

connection between corruption and violent political and social change. In fact, even the Afghanistan example, which receives the most sustained attention in *Thieves of State*, largely relies on anecdotal evidence to substantiate this supposed causal connection. The frustrations of numerous ordinary Afghans are documented, and yet at no point is careful analysis offered to show how this discontent at the macro level of Afghan society as a whole translated into the Taliban insurgency.

More worryingly still, *Thieves of State's* persuasiveness is undermined by ambiguity surrounding its core thesis. At times, Chayes claims that corruption fuels violent religious extremism in particular, but when the evidence does not fit this strong conclusion, she settles for the more modest claim that corruption contributes to often violent political and social change more broadly. This core confusion again suggests that Chayes should have opted for a much less ambitious brief: Rather than attempting to determine the impact of corruption across the centuries and around the globe, she could have, for example, much more successfully restricted herself to an exploration of the connections between corruption and the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

Despite Chayes's argumentative overreach, *Thieves of State* is a useful corrective to the assumption that security crises can be solved through the exercise of military power alone. As Afghanistan's fragile security situation after nearly fifteen years and hundreds of billions dollars of assistance makes plain, underlying social and political tensions can leave peace and stability elusive, notwithstanding the best efforts of the intentional community. With Afghanistan's government still dysfunctional and many Afghans still supportive of the Taliban insurgency, peace and political stability are likely to remain, as Chayes would predict, largely aspirational.

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This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate

by Naomi Klein

Simon & Schuster, 2014

\$30.00, 566 pages

ISBN 9781451697384

Reviewed by Oliver Waters



Naomi Klein's influential new book argues that climate change will inevitably lead to disaster unless we radically change our economic systems away from capitalism. It thus lays out a stark challenge to defenders of classical liberal political and economic ideals: are capitalism and the environment mutually exclusive?

Klein is clearly a passionate and informed advocate of her cause, evidenced by the wealth of thought-provoking and important material in the book that contributes to the ongoing debate about climate change and its global implications. However, she appears to lack a thorough understanding of the philosophical and economic doctrines she seeks to depose. This leads her to set up a false choice between the flawed versions of capitalism existing in the world today and a radically non-capitalist alternative.

It's true that few would defend currently existing capitalism as an ideal economic system. But many thoughtful political philosophers and economists over the centuries have defended certain economic principles, collectively named "capitalism," as necessary for a just and flourishing society. By not engaging with much of this extensive literature, Klein presents her readers with a straw-man form of capitalism that is easy to sweep aside in pursuit of the greater good.

According to Klein, capitalism consists of two axiomatic principles that are irrevocably inconsistent with the flourishing of humanity. The first is the ideology that nature is merely a passive slave to humanity's whims, and the second is capitalism depends on the doctrine of "extractivism." Let's examine both of these claims in turn.

Klein traces the human desire to "bend nature to our will" to Francis Bacon, the revered 17th century pioneer of the scientific method. His bold idea that the earth is completely "knowable and controllable"

was a key inspiration of the scientific revolution, as it represented a profound shift away from earlier pagan notions of nature as a kind of benevolent, all-powerful, maternal figure.

She argues that this was a key catalyst of the ideological shift bringing about an illusion of “total power and control” over nature, which propelled the widespread destruction of the natural environment as well as colonisation and slavery. The first thing to point out is that the kind of “control” Bacon had in mind was over the impersonal forces of nature, helping to inspire the natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry, geology, and biology. When it came to the “humane sciences,” however, he was explicitly anti-slavery and an advocate of women’s rights. So it is quite a stretch, to say the least, to draw a straight line from his philosophical contributions to the popularity of colonisation and slavery.

Now, one can definitely say that Bacon, and many who followed him, lacked an appreciation of the *complexity* of certain aspects of nature. Had he been able to take a course in modern chaos or complex systems theory, he would have appreciated that many natural processes, including the climate, cannot be deterministically modelled and thus fine-tuned via surgical interventions.

But Klein is not accusing Bacon and similar thinkers of this kind of “scientistic” hubris. Rather she is criticising his move away from “revering” nature: ceasing to treat it as a *morally* salient entity.

However, it is one thing to care about the well-being of conscious creatures, but Klein strays into the mystical territory of reifying “nature” into an intentional being. Indeed, she explicitly seeks a return to the pre-Enlightenment conception of nature, where we see ourselves as merely a “porous part of the world.” But this is simply to deny a fundamental fact about humanity: we are *not* merely part of the world. We are profoundly distinct from any other known natural entity, possessing as we do the capacity for *reason*.

In fact, far from being inherently destructive to nature, this unique capacity *is the only thing that can ultimately protect living systems*. This might sound silly, but consider that before humanity arrived on the evolutionary scene, more than 99 percent of all species that ever lived had

gone extinct. Nature, contrary to much wishful thinking, is not a beautiful harmony of living systems in the long run. Fresh disturbances, from volcanic eruptions, asteroid collisions, to mutated bacterial strains, will always upset its “balance,” and species are only safe to the degree that they can adapt quickly enough.

There is, right now, out in the universe, some chunk of rock on a trajectory towards Earth, which is big enough to destroy all forms of life. Who knows *when* it will strike, but it is a statistical certainty that it will. The only thing that could save the world from this fate is human knowledge—specifically the knowledge of how to divert or destroy such an asteroid.

Given this fact, why would anyone recoil against our responsibility to exert control over nature? One strong reason, which seems to motivate Klein especially, is the belief that such control inevitably manifests itself in the form of “extractivism.”

Throughout the book, Klein identifies “economic growth” with “extractivism.” Extractivism is the process of ceaselessly converting natural resources into waste to satisfy our own insatiable desires, conceiving of nature as, in Klein’s words, a “bottomless vending machine.”

But is economic growth, and the capitalism that drives it, inextricably tied to this doctrine? The core tenets of capitalism, as articulated by its most sophisticated advocates, are the private ownership of scarce resources and laws that permit the transfer of property only via voluntary trade.

Under this definition, nothing about capitalism implies extractivism. Extractivism is just a particularly unimaginative and short-sighted activity that capitalists might choose to engage in, but the vast majority of clever capitalists do not.

A good capitalist is driven by one key underlying force: the discovery of how to do more with less. Or, to put it another way, how to make labour more efficient. Thus the best measure of economic progress is not the quantity of raw materials we are digging up and consuming, but how much labour it takes to produce the same amount of valuable goods or services. If this is decreasing, then genuine economic growth is occurring.

The common confusion that “economic growth cannot continue indefinitely on a finite planet”

depends upon conceiving all economic progress as extractivist in nature. Of course, if all we ever did was simply destroy resources with the same kinds of technologies, we would eventually run out of them.

But what we actually do is develop technologies that *increase the productive uses of the same quantity of physical matter and energy*. Under this view, economic growth can indeed be infinite even on a planet of finite resources, because there is no upper limit to how advanced our technology can become. Once we are able to harness nuclear fusion, for example, suddenly four litres of sea-water (which contains the required deuterium fuel) would provide more energy than a thousand litres of gasoline. It is counter-intuitive but true nonetheless: real economic growth actually *increases* the energy and resources available to human beings.

Advocating for widespread social and economic change is appealing, especially to young, idealistic people. The injustices surrounding us seem so obvious. Why should we allow *private* interests and wealth to get in the way of immediate and pervasive action on climate change?

But appearances can be deceiving. To a child, the injustice of a painful vaccination is a matter of raw, infallible perception. It is so clearly *wrong*, and must be avoided at all costs.

Things are no different beyond the field of medicine. We cannot condemn economic policies and political ideals merely on the basis of *observed* hardships or inequalities. We must also include that which is unobserved. We must include the harm that does not occur, as well as that which does. We have to look at the incentives that an economic system creates and perpetuates,

not just the intentions of those who would bring these systems into being.

The advent of climate change does not force us to choose between really existing capitalism and socialism. We face the same choice as we always have: which political and economic *principles* are most ethical and true? Among these are certain ideas, often collectively referred to as “capitalism,” which reliably lead historically to prosperity and social harmony.

Ditching capitalism because of climate change would be like trying fix your dishwasher by burning down the kitchen. The point is to *improve* our conceptions of private property and the laws regulating it, and to do that we have no choice but to depend on our most compelling fundamental political and economic theories of how it actually works.

To the extent that Klein was seeking to persuade a majority of citizens to pay attention to the science of climate change, she has unfortunately made a serious strategic error. Her fundamental argument will not build broader coalitions, but rather alienate from the conversation many of those who are deeply concerned about climate change but who also see much to preserve in the ideas of political liberalism and free-market economics.

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