

Book Review: This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate by Naomi Klein

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In her latest book, **Naomi Klein**, author of global bestsellers *The Shock Doctrine* and *No Logo*, looks to tackle the war our economic model is waging against life on earth. **Sarah Lester** finds that Klein leaves us with the glimmer of hope that climate justice movements and social mobilisation can offer an alternative future.

This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate. Naomi Klein. Allen Lane. 2014.

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Naomi Klein in her new book *This Changes Everything* presents a new way of looking at two major problems: disaster capitalism and climate change. Klein's argument is that, while the majority of people think climate change is a threat, "we have not done the things that are necessary to lower emissions because those things fundamentally conflict with deregulated capitalism" which is the "reigning ideology" of our time (p.18). At the heart of the book Klein is supplying society with a challenge: are we on the right path, are we doing the right things for ourselves and for the future, and is this the best we can be? Arguably her core message is one of social and environmental justice: "the solution to global warming is not to fix the world, but to fix ourselves" (p.279).

The book starts with an analysis of the problems we are facing: fossil fuel extractivism, inequality, climate change deniers and their strong links to conservatism, unethical trade, and money. However, these problems are quickly complemented by solutions: ideas of hope, of what individuals can do differently, and suggestions of radical social solutions and public ownership of key services provided by the energy, transport and water sectors. Klein acknowledges that it does not present key facts about climate science, rather aims to address "the politics of human power" and can be read as another one of Klein's excellent diatribes on capitalism and the un-checked power of the free market. The opinions proposed in *No Logo* and *The Shock Doctrine* are developed, and Klein proposes that we need to wake up to the role that greed, "fully liberated by lax regulation and monitoring", plays in our society.

One thing is clear, Klein has her finger on the zeitgeist pulse of the moment: the suggestion in society that capitalism under the current system might not be working. Evidenced by Thomas Piketty's *Capital* on the nature of inequality, the thousands of people taking part at [climate marches](#) earlier this year, the Scottish [Green Party](#) gains in the Scottish Referendum, and even Russell Brand's *Revolution* – climate change as an indicator of our social failings is on the rise. In *This Changes Everything*, Klein is doing what she does best: capitalising, for want of a better word, on the urges of a social movement. She is looking beyond growth as our determinant of social strength. Are we entering a post-growth moment? The recent report by the [New Climate Economy](#) certainly doesn't think so and does little to challenge the current homogeneity of opinion that supports what Klein calls the "fundamental imperative at the heart of our economic model: grow or die" (p.21).



People's Climate March 2014 NYC. Credit: [South Bend Voice](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

Klein's ideas criticising current mitigation strategies might not be all that new, but they certainly are well presented. Her description of "trading in pollution" (p.218), covering the cap and trade economic system Europe currently uses to regulate emissions from the power sector, is excellent for non-economists. There are several examples of new innovative ways of describing old problems: for example, the use of 'extractivism' and 'extreme energy' to describe the mind-set with which we approach the planet's natural resources, and the description of coal as a sponge holding carbon tightly for millions of years. A particular highlight is the section on "the war on science", which captures the charmless irony of the oil and gas industry's claims that they are the only realistic scientific option, while the very same industry attacks the scientific study of the impacts of climate change and environmental pollution.

The book also joins the dots between climate change, poverty, and development. Social and environmental justice arguments feature strongly in the second half of the book, and even the controversial issues of wealth transfers and redistributive climate finance mechanisms are outlined in chapter three. Klein acknowledges that we shouldn't settle for "a tired old retread of the false choice between jobs and growth" (p.320), but try to find a positive way of re-investing in socially equitable business. The population problem and the problem of bringing "super-consumers" into the world is mentioned, if not fully addressed. While this isn't a book on climate justice for the developing world, it does recognise that "there is simply no credible way forward that does not involve redressing the real roots of poverty" (p.418).

The one considerable weakness of *This Changes Everything* is the lack of real information on renewable energy. While there is considerable debate on geoengineering and its discontents, existing solutions from the renewables sector are barely mentioned. Quick discussions of the Native American communities' use of solar power, and the reinvestment discussion of public money in renewable energy, are exceptions. More examples providing positive examples of renewables would be useful for the reader, such as the [Climatescope](#) initiative which aims to increase investment in developing countries by providing information on the renewable energy investment attractiveness of countries.

The book draws to a conclusion through a discussion on the connection between consumption and climate change; highlighting China's rising emissions due to their production of goods consumed by the western world. But for all her talk of "selective degrowth" and discouraging "wasteful consumption", Klein fails to really address the idea of prosperity without growth or question whether moderation is part of society anymore.

In *This Changes Everything*, Klein presents a dystopian status quo of “climate change fuelled disaster capitalism – profiteering disguised as emission reduction, privatized hyper-militarized borders, and quite possibly, high-risk geoengineering when things spiral out of control” (p.155) and suggests that “we are all in the sacrifice zone now”. However, she leaves us with the glimmer of hope that climate justice movements and social mobilisation can offer an alternative future: proposing the lifeline idea that “the truth is that there is no business as usual” and that we can determine our own path to change.

Sarah Lester is Regional Climate Change and Energy Adviser at the UK Department for International Development (DFID). She lives and works in New Delhi, India for DFID. Sarah’s research investigates energy needs in developing countries, with a focus on humanitarian response for refugees and displaced populations. Prior to working for DFID Sarah has held previous positions with the Grantham Institute Imperial College London, the Climate Policy Initiative at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin), and the Electricity Policy Research Group at the University of Cambridge. All blog pieces are written in her personal capacity and do not reflect the views of the UK Government. [Read more by Sarah.](#)

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