

A societal sea change

Nico Stehr ponders Naomi Klein's call for strategic mass action on climate change.

This year, New Zealand became the first country to acknowledge climate change when granting residence on humanitarian grounds — in this case, to a family from the low-lying Pacific island nation of Tuvalu. That the environmental and human realities of climate change are tangled up in such legal, economic and political complexities is the focus of social activist Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything*.

Klein's journey to this realization began in 2009 when, in the middle of the international economic meltdown, she first recognized the magnitude of climate change. As she states: "I denied climate change for longer than I care to admit." Five years on, she has synthesized her thinking about the dual financial and environmental disasters, arguing that the "market fundamentalism" favoured by the United States and the United Kingdom — involving privatization of public services, deregulation of corporate activities and reduced public spending — has "systematically sabotaged our collective response to climate change". Klein now advocates a mediating social force between climate science, politics and individual responsiveness and responsibility — in essence, "mass social movements" aiming to reduce fossil-fuel use and push for adaptation measures and behavioural change.

Klein's book — a combination of polemic, manifesto and analysis — covers much familiar territory. We get the history of global-warming discussions, the phenomenon of climate denialism and today's economic order, including the clash of interests between trade regimes and climate policy. As Klein notes, the "liberation of world markets, a process powered by the liberation of unprecedented amounts of fossil fuels", is now helping to accelerate the melting of Arctic ice. She also discusses responses to the climate emergency, including geoengineering schemes, as well as resistance to large-scale



This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate
NAOMI KLEIN
Simon and Schuster/
Allen Lane: 2014.

mining projects in various parts of the world. She includes her own eye-witness reportage from the front line, such as Canada's oil sands and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Klein acknowledges that extraction and use of fossil fuels is hardly analogous to social or political oppression such as slave ownership or gender discrimination, but argues that historical movements against such practices show how societal pressure can build, pushing governments to act. Mass action focused on climate change could have a transformative effect on societies, she posits, empowering the poor to demand rights and services.

In arguing that the "fundamentalist" changes to the structure of capitalism have stymied such a transformation, Klein overstates the case, however. Although privatization and deregulation triumphed in the 1980s in the United States and the United Kingdom, they did not in significant parts of the rest of the world, as she claims. And whether the US economic order exemplifies a secular trend towards global dominance remains an open issue. The conditions for change could be more favourable than Klein thinks, especially when it comes to the removal of ideological roadblocks to improving the ethics of markets on the basis of moral rather than mere monetary motives of production and consumption.

Of course, many other impediments to governing climate change remain. Klein is too optimistic in claiming that the immediately relevant solutions, such as adaptation or

reducing fossil-fuel use, have broadly been long understood. The governance of climate change, not merely mitigation and adaptation, is a tortuous problem and is hardly well developed theoretically, but it remains a key area of interdisciplinary research and real-world policy. We are just at the beginning of this difficult intellectual and practical journey. Klein recognizes the Sisyphean tasks ahead and proposes economic, legal and social measures that would enable better governance, such as the reform of trade law and the prevention of fossil-fuel extraction through the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights to oil- and coal-rich land.

The special appeal of Klein's position is her insight that any successful effort to curb emissions or adapt to climate change demands popular, pragmatic and sensible transformative goals that go well beyond mere fencing in. In contrast to climate scientists and observers such as James Hansen and James Lovelock, she is not an advocate of "inconvenient democracy" — that is, the claim that certain forms of democratic governance need to be overcome before climate change can be tackled effectively.

Whether *This Changes Everything* has identified the potential catalyst that will bring about an alternative future remains uncertain. Still-to-be-born large social movements around the world could act as a countervailing force to 'business as usual' and, as Klein puts it, "simultaneously clear some alternative pathways" to safer futures for humankind. Klein has explored early manifestations of such resistance among smaller, often ad hoc local social groups around the world. But her message is still delivered with a strong North American accent. ■

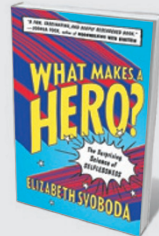
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The Dynamics of Disaster

Susan W. Kieffer (W. W. Norton, 2014)

Geologist Susan Kieffer showcases Earth's most destructive processes, highlighting geographical discrepancies in disaster preparedness. In 2010, for example, similar-energy earthquakes caused over 50,000 deaths in Haiti, yet none in New Zealand. (See Roger Bilham's review: *Nature* **502**, 438–439; 2013.)



What Makes a Hero?: The Surprising Science of Selflessness

Elizabeth Svoboda (Current, 2014)

Would you risk your life for a stranger's? Survival instinct would suggest not, but science writer Elizabeth Svoboda finds that heroism comes naturally to some, and others can learn altruism using methods such as compassion meditation.