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In ‘On Fire,’ Naomi Klein presents the ‘burning’ case for climate reform

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Book review

Reading Naomi Klein’s book, “**On Fire: The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal**,” is similar to watching a mega-disaster movie in a theater. But you can leave your fears behind when credits roll and you exit the theater. Klein’s message is much more dire: our human-induced climate change is devastating our livable earth, we are stuck here, it is not safe, the house is on fire.

Klein, an award-winning activist, writer and filmmaker and the the Gloria Steinem Chair in Media, Culture, and Feminist Studies at Rutgers University, does not just harvest new horrors; plenty of them are presented as chronic problems in “On Fire,” a collection of writings and speeches spanning a decade, with the most recent entry being from April of this year. The introduction and epilogue carry forth the book’s urgent advocacy to act now, in order to avoid eminent extinction.

To shake us out of our slumber, Klein presents heroes who are sounding the alarm. A prime example is Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old girl from Stockholm who in just eight months sparked the youth climate movement that culminated in March 2019, when nearly 2,100 climate strikes came to in 125 countries, with about 1.6 million young people participating. Thunberg said, “We cannot solve an emergency without treating it like an emergency.”

Along that line of reasoning, Klein argues climate-change-reversal efforts do not need to figure out every detail of the proposed solutions in advance, noting instead, “what matters is that we begin the process right away.” The emphasis on action, not planning, might be why Klein recognizes that deniers have gained traction by arguing efforts to halt climate change “will destroy capitalism ... killing jobs and sending prices soaring.”

Klein is sure to show the opposition facing the Green New Deal and other sweeping climate initiatives.

One moderator at the 2018 International Conference on Climate Change, hosted by conservative think tank the Heartland Institute, put it bluntly, saying such legislation could be “a green Trojan horse” filled with “Marxist socioeconomic doctrine.” A senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute noted a push to remove freedoms preventing the government from imposing

measures to fight climate change. One of the conference's keynote speakers, Patrick Michaels, a senior fellow in environmental studies at the Cato Institute, claimed the effort to support locally owned biofuel refineries was akin to a "Maoist" scheme.

Although these statements are from a handful of right-wing institutions, Klein includes the comments to show how public opinion has dramatically shifted. Based on polls taken in 2007 and 2011, the percentage of respondents who believe "the continued burning of fossil fuels would cause the climate to change" dropped from 71% to 44%.

Klein admits the deniers realize something many left-leaning politicians ignore: To stop the Earth from becoming an uninhabitable place, there must be a radical reordering of our economic and political systems that are antithetical to the "free market" belief system. In particular, she calls for a new civilization paradigm, one that does not dominate nature but respects it by rejecting the "growth imperative" tenet of capitalism. Her solution is to reduce the amount of material things that the wealthiest 20% of people on the planet consume.

To accomplish such sweeping change, she supports publicly funded elections and stripping corporations of their status as "people" in this country. For all countries, she suggests cutting military budgets by 25% and imposing a transaction tax on the financial sector. However, as she recognizes, just embracing aspects of a non-capitalist country has not necessarily proven to be the solution: The Soviet Union had even higher carbon footprints per capita than Britain, Canada and Australia. And recent report says China is constructing more than 100 coal-fired power plants in poorer nations as a way of outsourcing a portion of its carbon emissions.

Regardless of a government's ideology, Klein argues "we will not get the job done unless we are willing to embrace systemic economic and social change." The core of that change is adopting the head-spinning notion that economic growth is the villain here, not the savior of mankind. Unfortunately, she does not provide any country that rejects economic growth as a working model.

She concludes that incremental changes have not worked because the battle over climate change links all social-justice struggles. Working separately on each issue creates artificial boundaries between them. Consequently, the single largest determining factor "to pull us back from the climate cliff" will have to come from "actions taken by social movements in the coming years."

Klein provides the data and the vision. Her hope is to see a coordinated global movement to successfully reverse carbon consumption within each country — a challenge that will require something more than a book.

"On Fire: The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal" by Naomi Klein, Simon & Schuster, 320 pp., \$27

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