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Naomi Klein Lays Bare the Conflict Between Capitalism and the Climate

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The first thing to say about Naomi's Klein's latest book is that its title makes a grand promise, *[This Changes Everything](#)* ^[3] – and that's before you even get to the subtitle, which sets up a face-off between capitalism on one side and the climate on the other. The second thing to say is that no single book could ever meet such a promise. Klein, with careful aplomb, does not attempt to do so. Rather, she offers a tour of the horizon upon which we will meet our fates. Or, rather, the horizon upon which we will attempt to change them.

^[3]In the face of such huge topics, Klein's strategy is a practical one. She defers the problem of capitalism-in-itself (as German philosophers used to call it) and focuses instead on our era's particular type of capitalism – the neoliberal capitalism of boundless privatization and deregulation, of markets-über-alles ideology and oligarchic billionaires. Her central argument is not (as some have insisted) that capitalism has to go before we can begin to save ourselves, but rather that we're going to have to get past neoliberalism if we want to face the greater challenges. Klein writes:

Some say there is no time for this transformation; the crisis is too pressing and the clock is ticking. I agree that it would be reckless to claim that the only solution to this crisis is to revolutionize our economy and revamp our worldview from the bottom up – and anything short of that is not worth doing. There are all kinds of measures that would lower emissions substantively that could and should be done right now. But we aren't taking those measures, are we?

At the outset Klein asks the obvious question: Why haven't we, in the face of existential danger, mobilized to lower emissions? There are lots of reasons, but one stands above all others. We have not mobilized because "market fundamentalism has, from the very first moments, systematically sabotaged our collective response to climate change, a threat that came knocking just as this ideology was reaching its zenith." In other words the climate crisis came with spectacularly "bad timing." The severity of the danger became clear at the very

time when “there-is-no-alternative” capitalism was rising to ideological triumph, foreclosing the exact remedies (long-term planning, stricter government regulation, collective action) that could address the crisis. It’s a crucial insight, and it alone justifies the price of admission.

Klein reports that her “environmentalist friends” constantly ask her, “Do you have to say ‘capitalism’?” It’s a great laugh line, but it’s important to acknowledge that the question is a fair one. Because if capitalism – the hard core of our woe-begotten economy – is the problem, then our near-impossible task becomes even more difficult. Given her animus against neoliberalism (see her previous bestsellers, *No Logo* [4] and *The Shock Doctrine* [5]), you might expect her to agree that vocal anti-capitalism is unnecessary; neoliberalism is quite enough to fear all by itself. But Klein is playing another game, and it requires her to call things by their proper names. In this sense she may not even be an environmentalist, at least not in the old sense of the word. The modern American green movement has so long strained to avoid charges of anti-capitalism that you could write its history in terms of this avoidance. Such a history would recount endless screeds against “industrialism,” “technology,” “reductionism,” “patriarchy,” “overpopulation,” and, lately, even agriculture. All of these, no doubt, have something to teach us, but absent a coherent understanding of political economy, they shade together into noise and confusion.

So yes, she had to say “capitalism.” And so do the rest of us. For there is no greater priority than to bring the economy under effective democratic control, and if we imagine that we can do such a thing without, for example, learning to speak about growth in a coherent way, we are mistaken. Indeed, if we imagine that we can understand the problem of growth without understanding the problem of capitalism, then we ourselves are part of the problem. Klein knows this, and touches on the relevant debates, but – interestingly – she doesn’t press them very hard. Rather, and this is the same move she makes when it comes to climate science, she gives the reader a few choice entry points and then returns to her chosen strategy: “Think big, go deep, and move the ideological pole far away from the stifling market fundamentalism that has become the greatest enemy to planetary health.”

It’s quite an ask, and Klein does not pretend otherwise. Rather than retreat from the difficulties, she emphasizes that the necessary rate of emissions reduction is not beyond our powers, though it is without historical precedent. We have the money and the technology to save ourselves. The problem is that it’s too late for incremental strategies, and that the “great transition” we need will not come because, as in the old environmentalism, people rally to protect nature alone. Our only real hope is to put the problem of justice at center stage. Speaking of climate science, there’s a point I cannot omit. As Klein briefly explains, the global “carbon budget” is all but exhausted, and in consequence global emissions have to drop very far and very quickly if we’re to have any real chance of stabilizing the climate system. Her discussion of these issues is organized around key numbers provided by Kevin Anderson and Alice Bows-Larkin at the UK’s Tyndall Centre, scientists who argue that if we’re to stabilize the climate, the citizens of the wealthy world will have to reduce their emissions even faster than the global average, by 8 to 10 percent a year.

Greens like to speak of “renewal,” “reinvention,” and “restoration.” Increasingly, they speak of “resistance” as well. Klein has planted her flag on this hill, and her exploration of the global resistance to “extractivism” that she calls “Blockadia” is the heart of her book. There’s a lot to say about the politics of Blockadia – its potential and its limits – but the point I wish to emphasize is that when she looks at this resistance, she does not see a small and blinkered thing. She sees a movement that is learning by doing, and as fast as it possibly can. She wants to speed the process along, and to that end she continues down the list of “re” words, past even “resistance,” to arrive, finally, at “redistribution.” Her book’s excellent conclusion is

framed by an extensive discussion in which the abolition of slavery – rather than, say, the moon shot or the Manhattan Project or even the New Deal – is taken as the archetype of the global mobilization that we now need.

Another topic that Klein takes head-on is the deadlock in the international climate negotiations. How are we to understand the problem of development in a climate-constrained world? What are the obligations of the wealthy countries to the developing ones? Here again are questions that the green mainstream fears to explore in anything like a serious manner, but she puts them on the agenda, and for this she deserves a great deal of credit. (Full disclosure: She cites my own work with [EcoEquity](#) ^[6] and the Stockholm Environmental Institute).

Can *This Changes Everything* be taken as a marker of change? My sense is that it can. For one thing, it comes just after the People's Climate March, which was itself a milestone in the climate justice movement, and it was clearly written as an expression of that movement's ethos and priorities. The question is not if Klein has written a very good climate book – she has – but if it's the breakthrough book we need, the one that lays out the stakes in a manner that makes them comprehensible. There's no question it will help.

The novelist Nathaniel Rich, in his *New York Times* review of *This Changes Everything*, struck an interesting note when he compared it to [The Collapse of Western Civilization](#) ^[7], a grim “view from the future” just published by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway. Although Rich generally approves of Klein's “robust new polemic,” he's less sure about her optimism. He grants her the movement's progress, but differs when it comes to its adequacy in the face of the danger. Where Klein sees that danger as reason for an all-hands-on-deck mobilization, Rich recalls her admission that it will be extremely difficult to restrict the rise in global temperatures to an average of 4°C. Given that four degrees “is the premise for the nightmarish future described by Dr. Oreskes and Dr. Conway,” he concludes that *The Collapse of Western Civilization* “appears to be the book that is furthest from fiction.”

The point? Only that *The New York Times*, a bastion of realist moderation, chose to grace *This Changes Everything* with a reviewer who believes that the collapse of civilization is more likely than the transformational renewal that is the keystone of Klein's book.

In closing a recent talk, Klein said that most climate activists are haunted by despair, for they know that while everyone cares about the climate, their concern is thin. Her conclusion is that “only justice will fuel a movement that is truly fighting to win.” This is exactly right. Were we all to admit it, this really would change everything.

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^[8]

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