

Book Review

Naomi Klein

On Fire: The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal.

New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2019

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Over the past twenty years, I have had the pleasure of reviewing and generally praising four books by Naomi Klein. This is the fifth.

From a strictly “professional” and/or “academic” perspective, Ms. Klein has her faults. She is not (nor does she claim to be) an original thinker, a gifted theorist, a painstaking researcher, or a meticulous scholar. She is, however, a very good journalist. *On Fire* is a collection of essays written over the past decade. They are eminently readable and comprise a narrative that is both informative and engaging.

Ms. Klein is an effective popularizer and polemicist. No one should approach her books with the illusion that she will offer a disinterested account of her subject matter, but they can expect a solid, persuasive narrative that includes both anecdotal evidence and reliable summaries of research developed by experts in many fields. Though plainly “taking sides” on subjects of controversy, she has produced a body of work that no one should dismiss. She does, of course, inflame those who hold opposing views, but she is usually right about the “objective facts,” accurate in her assessment of self-interest in her opponents, and always willing to press her points to the point where analysis leads the more adventuresome among us to activism.

Among the sciences, there is one little fellow named Ecology, and in time we shall pay him more attention. — Kenneth Burke, <i>Attitudes Toward History</i> , 1937
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Klein’s best-selling volumes began with *No Logo* (1999) and continued through *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), *This Changes Everything* (2014), *No Is Not Enough* (2017) and, now, *On Fire*. She covers issues from domestic political economy to international relations — each with an emphasis on the promotion of participatory democracy, economic equity, social justice and, increasingly, environmentalism. Though arguably a little late to realize the full importance of the rise of the Anthropocene era, the devastating hazards of climate change, and other aspects of ecological degradation, she has come to understand fully that, absent a liveable planet, parochial squabbles over democracy, human rights, poverty, pervasive and invasive technology, misogyny, and racism are of little consequence. Concerns about the denial of education, health care, a living wage, and the rule of law first require planetary habitability. Put bluntly, we must secure the environmental sustainability that will allow us to live at all; then, we can sort out the details of how we want to live.

Of course, just because the good society and the good life are conditional upon the preservation of life itself, does not mean that debates about democracy and capitalism can be ignored. The alleged tension between the environment and the economy is not an either/or proposition. After all, an argument can be made (and Klein helps make it) that dealing effectively with climate change *requires* that we move beyond or, at the very least, that we fundamentally alter the nature and rules of capitalism as it is practiced not only in the western liberal democracies, but also in more explicitly authoritarian systems such as what is beginning to be called “Leninist Capitalism” in China (Huang, 2017). So, while some leaders are more willing than others to *talk* about global warming, pollution and the like, their carefully crafted verbal support rarely plays out in material practice.

You may proclaim, good sirs, your fine philosophy
But till you feed us, right and wrong can wait. – Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, 1928

Nowhere in the “liberal” democracies, the “illiberal” democracies, postcolonial nations, and authoritarian countries at any stage of economic development are ecological issues being addressed adequately. So, it seems, a transformation of political ideology and practice may be the key to taking properly remedial and redemptive policy decisions to promote a sustainable environment. In the absence of deep and enduring popular demand, there is little evidence that governments of any ideological stripe will do what is necessary to deal with the imminent hazards we all face. So, if Ms. Klein and others who take climate change seriously seem harsh and hyperbolic in their rhetoric, perhaps their impatience and anger can be forgiven for they have much to be impatient and angry about.

The Evolution of an Environmentalist

On her journey, Naomi Klein has managed to write extensively for magazines such as *Harper’s*, *The Nation*, and *The New Yorker*. She has contributed to newspapers including *The Globe and Mail*, *The Guardian*, and *The New Statesman*. She has lectured at the London School of Economics and currently occupies the Gloria Steinem Endowed Chair in Media, Culture and Feminist Studies at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey (not bad for a University of Toronto drop-out, just a few credits short of graduation). She has also dropped in to speak at “Occupy” and other protest rallies, acquired a couple of honorary doctorates, won some book prizes, been named among the top public intellectuals in the world, and is a senior contributor for *The Intercept*. She is nothing if not a celebrity ... but that shouldn’t be held too strongly against her.

Ms. Klein was a principal author and key signatory of the “Leap Manifesto” (<https://leapmanifesto.org/en/the-leap-manifesto/>), a document echoed in the American “Green New Deal.” First proposed and earlier rejected by Canada’s more-or-less “social democratic” electoral presence, the New Democratic Party in 2015, it was presented again in 2018 and referred to local constituency organizations for “discussion” — more talk, more inaction). It was also scorned by academic leftist James Laxer (2016) as an “elitist” document because it focused on climate change more than economic inequity and was too “detached ... from any critique of capitalism as being the root cause of the global warming emergency” (Annis, 2016). If this was

bad, her excoriation by right-wing pundits and corporate apologists was far worse (Anderson, 2016; Foster, 2015). She has been called everything from merely naïve to a threat to civilization, a harbinger of economic collapse and a devastating return to the political economy of the eighteenth century on a planet with over ten times as many (human) mouths to feed — most with a much heavier “environmental footprint” than our peasant and even aristocratic ancestors. She proposes, the critics claim, the abolition of automobiles, air conditioners, aircraft travel, and hamburgers! She threatens the world with a levelling of the global population and a common descent into penury, and the abandonment of — what else? — “progress.” The prospect of a sustainable economy built on renewable resources and employing millions or, better, allowing the productivity of automation to be distributed equitably among billions of people and nations is dismissed as absurdly utopian.

On Fire will both enhance her reputation among designated radicals and will solidify her status as a dangerous subversive among those who despise the multigenerational likes of Canadian environmental guru David Suzuki (b. 1936), US Senator Bernie Sanders (b. 1941), American ecological activist Bill McKibben (b. 1960), US Congressional Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (b. 1989), and teenaged Swedish climate change campaigner Greta Thunberg (b. 2003).

<p>The green elites want to take us back to a romantic world of small-scale, low-yield, subsistence farming. It is the worst prescription for the planet you could possibly imagine. – Margaret Wentz, <i>The Globe & Mail</i>, 2016</p>
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In light of the vicious reaction to the Green New Deal championed by Ms. Ocasio-Cortez and the rather vile responses to Ms. Thunberg’s North American tour by both the ardent followers of the current American president and by climate change deniers in general, Naomi Klein can expect that her status as a “world-class public intellectual” will offer no protection against criticism by large polluting industries and their advocates at the highest levels of government. As the political posturing about climate change heats up (so to speak), Klein will surely become even more of a target for advocates of unfettered capitalism than she is now ... or so she may hope.

True, multiple “Marxist” contingents may still find her critique of late capitalism too tepid, but she has been interweaving the themes of social class and ecology with ever-tighter twine as the gap between ecology and political economy becomes increasingly “academic” — a theoretical distinction perhaps without a practical difference.

Since the means of production (technology) and the relations of production (social class) have become more transparently interconnected (automation = the decline of the industrial “proletariat” and the rise of the postindustrial “precariat”), we now see how intimately linked the latest technologies are for family farmers, the independent trades, and small merchants as well as for factory, clerical, sales and even “professional” workers. Almost all occupations from law and medicine to agriculture and automobile repair are becoming automated, digitized, subjected to algorithms, and taken out of actual human hands, except insofar as they are located tapping out disembodied instructions on a keyboard that is attached to simulated humans with consciousness and conscienceless post-Turing machines purporting to have oxymoronic “artificial intelligence”

(Dreyfus, 1967) rather than being understood as little more than impressively speedy “counter-sorters.”

Klein’s main opposition will therefore come from the corporate sector: commerce, finance, manufacturing, resource extraction, and whatever is meant by the conflation of high technology, big data analytics, entrepreneurship, and the smorgasbord of labour process changes that are enabling the most massive shift of wealth from the middling and working classes to the wealthiest fraction of “1%” in many modern, advanced, and nominally democratic societies. Whether in the form of public, private, or public-private partnerships on the one hand, or in the institutional education and print, broadcast, and social media that offer them ideological support and the appearance of inevitability on the other, (post)modern corporations exercise a vastly disproportionate influence on government and public policy. Accordingly, much the same practices and policy priorities frame the private sector now and will continue to affect public sector institutions and initiatives for the foreseeable future. How much the public sector will keep mimicking the concerns and methods of the private sector will depend somewhat on which political parties are in power and how much actual control they wield; nonetheless, short of actual climatic catastrophe, there seem to be no currently functioning nation-state in which the ambitions of Naomi Klein and like-minded environmentalists are likely to dominate soon — regardless of the comforting rhetoric and necessarily compromised political promises of self-identified reformers at or near their countries’ respective seats of authority.

On what, then, can we base any authentic optimism other than the prospect that the environment will collapse to such an extent that we will be forced to take action, even though our fate may already be sealed?

The Evidence

Not long ago, climate change deniers insisted that the evidence for global warming was at most partial and, in any case, unproven. Some, including Canadian Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper even the provisions of the very modest Kyoto accords “a socialist scheme to suck money out of wealth-producing nations” (Sanger & Saul, 2008); not to be outdone, the current American president has been more specific, tweeting that “the concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive” (Schulman, 2018). For the most part, however, climate change critics have undertaken a strategic retreat.

<p>We will only green the world when we change the very nature of the electricity grid ... [and] that is a huge industrial project ... Like the New Deal, if we undertake the green version, it has the potential to create a whole new clean power industry to spur our economy into the 21st century. — Thomas Freidman, <i>The New York Times</i>, 2007</p>
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They first conceded that warming was taking place, but insisted that there was nothing abnormal about the evident heating of the planet, even considering that it has come in a short timeframe coextensive with the industrial revolution. The world has, they correctly stated, had fluctuating periods of warmth and periods of cold. They added, however, that there was nothing

about the current warming trend that couldn't be explained by the cycles of the Sun. What our planet hasn't had, of course, are periods of such sudden transition as the current one. Backtracking a little farther, however, the deniers soon admitted that the changes were real and disturbing, but they continued to insist that human activity had nothing to do with it — until they couldn't. Now, they are now clinging to the idea that, if technological innovation got us into this mess, then technological innovation can get us out. So, for example, in Canada's recent federal election, although Canadian Conservative leader Andrew Scheer continued to oppose a "carbon tax," he did go so far as to propose public financial support for certain "green technologies," apparently hoping that private sector corporations would come up with "smart" solutions, perhaps at about the same time that the last bit of profit could be squeezed out of the Alberta tar sands. The irony of a Conservative party that seems uninterested in "conserving" anything is, of course, largely lost on them

The health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever. We are eroding the very foundations of economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide. We have lost time. We must act now.

– Robert Watson, Chair, Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019

Naomi Klein relates the evidence including Jason Box's study revealing that Arctic ice is melting 40% faster than the United Nations expected in 2014 and the United Nations' Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform which documented the beginnings of the greatest mass extinction since the dinosaurs were demolished a little over 65 million years ago in an event that, we may confidently assume, could not be blamed on human hubris and which has put over a million plant and animal species at immediate risk. We learn that "in the more than three decades since governments and scientists started officially meeting to discuss the need to lower greenhouse gas emissions to avoid the dangers of climate breakdown ... global CO₂ emissions have risen by more than 40%, and they continue to rise."

Meanwhile, however much squalid underbelly of triumphal and chronically transactional capitalism has been variously labeled such as "casino capitalism" (Strange, 2015), "crisis capitalism" (Bjerg, 2014), "crony capitalism" (Lewis, 2013; Taber, 2015), "disaster capitalism" (Klein, 2007), "zombie capitalism" (Harmon, 2009), old-fashioned "late capitalism" (Jameson, 1991; Mandel, 1975) and, perhaps, most evocatively, "the cancer stage of capitalism" (McMurtry, 2013), the fact remains that the entire pattern of global economic arrangements has been revealed. It can no longer be ignored.

Many people have made an analogy between the climate change and World War II, noting that no less a public figure than Nobel Prize-winning Economist Joseph Stiglitz (2019) is among many to make the analogy to World War II: "When the US was attacked during the second world war no one asked, 'Can we afford to fight this war?' It was an existential matter. We could not afford *not* to fight it." He explains: "The climate emergency is our third world war. Our lives and civilization as we know it are at stake."

The methods may not be entirely the same, for this will not be a war fought with military troops and armaments; however, the same or even greater mobilization of citizens will be required, the same commitment of human and material resources will be needed, and the same level of regulation and redirection of energy in the private sector will be demanded if we are to have even moderate success. The question now becomes not so much what to do (there are ample means and methods available), but who, if anyone, will step forward to make the needed changes.

Who will do the mobilizing: not business and industry (which understands full well the seriousness of the issue, but have their own schedules for action — being unwilling to “roll out” new technologies only after the old ones have passed their peak profitability; and not the bulk of available political leaders who may agree that rapid action is required, but cannot bring themselves to risk electoral defeat by taking dramatic action to match their earnest speeches.

The war on the climate emergency, if correctly waged, would actually be good for the economy – just as the second world war set the stage for America’s golden economic era, with the fastest rate of growth in its history amidst shared prosperity.

– Joseph A. Stiglitz, 2019

Wherever in the world they live, this millennial and successor generations have something in common: they are among the first for whom climate disruption on a planetary scale is not an abstract future threat, but a soon-to-be-lived reality.

The New Youth Revolt

There is much speculation that both Klein’s supporters and detractors are increasingly being described not only by ideological, but also by demographic differences. As a much younger man in the querulous 1960s, I may have been in a minority because I did not take the notion of a “generation gap” as seriously as did some others from President Richard Nixon on the right to “Yippie” (Youth International Party) leader Abbie Hoffman.

I did not, for example, automatically distrust “anyone over thirty.” Now, as a septuagenarian with political views at least as “radical” (if not more so) and a temperament no more “patient” than when I was in my twenties (understandably, since I have much less time left to bicker about the future of the planet and its inhabitants), I am being asked once again to put my faith in youth and to exit the political stage in deference to those young folk who will actually experience the potentially and perhaps imminent catastrophic consequences of continuing to ignore or to reject the science of climate change.

Whether those now under thirty are knowledgeable, committed, and clever enough to achieve significant environmental reform in the apparently short time left to effect needed change is, of course, an open question (cf., for example: Cohen & Heberle, 2019; IPCC, 2019; Mast, 2019; UNICEF, 2019). All we can say for certain is that their parents (including the superannuated hippies from the 1960s) failed rather miserably and they turned over their

Jefferson Airplane records for the Bee Gees, gave up dancing in the street for discos, and learned the mantra that “greed is good.”

Granted, there is much to commend in some important social areas — reproductive rights for women, LGBTQ-2 rights, indigenous peoples rights and so on, have been discussed and extended to a far greater extent than most would have thought possible in the 1960s. These advances must not be demeaned and require even more effort to fulfill. Nonetheless, despite apparent improvements in accessibility to renewable resources in some forms of energy production and energy efficiency, the answer to humanity’s foundational question of material sustainability and cultural survival remains elusive at best and the playthings of unrepentant hypocrisy at worst.

Although there is little evidence that young people today, despite being the most academically credentialed generation in human history, have thought seriously enough about their circumstances to understand just what they are up against, that very innocence may be among their greatest assets. As Ms. Klein puts it, they have not yet learned all the lessons of their elders: “they have not yet been trained to mask the unfathomable stakes of our moment in the language of bureaucracy and overcomplexity.” So, for example, they had not learned that it was impossible to organize over two thousand “youth climate strikes” that involved 1.6 million young people in 125 countries. So, on March 15, 2019, they just did it” (Carrington, 2019).

Of course, mass demonstrations are no guarantee of political action: some have been successfully translated into concrete public policy; some have had temporary successes, but later disappointments; some have been abject failures; and some have been brutally repressed. The singular importance of this particular movement, however, is such that it cannot be permitted to be delayed, much less to fail. That is why it must be understood and supported by public sector innovators.

I do not see the climate crisis as separable from the more localised market-generated crises that I have documented over the years; what is different is the scale and scope of the tragedy, with humanity’s one and only home now hanging in the balance.

– Naomi Klein, 2019

Never before have scientists, policy experts, regulators, negotiators, front-line public servants, and much maligned “bureaucrats” been called upon to use their expertise in a project that must provide political leaders with the tools and techniques to transform rhetorical bromides into action. It is surely time to stop asking questions about how much such an almost metaphysical shake-up in what passes for common sense will cost; after all, we are enduring the lethal human and ecological costs of failing to act, and they are increasing every day.

People who are already aware of the extent and significance of the climate crisis and knowledgeable about its true nature should read this book in order to be inspired to translate good intentions into action, for Naomi Klein is a skillful motivator. People who are vaguely aware of the issue, but uninformed about its extent and dimensions should read this book, for Ms. Klein explains in adequate detail enough of the science to provide the firm base on understanding that is required if mobilization is to have an effect more profound than the passing

of some green wind. And people who are already fully aware and active in the movement to shift political priorities toward strong, comprehensive, and eminently practical programs in the interest of nothing less than the redemption of our species should read this book to grasp more fully the emerging common front against human self-immolation on a burning planet. Perhaps the most important reason for everyone to read this book is that it frankly disavows the belief that, if we all do our part, things will work our alright. If only people would foreswear plastic bags and transport their groceries in canvas tote-bags, if only people would turn down their home heating units in winter and their air conditioners in summer, if only people would travel by rail or purchase a hybrid automobile or more scrupulously separate their garbage to facilitate recycling ... and so on.

“The hard truth,” says Naomi Klein, “is that the answer to the question ‘What can I, as an individual do to stop climate change?’ is ‘Nothing.’ ... The individual decisions that we make are not going to add up to anything like the kind of scale of change that we need.” That’s why the correct question must be ‘What can we, as members of a broad public and as people engaged in the study and practice of public policy formation, public administration, and the theory and practice of public sector activity do to change the ethos of politics and governance in our own countries and our own workplaces, and how can we contribute to the mobilization of opinion so that the courageous young people will not lose hope and energy ... and may also forgive us for failing so long to acknowledge the obvious.

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