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# Sadly, this doesn't change very much

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# Sadly, this doesn't change very much

**Abstract**

Book review of Naomi Klein's latest book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (Simon & Schuster, 2014).

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healthier; to open borders to migrants whose displacement is linked to climate impacts; to finally respect Indigenous land rights—all of which would help to end grotesque levels of inequality within our nations and between them (7).

And though Elizabeth Kolbert recently quipped in the *New York Review of Books* this is “a rather tall order,” Klein remains stubbornly optimistic; this is precisely what she means when she says that *this changes everything*.

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**Sadly, this doesn't change very much**

The hopeful title of Naomi Klein's latest book belies its ultimate message. After five hundred and thirty three pages of sharp analysis and pointed prose I was left rather deflated. At one point Klein quotes an ecological activist who rightly notes that resistance and alternatives are integral strands to the DNA of social change (405). Her book describes the many examples of both abroad in the world today. But by the end the reader has too few reasons to believe that either can seed a new international order founded on less economic inequality, more inclusive decision-making and greater care for the non-human realm. The question is: does this reflect flaws in Klein's analysis or is it an all-too-accurate reflection of how formidably concentrated power now is in the hands of selfish and careless elites? My aim in this commentary is to provide an answer. I pursue this by explaining how Klein addresses two other questions. I'll come to both presently, but first something about the “this” that, in Klein's view, stands to “change everything.”

Klein's argument is predicated on the potential of anthropogenic climate change to alter all aspects of our fossil-fuel dependent lives (especially in the wealthy West and the BRIC countries). Since climate change is invisible (unlike the weather), this is the same as saying that the implications of climate science are

now so radical that they will (or should) make us all recognise the insanity of our situation. This—namely, representations of past, present and future climatic conditions—is what stands to change everything in Klein's view. The book's early pages recount her relatively late realisation that the scientific evidence and predictions demand an urgent root-and-branch reform of capitalism, better still a revolution against this mode of production. Climate change, she rightly notes, is far, far more than an “environmental issue.” It is caused by, and must be addressed by altering, economic processes, cultural norms, and political systems simultaneously. Later Klein points to various climate scientists who openly acknowledge how frightening the implications of their research are. Some of these now fear an average atmospheric temperature increase of 4 degrees Celsius or more with the next 150 years. In geological terms that is an epic rate of change, with momentous implications for agriculture, industry, energy systems and much else besides.

In this light, two questions arise. First, why have the profound societal implications of climate science been virtually ignored by political economic elites for so many years? The well-known failure of the 2009 United Nations meeting in Copenhagen to forge an effective international agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions was a stark example of how the “is” of science does not readily compel an “ought” in the

realms of political decision-making. The simultaneous bail-out of bankrupt banks by tax-payers in the USA and elsewhere was an equally stark reminder that what counts as a “crisis” worth addressing is contingent on who possesses most definitional authority in the public domain. The second question is: what social forces might bridge the fact-value/science-action divide and break the power of the “one percent” who seem oblivious to the rights and needs of the “ninety nine percent,” never mind of polar bears or mountain gorillas?

The first two parts of Klein’s book address the former question. They do so in a multi-tiered fashion. She argues that business elites get far too much of their wealth from ventures that dependent directly or indirectly on extracting and utilising fossil fuels. She further argues that these elites now exert too much influence on elected political leaders and control too much of the news media. But the contradiction between elite economic interests and measures to avert catastrophic climate change is only part of Klein’s analysis. Asking why many ordinary people do not challenge elites to address the climate problem, she points to the hegemony of neoliberal ideology. This ideology renders privatisation of public goods and services “common sense,” so too deregulation of business (including trade) and lower corporate taxation (paid for with cuts to public spending). Despite the huge inequalities and injustices it has produced, it has also seduced two generations of consumers with plentiful and affordable commodities, albeit at great environmental cost (and much household indebtedness). As Klein puts it, “... the liberation of world markets, a process powered by the liberation of unprecedented amounts of fossil fuel from the earth, has dramatically sped up the process that’s liberating Arctic ice from existence” (20-21). While climate science makes a far-reaching critique of neoliberalism logically necessary, Klein argues that free market ideology now permeates our very sense of self. As such it is a powerful counter-revolutionary force. For over 30 years it has fostered a culture of individualism, competitiveness and acquisitiveness. As she puts it, very many ordinary people are “locked in,” bound by chains they in some sense “choose” to wear.

As if this was not bad enough, Klein’s analysis pushes even further. For her, neoliberal ideology is layered on top of a much older worldview that permeates Western societies and their former colonies. This “extractivist” mentality, as she terms it, goes back to at least Francis Bacon’s influential writings. It is “a non-reciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking. It is the opposite of stewardship ...” (169). As Klein sees it, this worldview is shared by many on the Left, the Right and in the centre-ground. Though neoliberalism has benefitted from its prior existence, Klein’s point is that it is not enough to assail neoliberalism alone because extractivism is as much a problem as this regime of accumulation is.

In part two of *This Changes Everything*, entitled “Magical thinking,” Klein argues persuasively against current attempts to tackle climate change that propose to turn problems into solutions without challenging root causes. She takes issue with the attempts of “big Green”—namely, large environmental organisations like The Nature Conservancy—to push companies and governments towards “market-based solutions.” She reveals the green-washing perpetrated by billionaire greens like Virgin boss Richard Branson. And she points-out the risks of science-led proposals to use geoengineering as a Plan B when we should really be implementing Plan A—that is, a fundamental reform (or removal) of both neoliberal capitalism and of extractivism as a cultural norm.

Part three (“Starting anyway”) has its work cut-out to persuade readers that there is a way of weakening elite power, of replacing neoliberal ideology and of superannuating extractivism. It is full of inspiring stories drawn from all points of the compass. The acts of resistance Klein recounts she calls Blockadia, which is “not a specific location ... but rather a roving transnational conflict zone that’s cropping up with increasing frequency and intensity wherever extractive projects are attempting to dig and drill ...” (294-295). Blockadia aims to challenge, not compromise with, the ways of thinking and acting that got us into the climate crisis Klein hopes will catalyse a new socio-environmental order. But for such an order to eventuate she notes that a few activist-minded citizens

alone cannot be the trigger. Instead, “extraordinary levels of social mobilization” (459) are needed. Here she takes inspiration from historic campaigns against slavery and the recent Arab Spring and the Occupy movement—all of which involved a wide cross-section of various societies.

*This Changes Everything* was five years in the making. It is a very well researched book courtesy of Klein’s own globe-trotting efforts and those of two research assistants. It is a powerful indictment of neo-liberalism and extractivism. Its call for a more democratic, egalitarian and environmentally benign future where collective goods loom large is uplifting, even if some will regard it as lacking sufficient revolutionary conviction.

Yet ultimately Klein’s diagnosis of what is wrong about our world is detached from her analysis of what is needed to make things better. By the end of the book I could not see how Blockadia, allied with the powerful insights of climate science, might inspire the sort of sea-change Klein rightly believes is urgent and necessary. Indeed, at various points in the book she betrays her own doubts (see p. 26 and p. 420). Her reference to the anti-slavery campaigns of the 19th century in Part 3 also slightly smacked of desperation, as if the recent grass-roots struggles against authority were too fleeting to serve as true inspiration. In fact, at one point in *This Changes Everything* Klein worries

that Blockadia’s lack of institutional solidity and ideological unity are critical weaknesses. Even if they were not, she gives readers little reason to believe that the millions who do not want to change everything can have their hearts and minds altered by those who do. As her early chapter on climate change scepticism acknowledges, the power of reason—be it embodied in science or the climate justice movement—cannot by itself instigate a societal domino-effect.

Despite itself, *This Changes Everything* is thus a lesson in despair. Klein is not an academic researcher. She is a public intellectual—one of the very few global public intellectuals alive today. Yet her use of two talented aides and her existing high profile (meaning she is made aware of countless stories about power and resistance) suggest her analysis is not fundamentally awry. That’s deeply worrying both for her and her many readers. There’s something deeply geographical in all this. Klein at various points notes how the local movements constituting Blockadia typically emerge from attachment to place. Rootless and mobile, global capital—which has co-opted the political class in many countries—remains free to use its extraordinary monetary power to its own neoliberal, anti-ecological ends. As labour geographers and others have argued for many years, until anti-capitalist forces can mount a coordinated, worldwide assault capitalism will remain the only force capable of changing everything.

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Reviewed by

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### Climate change already changed everything

An indictment of the reigning neoliberal free-market ideology and practices fueling the drive towards catastrophic levels of global carbon emissions, Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* is a promising addition among mainstream publications dealing with climate change and the search for solutions. In this volume, Klein (who

has described herself as an “activist journalist”) identifies both the “corporate globalization process” and “market fundamentalism” (19) as the socio-economic and political drivers of global emissions, climate change, and lack of decisive action to counter them. For Marxist geographers and other critical scholars, there is enough in the opening of Klein’s intervention to take her seriously as a critical voice that understands the structural socio-political and economic processes