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Naomi Klein, Climate and Capitalism (Pt. 1)

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Naomi Klein's New Climate Book Explains Why the World Is Failing to Protect the Climate

In the aftermath of the fractious recently concluded global climate talks in Lima, Peru, Naomi Klein's remarkable book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (Simon & Schuster, 2014) takes on new relevance for everyone yearning for solutions to the climate crisis.

The book is a deeply insightful and unflinching look at the global threats posed by climate change, environmental devastation, and economic injustice.

We must confront them, Klein says, by first ripping away the ideological underpinnings of the political and economic systems that created and perpetuate these parallel crises. That underlying ideology is a belief in the virtues of unregulated, free-market capitalism.

After delegitimizing it, we must tackle economic inequality, environmental injustice, and climate change in a unified way, Klein maintains. That's because they are inextricably interrelated and because the climate crisis may be our last and best chance to simultaneously save civilization and redress its wrongs.

Klein is an extraordinarily gifted writer and visionary, Big Picture strategic thinker, but is her hugely ambitious agenda really feasible? What she's proposing is a very tall order -- more so even than saving the climate.

The key, she tells us, is to build a broad social movement founded on basic moral values and ecological principles rather than those of unfettered free enterprise, profit maximization, and perpetual economic growth, fueled by fossil fuels and other natural resources.

How do we do build that movement? Part two of this review examines whether Klein has provided a credible answer to that question.

The "Climate Moment"

Characterizing the formidable economic and climate challenges facing us today as "the climate moment," Klein proposes seizing it as a unique opportunity to implement sweeping new economic and environmental policies for reorienting humanity's relationship to the natural resources that sustain life on Earth.

At the very least, this absolutely requires an enforceable global climate agreement with scientifically determined targets based on the known effects of further emissions.

The world will also need to agree that the vast and economically recoverable deposits of coal, oil, and gas in North America, Asia, and the Middle East will have to be left unburned in the ground if the climate is to be saved. There is currently no prospect of that.

But current climate trends are ominous, and the inconclusive UN climate talks that ended on December 14 in Peru were not encouraging. The final accord included no global emissions limit, no individual national emissions quotas, and no enforcement mechanisms. A meaningful climate agreement at the forthcoming 2015 Paris UN climate summit is desperately needed. A strong enforceable agreement would keep more fossil fuels in the ground.

This Changes Everything is at its core as much about the redistribution of wealth and power on a planetary scale as well as about the ecocide we're committing in assailing the climate. It is thus about economic justice and the protection of nature.

In essence, Klein's solution is that we must make a revolutionary shift from an unsustainable economic model based on resource extraction and the exploitation of people to a relationship of interconnection and reciprocity with the natural world.

False Ideology and the Policies It Vindicates

The current climate impasse, according to Klein, stems from acceding to false ideology. The fundamentalist free-market capitalism paradigm is rife with deep contradictions, she asserts. It rests upon a counterfactual belief in infinite growth and on the tenets of minimalist passive governance, hostility to regulation, and aversion to public sector investment. It is a worldview, she believes, that has brought us over the edge of disaster to the brink of catastrophic climate change.

Commonsense responses to the climate crisis have been blocked, she tells us, by multinational corporations and other vested interests, especially large energy corporations. So, a core battle of ideas must be fought and won to delegitimize them and their policies, she says, before effective massive action to take on global warming can succeed.

Saving the climate is thus in one sense a "hearts and minds" battle that requires supplanting the free- market paradigm of resource extraction and perpetual growth with a more sustainable model based on resource stewardship and regeneration.

Her sophisticated articulation of that preferred paradigm is an important contribution to the growing climate movement. However, she also counsels that the Progressive movement and the political left must take a page from the Conservative's playbook and build the climate movement around "the pressing need to protect growth and jobs. . . ."

This appears a little at odds with her call for "de-growth," but her deft solution is to advocate expanding low-carbon sectors of the economy while contracting high-carbon sectors.

In the end, Klein demonstrates how the agenda of big, powerful corporations -- privatization, deregulation, low taxes, liberalization of trade and investment policy, globalization of agriculture, and reinforcing the industrial agricultural paradigm -- effectively precludes the solutions needed to address the climate crisis. Needless to say, all of those policies rest on that ideological scaffold of free-market fundamentalism she decries.

Klein is also effective in calling attention to the political alignment of the fossil fuel industry, super wealthy individuals, powerful corporations with their lobbyists, all wedded to business-as-usual energy policies and the self-seeking politicians who enable them.

The fundamental solutions to climate change are clear, Klein says, but to implement them, we must take corporate money out of politics. That would pave the way for rechanneling wealth from the fossil fuel sector to transform the energy sector from fossil to renewable energy, long a dream of the environmental movement.

California under Governor Jerry Brown is actually doing some of that now in funneling a revenue stream from its carbon cap and trade auctions into renewable energy and high speed rail development.

Some electoral and lobbying reforms can no doubt be accomplished by executive action, but some, Klein concedes, requires Congressional action, a big problem today when free-market Republicans control Congress.

Because of the dominance of free-market ideology in much of the world today, Klein admits that the full set of ideas and policies she spells out to fix the climate may seem outlandish. The role of her book, however, is to show why those ideas are necessary and to make them feasible.

Few will dispute that she has accomplished the first part of her agenda. How she has fared with the feasibility issue is the topic "Naomi Klein, Climate, and Capitalism -- Part 2."

End of Part 1

*John J. Berger, PhD. (www.johnjberger.com) is an energy and environmental policy specialist who has produced ten books on climate, energy, and natural resource topics. He is the author of *Climate Peril: The Intelligent Reader's Guide to Understanding the Climate Crisis* and *Climate Myths: The Campaign Against Climate Science*.*

Follow John J. Berger on Twitter: www.twitter.com/johnjbergerr

Coming Soon:

"Naomi Klein, Climate, and Capitalism--Part 2, Creating A Broad Social Movement"

Acknowledgement: The author is grateful for valuable discussions on topics in this series with independent environmental consultant and geographer Benson Lee.

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