"Only Mass Social Movements Can Save Us Now"

Review of Naomi Klein, This Changes Everything; Capitalism vs. the Climate

By Wayne Price (January 2015)

Hugo Chavez

Evo Morales

Naomi Klein's new book has been widely reviewed and widely read, not only on the left, but by many people concerned with looming ecological catastrophe. It deserves its popularity. Clearly written, it lays out the dangers of humanly caused climate change. It proposes alternatives by which we could still save the world.

She cites a 2012 report by the World Bank (not exactly a nest of radical eco-socialists) that a rise of the average global temperature by 2 degrees Celsius "would further add to 21st century global warming and impact entire continents." (13). The bank's report also warns that by century's end, "we're on track for a 4 degree C [7.2 degrees Fahrenheit] warmer world marked by extreme heat waves, declining global food stocks, loss of ecosystems and biodiversity and life-threatening sea level rise….There is also no certainty that adaptation to a 4 degree C world is possible. " (13)

Klein follows the best authorities on what a 4 degree C warmer world might be like. It "could raise global sea levels by 1 or possibly even 2 meters by 2100….This would drown some island nations…and inundate many coastal areas from Ecuador and Brazil to…much of California and northeastern United States….Major cities [are] likely in jeopardy…. Meanwhile brutal heat waves…can kill tens of thousands of people, even in wealthy countries….The heat would also cause staple crops to suffer dramatic yield losses across the globe….When you add ruinous hurricanes, raging wildfires, fishery collapses, widespread disruptions to water supplies, [animal and plant] extinctions, and globe-trotting diseases to the mix, it indeed becomes difficult to imagine that a peaceful, ordered society could be sustained…. " (13-14) And there is no reason to believe that once reaching 4 degrees C, the world would stop warming! Never mind "a peaceful, ordered society," a rise of 6 degrees C or higher could affect humanity as a giant meteor once affected the dinosaurs—global extinction.

In short, "climate change has become an existential crisis for the human race." (15) (For a further radical analysis of the climate crisis, see Price, 2010, Part I.)

What Should Not be Done

Much of Klein's book is a criticism of moderate, liberal, or pro-market programs for countering climate change. She demonstrates the futility of efforts to modify the market in order to decrease carbon emissions ("cap-and-trade"). She pillories the attempts of "Big Green" establishment NGOs to "work with" oil companies to modify their practices. She describes the efforts of apparently well-meaning billionaires to make their companies more ecology-friendly, only to find that this conflicted with their bottom lines, causing a return to destructive practices. The proposals of "experts" to save the earth by pouring iron into the oceans and reflective material into the atmosphere is held up to ridicule ("the solution to pollution is…pollution?" [256]).

Klein is also critical of "socialist" and left governments (state socialists) in Latin America and around the world, for their anti-ecological practices. She calls this the "extractivist left."

Ecologically Balanced Economy

Bill MacKibben

(176) This includes the governments of the late Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Boliva, the Workers' Party of Brazil, and social democratic and "Communist" governments in general. "These left and center-left governments have so far been unable to come up with economic models that do not require extremely high levels of extraction of finite resources, often at tremendous ecological and human cost." (180)

She notes that, "in Greece in May 2013…the left-wing Syriza party," which had a reputation for being pro-ecology, "did not oppose the governing coalition's embrace of new oil and gas exploration," but proposed that the profits be used to pay for pensions. (181) At best Syriza may be said to waffle on ecological issues, as it does on other issues.

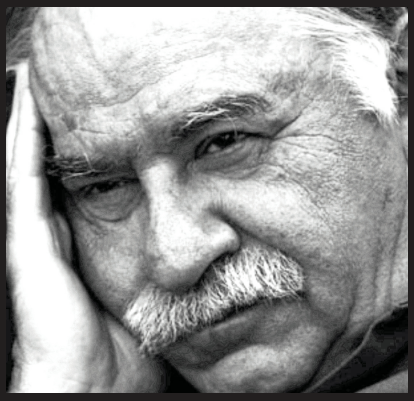
Her Program

Instead of pro-market policies, "we will need comprehensive policies and programs that make low-carbon choices easy and convenient for everyone….Cheap public transit and clean light rail accessible to all, affordable, energy-efficient housing…, cities planned for high-density living,…land management that discourages sprawl, and encourages local, low-energy forms of agriculture, urban design that clusters essential services like schools and health care along transit routes…., programs that require manufacturers to be responsible for the electronic waste they produce, and to radically reduce built-in redundancies and obsolescences." (91)

All this would be paid for by increasing taxes on the corporate rich, most especially on the petroleum and coal companies, as well as by cutting military spending. "Public money needs to be spent…[on] emission-reducing projects…the smart grids, …the citywide composting systems, the building retrofits, the visionary transit systems, the urban redesigns….: (108) This would be a "Great Transition" to an ecologically-balanced economy based on renewable energy.

Klein has concluded that there is a need for increased political and economic—and technological—decentralization. Localization cuts down on the costs of transportation and travel, makes it easier to use local energy sources and natural resources, and easier to recycle wastes. It encourages people to become directly involved in reorganizing technology and society—rather than to passively wait for some far-off political savior to solve their problems for them.

"There is a clear and essential role for national plans and policies….But…the actual implementation of a great many of these plans [should] be as decentralized as possible. Communities should be given new tools and powers….Worker-run co-ops have the capacity to play a huge role in an industrial transformation…. Neighborhoods [should be] planned democratically by their residents….Farming…can also become an expanded sector of decentralized self-sufficiency and poverty reduction." (133-134) She suggests that when auto factories or other industries close down, "The workers at these plants… could have been given the chance to run their old factories as cooperatives …." (123) We



Murray Bookchin

Louis XIV

need "to get far-reaching decentralized climate solutions off the ground…while fighting poverty, hunger, and joblessness at the same time." (136)

Many others who work on climate change have seen decentralization as a necessary part of the solution. Bill McKibben wrote a whole book on "the wealth of communities" and the need for a localist orientation. "We need to move decisively to rebuild our local communities….For community, it turns out, is the key to physical survival in our environmental predicament and also to human satisfaction." (McKibben, 2007; 2)

Socialist-anarchists have always made decentralization a major part of our program: local democracy, workers' management of industry, voluntary associations, and self-governing industrial-agricultural communities, all coordinated through networks and federations. From Kropotkin to Murray Bookchin, anarchists have seen the ecological value of decentralized federalism.

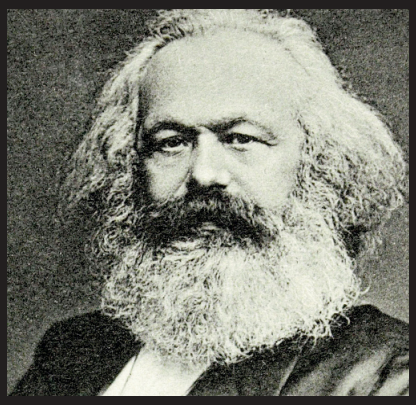
Anarchists do not disagree with Naomi Klein about an "essential role for national plans and policies." Some central coordination is necessary on a national (and international) level. But that does not mean that this could be effectively done by the existing bureaucratic-military-capitalist national states! (In fact, they are barriers to international coordination.) That is why we advocate federation from the local to the international level.

What is the Problem?

Given the threat to the whole of society, and given that there are programs for preventing disaster, why has nothing been done? "The world's governments have been talking about preventing climate change for more than two decades….[They have] not only failed to make progress…[but have] overseen a process of virtually uninterrupted backsliding." (11) In the United States, of the two major parties, one denies that there is even a problem and seeks to increase production of oil, coal, and natural gas. The other admits there is a problem, but does little or nothing about it. (Obama, for whom Klein says most climate activists probably voted, has expanded off-shore oil drilling and is for nuclear power.) She asks, "What is wrong with us?" (15)

The problem, as Naomi Klein sees it, is only partly that the use of carbon-based fuels is rooted deep in our technological economy, providing fuels for most energy, feed stock for fertilizers and pesticides used in growing food, and the basis for everything for which we use plastic and artificial fibers. Alternatives could be found for all this, even if it would require costly major changes. However, that would "spell extinction for the richest and most powerful industry the world has ever known—the oil and gas industry." (63) Not to mention the coal industry. Enemies of humanity, with the blindness of Louis XIV ("After me, the flood!"), they fight any attempt to limit their destruction of the world, with all the money and power at their command.

But the basic problem, Klein believes, is more than one group of giant corporations. "The real reason we are failing to rise to the climate moment is because the actions required



Karl Marx

Carbon Economy

directly challenge our reigning economic paradigm (deregulated capitalism combined with public austerity)…." (63) This is her thesis. Despite her subtitle, she does not believe that the problem is capitalism as such, but the neo-liberal, conservative, right-wing version of capitalism which believes in deregulation and (social service) budget cut-backs. Presumably, a liberal, Keynesian, version of capitalism, one which was regulated and spent money on public needs, would be able to deal with climate change. The climate cannot be saved "within the rules of capitalism, as they are currently constructed. Which is surely the best argument…for changing those rules." (88)

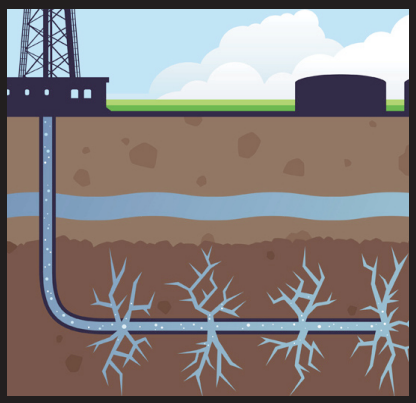
At times, she does seem to see capitalism as the problem. Because governments waited so long, "the things we must do to avoid catastrophic warming are no longer just in conflict with the particular strain of deregulated capitalism that triumphed in the 1980s. They are now in conflict with the fundamental imperative at the heart of our economic model: grow or die.,,,What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity's use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion….Capitalism… wins every time the need for economic growth is used as the excuse for putting off climate action yet again…." (21—22) Therefore, "we need to change pretty much everything about our economy…." (22)

This sounds like a different, more radical, approach. However, she is still not really presenting "capitalism" as the problem, but rather "our economic model" or "our reigning ideology" (21) and the "need for economic growth" as an "excuse."

Capitalism is not a "model" or "ideology" nor a set of "rules." It is an economic system, a repeating pattern of mass behavior—it is a relation of classes in the process of production and exchange. Its drive for constant growth—for the accumulation of capital, of money, of ever more profits—is not an "excuse" but a fundamental need. Businesses which do not grow are eventually wiped out by competing firms. CEOs who do not cause their corporations to increase profits are fired by their boards of directors. A capitalist class which does not grow may lose domination over its working class. Indeed, the only way for a capitalist class "to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion," which mustdestroy ecological balance and finite resources.

While Klein may want "to change pretty much everything about our economy," she does not discuss what an alternate economy might look like. Except as part of the "extractivist left," she does not raise "socialism"—which may be seen as some sort of democratic, cooperative, economy, with production for use, rather than for profit. She makes a couple of vague positive remarks about Marx and about anarchists.

Correctly, she does not think that the world can be saved by relying on the capitalist market. "The idea that capitalism and only capitalism can save the world from a crisis created by capitalism is…a hypothesis that has been tested and retested in the real world….There is plenty of room to make a profit in a zero-carbon economy, but the profit motive is not going to be the midwife for that great transformation." (252) So capitalist policies cannot save the world, but



Fracking

Zero Carbon Economy

once saved, a zero-carbon system can continue to develop a profit-making economy—that is, capitalism. Why wouldn't this capitalism re-create ecological crises out of its continued need to accumulate?

The Movement

Although a left-liberal (she writes for The Nation magazine), Klein expresses no faith in the Democratic Party or the electoral process. She sees both parties as dominated by big business—as they are. What she wants is the growth of a mass movement from below, tying climate issues together with all other popular concerns of oppression and suffering. She looks to "a powerful social movement—a robust coalition of trade unions, immigrants, students, environmentalists, and everyone else whose dreams were getting crushed by the crashing economic model." (121)

As Klein describes it, there is already an international movement of anti-climate change. She has traveled around the world, to observe and participate in local movements which oppose oil extraction, fracking, mining, dam building, mountaintop removal, overforesting, destruction of natural habitats, and dispossession of indigenous peoples. "Resistance to high-rise extreme extraction is building a global, grass-roots, and broad-based network, the likes of which the environmental movement has rarely seen…something alive and unpredictable and very much in the streets (and mountains, and farmers' fields, and forests)." (295-296)

She calls this movement of movements "Blockadia," for its dominant tactic of blockading corporate and government activities. She cites mass struggles in Greece, Romania, several places in Canada, Russia, China, Ecuador, Nigeria, and the U.S. Key aspects are the participation of First Nations (who have legal and moral claims on the land) allied with local white workers, farmers, and homeowners. She also refers to the leading roles often played by women.

She is entirely right to want to tie the struggle for climate justice together with all other popular struggles. "Only mass social movements can save us now." (450) As the ecological crisis deepens, so does the economic crisis of current capitalism on a world scale, and the attack on the working class and all oppressed by the ruling class and its agents. Suffering will continue to increase and so may resistance. This includes the current mass movement for Black rights, against mistreatment by police, as well as efforts for the rights of immigrants, for women's reproductive rights, for full equality for GLBT people, against wars, etc.

But a special point should be made about the struggles of workers, for a higher minimum wage, for unions, and for jobs at good pay. All of these issues can be related to proposals for rebuilding the U.S. economy, housing, infrastructure, and social services, in an ecologically-balanced, zero-carbon, way. This is important, not because workers are especially oppressed, but because workers—as workers—have a special strategic power, the ability to shut down the economy if they want, and to start it up in a different way—if they want.

Vanguardist Revolution

Luxemburg

Revolution?

Klein is right to support struggles-from-below for even limited reforms. Overall she provides a good list of reform proposals, including expanding public works, increasing workers' democracy, and taxing the corporations. Any successful reform (such as banning fracking in New York State) which may slow down the developing catastrophe is to be welcomed! But the capitalist state will refuse to significantly expand public works or workers' democracy. Then anarchists can claim that this demonstrates the need to replace the state with a federation of workplace councils and neighborhood assemblies, that will carry out this program.

But her analysis seems to say that capitalism as such does not need to be changed in order to finally prevent global climate change. There she is wrong. (Price, 2012, Part II.) A total systemic change is needed, that is, a revolution. Klein only mentions "revolution" twice in the book, both times negatively. First, she writes, "It would be reckless to claim that the only solution to the crisis is to revolutionize our economy and revamp our worldview from the bottom up—and anything short of that is not worth doing." (25) We revolutionary anarchists do believe that "the only [complete] solution to the crisis is to revolutionize our economy." But we do not believe that "anything short of that is not worth doing"—as I argued in the last paragraph! Nor are these contradictory goals: the more radical, militant, and threatening a mass movement is—that is, the more revolutionary—the more likely the capitalists are to enact reforms (to slow down the process of climate change).

Secondly, she declares (sounding like she has been re-reading A Tale of Two Cities), "Let's take it for granted that we want to do these radical things democratically and without a bloodbath, so violent, vanguardist revolutions don't have much to offer in the way of road maps." (452) Since she makes no other discussion of "revolution," she must be implying that the only kind of revolution there could be would be undemocratic, bloody, violent, and vanguardist (elitist). In response: revolutionary socialist-anarchists do not advocate a vanguardist and elitist revolution. We do not wish to take power ourselves and rule over the workers and oppressed. As part of the people, we want them to take power for themselves. Whether a revolution is a violent "bloodbath," depends on the resistance of the rulers and their agents. If a big majority of the people (almost all of whom are working class, blue collar or white collar) are for getting rid of capitalism; if the workers seize the means of production, distribution, transportation, and communication; and if the ranks of the military (mainly from the working class) refuse to shoot down the people; then the revolution could be fairly nonviolent. It depends on the capitalists. As for doing things "democratically," what could be more democratic than for the big majority of the population to overthrow the ruling minority, to set up a self-managed society?

This is a fine book and well worth reading, despite its limitations. As Naomi Klein explains, humanity is threatened with mass destruction—the destruction of "an ordered society" and possibly of the human species. A small minority of people hold the wealth and state power of this capitalist society. They do not seem to have a clue as to what they

could do to prevent this looming catastrophe. Instead, some of them fight tooth and nail to continue their suicidally destructive behavior, in blind service to their profits. Others just dither. Reforms to slow down the coming of the destruction would be useful, but even these seem limited at best. The capitalist ruling class is simply unable to maintain society and its members. As Luxemburg put it during World War I, the alternatives are "socialism or barbarism," or in Bookchin's phrase, "anarchism or annihilation." This is not what we want, but what we are facing.

[*Editors' Note:* This review appeared previously in the *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 64/5, Summer 2015]

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Part I: http://www.anarkismo.net/article/17024

Part II: http://www.anarkismo.net/article/17157?search_text=Wayne+Price