

Pro-capitalist “anti-capitalism”

A review of *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, by Naomi Klein

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Naomi Klein’s new book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, has been met with widespread acclaim among individuals and organizations associated with the environmental movement. The book’s release coincided with the September 21, 2014 “People’s Climate March” in New York City. The release was announced at a telecast event at which speakers from environmental and indigenous activist groups, such as 350.org and Idle No More, joined trade union officials to hail the book as a manifesto for climate-related protest politics. A companion film of the same name is scheduled for release in the fall of 2015.

In the book’s introduction, Klein notes that, according to the World Bank, “we’re on track for a 4°C warmer world.” This estimate is primarily based on current and projected levels of greenhouse gas emissions, which trap heat in Earth’s atmosphere.

She explains that, according to the best available science, “Four degrees of warming could raise global sea levels by 1 or possibly even 2 meters (3.3-6.6 feet) by 2100... Major cities in jeopardy include Boston, New York, greater Los Angeles, Vancouver, London, Mumbai, Hong Kong and Shanghai.” [P. 13]

She adds, “The heat would also cause staple crops to suffer dramatic yield losses across the globe... When you add ruinous hurricanes, raging wildfires, fisheries collapses, widespread disruptions of water supplies, extinctions and globe-trotting diseases to the mix, it indeed becomes difficult to imagine that a peaceful ordered society could be maintained.” [P. 14]

Klein notes that international attempts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, such as the Kyoto Protocol, have failed miserably. She asserts, “We are stuck because the actions that could give us the best chance of averting catastrophe... are extremely threatening to an elite minority that has a stranglehold over our economy, our political process, and most of our major media outlets.”

“[W]e have not done the things that are necessary to lower emissions because those things fundamentally conflict with deregulated capitalism.” [P. 18]

To effectively and equitably deal with the climate crisis, Klein calls for increased levels of renewable electricity, supported by “vast new electricity grids.” [P. 90]

In addition, society ought “to invest in starving public infrastructure like mass transit and affordable housing; to take back ownership of essential services like energy and water; to remake our sick agricultural system into something healthier; to open borders to migrants whose displacement is linked to climate impacts.” [P. 7]

At present, however, the governments of wealthier nations instead “will build ever more high-tech fortresses and adopt even more draconian anti-immigration laws. And, in the name of ‘national security,’ we will intervene in foreign conflicts over water, oil and arable land, or start those conflicts ourselves. In short, our culture will do what it is already doing, only with more brutality and barbarism, because that is what our system is meant to do.” [P. 49]

The book’s title implicitly argues that capitalism is fundamentally in conflict with the earth’s climate. However, Klein goes out of her way to make clear that her goal is simply to reform capitalism, not to overthrow it.

When the word “capitalism” appears in her book, it is invariably preceded by “neo-liberal,” or “deregulated” or “predatory.” On the page before the table of contents, Klein quotes science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, who argues that the task ahead is “comprehensively changing capitalism.”

What, then, does Klein mean by “capitalism,” and how would she like to see it changed? In an MSNBC interview, she asserts that, “capitalism as usual is an economic system based on short-term profits and growth.”

Klein argues the goal must be to create a version of capitalism in which “Low-carbon sectors of our economy can be encouraged to expand... while high-carbon sectors are

encouraged to contract.” [P. 21]

Such a program would be achieved on the basis of national protectionism, ending free trade agreements, and encouraging “buy local” schemes. It will also apparently require a reduction of living standards for the working class in advanced industrial countries, perhaps through a shorter work week with correspondingly lower wages. [P. 94]

In the same interview, Klein is asked what she would like to replace capitalism with. Her response is: “A system that can say no to corporations, that you can’t dig up five times more carbon than our atmosphere can safely absorb... Maybe even that you [fossil fuel companies] should help pay for us to transition away from fossil fuels.”

In other words, Klein is calling for a return to some sort of regulated capitalist economy. Along these lines, she makes numerous references to the New Deal and the Marshall Plan, programs that introduced various social reforms and government investment in infrastructure.

This is essentially the same argument she made in her popular 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine*. This journalistic exposé documents the way moneyed interests take advantage of crises to push through predatory agendas that would otherwise be politically impossible. The book, which was translated into 25 languages, made the *New York Times* bestseller list and topped similar lists in several other countries.

To achieve these ends, Klein calls for a diverse group of loosely affiliated organizations to undertake various forms of political “resistance.” Quoting Brad Werner, a complex systems researcher at University of California, San Diego, Klein writes: “[T]his includes ‘environmental direct action, resistance taken from outside the dominant culture, as in protests, blockades and sabotage by Indigenous groups, workers, anarchists, and other activist groups.’” [P. 450]

She calls on the courts to prevent fossil fuel extraction and transport by enforcing indigenous treaty rights. She writes: “If court challenges like Beaver Lake’s can succeed in halting tar sands expansion, they could very well be the best chance for the rest of us to continue enjoying a climate that is hospitable to human life.” [P. 379]

She supports civil disobedience campaigns surrounding the Keystone XL oil pipeline and other fossil fuel infrastructure projects, which aim to pressure the Obama administration and other politicians. She promotes fossil fuel divestment campaigns at universities, banks and other investing institutions.

Building off her conception of *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein calls for a “people’s shock” in response to the threats posed by climate change: “Given these factors... another crisis will see us in the streets and squares once again... The real question is what progressive forces will make of that

moment, the power and confidence with which it will be seized.” [P. 466]

In other words, she calls for “progressive” political figures to utilize major social crises to gain access to the halls of state power to carry out a shift in environmental and social policies. What would it look like if the forces Klein promotes were to come to power? Fortunately, we can answer this question by looking to Greece.

Klein extensively quotes her interviews with Alexis Tsipras, leader of the Syriza party in Greece, which she calls “one of the few sources of hope in Europe.” [P. 466]

In the months since her book’s publication, Syriza has taken power in Greece, quickly abandoning all its campaign promises. It is now implementing a program of brutal austerity. Yanis Varoufakis, Syriza’s lead bargainer in negotiations with Greece’s creditors, openly states, much like Klein, that his goal is to save capitalism from itself.

Klein is a skilled journalist. Her exposures of the hypocrisy of major environmental NGOs and green-sounding billionaires should dispel any illusions that such forces can address climate change. Her consultations with leading scientists shine through in many places, especially her discussion of the effects of environmental disturbances on developing life. She clearly and convincingly communicates that the current economic system is on track to unfathomable environmental devastation, and requires a massive overhaul.

Her political conceptions are often amorphous, and one gets the distinct sense that many have not been carefully thought through. However, she expresses clearly the interests of a privileged layer of the upper-middle class.

These layers, embodied in the social elements present at Klein’s book release, long ago gave up on the working class as an agent of revolutionary change. They are terrified by the apparently imminent collapse of capitalist society and its revolutionary implications. Their aim is to stabilize capitalism and block the development of an independent movement of the working class, the only social force capable of rationally responding to climate change.



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