



## The birth of an ecological revolution: A commentary on Naomi Klein's climate change manifesto

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### review of

Klein, N. (2014) *This changes everything: Capitalism vs. the climate*. Penguin Books, London. (PB, pp. 576, £6.29, ISBN: 9780241956182).

I hear babies cry, I watch them grow  
They'll learn much more than I'll ever know  
And I think to myself what a wonderful world. (Weiss and Thiele, 1967)

What if it's a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing? [437]

The game is nearly up for humanity. Over the past 250 years we have engaged in a massive social and ecological experiment that has changed the face of the planet, an experiment that is now running beyond our ability to effectively control. This book should be required reading for all students and academics, no matter what their field of study might be. Many of the arguments set out in the book are familiar to those of us who have been following the climate change debate over the past 20 years or so. Klein's book shows how corporations and States have collaborated to stall action to confront climate change, especially with respect to the all important 2 degree celsius limit beyond which change will prove catastrophic. The book also provides an insightful account of the failure of Big Green and environmental social movements. These movements have failed largely due to their cooptation by business interests, where many of the biggest environmental groups have received direct funding from major polluters, and

have taken senior members of the fossil fuel industry and their representatives onto their boards of governors. As a result, these groups have tended to advocate market based solutions to addressing climate change, which has led to a complete failure to regulate and reduce the causes of climate change and a failure to achieve their ostensive goals.

Klein makes frequent reference to the Second World War in her book. She sums up the problem as follows; ‘the bottom line is [...] our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life’ [21]. The analogy of the present environmental crisis with war is appropriate in terms of it being a war that is directed against all life, and in terms of its possible solution which requires a grand vision on the scale of a ‘Marshall Plan for the Earth’ [5]. As in war time, Klein emphasizes that this plan requires us to restructure our economies and our way of living. This will involve personal and collective sacrifice, which is already being borne by poor nations, but ought to be borne by all. Klein argues that notwithstanding the delusions of comfortable liberal commentators, radical change is necessary both in terms of our social and economic infrastructure, and in terms of our way of living. Klein’s book introduces a number of interesting concepts for helping us to grasp the full extent of the problem and offers a conceptual tool box for adequately addressing it. These conceptual tools include both the problems that must be confronted and the tactics that could form the new Marshall Plan, including i) extractivism, sacrifice zones and environmental racism, ii) climate denial, iii) the failure of market-based solutions; iv) the important role of social movements, which Klein calls ‘blockadia’, v) divestment from fossil fuels and a new great transformation, vi) and establishing a legal ‘right to regenerate’. A brief overview shall now be given of these themes.

### **Extractivism, sacrifice zones and environmental racism**

The idea of a ‘sacrifice zone’ is one of the most powerful concepts that is developed in this book which clearly articulates the close link between climate change, social inequality, and post-colonial capitalism. Numerous examples are given of sacrifice zones, especially in the oil rich regions of Africa and Latin America, such as the Ogoni Land and the Ecuadorian rainforest, which have been devastated by the activities of both local and Western oil companies, including Shell, BP and Chevron. Klein explains that, ‘They were poor places. Out of the way places. Places where residents lack political power, usually having something to do with some combination of race, language, and class’ [310]. Entire islands such as Naura have had their ecosystems hollowed out and made uninhabitable after being mined for their rich mineral deposits. The example of

Naura is a particularly revealing case, since having had its natural resources extracted and its ecosystem destroyed, it has transformed itself into a tax haven for the wealthy and was a key node of the secretive, offshore financial networks that led to the 2008 global financial crisis.

Klein explains our relationship with nature by the term ‘extractivism’, which relates both to the general mode of economic production and the more general way of living based upon ‘extreme rootlessness’ [343]. It is worth quoting Klein at length on this issue, given its centrality to different aspects of the argument set out in her book:

Extractivism is [...] directly connected with the notion of sacrifice zones – places that, to their extractors, somehow don’t count and therefore can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed, for the supposed greater good of economic progress [...] it is bound up too with notions of racial superiority, because in order to have sacrifice zones, you need to have people and cultures who count so little that they are considered deserving of sacrifice. [169-170]

The history of extractivism and ecological destruction cannot be separated from colonial history where Klein explains that, ‘the legacy of systemic environmental racisms [...] allowed toxic industries to build in areas inhabited mostly by people of color’ [106]. However, the recent intensification of climate change means that it is increasingly difficult to maintain the distance between the rich North and impoverished sacrifice zones of the global South, and as Klein explains, ‘the game is up, and we are all in the sacrifice zone now’ [315].

## Climate denial

Building on the excellent work of Oreskes and Conway (2010), Klein devotes much space in her analysis to exposing the vast denial industry that has been built up and sponsored by industrialists who stand to lose money if legal restrictions are imposed upon their polluting practices. Oreskes and Conway’s (2010) insightful account of the history of climate change denial reveals that denial has been an explicit strategy of a very small group of rabid cold war scientists who believed that any attempt by government or civil society to curb the harmful activities of industry is nothing less than a communist conspiracy. Supported by significant amounts of funding from industry, this group of cold war scientists engaged in the persistent denial of social problems created by industry including the link between pollution and acid rain, CFCs and the hole in the ozone layer, smoking and cancer, and carbon dioxide and climate change. Klein builds on this work and investigative research undertaken by Greenpeace ([exxonsecrets.org](http://exxonsecrets.org)) to highlight the network of corporate sponsored climate deniers, including the Heartland Institute, the Cato Institute, the American

Enterprise Institute and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, whose influence on the public perception of climate science has been significant. The success of the climate denial strategies of big business has been so great that even now that there is overwhelming agreement amongst scientists on the role of man in causing climate change and the desperate urgency to address this, the US Senate voted in January this year that they believe man has played no part in this change (Davenport, 2015).

Klein notes that academic research has itself been tainted by these networks of influence, 'it's virtually impossible to do public interest work of any scale – in academia, or journalism, or activism – without accepting money of questionable origin' [198]. Given the financial pressure under which many academics are now working, it is hardly surprising that so many end up advocating market-based solutions, despite the mounting evidence that these have singularly failed to reduce carbon emissions.

### **The market will not save us**

One of the key arguments of the book is to dispel the myth that the market will save us. Klein provides an exhaustive amount of evidence to show repeated failures of the market in providing solutions such as the European Union's Emissions Trading System, which has led to a huge increase in the amount of carbon dioxide being pumped into the atmosphere, rather than any degree of moderation. Klein notes that many businesses have used the carbon trading scheme as an opportunity to make a fast buck on the stock market. Rather than reducing their carbon emissions, the airline companies alone made \$1.8 billion dollars from carbon trading in 2012, but they did not cut their emissions. A recent investigation into the carbon trading system by Europol, found that as much as 90% of the carbon trading market was founded upon fraudulent activity (Philips, 2009). Klein also examines the failure of market-based solutions in the development of alternative, sustainable forms of energy production, such as wind and solar power, where successful transitions have always been supported by direct government intervention to help build the needed infrastructure.

One of the most insightful examples Klein draws upon to highlight the idiocy of market-based solutions to climate change is the rise of the billionaire climate 'messiah'. She takes Richard Branson as an exemplar who has generously promised a £3 billion donation to environmental projects including all the profits from his transportation business. Although some money has been donated, Klein remarks that nothing like the original amount pledged has transpired. His airline business continues to increase its carbon emissions. But far from being

the great benefactor and ecological messiah, Branson is himself a recipient of massive subsidies from the British taxpayers. Branson is symptomatic of 'billionaires who were going to invent a new form of enlightened capitalism, but decided that, on second thought, the old one was just too profitable to surrender [...] the profit motive was not going to be the midwife for that great transformation' [252].

The market will not save us. If we are serious about addressing climate change then we need to create a new political system, and one that is closer to socialism than to free market capitalism. Klein argues that, 'when climate change deniers claim that global warming is a plot to redistribute wealth. It's not (only) because they are paranoid. It's also because they are paying attention' [93]. Klein's book presents a vast amount of evidence that clearly shows the continuing failure of market-based solutions to the urgent problems that climate change presents us. This brings us to her proposed solutions, which include a diverse range of tactics including grass roots activism and the creation of an effective political system to promote a 'great transformation' to more sustainable ways of living.

## **Blockadia**

Klein coins the term 'blockadia' to describe a global network of grassroots social movements dedicated to protecting the environment. Blockadia is a notional conceit that describes a disparate network of local resistance movements. What unites these local movements is an ideological commitment to environmental protection, participative local democracy, the tactics of direct action, and the enforcement of the 'precautionary principle' in our interactions with the environment. Klein observes the prominent role of women in the leadership of these groups and the important role of the social media in connecting, coordinating and promulgating messages of isolated communities as part of a 'transnational narrative about resistance to a common ecological crisis' [303].

Klein brings our attention to the phenomenal successes of these small movements in numerous actions over the past decades. She notes the success of local movements in lobbying for a host of important environmental protection laws that were passed during the 1960s and 1970s. Of more recent interest Klein observes the success of these local movements in banning fracking in countries including France, the Netherlands, Germany, Scotland, and Bulgaria, and in many smaller regions such as Vermont, Quebec and Newfoundland. Direct action by local groups has forced Shell out of the Ogoni Land in Nigeria, and in Ecuador the Accion Ecologica has helped win a high court order compelling

Chevron to pay \$9.5 billion to the indigenous communities whose lands have been poisoned and health destroyed by oil exploitation.

## **Divestment and the great transition**

The economic historian Karl Polanyi (1944/2002) described the industrial revolution and the massive social upheaval that it brought about as the ‘great transformation’. Klein draws on this idea to explain the historical origins of the current environmental crisis, and to describe what is needed to stop this crisis – another ‘great transformation’. The key to this transition to a sustainable society is managed degrowth, which necessitates that we consume less. As she explains, ‘We will need comprehensive policies and programs that make low carbon choices easy and convenient for everyone’ [91]. This includes low carbon public transportation infrastructure, bicycle lanes, energy efficient housing, renewable sources of energy, land management, and low carbon lifestyles based upon the principle of ‘living nonextractively’.

The new great transformation entails divestment from fossil fuels, the introduction of a steep carbon tax, the revocation of corporate charters for persistent polluters, slashing military budgets, and stopping the existing fossil fuel subsidy which Klein reports is currently estimated at \$775 billion (note, the IMF reports the much higher figure of \$5.3 trillion, see Donnan, 2015). In place of the old carbon intensive economies, a new infrastructure must be developed to support low carbon lifestyles. Klein notes that many countries have already been successful in developing the rudiments of such an infrastructure. Denmark has 40% of its energy coming from renewable energy sources and Germany has 25%. It is technologically feasible to wean ourselves off our addiction to fossil fuels now, and with the political will this can be accomplished within a relatively short timespan. Food production and distribution habits must also be changed to reduce our carbon footprint. Klein explains that ‘Communities should be given new tools and powers to design the methods that work best for them [...]’ [133]. This requires the development of decentralised self-sufficient energy cooperatives and agroecology which ‘have triple climate benefit: they sequester carbon in the soil, avoid fossil fuel-based fertilizers, and often use less carbon for transportation to market’ [134].

## **The right to regenerate**

In the closing chapters of her book Klein draws a curious analogy between her body’s recent reproductive struggles and the reproduction of the planet’s ecosystem more generally. Klein provides a moving account of her engagement

with fertility treatment, enduring a series of miscarriages in her attempt to bear a child. She explains how it was only after abandoning hope in a technological fix that she was lucky enough to give birth to a healthy child. This personal story is followed in the book by a disturbing account of the huge increase in birth defects in the animal world throughout the planet, bearing witness to what Hawken (1993) has described as ‘the death of birth’. In light of this account of the gradual collapse of the reproductive systems of the ecosystem, Klein proposes ‘the right to regenerate’ as a new fundamental right.

Klein provides insight into how such a right to regenerate could function by drawing upon existing indigenous rights. She explains that ‘[...] Indigenous land and treaty rights have proved a major barrier to the extractive industries in many of the key struggles of Blockadia’ [370]. In Canada many aboriginal land treaties did not allow ownership or exploitation by the colonial settlers where rights were only given to sharing the land, and on condition that it was not used beyond the ‘depth of a plough’ [372]. According to Klein the most significant political victory for the ‘right to regenerate’ has been the United Nations’ Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted in 2007, and its provision that, ‘Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and the protection of the environment and the productive capital of their lands or territories and resources’ [377].

The right to regenerate can be seen as a new form of environmental biopolitics which redefines the biopolitical right to life in terms of an environmental right to regenerate. The environment has been a biopolitical issue from its outset, concerning the management of populations with respect to their geographical, climatic and hydrographic conditions (Foucault, 2004; see also Skoglund, 2015). In its neoliberal form this biopolitics entails decisions about who will make a profit from the coming environmental disasters and who will suffer, although it is Klein’s ardent hope that we can overcome this neoliberal form of biopolitics and create a new way of living based upon a biopolitical right to regenerate. Klein’s book shows us that we are now in the position of administering our gradual demise as a species, where in biopolitical terms the powers to enhance life and survival have reached a paradoxical point where they could lead to total annihilation (Foucault, 1981).

### **Implications of ‘This changes everything’ for management and organization studies**

Wittneben et al. (2012) have remarked that much of the research on the subject of climate change within the field of management and organisation studies has

been characterised by apathy and inertia, based upon the convenient assumption that a ‘win-win’ solution can be created within the existing system of extractivist capitalism. However, there is an emerging literature within the field that is clearly supportive of the findings highlighted by Klein’s work, including the failure of carbon markets (Böhm et al., 2012; Lohmann, 2009; Veal and Mouzas, 2012), the legacy of colonialism in environmental destruction (Böhm et al., 2012), the pernicious effects of corporate sponsored denialism (MacKay and Munro, 2012), and the urgent need for a transition to a low carbon economy (Forbes and Jermier, 2010; Wittneben et al., 2012).

A review essay on Klein’s book that appeared recently in the *Administrative Science Quarterly* criticized it for a ‘blurred diagnosis’ of the causes of climate change (Adler, 2015). According to this review, Klein blames the current environmental crisis on three different sources, i) capitalism, ii) extractivism, and iii) neoliberalism. The review argues that this blurred diagnosis allows for a reformist agenda to sneak into the book, where Adler (2015) believes that Klein’s criticisms of the excesses of neoliberalism and extractivism serve as a distraction from the genuine culprit which is capitalism itself, and only a critique of capitalism itself will necessitate wholesale systemic change. The problem with Adler’s analysis is that there is no basis for the reformist approach to change to be found in Klein’s book, in which the need for dramatic system wide change is repeated on so many occasions that it is difficult to see how he arrives at his startling interpretation of her book. Adler finds one brief quote on pages 25-26 of Klein’s book where she says there is ‘some breathing space’ for some reformist policies, but she devotes the bulk of the remaining 575 pages to far more radical proposals. Adler’s own conclusion is that ‘we need immediately to get down the path of radical “de-growth”’ (2015: 21), which is in fact the main conclusion advocated by Klein’s book. Ultimately, Adler proposes that a combination of activism by grassroots social movements, top down economic planning by governments and a socialist system of democratic government are roads to environmental recovery. In this he departs from Klein’s analysis not one jot.

A minor point of criticism that could be levelled at the book is its concern for the role of sacrifice in the coming ecological revolution. We might follow Vaneigem’s (1968/1983) warning that a revolution ceases once it calls for sacrifice. The idea of sacrifice is itself grounded in a logic of exchange that revolutionary practice should seek to overcome. In contrast, Vaneigem (1968/1983) argues that revolutionary practice requires carnival and poetic creation. A related criticism is that although it rightly highlights the need for us to reduce wasteful consumption, its focus on practices of consumption is in danger of underplaying a positive reconstruction of the means of production around sustainable practices. A more systematic consideration of the implications for new working



practices might move it away from notions of sacrifice to a discussion of ‘new forms of labour for a new kind of nature’ (Wark, 2015: 222), and the collaborative working practices that are entailed by the creation of new practices for sustainable living. These minor criticisms may yet be addressed in future work and should not deflect from acknowledging the great achievement of Klein’s book in clearly stating the significance of climate change for us, and in presenting a wide range of feasible measures that can be adopted in order to adequately address this immanent problem.

This book is a call to action which many are heeding. Since it was published there is mounting evidence of the further successes of ‘blockadia’ which is clear from the recent legal victory of the Urgenda Foundation in the Netherlands in forcing its government to adopt much stricter measures to address climate change, and in Pope Francis’ (2015) recent intervention by issuing an encyclical on climate change and inviting Klein herself to advise the Vatican on this important matter. In sum, *This changes everything* is without doubt one of the most important books yet published on the topic of climate change. The book is of crucial importance to the work of business students, academics and to any concerned citizens. Read it.

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