. A rushing river fed by countless streams, gathering collective force to finally reach the sea."

Some final Klein comments to chew on:

- *"Winning will certainly take the convergence of diverse constituencies on a scale previously unknown."* (p.459)
- *"Any attempt to rise to the climate challenge will be fruitless unless it is understood as part of a much broader battle of worldviews, a process of rebuilding and reinventing the very idea of the collective, the communal, the commons, the civil, and the civic after so many decades of attack and neglect. Because what is overwhelming about the climate challenge is that it requires breaking so many rules at once—rules written into national laws and trade agreements."* (p.460)
- *"A great deal of the work of deep social change involves having debates during which new stories can be told to replace the ones that have failed us."* (p.461)
- *"Fundamentally, the task is to articulate not just an alternative set of policy proposals but an alternative worldview to rival the one at the heart of the ecological crisis...an unshakable belief in the equal rights of all people and a capacity for deep compassion will be the only things standing between civilization and barbarism."* (p.462)
- *"The climate movement has yet to find its full moral voice on the world stage, but it is most certainly clearing its throat...most of all, [the] clarion voices are coming from the front lines of Blockadia, from those lives most directly impacted by both high-risk fossil fuel extraction and early climate destabilization."* (p.464)
- *"It is slowly dawning on a great many of us that no one is going to step in and fix this crisis; that if change is to take place it will only be because leadership bubbled up from below."* (p.465)

Comment: A Question of Framing

Blockadia's activist leadership "from below" may well be necessary, but is it sufficient? Klein cites hundreds of individuals and organizations, not only activists on the front lines but UN agencies, the World Bank, and many scientists from respected organizations. Yet, despite 59 impressive pages of footnotes in small print, and six pages of acknowledging help from

hundreds of individuals (including two full-time researchers assisting this writing), Klein underestimates the extent of international sustainability-related organizations by a factor of three or perhaps even four or more! To take just one specific example, she suggests a “Marshall Plan for the Earth” in several parts of the book, seemingly unaware of the Global Marshall Plan Initiative in Germany, founded by Franz Josef Radermacher and others from the Club of Rome and other groups in 2003. Perhaps this is a very small rivulet with little or no input into the “rushing river” gathering collective force, as Klein envisions, but many other streams are seemingly having influence to the “gathering collective force.”

An ongoing survey of more than 900 security and sustainability organizations,* of which roughly three-quarters are concerned with sustainability and/or climate change, points to a great number of “top down” organizations and projects, as well as “bottom up” activist groups. Klein complains that “a robust movement responding to the climate crisis is not emerging fast enough.” (p.61) But perhaps there is a far greater movement than Klein—or anyone else—imagines, although it still has far to go. One reason that Klein underestimates the movement is that her argument is framed in terms of bottom-up climate groups vs. capitalism, enabled by dismissing “the failures of top-down environmentalism.” (p.295) The top-down sector may have had relatively little impact in the past, but it is rapidly expanding around the concept of sustainability and sustainable development, which embraces climate concerns and more, and may well be approaching critical mass, especially as it increasingly overlaps with security thinking.

While Klein is underestimating the macro-system promoting sustainability, she overestimates the leviathan of free market capitalism, while ignoring several other barriers to sustainable progress—again a problem of framing. Capitalism comes in many forms, and Klein is correct in questioning the simplistic free market ideology in North America that favors business interests, reduces government regulation, and starves public spending (although the state capitalism in China is perhaps equally ruinous for the environment). But her major complaint is against fossil fuel and mining industries, best seen as icons of industrial era capitalism.

Many other corporations and businesses are open to sustainability and responsibility arguments, and are prodded by groups such as Business for Social Responsibility (promoting a “just and sustainable world”), Corporate EcoForum, the Green Biz Group, the Dow Jones Sustainability Indices ranking 2500 large companies and industry leaders, the Sustainable Accounting Standards Board (developing sustainability standards for more than 80 industries in ten sectors), Sustainable Brands, Tomorrow’s Company in London, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development in Geneva (with its **Vision 2050** scenario and **Action 2020** platform), and the widely-known World Economic Forum in Davos (concerned with food and water security, environmental issues, and much more). Most notable is the UN Global Compact involving 12,000 corporate participants and other stakeholders from over 145 countries in following 10 principles in the areas of human rights, labor standards, and the environment—a “practical framework for sustainable policies”. The Global Compact Cities Programme in Melbourne is the urban counterpart promoting the same principles. Also see the C40 Climate Leadership Group for megacities, the Climate Alliance of European

* Michael Marien, along with newly-elected WAAS Fellow David Harries, is preparing an online guide to more than 900 Security and Sustainability organizations—a project of the World Academy of Art and Science. A 94-page Second Interim Draft of the “S&S Guide” is available on request from mmarien@twcny.rr.com. An expansion of this Interim Draft will be sent to WAAS Fellows sometime in 2015.

Cities, ICLEI: Local Governments for Sustainability, Sustainable Cities International, and other urban groups.

The business view of sustainability may not be all that Klein and others might hope for, and some business actions may be trivial “greenwashing.” But this activity to shape responsible 21st century capitalism should not be dismissed without some reasonable evidence. Arguably, as climate change worsens, it is a better strategy to split the capitalist sector, gaining support from a growing number of worried businesses while isolating the fossil fuel and mining polluters and forcing them to clean up their toxic activities and to diminish them (leaving much oil and gas in the ground, as recommended by the International Energy Agency).

Meanwhile, there are several other barriers to the sustainability transition, in addition to powerful and reactionary extractive industries. To quickly suggest a few: 1) short-term security concerns about terrorism and cyber-security that demand immediate attention; 2) the inexorable march of new technologies for better *and* worse, threatening loss of jobs through robotics and new bioweapons to add to still worrisome nuclear stockpiles; 3) contamination of air, water, land, and human bodies by a myriad of untested chemicals; 4) information overload that keeps the entertainment-drenched public from appreciating long-term existential threats of human-caused climate change; 5) lack of any institution for seriously debating the many serious issues of our time with evidence-based arguments; 6) fundamentalist religious beliefs that promote violence and violation of human rights, deny charity to the suffering, and/or (among Christian Evangelicals) see extreme weather events as welcome signs of biblical end times.

Fuller consideration of these barriers, an appreciation of the role of non-extractive corporations in promoting sustainability, and a better mapping of the vast but increasingly overlapping worlds of security and sustainability organizations would certainly hasten the global transition. Three big “top down” events in late 2015 will probably help: the unprecedented encyclical on climate change from Pope Francis, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals for all nations (to be issued by the UN in September as a post-2015 follow-on to the largely successful Millennium Development Goals), and the December “COP 21” conference in Paris (which seeks a new global agreement on mitigating climate change). Together, with luck, this may begin to change everything!

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Postscript

Also see “A People’s Shock” by Naomi Klein (*The Nation* Cover Feature, 6 October 2014, pp.12-21), adapted from her book (Klein is a columnist for *The Nation*, America’s leading progressive magazine). The spin-off is introduced by a sort of sub-title, asserting that “Climate change has created a historic opening for progressives. Rather than the ultimate expression of the shock doctrine, it can be a People’s Shock—a blow from below.” Klein goes on to discuss how to change the reigning and ruinous worldview, reiterating that “a great deal of the work of deep social change involves having debates” (p.461) to replace the old stories that have failed us. Interestingly, she does not mention “Blockadia” at all!