News
EarthBeat



Environmental activist protests against fossil fuel outside the COP24 U.N. Climate Change Conference in Katowice, Poland, Dec. 10, 2018. (CNS/Agencja Gazeta, Grzegorz Celejewski via Reuters)

by Natalie Hanman

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Editor's note: *This interview with Naomi Klein about her new book,* On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*, originally appeared in The Guardian. It is republished here as part of NCR's partnership with Covering Climate Now, a global collaboration of more than 250 news outlets to strengthen coverage of the climate story.*

Why are you publishing this book now?

I still feel that the way that we talk about climate change is too compartmentalized, too siloed from the other crises we face. A really strong theme running through the book is the links between it and the crisis of rising white supremacy, the various forms of nationalism and the fact that so many people are being forced from their homelands, and the war that is waged on our attention spans. These are intersecting and interconnecting crises and so the solutions have to be as well.

The book collects essays from the last decade, have you changed your mind about anything?

When I look back, I don't think I placed enough emphasis on the challenge climate change poses to the left. It's more obvious the way the climate crisis challenges a rightwing dominant worldview, and the cult of serious centrism that never wants to do anything big, that's always looking to split the difference. But this is also a challenge to a left worldview that is essentially only interested in redistributing the spoils of extractivism [the process of extracting natural resources from the earth] and not reckoning with the limits of endless consumption.



Read an extract from Naomi Klein's new book, [On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal]

What's stopping the left doing this?

In a North American context, it's the greatest taboo of all to actually admit that there are going to be limits. You see that in the way Fox News has gone after the Green New Deal – they are coming after your hamburgers! It cuts to the heart of the American dream – every generation gets more than the last, there is always a new frontier to expand to, the whole idea of settler colonial nations like ours. When somebody comes along and says, actually, there are limits, we've got some tough decisions, we need to figure out how to manage what's left, we've got to share equitably – it is a psychic attack. And so the response [on the left] has been to avoid, and say no, no, we're not coming to take away your stuff, there are going to be all kinds of benefits. And there *are* going to be benefits: we'll have more livable cities, we'll have less polluted air, we'll spend less time stuck in traffic, we can design happier, richer lives in so many ways. But we are going to have to contract on the endless, disposable consumption side.

Do you feel encouraged by talk of the Green New Deal?

I feel a tremendous excitement and a sense of relief, that we are finally talking about solutions on the scale of the crisis we face. That we're not talking about a little carbon tax or a cap and trade scheme as a silver bullet. We're talking about transforming our economy. This system is failing the majority of people anyway, which is why we're in this period of such profound political destabilization – that is giving us the Trumps and the Brexits, and all of these strongman leaders – so why don't we figure out how to change everything from bottom to top, and do it in a way that addresses all of these other crises at the same time? There is every chance we will miss the mark, but every fraction of a degree warming that we are able to hold off is a victory and every policy that we are able to win that makes our societies more humane, the more we will weather the inevitable shocks and storms to come without slipping into barbarism. Because what really terrifies me is what we are seeing at our borders in Europe and North America and Australia – I don't think it's coincidental that the settler colonial states and the countries that are the engines of that colonialism are at the forefront of this. We are seeing the beginnings of the era of climate barbarism. We saw it in Christchurch, we saw it in El Paso, where you have this marrying of white supremacist violence with vicious anti-immigrant racism.

That is one of the most chilling sections of your book: I think that's a link a lot of people haven't made.

This pattern has been clear for a while. White supremacy emerged not just because people felt like thinking up ideas that were going to get a lot of people killed but because it was useful to protect barbaric but highly profitable actions. The age of scientific racism begins alongside the transatlantic slave trade, it is a rationale for that brutality. If we are going to respond to climate change by fortressing our borders, then of course the theories that would justify that, that create these hierarchies of humanity, will come surging back. There have been signs of that for years, but it is getting harder to deny because you have killers who are screaming it from the rooftops.

One criticism you hear about the environment movement is that it is dominated by white people. How do you address that?

When you have a movement that is overwhelmingly representative of the most privileged sector of society then the approach is going to be much more fearful of change, because people who have a lot to lose tend to be more fearful of change, whereas people who have a lot to gain will tend to fight harder for it. That's the big benefit of having an approach to climate change that links it to those so called bread and butter issues: how are we going to get better paid jobs, affordable housing, a way for people to take care of their families? I have had many conversations with environmentalists over the years where they seem really to believe that by linking fighting climate change with fighting poverty, or fighting for racial justice, it's going to make the fight harder. We have to get out of this "my crisis is bigger than your crisis: first we save the planet and then we fight poverty and racism, and violence against women". That doesn't work. That alienates the people who would fight hardest for change. This debate has shifted a huge amount in the US because of the leadership of the climate justice movement and because it is congresswomen of color who are championing the Green New Deal. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaibcome from communities that have gotten such a raw deal under the years of neoliberalism and longer, and are determined to represent, truly represent, the interests of those communities. They're not afraid of deep change because their communities desperately need it.

In the book, you write: "The hard truth is that the answer to the question 'What can I, as an individual, do to stop climate change?' is: nothing." Do you still believe that?

In terms of the carbon, the individual decisions that we make are not going to add up to anything like the kind of scale of change that we need. And I do believe that the fact that for so many people it's so much more comfortable to talk about our own personal consumption, than to talk about systemic change, is a product of neoliberalism, that we have been trained to see ourselves as consumers first. To me that's the benefit of bringing up these historical analogies, like the New Deal or the Marshall Plan – it brings our minds back to a time when we were able to think of change on that scale. Because we've been trained to think very small. It is incredibly significant that Greta Thunberg has turned her life into a living emergency.

Yes, she set sail for the UN climate summit in New York on a zero carbon yacht ...

Exactly. But this isn't about what Greta is doing as an individual. It's about what Greta is broadcasting in the choices that she makes as an activist, and I absolutely respect that. I think it's magnificent. She is using the power that she has to broadcast that this is an emergency, and trying to inspire politicians to treat it as an emergency. I don't think anybody is exempt from scrutinizing their own decisions and behaviors but I think it is possible to overemphasise the individual choices. I have made a choice – and this has been true since I wrote *No Logo*, and I started getting these "what should I buy, where should I shop, what are the ethical clothes?" questions. My answer continues to be that I am not a lifestyle adviser, I am not anyone's shopping guru, and I make these decisions in my own life but I'm under no illusion that these decisions are going to make the difference.

Some people are choosing to go on birth strikes. What do you think about that?

I'm happy these discussions are coming into the public domain as opposed to being furtive issues we're afraid to talk about. It's been very isolating for people. It certainly was for me. One of the reasons I waited as long as I did to try and get pregnant, and I would say this to my partner all the time – what, you want to have a Mad Max water warrior fighting with their friends for food and water? It wasn't until I was part of the climate justice movement and I could see a path forward that I could even imagine having a kid. But I would never tell anybody how to answer this most intimate of questions. As a feminist who knows the brutal history of forced sterilization and the ways in which women's bodies become battle zones when policymakers decide that they are going to try and control population, I think that the idea that there are regulatory solutions when it comes to whether or not to have

kids is catastrophically ahistorical. We need to be struggling with our climate grief together and our climate fears together, through whatever decision we decide to make, but the discussion we need to have is how do we build a world so that those kids can have thriving, zero-carbon lives?

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Over the summer, you encouraged people to read Richard Powers's novel, *The Overstory*. Why?

It's been incredibly important to me and I'm happy that so many people have written to me since. What Powers is writing about trees: that trees live in communities and are in communication, and plan and react together, and we've been completely wrong in the way we conceptualize them. It's the same conversation we're having about whether we are going to solve this as individuals or whether we are going to save the collective organism. It's also rare, in good fiction, to valorize activism, to treat it with real respect, failures and all, to acknowledge the heroism of the people who put their bodies on the line. I thought Powers did that in a really extraordinary way.

What are you views on what Extinction Rebellion has achieved?

One thing they have done so well is break us out of this classic campaign model we have been in for a long time, where you tell someone something scary, you ask them to click on something to do something about it, you skip out the whole phase where we need to grieve together and feel together and process what it is that we just saw. Because what I hear a lot from people is, ok, maybe those people back in the 1930s or 40s could organize neighborhood by neighborhood or workplace by workplace but we can't. We believe we've been so downgraded as a species that we are incapable of that. The only thing that is going to change that belief is getting face to face, in community, having experiences, off our screens, with one another on the streets and in nature, and winning some things and feeling that power.

You talk about stamina in the book. How do you keep going? Do you feel hopeful?

I have complicated feelings about the hope question. Not a day goes by that I don't have a moment of sheer panic, raw terror, complete conviction that we are doomed,

and then I do pull myself out of it. I'm renewed by this new generation that is so determined, so forceful. I'm inspired by the willingness to engage in electoral politics, because my generation, when we were in our 20s and 30s, there was so much suspicion around getting our hands dirty with electoral politics that we lost a lot of opportunities. What gives me the most hope right now is that we've finally got the vision for what we want instead, or at least the first rough draft of it. This is the first time this has happened in my lifetime. And also, I did decide to have kids. I have a seven year old who is so completely obsessed and in love with the natural world. When I think about him, after we've spent an entire summer talking about the role of salmon in feeding the forests where he was born in British Columbia, and how they are linked to the health of the trees and the soil and the bears and the orcas and this entire magnificent ecosystem, and I think about what it would be like to have to tell him that there are no more salmon, it kills me. So that motivates me. And slays me.

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