

Is capitalism killing us?

Written by The Conversation

Modern life is full of ironies, paradoxes and what Marxists used to call “contradictions”. Perhaps the greatest contradiction of all time is the possibility that the capitalist system is not only incompatible with a sustainable natural environment, but that it is also placing a rather large question mark over our collective future on the planet.

While this may come not come as a revelation to the surprisingly large number of Marxist scholars working on environmental issues, it ought to be the proverbial wake-up call for the rest of us. Until recently, however, it looked like a message that few would actually hear, much less heed. Marxists haven’t really had a bestseller since the Communist Manifesto, and Karl himself isn’t too popular with the younger set – his trend-setting facial hair notwithstanding.

Naomi Klein, by contrast, is someone who does have recognition and credibility in the eyes of a youthful audience. Her latest book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*, is consequently likely to be far more widely read than anything produced by the Marxists who have been making similar arguments for years. Whether she will have any more luck in convincing people of the idea that “our economic system and our planetary system are now at war” is debatable.

Having read some of the leading Marxist writers on this topic I was not as astounded by some of Klein’s claims as the luminaries who provided endorsements for her book apparently were. I was, however, more acutely conscious of my own contradictory and unsustainable position than usual: I read the book on a return flight to Brisbane.

Clearly, if we have to rely on the likes of me to save the planet, we’re in trouble. I do more than my fair share of gadding about and I’m unlikely to stop as I make the entirely rational calculation that there’s no point in my doing otherwise and radically changing my behaviour unless everyone else does. And you’re not going to either, are you?

This is the essence of the problem we all face, of course, and the justification for the do-nothing approach of many governments around the world. While our own choices make eminent sense to us as individuals, they are a disaster when added together.

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I'm a great admirer of Klein's willingness to address the most important and difficult of questions, but her answers are disappointingly unconvincing. What we need, she argues, is:

... an entirely new economic model and a new way of sharing this planet.

She may well be right; in fact, I'm sure she is. But the question, as ever, is how do we get from where we are now to where we want to be? This assumes that we know who "we" are, and "they" don't try to stop us, of course. Klein's answer to this conundrum is that "any credible source of hope will have to come from below".

Like so many others, she has essentially given up on the political and especially the economic elites who refuse to take our seemingly inescapable fate seriously. She argues that:

The failure of our political leaders to even attempt to ensure a safe future for us represents a crisis of legitimacy of almost unfathomable proportions.

She may well be right about that, too, but it's not obvious what a different political system looks like.

Likewise it's not clear what the alternative to capitalism is, or even whether that capitalism is unambiguously the principal cause of our environmental woes. As Klein acknowledges – but doesn't really explore in any detail – "socialism" as practised by China and the Soviet Union, at least, was synonymous with the ravaging of nature and environmental degradation on an epic scale.

The most fundamental and unaddressed question in this book and wider environmental debates more generally is about the carrying capacity of the planet – especially when populated by people [like me](#) .

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In my defence, I haven't added to the planet's burdens by actually reproducing myself. Klein has, and I wonder how much of a difference this has made to her worldview. I'm guessing that if you've got kids you might feel an obligation to be positive and optimistic about the future no matter how compelling the evidence to the contrary may be.

For what it's worth my dispiriting guess is that the incentive structures associated with capitalism and the fact that its principal beneficiaries are generally also the most politically powerful people on the planet means that sustained efforts at climate mitigation will be extremely difficult. Such efforts may come too late – if they come at all.

When the likes of the [Koch brothers](#) in the US cease to be politically powerful and influential figures in the climate change debate, then perhaps I'll begin to think differently.

I hope Klein's optimism is justified, just as I hope to be talked out of my pessimism. In the meantime I shall continue to try and convince students that change is both possible and that they can play a key role in bringing it about – even if it means indulging in a little self-censorship to do so.

That's another of life's contradictions and paradoxes: the truth – if that's what it is – really has become a bit too inconvenient for words.

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