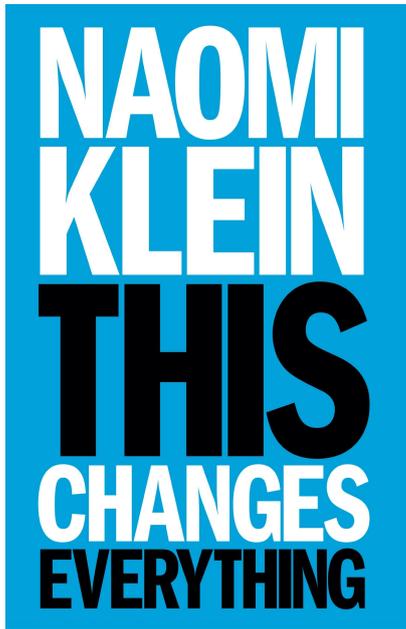


Review: Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*

Dave O'Farrell



Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything* 2014 Allen Lane, £14.99

This Changes Everything, the latest book by Naomi Klein, is already having a significant impact on the climate change debate. Klein's offering is a refreshing and frank look at the subject, she doesn't devote endless pages to countering the spurious arguments of climate change deniers or gush about the latest supposed scientific or technological breakthrough which will save us from an ever closer disaster of our own making. As readers familiar with Klein's other works - she is the author of *No Logo* and *The Shock Doctrine* - will no doubt expect the focus is clearly on the much bigger picture. Ultimately the growing climate crisis is not about the science, it's about the politics.

In many ways the book comes across as a culmination of Klein's journalism and activism to date. She is quite frank about the reasons why climate hasn't been a ma-

ior focus of her work to date, dealing with climate change means dealing with a

kind of cognitive dissonance [which] is simply a part of being alive in this jarring moment in history when a crisis we have been studiously ignoring is hitting us in the face - and yet we are doubling down on the stuff that is causing the crisis in the first place¹

The fact that an essentially undeniable crisis - of our own making and which threatens our very existence as we know it - is rapidly unfolding before our eyes and yet as a society we continue with exactly the same behaviour - and worse - as though the consequences will never appear is on the face of it a problem so seemingly bizarre and incomprehensible that it seems to defy any form of logical explanation. Understanding and explaining why, collectively, we behave in such a manner requires an analysis of our whole society and how our energy policy is shaped.

It's not about carbon - it's about capitalism

In her political analysis of the climate change crisis Klein is on familiar ground. She solidly links the failure to address the problems of climate change - which are not by a long stretch recent knowledge - with the fact that the formation of a strong scientific consensus that we were dangerously altering our planet and needed to act to halt this change emerged at the same time as a neoliberal ideology gripped governments and much mainstream economic

¹p.3.

thought. This neoliberal consensus - the disaster capitalism of *The Shock Doctrine* - was fundamentally at odds with the actions prescribed by climate scientists. The sort of radical action needed to cut carbon emissions, like large scale investment in cheap and effective public transport or a rapid move away from fossil fuels to renewable alternatives, rapidly run into and contradict the fundamental rule of capitalism - 'grow or die'. The sort of government interventions needed to move society from a dependency on high carbon energy just can't be reconciled with a political ideology which loudly proclaims 'private good, public bad!'. Unfortunately for us what was true in the 70's and 80's is only more true today - and that's even taking account of the global failure of neoliberal policies and the resulting massive global recession.

If we needed to take action when a scientific consensus first emerged how much more action do we need to take today? Klein is clear on this subject - rapidly reduce our use of fossil fuels and drastically reduce our carbon emissions within - at most - the next decade. This is, of course, the position of any sane person who recognises the threat of climate change but Klein makes it clear that because we have spent so long not simply ignoring the problem but actively making things much much worse that nothing but the most drastic - from a status quo point of view - and widespread actions are even starters for achieving the results the survival of our societies depend on. Indeed in failing to address our societal addiction to carbon we are not simply standing still, we are exacerbating the problems we must solve on a daily basis.

... one of the great misconceptions of the climate debate

²p.142.

³p.147.

is that our society is refusing to change, protecting a status quo called 'business-as-usual'. The truth is that there is no business-as-usual. The energy sector is changing dramatically all the time - but the vast majority of those changes are taking us in precisely the wrong direction, toward energy sources with even higher planet-warming emissions than their conventional versions.²

The energy sector is continually seeking new sources of fossil fuel; in order to satisfy their market driven needs for future fuel reserves ³ companies increasingly look to new methods of extraction - from drilling in ever deeper waters to fracking and the Alberta tar sands. If those who are rapidly cooking the planet can be so radical in their actions why have those who want to save it not kept pace?

Here again the very foundations of how our societies are organised lies at the heart of the answer. The power - economic and political - those who get rich from the fossil fuel industry wield and the neoliberal ideology - again economic and political - which shapes our political landscape feed off each other and form a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to real action and real change when it comes to the climate. Yet it is exactly these structures, indeed the entire economic and political structures of our society, which must be overcome. It is hard to disagree with Klein when she draws the conclusion that in many ways it is the climate change deniers from right wing groups such as the Heartland institute - with all the attendant noise about socialism and attacks on their freedom - who best understand the types of actions

that are required to challenge the status quo.

...when it comes to the political and economic consequences of these scientific findings, specifically the kind of deep changes required not just to our energy consumption but to the underlying logic of our liberalized and profit seeking economy, they have their eyes wide open. The deniers get plenty of details wrong (no, it's not a communist plot...), but when it comes to the scope and depth of change required to avert catastrophe, they are right on the money.⁴

Klein's analysis on why exactly the response of the environmental movement - and by extension the left - has not been able to successfully articulate a response that meets both the 'scope and depth' is insightful and illuminating.

Firstly there is the co-option of much of the green movement. Examples of environmental organisations who have swallowed the line of market driven policies as a solution to the market driven policies causing climate change are depressingly common. Striking examples highlighted in the book include; the Environmental Defense Fund who went from filing the lawsuit that saw DDT banned in the U.S. - operating under the unofficial motto of 'sue the bastards' - to proposing cap and trade markets for sulfur dioxide emissions to combat acid rain - described by their vice president for strategy and communications as 'creating

markets for the bastards' . It was a strategy that was very popular in the corporate world and brought in big money from wealthy donors with their annual operating budget expanding from \$3 million to \$120million.⁵ And the Nature Conservancy who actually drilled for oil on one of their own nature reserves!⁶

There is also the real fact that in the past environmental concerns were often limited in scope and, crucially, to the better off and somewhat elite in society⁷ - from those with the time and money to engage in wilderness pursuits campaigning to keep their own little patch of wilderness for their own enjoyment to the rather extreme example of the Bronx Zoo director who - channeling Rudyard Kipling and all the worst arrogance of colonialism's 'paternalistic' attitude to nature - urged educators in America to

'take up their share of the white man's burden' and help 'to preserve the wildlife of our country'⁸

This trend may have lessened with time, however in many countries we still see Green parties who draw their support base from predominately 'middle class' and better off sections of society - the Irish Green Party being a case in point - and articulating policies, including climate policies, firmly rooted in the political and economic orthodoxy of neoliberalism. Obviously such organisations are not best positioned to achieve the changes needed to combat climate change.

Perhaps most crucially there is a long failure to link, in a sustained and tangible way, the environmental movement with

⁴p.44.

⁵p.201-211.

⁶p.192.

⁷p.183.

⁸p.183.

other struggles; environmental concerns are often raised by the left and there is of course an understanding that the forces driving the destruction of our environment have their roots in the capitalist system but a sustained movement against this destruction has not been achieved. Despite climate change being an ever present issue it has often been seen as something that is somehow removed from the present struggle or simply too big an issue to take on outside of a limited or immediate goal relating to a particular fight. Indeed the counterpoising of the question of climate change with immediate struggle has often been a divisive argument- from those both inside and outside the establishment. Klein quotes the examples of the US Senator, Gaylord Nelson, one of the initiators of the first Earth Day, declaring in 1970 that the environmental crisis made

Vietnam, nuclear war, hunger, decaying cities, and all other major problems one could name ... relatively insignificant in comparison⁹

and the radical journalist I.F. Stone describing Earth Day as a

‘gigantic snowjob’ that was using ‘rock and roll, idealism and non inflammatory social issues to turn the youth off from more urgent concerns which might really threaten our power structures’¹⁰

In rejecting both positions Klein arrives at the conclusion that most Marxists would agree with.

The environmental crisis - if conceived sufficiently broadly

- neither trumps nor distracts from our most pressing political and economic causes: it supercharges each one of them with existential urgency¹¹

The underlying logic of capitalism - with its eternal quest for profit and drive for accumulation - combined with the reality of climate change can only serve to exacerbate all of the existing problems of today’s world. For example as climate change begins to effect world food supplies it is highly likely we will see massive famine, mass migration and quite possibly wars fought over water and food sources in the same way wars are fought for energy security today. The only viable solution to this scenario is a movement which really **does** ‘threaten our power structures’. Such a movement requires masses of people to get behind it and much of the book deals with the many ways in which groups have gotten organised and fought back against the capitalist behemoths who are threatening not just their local environments but the very planet we all depend on.

Cowboy and Indian alliances

The struggles detailed by Klein in the book are many and varied yet there is an underlying thread linking all the struggles, no matter what the fight or the means by which it was fought - and indeed still being fought - each and every one has come face to face with the basic tenets of the free market fundamentalism which characterise the prevailing political ideology of modern society.

Many of the struggles relate to the fight against the proposed Keystone XL pipeline - a pipeline which aims to bring oil from the Alberta tar sands to the Texas coast

⁹p.153.

¹⁰p.153.

¹¹p.153.

- which has resulted in a series of unlikely alliances such as the alliance between Indigenous tribes and cattle ranchers which became known as the cowboys and Indians alliance - or the

unlikely coalitions that brought together vegan activists who think meat is murder with cattle farmers whose homes are decorated with deer heads¹²

This ability of climate struggles to unite historically highly divided groups within a community is continually underscored. A particularly striking example relates to the Indigenous First Nation Mi'kmaq people in the Canadian Province of New Brunswick. In 2000 a campaign of racist intimidation and violence against native fishermen followed a decision in the supreme court which upheld their rights to fish as their ancestors had. Non-native fishermen destroyed lobster pots, ransacked fish processing plants, burnt a ceremonial arbor and hospitalised several Indigenous people. Yet in 2013 the Mi'kmaq were at the head of local protests against fracking involving the whole community. Where previously Indigenous rights to the land had caused riots and division now the same rights and connection to the land served as a focal point for an entire community protecting their common environment.

Indeed the prospects for a mass fight back against climate change are growing daily as more and more people around the world are directly impacted, not just by climate change itself but, by the increasingly

destructive extraction methods of the fossil fuel industry. Even just in North America the figures are staggering - a Wall Street Journal investigation from 2013 found that more than 15 million Americans live within a mile of a well that has been fracked since 2000.¹³ The cross section of American society suddenly finding themselves on the front line of the fossil fuel industry that Klein lists is broad and occasionally bizarre; from the Indigenous tribes and cattle ranchers to employees of the oil companies¹⁴ and - in what must rank as one of the most glaring examples of 'do as I say, not as I do' of all time - the CEO of Exxon Rex Tillerson joining a lawsuit opposing fracking near his Texas mansion!¹⁵

No quick fixes

The main strength of the central argument to *This Changes Everything* is Klein's insistence that what is needed to fight climate change is a mass movement to bring together all the individual threads of the struggle against climate change. Notions that we will somehow be saved from the worst excesses of climate change by market driven solutions, the philanthropy of 'green billionaires' like Bill Gates or Richard Branson¹⁶, or some sort of technological quick fix such as the often touted geoengineering are systematically demolished¹⁷ and shown to be exactly what they are - more of the same. Just another series of measures - all firmly within the framework of the neoliberal markets - which would allow us to continue spewing carbon into the atmosphere like there is no tomorrow.

¹²p.302.

¹³p.312.

¹⁴p.313.

¹⁵p.314.

¹⁶Chap. 7. No Messiahs: The Green Billionaires Won't Save Us

¹⁷Chap. 8. Dimming the Sun: The Solution to Pollution Is ... Pollution?

Building a mass movement

Almost every conceivable tactic and strategy is discussed in relation to the struggles of different groups and communities, from legal challenges under environmental legislation or native peoples rights, through lobbying of politicians and governments, to wide scale direct action blocking the construction of pipelines, mines, wells and associated infrastructure. It is clear that Klein sees a place for all these varied tactics in a very broad movement but it is also here that the enormity of the task is made abundantly clear.

Unlike much of the conventional discourse on the subject of climate change the focus is not on technological difficulties - we already have, if not all then at least the vast majority of, the necessary knowledge to transition our economies from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. That is not the difficult part, the difficulties lie in creating the political will to make the required change happen. That is the difficulty of building and sustaining a mass movement.

These difficulties are laid bare in a simple look at the multitude of mass protest movements around the world in the last number of years. Klein notes that if they have

demonstrated anything, it is that these movements are snuffed out far too quickly, whether by repression or political cooption, while the structures they opposed reconstitute themselves in more terrifying and dangerous forms. Witness Egypt.

This terrifying reality seems to have had the effect of shifting Klein's own views on how new movements need to learn from

the experiences of struggles such as occupy. She writes that while she has

in the past, strongly defended the rights of young movements to their amorphous structures ... the last five years immersed in climate science has left [her] impatient. As many are coming to realize the fetish for structurelessness, the rebellion against any kind of institutionalization, is not a luxury today's transformative movements can afford.

Klein continues

...we collectively lack many of the tools that built and sustained the transformative movements of the past. Our public institutions are disintegrating, while the institutions of the traditional left - progressive political parties, strong unions, membership-based community service organizations - are fighting for their lives.

The book ends with a search for a movement from our past that may serve as an example for the climate movement envisaged by Klein. She briefly considers a number of struggles and the lessons taken are not always comforting.¹⁸

In the U.S. she cites the Civil Rights movement, which won formal equality between blacks and whites but never managed the economic victories which Martin Luther King remarked could not be purchased at 'bargain rates'.

Democratically elected 'socialist' governments such as Mohammad Mosaddagh in Iran and Salvador Allende in Chile are considered along with the observation that

¹⁸p.453-456.

both 'experiments' were interrupted by foreign sponsored coups d'etat.

Post-colonial Independence movements are considered but it is noted that even the successful struggle to overcome apartheid in South Africa suffered its biggest defeats in the economic sphere with much of the apartheid wealth untouched and growing inequality.

Even the struggle for the abolition of slavery suffers such economic defeats as the wealthy slave owners were invariably compensated for the loss of their 'property' while restitution for the wrongs done to those held in slavery - and their families often over generations - is in many cases still not forthcoming.

Klein concludes by noting that the times when crisis hits and the ability to change the world suddenly seems possible are 'excruciatingly rare and precious' and we must make the most of them. With capitalism in continuing crisis it is impossible to predict the next event which will bring people onto the streets and into conflict with the status quo. As Klein puts it

...it must be harnessed not only to denounce the world as it is, and build fleeting pockets of liberated space. It must be the catalyst to actually build the world that will keep us all safe. The stakes are simply too high,

and the time too short, to settle for anything less.

If there is a criticism of the book it is to be found here in the examination of these past struggles. There is for any socialist a glaring omission from the list of past struggles - the Russian Revolution. While Klein is right to reject the Stalinist horror visited across the former USSR her assertion that

let's take it for granted that we want to do these things democratically and without a blood-bath, so violent, vanguardist revolutions don't have much to offer in the way of roadmaps

is really wide of the mark on many fronts. In terms of violence and blood-baths - as many of Klein's own examples show - they are by and large the stock and trade of those already in power - of the establishment. The October Revolution in 1917 was largely bloodless unlike the ensuing civil war and foreign invasions and the mass self organisation of the Russian people in soviets must, by any measure, represent one of the high points of democracy in human history.

This serious criticism, for any socialist, aside Klein has produced an invaluable book on an immensely important subject which deserves to be read by everyone with even a passing interest in climate change - which should be all of us.