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This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate by Naomi Klein

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by John J. Berger - Jan 15, 2015

A Broad Movement is the Magic Sauce in Naomi Klein's This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate

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Continuation of Part 1

In *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (Simon & Schuster, 2014) author Naomi Klein claims that the key to breaking the climate and energy policy logjam in Washington, D.C., and probably in Ottawa, too, is the building of a powerful social movement.

Citizens can then vote leaders into office who are willing to take decisive action to protect the climate. The movement can also pressure government “from below” to say no to pipelines, new coal mines, and to all frontier carbon development, including offshore oil drilling and tar sands development. An aroused public can demand renewable energy, public infrastructure, public services, and green jobs.

Once you postulate this broad social movement in the service of climate protection, the rest of Klein’s long-term agenda then begins to seem more feasible, although it ultimately requires a major economic restructuring, lifestyle changes, and a political transformation, as well as policies aimed at reducing consumption, a politically taboo subject.

Klein’s climate solution includes long-term energy and economic planning with an emphasis on the kind of decentralized renewable energy production that has proven so successful for many farmers and ranchers in Western Europe and the U.S., plus investments in energy efficiency and electric vehicles.

It requires more regulation of the corporate sector, an expansion of the public safety net, carbon taxes, and greater support for infrastructure, including mass transit with electric trains powered by renewable energy. As Klein understands, entrenched vested interests will, of course, fight these reforms tooth and claw.

Building a Mass Movement

Advocacy of this sort of job-creating public investment could indeed serve as a nucleus around which a broadly based social movement could begin to coalesce, but whether it could be induced to embrace Klein’s larger agenda is unclear.



This movement would likely first be dominated by “bread-and-butter” issues. Smart leadership could then endeavor to weave climate concerns into core demands for jobs, higher wages, less inequality, and a better environment.

The broad movement could then grow through the implementation of a “Marshall Plan for the Earth,” to which Klein makes a couple of references.

Klein correctly believes that economic fairness and inequality should be addressed jointly with environmental affronts. Thus she urges the climate movement and the environmental community to stand with labor and low-income communities in support of green jobs, living wages, local hiring, and reducing excessive consumption by the wealthy.

This solidarity could serve as the foundation for building a broad movement. Klein’s Populist advocacy of “higher taxes on the wealthy,” “public power, so people can take control of energy supply and environmental quality,” and “a basic annual income” are all right in line with the creation of this grand coalition.

Some of Klein’s other notions are not exactly popular mainstream ideas, although a powerful case can be made for them. She espouses “de-growth,” “de-consumption,” “de-globalization,” and changes in human settlement patterns.”

By “de-consumption,” she means that some who have a lot need to consume less, and those with less need to be able to consume more. “Consume less” policies, however, would be relatively unprecedented, and are generally neglected, she concedes.

Presumably the mechanism for discouraging overconsumption would be a more progressive income tax system. She does not explain how much consumption would have to be foregone.

As to de-globalization, Klein wants to rewrite international trade rules that were made with little public scrutiny. They impede production of green energy and the reduction of GHG emissions, she says. Instead, she advocates buying local goods and restricting trade in goods that have a large CO2 “footprint.”

Where Power Ultimately Resides

Klein has great faith in the activism of indigenous people to block fossil fuel development and inspire broader public opposition, coining the term, “Blockadia.” She strongly supports Native American treaty rights, recognizing that in protecting their aboriginal land and traditional lifestyles, they are also protecting the environment and climate.

She evidently sees these and other local “pockets of resistance” to fossil fuel encroachment as the yeast from which the broad social movement will arise. Here her argument may be more a leap of faith.

These local battles are often, though not always, in geographically remote rural areas. They are frequently conducted by low-income, Native American, or other marginalized groups with whom Middle America does not readily identify.

Moreover, these local communities trying to block resource extraction projects don’t have the power to change the U.S. tax code or alter national spending priorities or ram big, New Deal-like social programs through a recalcitrant Congress, all of which must eventually be done to protect the climate.

Yet these isolated pitched battles may be like sparks awakening the conscience of a nation, particularly youth and those who live in the urban population centers where political power is concentrated and middle class movements are likely to arise.

In any case, *This Changes Everything* never fully explains the step-wise process by which the seeds of resistance are transformed into that vitally necessary mass climate movement so key to Klein’s vision.

Klein seems to believe that like lightning striking a mixture of amino acids in a beaker, the recurrence of ever-more serious climate-related disasters will catalyze the creation of the movement.

But even huge disasters like Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Katrina have not yet done so, though they have already clobbered tens of millions of people. If a truly colossal disaster on an even larger scale is required to finally empower such a movement, it may by then be too late.

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*.