

Naomi Klein: This changes everything – Capitalism vs. The Climate

“Most projections of climate change presume that future changes — greenhouse gas emissions, temperature increases and effects such as sea level rise — will happen incrementally. A given amount of emission will lead to a given amount of temperature increase that will lead to a given amount of smooth incremental sea level rise. However, the geological record for the climate reflects instances where a relatively small change in one element of climate led to abrupt changes in the system as a whole. In other words, pushing global temperatures past certain thresholds could trigger abrupt, unpredictable and potentially irreversible changes that have massively disruptive and large-scale impacts. At that point, even if we do not add any additional CO₂ to the atmosphere, potentially unstoppable processes are set in motion. We can think of this as sudden climate brake and steering failure where the problem and its consequences are no longer something we can control.”

—Report by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the world’s largest general scientific society, 2014

A voice came over the intercom: would the passengers of Flight 3935, scheduled to depart Washington, D.C., for Charleston, South Carolina, kindly collect their carry-on luggage and get off the plane.

They went down the stairs and gathered on the hot tarmac. There they saw something unusual: the wheels of the US Airways jet had sunk into the black pavement as if it were wet cement. The wheels were lodged so deep, in fact, that the truck that came to tow the plane away couldn’t pry it loose. The airline had hoped that without the added weight of the flight’s thirty-five passengers, the aircraft would be light enough to pull. It wasn’t. Someone posted a picture: “Why is my flight cancelled? Because DC is so damn hot that our plane sank 4” into the pavement.”

Eventually, a larger, more powerful vehicle was brought in to tow the plane and this time it worked; the plane finally took off, three hours behind schedule. A spokesperson for the airline blamed the incident on “very unusual temperatures.”

The temperatures in the summer of 2012 were indeed unusually hot. (As they were the year before and the year after.)

And it’s no mystery why this has been happening: the profligate burning of fossil fuels, the very thing that US Airways was bound and determined to do despite the inconvenience presented by a melting tarmac. This irony—the fact that the burning of fossil fuels is so radically changing our climate that it is getting in the way of our capacity to burn fossil fuels—did not stop the passengers of Flight 3935 from reembaring and continuing their journeys. Nor was climate change mentioned in any of the major news coverage of the incident.

I am in no position to judge these passengers. All of us who live high consumer lifestyles, wherever we happen to reside, are, metaphorically, passengers on Flight 3935. Faced with a crisis that threatens our survival as a species, our entire culture is continuing to do the very thing that caused the crisis, only with an extra dose of elbow grease behind it. Like the airline bringing in a truck with a more powerful engine to tow that plane, the global economy is upping the ante from the most vulnerable least of all. And though perfectly understandable, this too is a way of looking away.

ventional sources of fossil fuels to even dirtier and more dangerous versions—bitumen from the Alberta tar sands, oil from deepwater drilling, gas from hydraulic fracturing (fracking), coal from detonated mountains, and so on.

Meanwhile, each supercharged natural disaster produces new irony-laden snapshots of a climate increasingly inhospitable to the very industries most responsible for its warming. Like the 2013 historic floods in Calgary that forced the head offices of the oil companies mining the Alberta tar sands to go dark and send their employees home, while a train carrying flammable petroleum products teetered on the edge of a disintegrating rail bridge. Or the drought that hit the Mississippi River one year earlier, pushing water levels so low that barges loaded with oil and coal were unable to move for days, while they waited for the Army Corps of Engineers to dredge a channel (they had to appropriate funds allocated to rebuild from the previous year’s historic flooding along the same waterway). Or the coal-fired power plants in other parts of the country that were temporarily shut down because the waterways that they draw on to cool their machinery were either too hot or too dry (or, in some cases, both).

Living with this kind of cognitive dissonance is simply part of being alive in this jarring moment in history, when a crisis we have been studiously ignoring is hitting us in the face—and yet we are doubling down on the stuff that is causing the crisis in the first place.

I denied climate change for longer than I care to admit. I knew it was happening, sure. Not like Donald Trump and the Tea Partiers going on about how the continued existence of winter proves it’s all a hoax. But I stayed pretty hazy on the details and only skimmed most of the news stories, especially the really scary ones. I told myself the science was too complicated and that the environmentalists were dealing with it. And I continued to behave as if there was nothing wrong with the shiny card in my wallet attesting to my “elite” frequent flyer status.

A great many of us engage in this kind of climate change denial. We look for a split second and then we look away. Or we look but then turn it into a joke (“more signs of the Apocalypse!”). Which is another way of looking away.

Or we look but tell ourselves comforting stories about how humans are clever and will come up with a technological miracle that will safely suck the carbon out of the skies or magically turn down the heat of the sun. Which, I was to discover while researching this book, is yet another way of looking away.

Or we look but try to be hyper-rational about it (“dollar for dollar it’s more efficient to focus on economic development than climate change, since wealth is the best protection from weather extremes”)—as if having a few more dollars will make much difference when your city is underwater. Which is a way of looking away if you happen to be a policy wonk.

Or we look but tell ourselves we are too busy to care about something so distant and abstract—even though we saw the water in the subways in New York City, and the people on their rooftops in New Orleans, and know that no one is safe, Or we look but tell ourselves that all we can do is focus on ourselves. Meditate and shop at farmers’ markets and stop driving—but forget trying to actually change the systems that

are making the crisis inevitable because that's too much "bad energy" and it will never work. And at first it may appear as if we are looking, because many of these lifestyle changes are indeed part of the solution, but we still have one eye tightly shut.

Or maybe we do look—really look—but then, inevitably, we seem to forget. Remember and then forget again. Climate change is like that; it's hard to keep it in your head for very long. We engage in this odd form of on-again-off-again ecological amnesia for perfectly rational reasons. We deny because we fear that letting in the full reality of this crisis will change everything. And we are right.

We know that if we continue on our current path of allowing emissions to rise year after year, climate change will change everything about our world. Major cities will very likely drown, ancient cultures will be swallowed by the seas, and there is a very high chance that our children will spend a great deal of their lives fleeing and recovering from vicious storms and extreme droughts. And we don't have to do anything to bring about this future. All we have to do is nothing. Just continue to do what we are doing now, whether it's counting on a techno-fix or tending to our gardens or telling ourselves we're unfortunately too busy to deal with it.

All we have to do is not react as if this is a full-blown crisis. All we have to do is keep on denying how frightened we actually are. And then, bit by bit, we will have arrived at the place we most fear, the thing from which we have been averting our eyes. No additional effort required.

There are ways of preventing this grim future, or at least making it a lot less dire. But the catch is that these also involve changing everything. For us high consumers, it involves changing how we live, how our economies function, even the stories we tell about our place on earth. The good news is that many of these changes are distinctly un-catastrophic. Many are downright exciting. But I didn't discover this for a long while.

I remember the precise moment when I stopped averting my eyes to the reality of climate change, or at least when I first

allowed my eyes to rest there for a good while. It was in Geneva, in April 2009, and I was meeting with Bolivia's ambassador to the World Trade Organization (WTO), who was then a surprisingly young woman named Angélica Navarro Llanos. Bolivia being a poor country with a small international budget, Navarro Llanos had recently taken on the climate portfolio in addition to her trade responsibilities. Over lunch in an empty Chinese restaurant, she explained to me (using chopsticks as props to make a graph of the global emission trajectory) that she saw climate change both as a terrible threat to her people—but also an opportunity.

A threat for the obvious reasons: Bolivia is extraordinarily dependent on glaciers for its drinking and irrigation water and those white-capped mountains that tower over its capital were turning gray and brown at an alarming rate. The opportunity, Navarro Llanos said, was that since countries like hers had done almost nothing to send emissions soaring, they were in a position to declare themselves "climate creditors," owed money and technology support from the large emitters to defray the hefty costs of coping with more climate-related disasters, as well as to help them develop on a green energy path.

She had recently given a speech at a United Nations climate conference in which she laid out the case for these kinds of wealth transfers, and she gave me a copy. "Millions of people," it read, "in small islands, least-developed countries, landlocked countries as well as vulnerable communities in Brazil, India and China, and all around the world—are suffering from the effects of a problem to which they did not contribute.... If we are to curb emissions in the next decade, we need a massive mobilization larger than any in history. We need a Marshall Plan for the Earth. This plan must mobilize financing and technology transfer on scales never seen before. It must get technology onto the ground in every country to ensure we reduce emissions while raising people's quality of life. We have only a decade."

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Exercises:

1. **Describe** one of the examples of Naomi Klein, which shows the drastic influence of the climate crisis.
2. **Outline** how Naomi Klein speaks about „climate change denial“ (l. 83 and 93).
3. **Analyze** what brought Naomi Klein to stop averting her eyes to the reality of climate change (l. 154).
4. **Asses** to the statement: „A great many of us engage in this kind of climate change denial“ (l. 93)