

Naomi Klein: 'Big green groups are more damaging than climate deniers'

Environment movement is in 'deep denial' over the right ways to tackle climate change, says Canadian author



Naomi Klein says green groups have been backing the wrong solutions to climate change, such as the UN Clean Development Mechanism. Photograph: Murdo Macleod

By Jason Mark

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Canadian author Naomi Klein is so well known for her blade-sharp commentary that it's easy to forget that she is, above all, a first-rate reporter. I got a glimpse into her priorities as I was working on this interview. Klein told me she was worried that some of the things she had said would make it hard for her to land an interview with a president of the one of the Big Green groups (read below and you'll see why). She was more interested in nabbing the story than being the story; her reporting trumped any opinion-making.

Such focus is a hallmark of Klein's career. She doesn't do much of the chattering class's news cycle blathering. She works steadily, carefully, quietly. It can be surprising to remember that Klein's immense global influence rests on a relatively small body of work; she has published three books, one of which is an anthology of magazine pieces.

Klein's first book, [No Logo](#), investigated how brand names manipulate public desires while exploiting the people who make their products. The book came out just weeks after the WTO protests in Seattle and became an international bestseller. Her next major book, [The Shock Doctrine](#), argued that free-marketeters often use crises – natural or manufactured – to ram through deregulatory policies. With her newest, yet-to-be named book, Klein turns her attention to climate change. Scheduled for release in 2014, the book will also be made into a film by her husband and creative partner, Avi Lewis.

Klein's books and articles have sought to articulate a counternarrative to the march of corporate globalization and government austerity. She believes climate change provides a new chance for creating such a counternarrative. "The book I am writing is arguing that our responses to climate change can rebuild the public sphere, can strengthen our communities, can have work with dignity."

First, though, she has to finish the reporting. As she told me, speaking about the grassroots response to climate chaos: "Right now it's under the radar, but I'm following it quite closely."

During your career you've written about the power of brand names, populist movements around the world, and free market fundamentalism. Why now a book and film on climate change?

You know, *The Shock Doctrine*, my last book, ends with climate change. It ends with a vision of a dystopic future where you have weak infrastructure colliding with heavy weather, as we saw with Hurricane Katrina. And rather than working to prevent future disasters by having lower emissions, you have all these attempts to take advantage of that crisis. At the time, it seemed to me that climate change was potentially going to be the biggest disaster-capitalism free-for-all that we've seen yet. So it was quite a logical progression for me to go from writing about disaster-capitalism in *The Shock Doctrine* to writing about climate change. As I was writing *The Shock Doctrine*, I was covering the Iraq War and profiteering from the war, and I started to see these patterns repeat in the aftermath of natural disasters, like the Asian tsunami and then Hurricane Katrina. There are chapters in that book on both of those events. Then I came to the idea that climate change could be a kind of a "people's shock," an answer to the shock doctrine – not just another opportunity by the disaster capitalists to feed off of misery, but an opportunity for progressive forces to deepen democracy and really improve livelihoods around the world. Then I came across the idea of "climate debt" when I was doing a piece on reparations for Harper's magazine. I had a meeting with Bolivia's climate

negotiator in Geneva – her name is Angélica Navarro – and she put the case to me that climate change could be an opportunity for a global Green Marshall Plan with the North paying climate debts in the form of huge green development project.

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy you wrote about the potential of a "people's shock." Do you see that it's happening, a global grassroots response to some of the extreme weather we're experiencing?

I see a people's shock happening broadly, where on lots of different fronts you have constituencies coming forward who have been fighting, for instance, for sustainable agriculture for many, many years, and now realize that it's also a climate solution. You have a lot of reframing of issues – and not in an opportunistic way, just another layer of understanding. Here in Canada, the people who oppose the tar sands most forcefully are Indigenous people living downstream from the tar sands. They are not opposing it because of climate change – they are opposing it because it poisons their bodies. But the fact that it's also ruining the planet adds another layer of urgency. And it's that layering of climate change on top of other issues that holds a huge amount of potential.

In terms of Hurricane Sandy, I really do see some hopeful, grassroots responses, particularly in the Rockaways, where people were very organized right from the beginning, where [Occupy Sandy](#) was very strong, where new networks emerged. The first phase is just recovery, and now as you have a corporate-driven reconstruction process descending, those organized communities are in a position to respond, to go to the meetings, to take on the real estate developers, to talk about another vision of public housing that is way better than what's there right now. So yeah, it's definitely happening. Right now it's under the radar, but I'm following it quite closely.

In a piece you wrote for The Nation in November 2011 you suggested that when it comes to climate change, there's a dual denialism at work – conservatives deny the science while some liberals deny the political implications of the science. Why do you think that some environmentalists are resistant to grappling with climate change's implications for the market and for economics?

Well, I think there is a very a deep denialism in the environmental movement among the Big Green groups. And to be very honest with you, I think it's been more damaging than the right-wing denialism in terms of how much ground we've lost. Because it has steered us in directions that have yielded very poor results. I think if we look at the track record of Kyoto, of the UN Clean

Development Mechanism, the European Union's emissions trading scheme – we now have close to a decade that we can measure these schemes against, and it's disastrous. Not only are emissions up, but you have no end of scams to point to, which gives fodder to the right. The right took on cap-and-trade by saying it's going to bankrupt us, it's handouts to corporations, and, by the way, it's not going to work. And they were right on all counts. Not in the bankrupting part, but they were right that this was a massive corporate giveaway, and they were right that it wasn't going to bring us anywhere near what scientists were saying we needed to do lower emissions. So I think it's a really important question why the green groups have been so unwilling to follow science to its logical conclusions. I think the scientists Kevin Anderson and his colleague Alice Bows at the [Tyndall Centre](#) have been the most courageous on this because they don't just take on the green groups, they take on their fellow scientists for the way in which neoliberal economic orthodoxy has infiltrated the scientific establishment. It's really scary reading. Because they have been saying, for at least for a decade, that getting to the emissions reduction levels that we need to get to in the developed world is not compatible with economic growth.

What we know is that the environmental movement had a series of dazzling victories in the late 60s and in the 70s where the whole legal framework for responding to pollution and to protecting wildlife came into law. It was just victory after victory after victory. And these were what came to be called "command-and-control" pieces of legislation. It was "don't do that." That substance is banned or tightly regulated. It was a top-down regulatory approach. And then it came to screeching halt when Regan was elected. And he essentially waged war on the environmental movement very openly. We started to see some of the language that is common among those deniers – to equate environmentalism with Communism and so on. As the Cold War dwindled, environmentalism became the next target, the next Communism. Now, the movement at that stage could have responded in one of the two ways. It could have fought back and defended the values it stood for at that point, and tried to resist the steamroller that was neoliberalism in its early days. Or it could have adapted itself to this new reality, and changed itself to fit the rise of corporatist government. And it did the latter. Very consciously if you read what [[Environmental Defense Fund](#) president] Fred Krupp was saying at the time.

It was go along or get along.

Exactly. We now understand it's about corporate partnerships. It's not, "sue the bastards;" it's, "work through corporate partnerships with the bastards." There is no enemy anymore.

More than that, it's casting corporations as the solution, as the willing participants and part of this solution. That's the model that has lasted to this day.

I go back to something even like the fight over NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement. The Big Green groups, with very few exceptions, lined up in favor of NAFTA, despite the fact that their memberships were revolting, and sold the deal very aggressively to the public. That's the model that has been globalized through the World Trade Organization, and that is responsible in many ways for the levels of soaring emissions. We've globalized an utterly untenable economic model of hyperconsumerism. It's now successfully spreading across the world, and it's killing us.

It's not that the green groups were spectators to this – they were partners in this. They were willing participants in this. It's not every green group. It's not [Greenpeace](#), it's not [Friends of the Earth](#), it's not, for the most part, the [Sierra Club](#). It's not [350.org](#), because it didn't even exist yet. But I think it goes back to the elite roots of the movement, and the fact that when a lot of these conservation groups began there was kind of a noblesse oblige approach to conservation. It was about elites getting together and hiking and deciding to save nature. And then the elites changed. So if the environmental movement was going to decide to fight, they would have had to give up their elite status. And weren't willing to give up their elite status. I think that's a huge part of the reason why emissions are where they are.

At least in American culture, there is always this desire for the win-win scenario. But if we really want to get to, say, an 80 percent reduction in CO2 emissions, some people are going to lose. And I guess what you are saying is that it's hard for the environmental leadership to look some of their partners in the eye and say, "You're going to lose."

Exactly. To pick on power. Their so-called win-win strategy has lost. That was the idea behind cap-and-trade. And it was a disastrously losing strategy. The green groups are not nearly as clever as they believe themselves to be. They got played on a spectacular scale. Many of their partners had one foot in US CAP [Climate Action Partnership] and the other in the US Chamber of

Commerce. They were hedging their bets. And when it looked like they could get away with no legislation, they dumped US CAP completely.

The phrase win-win is interesting, because there are a lot of losers in the win-win strategy. A lot of people are sacrificed in the name of win-win. And in the US, we just keep it to the cap-and-trade fight and I know everyone is tired of fighting that fight. I do think there is a lot of evidence that we have not learned the key lessons of that failure.

And what do you think the key lessons are?

Well one of them is willingness to sacrifice – in the name of getting a win-win with big polluters who are part of that coalition – the communities that were living on the fence line. Communities, in Richmond, California for instance, who would have been like, "We fight climate change and our kids won't get as much asthma." That win-win was broken because you get a deal that says, "OK you guys can keep polluting but you're going to have to buy some offsets on the other side of the planet." And the local win is gone, is sacrificed.

I'm in favor of win-win, you know. The book I am writing is arguing that our responses to climate change can rebuild the public sphere, can strengthen our communities, can have work with dignity. We can address the financial crisis and the ecological crisis at the same. I believe that. But I think it's by building coalitions with people, not with corporations, that you are going to get those wins. And what I see is really a willingness to sacrifice the basic principles of solidarity, whether it is to that fence line community in Richmond, California or whether it's with that Indigenous community in Brazil that, you know, is forced off their territory because their forest has just become a carbon sink or an offset and they no longer have access to the forest that allowed them to live sustainably because it's policed. Because a conservation group has decided to trade it. So these sacrifices are made – there are a lot of losers in this model and there aren't any wins I can see.

You were talking about the Clean Development Mechanism as a sort of disaster capitalism. Isn't geoengineering the ultimate disaster capitalism?

I certainly think it's the ultimate expression of a desire to avoid doing the hard work of reducing emissions, and I think that's the appeal of it. I think we will see this trajectory the more and more climate change becomes impossible to deny. A lot of people will skip right to geoengineering. The appeal of geoengineering is that it doesn't threaten our worldview. It leaves us in a

dominant position. It says that there is an escape hatch. So all the stories that got us to this point, that flatter ourselves for our power, will just be scaled up.

[There is a] willingness to sacrifice large numbers of people in the way we respond to climate change – we are already showing a brutality in the face of climate change that I find really chilling. I don't think we have the language to even describe [geoengineering], because we are with full knowledge deciding to allow cultures to die, to allow peoples to disappear. We have the ability to stop and we're choosing not to. So I think the profound immorality and violence of that decision is not reflected in the language that we have. You see that we have these climate conventions where the African delegates are using words like "genocide," and the European and North American delegates get very upset and defensive about this. The truth is that the UN definition of genocide is that it is the deliberate act to disappear and displace people. What the delegates representing the North are saying is that we are not doing this because we want you to disappear; we are doing this because we don't care essentially. We don't care if you disappear if we continue business-as-usual. That's a side effect of collateral damage. Well, to the people that are actually facing the disappearance it doesn't make a difference whether there is malice to it because it still could be prevented. And we're choosing not to prevent it. I feel one of the crises that we're facing is a crisis of language. We are not speaking about this with the language of urgency or mortality that the issue deserves.

You've said that progressives' narratives are insufficient. What would be an alternative narrative to turn this situation around?

Well, I think the narrative that got us into this – that's part of the reason why you have climate change denialism being such a powerful force in North America and in Australia – is really tied to the frontier mentality. It's really tied to the idea of there always being more. We live on lands that were supposedly innocent, "discovered" lands where nature was so abundant. You could not imagine depletion ever. These are foundational myths.

And so I've taken a huge amount of hope from the emergence of the [Idle No More](#) movement, because of what I see as a tremendous generosity of spirit from Indigenous leadership right now to educate us in another narrative. I just did a panel with Idle No More and I was the only non-Native speaker at this event, and the other Native speakers were all saying we want to play this leadership role. It's actually taken a long time to get to that point. There's been so much abuse heaped upon these communities, and so much rightful anger at

the people who stole their lands. This is the first time that I've seen this openness, open willingness that we have something to bring, we want to lead, we want to model another way which relates to the land. So that's where I am getting a lot of hope right now.

The impacts of Idle No More are really not understood. My husband is making a documentary that goes with this book, and he's directing it right now in Montana, and we've been doing a lot of filming on the northern Cheyenne reservation because there's a huge, huge coal deposit that they've been debating for a lot of years – whether or not to dig out this coal. And it was really looking like they were going to dig it up. It goes against their prophecies, and it's just very painful. Now there's just this new generation of young people on that reserve who are determined to leave that coal in the ground, and are training themselves to do solar and wind, and they all talk about Idle No More. I think there's something very powerful going on. In Canada it's a very big deal. It's very big deal in all of North America, because of the huge amount of untapped energy, fossil fuel energy, that is on Indigenous land. That goes for Arctic oil. It certainly goes for the tar sands. It goes for where they want to lay those pipelines. It goes for where the natural gas is. It goes for where the major coal deposits are in the US. I think in Canada we take Indigenous rights more seriously than in the US. I hope that will change.

It's interesting because even as some of the Big Green groups have gotten enamored of the ideas of ecosystem services and natural capital, there's this counter-narrative coming from the Global South and Indigenous communities. It's almost like a dialectic.

That's the counternarrative, and those are the alternative worldviews that are emerging at this moment. The other thing that is happening ... I don't know what to call it. It's maybe a reformation movement, a grassroots rebellion. There's something going on in the [environmental] movement in the US and Canada, and I think certainly in the UK. What I call the "astronaut's eye worldview" – which has governed the Big Green environmental movement for so long – and by that I mean just looking down at Earth from above. I think it's sort of time to let go of the icon of the globe, because it places us above it and I think it has allowed us to see nature in this really abstracted way and sort of move pieces, like pieces on a chessboard, and really loose touch with the Earth. You know, it's like the planet instead of the Earth.

And I think where that really came to a head was over fracking. The head offices of the Sierra Club and the NRDC and the EDF all decided this was a "bridge fuel." We've done the math and we're going to come out in favor of this

thing. And then they faced big pushbacks from their membership, most of all at the Sierra Club. And they all had to modify their position somewhat. It was the grassroots going, "Wait a minute, what kind of environmentalism is it that isn't concerned about water, that isn't concerned about industrialization of rural landscapes – what has environmentalism become?" And so we see this grassroots, place-based resistance in the movements against the Keystone XL pipeline and the Northern Gateway pipeline, the huge anti-fracking movement. And they are the ones winning victories, right?

I think the Big Green groups are becoming deeply irrelevant. Some get a lot of money from corporations and rich donors and foundations, but their whole model is in crisis.

I hate to end a downer like that.

I'm not sure that is a downer.

It might not be.

I should say I'm representing my own views. I see some big changes as well. I think the Sierra Club has gone through its own reformation. They are on the frontline of these struggles now. I think a lot of these groups are having to listen to their members. And some of them will just refuse to change because they're just too entrenched in the partnership model, they've got too many conflicts of interest at this stage. Those are the groups that are really going to suffer. And I think it's OK. I think at this point, there's a big push in Europe where 100 civil society groups are calling on the EU not to try to fix their failed carbon-trading system, but to actually drop it and start really talking about cutting emissions at home instead of doing this shell game. I think that's the moment we're in right now. We don't have any more time to waste with these very clever, not working shell games.

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