

## Climate Change: A Way Out of Capitalism?

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**No problem in the world is more important than climate change. In her latest book, Naomi Klein aims to show that fighting global warming means fighting capitalism. But how?**

Reviewed: Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, Simon and Schuster, 2014, 576 p.

*This Changes Everything* ('this' being global warming) explores how we could escape the disaster and devastation that will come with a worldwide rise in temperature. This is not an academic text nor is it a collection of scientific data on climate change; Naomi Klein does not try to convince her reader of the reality of the problem. The author is a Canadian journalist and activist whose first book, *No Logo*, sold a million copies and contributed to the rise of the alter-globalization movement. Her second book, *The Shock Doctrine*, was also a worldwide bestseller. *This Changes Everything* argues that ecological sustainability is incompatible with capitalism and that climate change and its extremely serious consequences are an opportunity to rid society of capitalism given that, in the long run, we will have to choose between the latter and the survival of the human species. *This Changes Everything* is a contribution to public debate by an expert in social movements and one of the leading left-wing ideologists of the 2000s.

### Capitalism vs. The Climate

For Naomi Klein, nothing better illustrates the link between capitalism and global warming than international trade law and the World Trade Organization (WTO). At the WTO, the largest greenhouse gas emitters are waging a legal war against one another to cancel other countries' subsidies for renewable energies. Any policy encouraging local industry is labelled 'protectionist' and can therefore lead to an appeal with the WTO, where judges make decisions that are crucial to the planet's future based only on the agreements signed by states. At the 1992 Rio Summit, it was agreed that 'measures taken to combat climate change' should not constitute a 'disguised restriction on international trade.' Free market fundamentalism allows capitalists to scour the globe in search of the cheapest labour, in places where environmental regulations are generally non-existent. As Naomi Klein puts it, cheap labour and dirty energy are a 'package deal'. Fighting climate change therefore entails leaving capitalism behind.

*This Changes Everything* lists all the things that won't work in the fight against climate change. We can expect nothing from the Big Green groups like the Nature Conservancy or the Environmental Defense Fund, which have for the most part been corrupted by multinationals. We can expect nothing from billionaire philanthropists, to whom Naomi Klein devotes an entire chapter. We can expect nothing from small daily lifestyle

changes either. And, above all, we can expect nothing from emissions trading, which has had obvious perverse effects: in India, a whole industry now produces air pollutants in order to then destroy them and pocket the environmental subsidies. There is also little to be expected from geoengineering (advocated by Bruno Latour and Stephen Hawking), which consists not in reducing emissions but in acting on the effects of global warming by capturing carbon or spraying sulphur dioxide into the stratosphere to lower the temperature (a solution supported by the authors of *Freakonomics*<sup>1</sup>). The potential perverse effects of geoengineering are unending and it can only be the last resort of a world adrift. According to Naomi Klein, humans would do better to radically change their lifestyle.

But how? This raises the question of the political conditions for implementing environmental policies. An interesting aspect of Naomi Klein's book is that she has no faith in electoral democracy. She does not write a single word about elections (except to underline that Bill Clinton and Jean Chrétien went back on their campaign pledges regarding NAFTA) or about green parties. The implicit conclusion to be drawn here is that there is nothing to be expected from elected officials, as they always end up working to further the interests of multinational corporations: liberal democracy is incapable of doing anything other than destroying the planet. Only social movements and grassroots demonstrations can occasionally force governments and multinationals to backtrack. At the same time, Naomi Klein underlines that, in the domain of ecology, incentive-based policies are not enough, and firm bans are necessary (for example on fracking). However, *This Changes Everything* says precious little about public policy: it frames future change as based on social movements holding vigorous protests so as to direct Western lifestyles towards the relationship indigenous peoples have with the natural world.

Naomi Klein explains that, in this fight, we have to assume that state resources are at the service of capital. For example, Pennsylvania's Homeland Security shared its intelligence on anti-fracking groups with shale gas companies, while French utility EDF spied unlawfully on Greenpeace. The police always crack down on activists rather than on the multinationals producing greenhouse gases. The collusion between the state and oil industries is exemplified by the case of the Niger Delta, where oil extraction is particularly polluting: it is estimated that, over the past 50 years, an Exxon Valdez-worth<sup>2</sup> of oil has spilled in the Delta each year. Shell, in particular, practises flaring: rather than capturing the natural gas that is released in the oil drilling process, it sets fire to it, which is both wasteful and highly polluting. When the protests by the Ogoni people, who live in the delta, gained too much traction, a brutal repression led by the Nigerian military junta caused the death of hundreds of residents, including the poet and playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa who was hanged along with eight compatriots after being tried on trumped-up charges, all to facilitate Shell's operations.

Naomi Klein underscores one aspect of the problem, namely that oil companies are constantly revolutionising their means of extraction, particularly with the rise of fracking and horizontal drilling. Every new source of hydrocarbon (Alberta tar sands, shale gas in the United States) increases the quantity of particles released into the atmosphere and contributes to global warming. This leads in turn to the melting of the glaciers, polar ice cap and permafrost, which release substantial quantities of carbon dioxide thus increasing global

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<sup>1</sup> *Freakonomics* is a bestseller by economist Steven D. Levitt and journalist Stephen J. Dubner published in 2005. A sequel was published in 2009, *SuperFreakonomics*, with a controversial chapter devoted to global warming.

<sup>2</sup> The Exxon Valdez was an American oil tanker that ran aground in 1989 on the Alaska coast. The accident spilled 40,000 tons of oil across 800km of coast. The scandal led to tighter legislation in the United States.

warming even further. There is no reason for this to stop, because oil companies are the richest, most profitable and most powerful companies in the economic world.

### **A Romantic View of Social Movements**

*This Changes Everything* has many merits, not least talking about climate change and reminding us just how urgent the issue is: it is now inevitable that the world temperature will increase by two degrees, but drastic action over the next decade could prevent us reaching four degrees of warming. We have no time to lose and it is a credit to Naomi Klein that she reminds us of this fact, devoting her work and her fame to publicising the problem. Her book teems with facts, stories and data that cannot fail to give the reader a better and greater awareness of the issues at stake in climate change. Her aim is to mobilize people and, in this sense, she is successful.

That being said, *This Changes Everything* says much more about the current state of progressive thinking within a certain sphere of environmental activism than it does about the paths and means through which we might hypothetically go beyond capitalism. And from this point of view, the book is somewhat depressing.

Its main contradiction lies in its focus on social movements, demonstrations and grassroots mobilisation when the scale of what needs to be done far exceeds the scope of action of social movements. Fundamentally challenging capitalism goes beyond the framework of local protests. Implementing strict bans (on oil drilling, on the use of air pollutants) and massively reducing greenhouse gas emissions is beyond the remit of self-managed communities. Naomi Klein is undoubtedly right not to place any hope in electoral democracy, where economic interests and short-term electoral calculations tend to take precedence over environmental concerns. However, she is too optimistic about the power of social movements or the example of indigenous peoples resisting multinationals. In her book, it is not clear how we might move from local mobilisations to a planetary transition out of capitalism. Some might even conclude that, in the end, only an authoritarian power could actually implement the necessary changes. Naomi Klein's model for sustainable society is that of indigenous peoples: a society without geopolitics, without public policy, magically free of the harmful influence of the oil lobby thanks to citizen mobilisation. The problem is not so much that such a society is impossible, but rather that it is unthinkable in the ten years to come. And yet, Naomi Klein says it herself, it is precisely in the next ten years that action must be taken. As a result, the sort of 'New Age' call for a return to nature sounds rather like a form of paradoxical resignation in the face of the inevitability of climate change.

In particular, Naomi Klein's refusal to seriously discuss the implementation of a carbon tax or of emissions trading testifies to a form of romanticism that is not constructive. It is probable that powerful social movements are necessary to put this kind of public policy in place; it is certain that, in our 2014 reality, a substantial carbon tax and restrictive emissions trading are more efficient in reducing emissions than a hypothetical ban on fossil fuels.

Naomi Klein does not mention the question of 'peak oil', the notion that we are coming to the end of the earth's oil and gas resources. And yet this question is central. There are two possible scenarios: either peak oil will lead to increased oil prices, thus making renewable energies more profitable and thereby mechanically reducing emissions; or peak oil will be significantly postponed by the exploitation of shale gas and tar sands (the question is subject to debate). If oil is not becoming scarce, as the author seems to suggest, then shifting

to renewable energies must be a political choice rather than the consequence of a natural constraint. From this perspective, it would seem that the problem is not so much capitalism as the political power of oil interests in the United States and Canada (a conclusion which is coherent with the book's argument). It is a shame that *This Changes Everything* does not take stock of this situation.

Finally, the book does not address the demographic question. Naomi Klein talks as if lifestyles were the only problem. But it is not certain that the earth will be able to feed several billion extra humans. High-intensity agriculture is not ecologically sustainable. The problem is therefore determining the number of humans that could be fed through sustainable agriculture. If we imagine a perfect distribution of production, we might be able to feed 11 billion humans ([which is the average projection for 2100](#)). But this perfect distribution is unrealistic: in the real world, the distribution of food will be extremely unequal, with all the problems that will entail, particularly in a context exacerbated by the droughts caused by climate change in the Global South. In short, the various prospects all seem grim, but at least *This Changes Everything* has us talking about these key issues.

Published in *Books&Ideas*, October 12<sup>th</sup> 2015

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