

Naomi Klein

On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal

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On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal presents speeches, essays and reportage from the 2010s, composed and edited by the Canadian author and activist, Naomi Klein. With dispatches from the infamous Macondo Blowout, post-hurricane Puerto Rico, Canada's record-setting 2017 wildfires, and the United States, where white supremacy is influencing debates over climate refugees and fortified borders, *On Fire* conveys the foreboding truth that ours is a planet in ecological crisis, hurtling toward climate catastrophe. In this sense, Félix Guattari seems right to state, 'There will be no more human history unless humanity undertakes a radical reconsideration of itself' (Guattari 2000: 68).

Since the early 2000s, 'Green New Deal' proposals – legislation aimed at fighting climate change and economic injustice – have arisen internationally. Klein's Green New Deal has influenced, and takes influence from, the United States, where Democratic Senator Edward Markey and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have recently released a Green New Deal resolution. The resolution asks Congress to follow a ten-year programme of national mobilisation committed to 100 percent zero emissions energy sources, upgrading all new and existing buildings to reach maximal energy efficiency, guaranteeing a job with a family-sustaining wage, and providing quality healthcare. Easy, right? No, Klein admits honestly. Yet, such reform is not without historical precedent. Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, the Green New Deal's practical forerunner, shows 'how radically both a society's infrastructure and its governing values can be altered in the span of one decade' (p. 34).

On Fire highlights Klein's keen awareness of the alienation felt from campaign models that ask suffering people to shelve their concerns about poverty, war, systematic racism and gender inequality and to first save the world. Klein seeks to demonstrate how all of these crises interconnect with climate crisis and how the solutions might too. As such, the Green New Deal is not about sacrificing employees of car plants and coalmines, where job prospects are uncertain and poverty looms, on the altar of ameliorating emissions. Rather, it is about creating profitable and secure eco-sector jobs that 'simultaneously lower emissions and lower the economic strain on working people' (p. 288). The Green New Deal is not about prioritising environmentalism over racism. It is about realising that the othering of Arab and Muslim people has always been 'the silent partner of [Western] oil dependence' – and, inseparable, therefore, 'from the blowback from fossil fuels that is climate change' (p. 160). The Green New Deal does not promote climate marches instead of women's

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marches. Rather, it asks activists to unite in their mutual pursuit of a society free from the dictates of a both exploitative and patriarchal economic system.

For Klein, the Green New Deal will only succeed if it accompanies a managed transition to an economic paradigm free from late capitalist modes of production. Though she stresses the huge potential for job creation in clean tech and renewables, Klein objects to the idea that renewable energy and greater efficiencies will allow us to sever economic growth from its environmental impact. Klein argues that greater efficiency will be unable to keep up with the pace of growth; as greater efficiency nearly always accompanies greater consumption, the gains are reduced or even cancelled out.

Put simply, ‘climate change is not a problem that can be solved simply by changing what we buy – a hybrid instead of an SUV’ (p. 122). Klein states that climate change demands that comparatively wealthy countries, namely the Anglosphere (the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom), reduce their levels of consumption in order that others can have enough to live. For Klein, this means not just a different set of policy proposals but also a different worldview organised toward upending modern capitalism, the ‘system of limitless consumption and ecological depletion at the heart of the climate crisis’ (p. 19). Klein admits that shifting cultural values is ‘a tall order’ (p. 98): ‘the kind of transformation that is now required will happen only if it is treated as a civilization *mission* ... in every major economy on earth’ (p. 178). A ‘popular countervailing movement’ embedded in ‘interdependence rather than hyperindividualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy’ must oversee this mission (p. 98). Politicians sympathetic to these ideals will be useful. However, Klein believes the crucial questions are not going to be settled solely through elections. ‘At their core, they are about building political power – enough to change the calculus of what is possible’ (p. 262).

Klein is undoubtedly an accomplished writer. The case she makes for the Green New Deal communicates palpable urgency. Yet, the structure of *On Fire* is repetitive and mishmash. This is not helped by a generalised description of how the Green New Deal should be implemented and function. Calls to tax the rich and filthy, reign in corporations and redistribute wealth are repeated incessantly, yet little serious thought is spared for how this might occur.

On Fire laments that the work of non-white, non-Western people to tackle climate crisis goes underreported in the Anglosphere. Klein does attempt to address this; she mentions indigenous land defenders in Brazil who are fighting extractive industries. Yet, a dogmatic focus on dismantling Western capitalism leads Klein to disengage, almost entirely, from large-scale climate action taking place in developing countries. *Buen vivir*, a directive for ecologically-balanced, community-centric living, rooted in the worldview of the Quechua people of the Andes, was incorporated into the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, making Ecuador the first country in the world to codify legally enforceable

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Rights of Nature. Though this demonstrates that ideals relevant to the Green New Deal are, indeed, implementable on a large scale, Klein acknowledges Ecuador's Rights of Nature cursorily in a single sentence. By contrast, the work of the white Westerner, Greta Thunberg, is adulated extensively over several pages. Klein's praise of Thunberg, in the context of a seemingly unreceptive attitude toward national climate action by developing countries, risks advancing a white saviour narrative. As the Nigerian-born Igbo author, Chika Unigwe, writes, 'This tendency ... to present Thunberg as the one who calls, and the others existing only to heed her call, is problematic, especially for those black and brown activists whose media invisibility leads to invisibility to organisations whose help they could greatly benefit from' (Unigwe 2019). Klein would do well to take note.

On Fire should appeal to a wide audience; Klein offers accessible prose, even if the book is unnecessarily long. As an engaging chronology-cum-critique of attitudes toward climate change during the 2010s, the book succeeds. As a practical guide as to how the Green New Deal should be implemented to save the planet, it is far less to be praised. Nonetheless, *On Fire* represents a much needed, albeit overreaching, response to climate crisis.

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References

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