

Book Review

Naomi Klein

This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus the Climate

New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014

Reviewed by: Howard A. Doughty

Aside from eternal ethical and existential issues, our species is currently bedeviled by two main problems. One is of sufficient significance to constitute a foundational threat to what pass for contemporary human civilizations. The other is far greater, for it poses a manifest threat to our species. Neither one can be indefinitely ignored. Neither is apt to be solved if we maintain our current patterns of belief and behaviour.

One is economic and the other is ecological. We have known something about economic problems at least since Adam Smith (1723-1790) told us how to account for the “wealth of nations” in 1776. We have had hints about ecological issues at least since 1798 when Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) warned us against unrestricted population growth. Seldom, however, have we systematically addressed the relationship between the two. In fact, we have been misled into thinking that these are separate problems or, worse, when we did discern a connection, we believed that potential solutions to one involve disregarding or discounting and thereby exacerbating the other.

In good times, of course, we are downright sentimental about wildlife and wilderness conservation. We go out of our way to enjoy natural beauty, praise national parks and voluntarily pick up trash in public places. Even now, many of us dutifully separate our garbage in the hope that paper, bottles, plastic wrappers and organic waste will be properly recycled. These are not, however, especially good times and we are becoming willfully careless.

Kurt Vonnegut’s 1972 epitaph for our planet, to be carved in the wall of the Grand Canyon for the viewings of extraterrestrials, should they ever visit: “Earth: we could have saved it, but we were too damned lazy and too damned cheap.”

“Saving the planet” is now conventionally described as a threat to “Jobs! Jobs! Jobs!” and, since most people’s social consciousness is determined by the size and the source of their paychecks, the invitation to trade steady employment for the safety of a polar bear, a spotted owl or a stand of ancient timber is most often politely declined; and, if that doesn’t work, it is impolitely rejected. *In extremis*, as in Canada today, environmental activists—especially if they are or are too closely associated with the struggle of aboriginal peoples to assert their legitimate native land claims—are shouted down as the current federal government labels them as “terrorists”. But let me deal with economics first.

The Economic Problem

As we lurch through the early decades of the twenty-first century, we can set aside various panics over such *crises de jour* as “illicit drugs,” “viral pandemics” and even “terrorism” for a moment. They are symptoms, not diseases *per se*. There are fundamental causes of all three that are rarely recognized by perceptive observers and analysts. They lie largely in the domain of what Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) famously called the “dismal science”; namely, economics.

Most people don’t like to discuss economics except in the banal and mischievous terms that are bandied about in the “Business” sections of daily newspapers and current affairs programs on cable television.

One reason for our reluctance is that people aren’t doing as well as they think they should and talking about money exposes them to criticism and to self-criticism—stated or implied—about why they have so little of it or, worse, why they owe so much. Although they have heard a great deal about American and European bank failures and bail-outs, manufacturing collapses, government debt, toxic assets, various investment bubbles, criminally fixed interest rates and high-tech skimming and scamming, these abstractions don’t readily translate into lapsed mortgage payments or the price of bananas and lettuce. In the process, we experience a sense of failure, betrayal and despair.

Unemployment is well understood (especially by people who do not have jobs), but making the link between personal bank accounts and mainstream macroeconomics is difficult, especially when the noted “experts” in the field use arcane language and unfathomable statistics to explain the obvious in terms that make no sense to ordinary citizens or to recommend policies the only possible outcome of which is to make matters worse. I speak, of course, of “austerity” budgets that seem to be in favour among political parties of almost all conceivable ideological stripes—the only differences being that “liberal” parties impose austerity with regret, while “conservative” parties do so with glee. And anyway, all those high-powered and highly paid economic geniuses rarely get things right. This is the element of failure.

<p>“There is no such thing as society. There are only individuals ... and families.” Margaret Thatcher, 1987</p>
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Another reason for our silence is that modern, industrial, urban and highly technological societies (in which many of us live and most of the rest of us want to live) have promised, since the European Enlightenment, that free markets, human rights, representative democracy, science and technology, expanding education and so on would solve most human problems for most of the world’s population. It was called “progress” and people learned to expect it.

Progress implied prosperity and individual liberty as well as victory over poverty, tyranny, disease, onerous labour, squalor and ignorance. Not much more than fifty years ago when the massive growth of higher education saw the expansion of existing colleges and universities and the building of many new institutions, some “futurists” and even some garden-variety psychologists and sociologists imagined that unfettered technological advance, whether in automated factories or eventually through the mediation of the computer chip, would soon

create a world in which peace and prosperity would define our lives and the only serious domestic problem would be how to fill all the leisure time that our high-tech economy would afford us.

Government is not a solution to our problem government is the problem.
– Ronald Reagan, 1981

Now, however, it is plain that people are working more, enjoying it less, losing disposable income, increasing private debt and often juggling minimum-wage jobs. It is also clear that young people are facing the probability that they will be economically worse off than their parents. And, of course, we are beginning to experience the consequences of declines in cheap food, cheap energy, cheap housing and cheap education. We are, it is true, experiencing cheap interest rates on personal and business loans, but even this apparent anomaly seems to have disturbing implications in the form of anticipated deflation. So, as we take note of the widening chasms between rich and poor, we must conclude that something is seriously wrong and that no one in authority seems able to understand it fully, nor to know how to fix it. In fact, we are either told vapidly that there are “challenges” to be faced (about which we should have an insipid “conversation” ... perhaps sending millions of “tweets” to our elected representatives or corporate executives), or we are encouraged to believe that the more insurmountable troubles are our fault. This is the element of betrayal.

A third reason to avoid serious economic talk is that, since the implosion of what we (and many of its proponents) falsely thought was communism, there really hasn't been a good way for people with the wit to recognize that the promises of the Enlightenment remain unfulfilled and the will to imagine significantly different and better ways to do things have been misdirected and diverted into what Linda McQuaig (1998) brilliantly called the “cult of impotence.” More than ever, there is a generalized sense of powerlessness that is exploited by clever politicians who capitalize (so to speak) on individual anxiety to the extent that a large number of working people have been gulled into blaming trade unions for their plight. (A mixture of racism and religious bigotry, of course, aids and abets what some people call “false consciousness.”)

And then along came Thomas Piketty (2014; Doughty, 2014). No matter that inchoate and seemingly ineffective movements (notably “Occupy”) had nibbled at the fringes of corporate complacency and had done their part to free up even more money for the national security state and its penchant for universal surveillance, the detection and detention of dissenters. And never mind that the growing gap between rich and poor had been anticipated for some time (roughly since Marx) and that any number of critical economists had not only observed, analyzed and empirically explained it. And disregarding the fact that even Nobel Prize-winning economists such as Paul Krugman

(2012; Doughty, 2012a) and Joseph Stiglitz (2012; Doughty, 2012b) attempted to make a widespread adult discussion of social class possible through their extensive popular writings (notable in *The New York Times*), it was Piketty who came closer to holding up a mirror and showing us how inequality and inequity were not contingent facts but essential factors in determining our social relations. Still, even he could come up with no vision bolder than a modest increase in taxes on the very wealthy. So, with the fading of the last shred of President Obama's failure to

deliver on the promise of change and hope, the fact remains that in the absence of a credible and well-articulated alternative to late capitalism, most people see no coherent plan of escape and have resigned themselves to our collective fate. Thus is the element of despair.

Thus endeth the first part.

The Environmental Problem

In 1937, the eminent American literary critic Kenneth Burke (1959, p. 150) tucked a phrase quietly in a footnote to an essay entitled “Naïve Capitalism.” This was it: “Among the sciences, there is one little fellow named Ecology, and in time we shall pay him more attention.”

Burke went on to explain:

[Ecology] teaches us that the *total* economy of this planet cannot be guided by an efficient rationale of exploitation alone, but that the exploiting part must itself eventually suffer if it too greatly disturbs the *balance* of the whole ... So far, the laws of ecology have begun avenging themselves against restricted human concepts of profit by countering deforestation and deep plowing with floods, droughts, dust storms, and aggravated soil erosion. And in a capitalist economy, these trends will be arrested only insofar as *collectivist* ingredients of control are introduced ...”

It took another quarter-century before Burke’s cautionary comment took hold. In the decade 1962-1972, some critical thinking must have taken place. Rachel Carson (1962), Paul Ehrlich (1968), and Donald Meadows et al (1972) caught the attention of the reading public by highlighting some of the harsh consequences of industrial progress. At about that time, earnest environmental organizations such as Greenpeace were established. It seems, to some of us, that we were beginning to notice what we were doing and what we had done. Even US President Richard M. Nixon appeared to be supportive. In 1972, he created the American Environmental Protection Agency. Now, over five years later, Mr. Nixon’s followers in the US Republican Party are trying to destroy it. Things change.

Of course, awareness didn’t fade among those who truly understood the nature and extent of the environmental crisis. Nonetheless, as the economic situation worsened, politicians retreated from presenting stronger ecological policies, enforcing restrictions on air, water and soil pollution, enforcing restrictions on the use of non-renewable resources and otherwise making even a modest effort to maintain nature’s balance was small. There were highly publicized events such as the far-famed report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, popularly known as the Bruntland Report (1987), the Rio Conference on the Human Environment which popularized the concept of “sustainable development” and, of course, the Kyoto Protocol in which many nations affirmed their willingness to reduce “greenhouse gases” (there were 55 original signatories; Canada is the only country to have withdrawn).

“Whenever I hear the phrase ‘sustainable development,’ I know one thing: it is development that will be sustained.”
- John Livingston, 1990

Other national and international conferences were held. Distinguished scientists and earnest activists explained the global, national and local situations; yet, when it came to taking concrete action, most politicians begged to be excused.

Instead, for far longer than reason would permit, environmentalists were depicted as romantic, irrational “tree-huggers.” When carbon emissions were mentioned, the future prime minister of Canada declared global warming to be a hoax and dismissed the issue as a “socialist plot.” He rejected international cooperation and declared that the “Kyoto [Accord] is essentially a socialist scheme to suck money out of wealth-producing nations” (Toronto Star, 2007). Even today, corporate television treats the matter as controversial and ensures that advocates from the petroleum and other extraction industries are given every opportunity to present the “other side” of an argument that should have been put to rest long ago.

Understandably, the petroleum industry, the automobile industry, the chemical industry, the coal industry and any number of other major contributors to ecological degradation are unwilling to accept the fact that the Earth has long since passed the an important “tipping point” and that it may already be too late to restore ecological sanity to human conscious purposes and practices.

Enter Naomi Klein

The daughter of self-described “hippies,” Naomi Klein (2002, 2007; Doughty, 2002, 2007) was raised in Montréal and came to public attention after having been “radicalized” after a fashion in university. Like her father-in-law, former Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations, Ms. Klein failed to complete her undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto (though I won’t bet against her one day getting a Doctor of Laws *honoris causa* from that august institution.

She is the author of wildly popular criticisms of late capitalism. A prolific journalist and activist, she has won prestigious awards and has been vilified in the corporate media. Her inescapable presence, however, has kept her on “top ten” lists of influential women for over a decade. She has, in speaking and in writing, an attractive and engaging persona that has made her work popular not only among the disaffected left which is her natural audience, but also among people who are on her wrong side and, she would claim, the wrong side of history.

A late-comer to the environmental movement, she has been mainly preoccupied with issues of class, gender and race for the bulk of her career. *This Changes Everything* marks her realization that climate change cannot be put aside and left for others to manage while she continues the struggle for social justice. Instead, she has taken up the fight for the planet, a fight that must be won if there is to be any hope for humanity.

Klein's thesis is simple: "[O]ur economic system and our planetary system are now at war. Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life."

Governments also need to "remember how to say no," Klein says, especially to energy projects such as the "terra-deforming" tar sands mines of Alberta, which climate scientist James Hansen has warned will mean "game over" for the climate, and which Klein captures in a phrase: "The earth, skinned alive."

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- Robert Jensen, 2014

Note: she said *our* economy, which is not the same as *the* economy. Our economy is a historical phenomenon which is responsible for the greatest prosperity and the greatest environmental pollution that the world has seen. Our economy is destroying the environment that sustains it. Just as Karl Marx was mistaken when he imagined that the so-called "internal contradictions" in capitalism would bring that system down sooner rather than later, people like Ehrlich and the authors of *The Limits to Growth* may have erred in their timeline; however, they did not err in determining our direction or divining our fate. So, environmentalist authors and bloggers such as John Michael Greer (<http://thearchdruidreport.blogspot.ca/>) and James Howard Kunstler whose blog kunstler.com/writings/clusterfuck-nation/ have been reaching out on the web with brilliant, entertaining and scientifically rigorous messages for years. Klein offers little that is new, but she reaches an enormous and influential number of citizens.

"The very thing we must do to avert catastrophe—stop digging—is the very thing these companies cannot contemplate without initiating their own demise."

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. – Naomi Klein

Naomi Klein's arguments are harsh and penetrating. She challenges neoliberal ideology and refuses to endorse the paradoxical "faith" in science and technology to overcome our collective ecological crisis. She links the policies of privatization,

deregulation and austerity and presents them as a core cause of environmental degradation. She is also caustic in her repudiation of "market-friendly" projects to keep growing but to "grow smarter." Nothing less than the embrace of steady-state economics modified by selective "de-growth" will do.

Naomi Klein's solution also draws on others. It is partly moral. She speaks of replacing the economy of private greed with the economy of public caring. She is unforgiving in her dismissal of billionaire ecological philanthropists. She is firm in her advocacy of the need to overcome (not overthrow) capitalism and to do so now.

What once seemed like intractable and unconnected problems are not. Lots of people have understood this for some time. What Naomi Klein has done in this well-written, well-argued and, to me, almost irrefutable book has been to put the situation and the options (or the lack thereof) flatly, firmly and defiantly on the table.

She is being noticed. And, of course, it won't matter. No one from President Obama to the suppliers of equipment to the frackers and the oil sands squeezers will do enough to accomplish what needs to be done. The crisis is not yet immediately apparent and it is not demonstrably imminent. The true danger is that, if it is not already too late to redeem the biosphere and keep it as a source of human and non-human life as we know it, then it certainly will be by the time we wake up.

This Changes Everything will be no more than a nudge in the right direction. But, unlike the well-intentioned and obviously accurate prognostications of innocents, it actually is a nudge. It has made a difference and will continue to do so. It should be purchased by anyone and everyone who at least inchoately appreciates our condition. If it does nothing else, it will inspire public sector innovators to fight for the right to speak and an end to the suppression of science and scientific knowledge.

[I]f the danger of climate change is sufficiently grave and imminent for governments to be considering science-fiction solutions, isn't it also grave and imminent enough for them to consider just plain science-based solutions?

- Naomi Klein

It will not be enough for us or our progeny to stare out at a ruined biosphere and say "we told you so."

About the Reviewer:

Howard A. Doughty teaches cultural anthropology and political economy at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com.

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