

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014. ISBN: 9781451697384 (cloth); ISBN: 9781451697407 (ebook)

In this review I will offer a critique of Naomi Klein's new book *This Changes Everything*. This is a problem. Marxists have a long history of ruthless critique (and jealousy) of more prominent (and popular) Left thinkers. I attended a historical materialism conference years ago and it appeared that the true intellectual enemies of the working class were actually Paul Krugman and Joe Stiglitz. Moreover, Marxist geography often carries the double burden of the Left ignoring their Marxism (despite David Harvey's recent stardom), and the popular press ignoring their geography (ceding it to the likes of Jared Diamond or Robert Kaplan). The ideas populating the Left today are often problematic, extremely simplistic, not to mention politically ineffective. Critical geography has much to add to Left thinking, but we could still be far more effective in circulating their ideas beyond the silos of academic publishing (and one could hope, perhaps naively, that this open access *Antipode* site for reviews might be a tiny step in that direction). Naomi Klein can teach us much on how to *popularize* a critique of neoliberal capitalism.

Before my critique, I want to say there is much that is fantastic and needed about Klein's book. She is a gifted writer who combines vivid storytelling with a passionate and political sense of urgency. Although the book presents a bleak view of the climate science—not that the readers of *Antipode* need to be reminded—this book will likely inspire thousands of climate activists to mobilize against fossil fuel-fired capitalism. She perhaps saves her best work for last: the final chapter is an extremely effective (and affective!) exploration of her own struggles with fertility and the wider mass extinction of life on earth. Her examination of the connections between her own bodily “natures” and nonhuman nature belies much of the book's rigid boundary between “nature” (as a regenerative, Gaia-like force to be obeyed) and “society” (as a dominating and destructive force).

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Much of Klein's argument (in particular that featured in "Part I") is absolutely spot on: the continued dependence on fossil fuels is not only a *product* of an ideology of "market fundamentalism" and policies crafted as a "corporate liberation project" (p.39); neoliberal free market ideology is also the main *barrier* to tackling climate change because the crisis requires a massive intervention of the state and collective mobilization: "How could governments heavily regulate, tax, and penalize fossil fuel companies when all such measures were dismissed as relics of 'command and control' communism?"(p.20). By making this argument, Klein makes clear that our failure to address climate change is not because of some natural and transhistorical tendency toward greed and materialism, but rather a historically specific political conjuncture that has dominated only for a mere four decades. It is a reigning political ideology that can be struggled against and overcome. Just like the insurgent neoliberals defeated a Left-Keynesian consensus in the 1970s, a new Left-radical climate politics could shift politics leftward once again.

Klein's critique of neoliberalism only animates the first part of the book. Then the book takes a turn to critique broader "civilizational narratives" (p.170) based on what she calls "extractivism". Klein argues the deeper problem is not with neoliberalism, but with "powerful cultural narratives that transcend geography and ideological divides" (p.159). This is where the book goes astray. Initially a promise of a historically specific critique of the neoliberal class project (something much needed for leftist environmental thinking), the book resorts to well-trodden environmentalist tropes against modernism and industrialism. Suddenly the problem is not a political class and its power, but rather all of us and, in particular, how we think. The solution is a "shift in worldview" (p.424). The book starts as if it was written by David Harvey, and ends as if it was written by Carl Sauer. In what follows I will offer critiques of three fundamental arguments in this part of Klein's book: [i] the critique of "endless growth"; [ii] the environmental critique of modernism; and [iii] the focus on struggles against "accumulation by dispossession".

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Against Growth or Capital Accumulation?

Attacking Klein for failing to distinguish between growth and capital accumulation sounds like it was lifted from *Jacobin*'s hilarious short article, "How to write a Marxist critique of Thomas Piketty without actually reading the book" (my favorite line was that the review must include, "something something law of value something" [see Levenson 2014]). Growth versus accumulation might seem needlessly semantic but, nevertheless, I think it is an important distinction that Klein fails to make. Klein critiques capitalism as an "economic model based on endless growth" (p.169). Yet, like many other critiques of growth in ecological economics (e.g. Daly 1996), and increasingly amongst the so-called "de-growth" movement (e.g. Latouche 2009), she tends to conceptualize this as a unitary and homogenous social system that "needs" growth. This fails to grasp how the need for "growth" under capitalism is *growth for capital* (M-C-M'). This in no way suggests "growth" in terms of resource consumption for the majority of workers and others who do not privately own the means of production. In fact, it is more common to witness spectacular growth *alongside* even more spectacular material deprivation and scarcity. The fact that "growth" has some indirect effects like employment and (sometimes) rising wages does not contradict the class dimensions of who controls and mostly benefits from growth. Yet, Klein often claims the problem is with "us" and that "we" must "consume less, right away" (p.90). She even goes as far as to state that "consumption levels went crazy in the 1980s" (p.91). So, the decade of Reagan, austerity, stagnating incomes, and rising debt was a decade of "crazy" levels of consumption? For whom? Klein is right that the problem is a society where most production is organized around the private quest for profit above all social or environmental considerations, but the solution to such a society is not to struggle against an "economic model" but rather an "economic class" who mainly benefits from this growth.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Failing to understand the class dimensions of accumulation predictably leads Klein into familiar anti-growth environmental politics. She sings the praises of the famous 1972 publication *The Limits to Growth* as being right all along (p.185-187) (despite the regressive and Malthusian implications of its arguments).¹ More broadly, she presents an ascetic (and likely unappealing) political vision of a future of “consuming less”. What if expropriating those who benefit from growth actually allows huge portions of “us” to consume a lot more? This is implicit in her call for a “basic income” for all, but she fails to consider how this contradicts her anti-growth/consumption politics.

The Materiality of Modernity

The “civilizational narrative” that Klein isolates as the root of our environmental problems is the modernist faith in technology and its ability to control nature. Klein suggests a political shift needed in order to solve climate change “will require rethinking the very nature of humanity’s power—our right to extract ever more without facing consequences, our capacity to bend complex natural systems to our will. This is a shift that challenges not only capitalism, but also the building blocks of materialism that preceded modern capitalism, a mentality some call ‘extractivism’” (p.25). The mentality of extractivism is built upon a “secular religion” (p.289) of technology based on the “myth that we are masters of nature” (p.395).

Klein consistently explains this “civilizational narrative” as a “worldview” (p.23), a “mentality” (p.25), and a “mindset” (p.177). Like many critics of modernity before her, she traces this worldview to the enlightenment “metanarrative” of nature as something to be subdued and controlled (offering yet another review of the thought of Francis Bacon). How do we overcome the modernist mindset? For Klein, the kind of transformation needed to solve climate change needs to accompany a “shift in worldview” (p.424). When seeking alternatives it is not

¹ On *The Limits to Growth*, see Sara Nelson’s (2014) recent *Antipode* paper.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

surprising that Klein romanticizes nostalgic “lost...connections” with the natural world that a “great many of us just forgot about...for a while” (p.446). Of course, Klein also links this to “indigenous-inspired ideas” (p.444) and claims that it is primarily indigenous cultures that “have kept this alternate way of seeing the world alive” (p.443).

As I will discuss below, the environmental politics of defense of and attachment to place is central to Klein’s understanding of political resistance, but for my purposes here I want to emphasize that what Klein mainly advocates is a shift in ideas, in discourse, in ways of thinking about the world. Indeed, quite shockingly after 446 pages based on a critique of “extractivism”, she casually mentions that “[I]iving nonextractively does not mean that extraction does not take place: all living things must take from nature in order to survive. But it does mean the end of the extractivist mindset...” (p.447). How much real extraction will accompany the end of the mindset? How much iron ore will a society need that has stopped “thinking” in this way?

What Klein fails to grasp is that the problem with modernity is not simply about narratives and worldviews; it is about the *material* centrality of machines, fossil fuels, and globalized entanglements to the reproduction of social life. It is true that Klein links fossil fuels to the globalization of the extractivist mindset (in the form of spreading capitalism and colonial plunder), but she doesn’t think much about how this process has not only enriched capitalists and colonists in the name of dominating nature; it has also ensnared millions of workers and ordinary people who live with and among electronic devices, steel-based machinery, concrete-based infrastructure, chemical-based products, and so on. For these millions, offering a different “worldview” based on ecological attachment to place (and putatively some kind of labor/livelihood based on local resources) is not likely to entice political solidarity.

Overcoming the ecological crisis of climate change not only means confronting modernist ways of thinking, but also the materiality of modernism. This links to my own Marxist position that in order to build a society beyond capital we cannot look backward to “forgotten”

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

lost connections rooted in pre-industrial society. Society as we know it is for better or worse inextricably tied to the materiality of industrial systems. This materiality constitutes what Geoff Mann refers to as a “historical necessity”, which “is not something we can shirk... To imagine what can be, we must understand what is” (2009: 928-929). This “necessity” has been based upon the rapid surge in industrial labor productivity that lowers the necessary labor needed to reproduce life (for some). This is what Marx called the “specifically capitalist” shift to “large scale industry” and the quest for relative surplus value based on constant revolutions in labor-saving technologies. Of course, capitalism’s uneven development has excluded billions of people from the benefits of this productivity increases: from rural smallholders to urban slum dwellers all eking out survival via local resources. But, Marx thought the productivity gains of industrial capitalism needed to be *harnessed* for all of society not just the elite and middle strata.

To put it in less Marxist terms, fossil fuel-powered industrialization has entangled millions of workers into massively productive systems that drastically lower the amount of labor needed for basic food, housing, and other “necessities”. These systems of industrial production have led millions to leave land-based agricultural livelihoods for urban lives based on a reliance on commodities—lives that Klein rightly points out are deeply alienated from attachments with the ecological relations. For example, in the United States as recently as 1910 35% of the population worked directly in agriculture; now it is less than 2% (Huber 2013: 86). For all its climate horrors, fossil fuel-powered industry has also meant the drastic reduction in hard manual labor needed to reproduce social life. It might sound good to some of us bourgeois gardeners, but a return to a labor-intensive agricultural society is neither materially possible nor politically attractive given the legacy of pre-industrial slavery and other forms of direct exploitation of living muscle power in agrarian societies.

When Klein takes a step back to tackle “civilizational narratives” she basically rehearses nothing new in the canon of 20th century environmental thought. From Carl Sauer to Aldo

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Leopold, anti-modernist environmentalism requires a *reversal* toward pre-modern forms of life, to locally-based production systems, to attachments to the dynamics of place and ecology. The problem is, of course, no such reversal is possible (at least not without a large-scale collapse in the materiality of industrial social reproduction systems themselves). To put a twist on Bruno Latour's (1993) famous book, we can never *not* be modern. We must see modernity—a culture saturated in fossil fuels, machines and chemicals—as a *material basis* for revolution and liberation. As Marx suggests, this drastic reduction in the production time needed for “the realm of necessity” provides the basis for the “realm of freedom”, based on “the development of human powers as an end in itself” (1981: 959). This is not to say it is not important to integrate knowledge of local ecological dynamics into a post-capitalist way of producing (including methods of agroecology and clean energy technologies which Klein supports). The problem with capitalism is the value system does not “see” the vast ecological relationships that underlie wetlands, forests, and other diverse ecologies (Robertson 2012). Yet, we must also acknowledge that ecological knowledge itself (including the very climate science that “changes everything”) is a product of “modernism”—a science of understanding, and sometimes attempting to control, the complexities of ecological life. The science of ecology has even been able to develop with some marginal autonomy from the exigencies of accumulation in a capitalist society. Of course, the best aspects of ecological science's understanding of the webs of life is not news to indigenous and peasant-based societies still attached to the land as the basis for livelihood. But, we cannot imagine that those societies could be a basis for a future society beyond capital. Moreover, as important as they are, the struggles of these communities against the encroachment of industrial capitalism cannot be *by themselves* the basis for a struggle against capitalism, or the hope for solving the mammoth challenge of climate change. Yet, it is these struggles that give Klein the most hope.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

The Politics of Accumulation by Dispossession

The third part of the book examines the various forms of resistance to fossil fuel extraction and the wider climate movement. The majority of movements—the battle against pipelines, indigenous land rights struggles, local bans on fracking—are forms of place-based resistance to the expansion of fossil fuel-based infrastructure; what she calls “Blockadia”. Klein makes the case that this is a grassroots but *connected* movement under the banner of the climate movement. Yet, the politics of actual connection are left assumed and unexplained.

These types of struggles almost completely conform to what David Harvey (2003) described as struggles against “accumulation by dispossession” over a decade ago. These are struggles to defend places against their integration into the circuits of capital. What is often forgotten about Harvey’s twist on Marx’s concept of “primitive accumulation” is that he was actually offering a *critique* of the Left’s focus on only this kind of politics. For Harvey, the struggles against accumulation by dispossession run the risk of being too “diffuse...inchoate, fragmentary, and contingent...[focused on] destruction of habitat here, privatization of services there, expulsion from land somewhere else, biopiracy in yet another realm” (2003: 173-174). Harvey suggests that they need to be linked to struggles focused on what he calls “the expanded reproduction of capital” (2003: 170). For Harvey, this includes the labor movement, but also other struggles over state power (party politics), and a wider socialist politics to take collective control over economic systems of production: “the point of socialist politics was not to protect the ancient order but to attack directly the class relations and forms of state power that were attempting to transform it and arrive thereby at a totally different configuration of class and state powers” (2003: 165). More than fragmented resistance to the integration of places and resources into circuits of capital (accumulation by dispossession), these struggles can fight capital from the inside through strikes and demands over control of production itself. Harvey’s point was not to

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

ignore struggles against “accumulation by dispossession”, but rather to suggest that a “connectivity between struggles...must assiduously be cultivated” (2003: 179).

When Klein mentions socialism she does so in terms of its negative environmental record (p.178-179). When she mentions “revolution” she brings up celebrity Russell Brand (p.155). When she mentions the labor movement she lambasts unions for “trying to freeze in place the dirtiest jobs, instead of fighting for the good clean jobs their members deserve” (p.178). For Klein, “visionary” labor movements “fight for policies that do not force workers to make... choices” between dirty jobs or no jobs at all (p.400). Klein’s advocacy of public power and fossil fuel divestment might be the closest thing to a politics centered on the expanded reproduction of capital. Yet it is hard to argue for the transformative power of these struggles (for example, the fossil fuel divestment movement’s limitations have been laid out well by Christian Parenti [2012]).

Most of Klein’s hope for the future rests with “Blockadia”. Klein’s focus on the politics of accumulation by dispossession is rooted in a longstanding and important aspect of environmental politics—the attachment to place. Most evident in the Chapter 10, “Love will save this place”, Klein lauds movements that defend ecological knowledge of a local place against a globally rapacious capital: “When what is being fought for is an identity, a culture, a beloved place that people are determined to pass on to their grandchildren, and that their ancestors may have paid for with great sacrifice, there is nothing companies can offer as a bargaining chip” (p.342). Again, most of Klein’s narrative laments our lost connection with nature (and is often coated in the politics of indigeneity).

These are vital struggles against fracking’s despoliation of local water systems; against the evisceration of indigenous tribal land; against pipelines ripping through ancient forests. The courage and tenacity of those movements who resist such projects is inspiring and, of course, deserves praise and solidarity. Indeed any future ecologically-rational society must develop

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

precisely these types of local understanding, and attachments to and defenses of the ecological dynamics of place. But, here's the problem: they are not by themselves enough to move our society toward solutions to the climate crisis. For that, we also need a wider social transformation of the production systems underlying many of our industrial, urbanized lives. While the ecology of attachment to place is laudable, it is no answer for the millions of unemployed and workers who are placeless under capitalism. In other words, most people don't interact with places or landscapes for their livelihoods—they interact with commodities. Any political struggle must appeal to these people as well, and must be seen as *delivering* a different mode of life and living from the “abstract domination” of capitalism (Postone 1993).

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Marx understood that capitalism via industrialization, urbanization, and globalization made production increasingly *social*—that is, it tied places together in networks of abstract dependence. Under capitalism those networks are driven by value accumulation, but under socialism, Marx argued, the “associated producers” must “govern the human metabolism of nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power” (1981: 959). Klein of course sees these efforts of “control” as the fatal flaw of “extractivism”, but place attachment and local ecologies are no *political* answer for a highly urbanized and industrial society that must be transformed from the inside out if we are to halt the worst effects of climate change. For that, we need to collectively transform our transportation, electric, industrial, and urban systems to provide for both widespread social needs for food, shelter, care, leisure, and love, and the ecological “needs” of diverse life forms on earth. As Klein rightly suggests, this transformation requires relying upon clean energy and forms of extraction that harness rather than destroy the regenerative aspects of ecological systems. The question for us is

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

how to build a future society *out of industrial modernity*. This will require new mindsets for sure, but also new materialities and new social relations of collectivity as if life mattered.

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Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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