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« This Changes Everything » ... but not without a revolution (About the work by Naomi Klein)
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This Changes Everything, Capitalism vs. The Climate

Naomi Klein

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Scientific opinion is unanimous that climate change poses a planetary emergency. Naomi Klein does not pile on the facts on this subject. She bases herself on the internationally agreed upon minimum goal recognized by political institutions: limiting global warming to 2 degrees celsius. This implies a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions starting today, whereas in fact they are rising more and more quickly.

The problem is political, not technical

There is no technical barrier to the transition needed to diminish our emissions. Every year renewable energy (solar, wind, etc.) increases its output while its production costs diminish. Today this evolution makes the replacement of fossil fuels credible. Naomi Klein shows how we can make urban living low energy, by living collectively, in housing that is self sufficient in renewable energy, developing free public transportation, and transforming agriculture, a prime source of greenhouse gas emissions.

If nothing is being done today in spite of the scientific proof of planetary warming along with the technology available to keep it in check, it is because, "*Our economic system and our planetary system are now at war.*" Once Naomi Klein states this frankly she adds: "*Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on Earth, including human life. 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. Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it's not the laws of nature.*" (21) "*... even more powerful than capitalism... is the fetish of centrism—of reasonableness, seriousness, splitting the difference, and generally not getting overly excited about anything. This is the habit of thought that truly rules our era ...*" (22)

We need a shift in political "power—specifically ... a shift in who wields it, a shift away from corporations and toward communities, which in turn depends on whether or not the great many people who are getting a rotten deal under our current system can build a determined and diverse enough social force to change the balance of power." (25)

This is an attractive program, a change from the lessons in morality taught by the European environmentalist parties such as the Greens, who are more attached to their positions as deputies and ministers than to denouncing the disastrous effect of capitalism on the planet.

Capitalism vs. Nature

Far from holding itself to an abstract denunciation, the work abounds with concrete examples. Klein goes over the behavior of Big Oil with a fine tooth comb. We learn that companies need to constantly show "reserve-replacement ratios", which is to say they must possess in their oil reserves quantities that are equal to that which are already being exploited or see their stock prices plummet. This leads to a mad rush toward exponential exploitation of fossil fuels. If all of these reserves were burned, the amount of CO2

released into the atmosphere would be five times the critical amount that would lead to warming of 2 degrees celsius. The choice is posed clearly between the profits of the Kings of Oil and the climate.

Naomi Klein takes on the North American environmental organizations that preach “green capitalism” along with The Nature Conservancy, an NGO which enriches itself thanks to gas wells in a nature preserve it is supposed to protect! She argues against “*market solutions*” such as the CO2 emissions trading market which only enrich a few more polluters and speculators.

In a chapter oozing with irony, the author ridicules billionaire philanthropists like Richard Branson (Virgin), Bill Gates (founder and ex CEO of Microsoft) and Warren Buffet (Financier) who claim to finance the fight against climate change... while they are among the greatest emitters. Their foundations serve their own profits first and foremost and aren't a bit green.

However, Naomi Klein's critique of the economic system holds itself obediently to denouncing “deregulated capitalism”, put in place by the signatories to commercial treaties such as those of NAFTA, signed in 1994, or TAFTA (Transatlantic Free Trade Agreement), which is being negotiated right now. Here, in the signatures on these pieces of paper is the secret of the accelerating destruction of the planet, which in reality is the sanctioning of an existing relationship of forces. As a counterpoint to the denunciation of “*laissez-faire economics*”, Naomi Klein praises the thirty post-war years ('45 to '75 known in France as “Les Trente Glorieuses”) and the Marshall Plan days in the manner of our *supposed left of the national left*. (Difficult to translate: *de notre prétendue gauche de la gauche nationale*.)

When she attempts to explain the mad rush of society to extract and waste our natural resources, she invokes “*extractivism*”, a state of mind that considers nature to be a reservoir at the disposal of mankind. Far from demonstrating the impossibility of regulating capitalism, a system by nature anarchistic and based on the exploitation of nature by mankind, she holds responsible a nebulous, “*power relation between humans and the earth*”. While Marxist criticism unveils a social relationship that is one of domination and exploitation, and gives us weapons to fight this through class struggle, “*extractivism*” is only a moral denunciation, outside of history, and powerless.

Green Reformism

This refusal to see that it is capitalism itself, and not only its “deregulated” phase of the last 40 years, which is at the origin of the ills of the planet leads the author naturally to a reformist perspective which she states clearly, “*Progressives [must show] that the real solutions to the climate crisis are also our best hope of building a much more stable and equitable economic system, one that strengthens and transforms the public sphere, generates plentiful, dignified work, and radically reins in corporate greed.*” (125)

The historic references that she chooses to illustrate her thought are telling: her inspiration comes from Roosevelt's New Deal, to set off a “*Marshall Plan for the Earth*”. (5)

One billion dollars a year for ten years would be enough to bring running water and electricity to 1.5 billion people who lack these, all with renewable energy. This represents just barely more than 0.1% of world-wide annual production for such an important task. This number is striking and tells us much about the priorities of the leaders of this economy. But who will manage this non-profitable investment? How can we force States and the bourgeoisie to carry out this type of program if we hold ourselves to the goals of the author who stays within these strict limits?

Naomi Klein's responses to these questions are diverse, very diverse. We would need a “*mobilization of citizens*” the avant-guard of which is “*Blockadia*” - the name Naomi Klein gives to the movements that block industrial projects in rural areas which we know better in France under the acronym ZAD. The

strength of these movements would reside in the “*relationship to the land*” which these rural populations have and which would be “*the essence of the anti-extraction movement*”. On this slippery turf, Naomi Klein slides toward the mystical demagoguery of “*rights of Mother Earth*” (444), or the Pachamama (Nature) of the Bolivian President, Evo Morales. She concludes that this blockadia needs to find support from nationalisms and micro-nationalisms, in the name of the defense of “*the rights of indigenous people*” and the need for a “local production with local jobs”.

Now that we are living in the transitional decade in which world wide urbanization has surpassed 50%, now that capitalism continues to dissolve the economy of the agricultural village and to throw out onto the streets and toward migration millions of future proletarians, now that two centuries of capitalism and class struggle have demonstrated that fundamental political changes in favor of the exploited classes have all come from the cities... Naomi Klein would have us go back to the country!

Of course, she also formulates some perspectives for the “citizens” of the cities: to demonstrate against the “free trade” agreements, to pressure universities and municipal councils to divest from the most polluting sectors and also to “*to reinvest that money in entities that have a clear vision for the healing process*”. (401). Here we see the return of “*green capitalism*” that the author had promised us to steer clear of.

All this reduces itself in the end to organizing pressure groups. For, “*the only thing politicians fear more than losing donations is losing elections.*” (152) In the face of monopoly capitalism, Naomi Klein opposes petit-bourgeois democracy, in the city as in the countryside.

The revolutionary urgency to face the climate emergency

Among the numerous social movements cited as examples by Naomi Klein, the working class shines by its absence. How paradoxical to exclude salaried workers from a study which gives itself the goal of proposing a revolution in the means of production. But this is coherent with a reformist perspective that is only interested in curbing capitalism with the goal of making it more compatible with the preservation of nature.

In the twenty-first century more than ever, the working class (in the broad sense, including the fraction condemned to unemployment or “the industrial reserve army”) is the class that produces wealth by its very nature, and this in every sector of the economy. If it is a question of “*Planning and Banning*” as is indicated in one of the chapters of the book, than nothing can be taken on by considering the workers only as victims, or at best as a mass to be manipulated for “*citizen’s mobilizations*”.

The ability to respond to the climatic emergency, by its very nature an international phenomenon, is totally incompatible with the short-term profit motive that characterizes the capitalist economy. The containment of greenhouse gas emissions alone requires economic planning at an international level. Only a society where production is guided democratically, by the producers themselves, would allow for a life worthy for all as well as the preservation of the planet. This requires a working class revolution that would wrest ownership of the means of production from the hands of the bourgeoisie.

This is a perspective that Naomi Klein sweeps away with a sway of her hand: “It goes without saying that this change must be accomplished democratically and without blood. Violent revolutions led by a vanguard are not constructive”. This sounds like the preaching of the bourgeoisie that tells us that we grow out of it when we grow up! How can we take ecological imperatives into consideration within our communist and working class perspective and integrate them into the working class movements? After reading this book these questions remain unanswered.