



False Choices

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In her new book, Naomi Klein sets up a false choice between the capitalism existing today, and a radically non-capitalist alternative, writes Oliver Waters.

Naomi Klein's influential new book argues that climate change will inevitably lead to disaster unless we radically change our economic systems away from capitalism. It thus lays out a stark challenge to defenders of classical liberal political and economic ideals: are capitalism and the environment mutually exclusive?

Klein is clearly a passionate and informed advocate of her cause, evidenced by the wealth of thoughtprovoking and important material in the book that contributes to the ongoing debate about climate change and its global implications.

However, she appears to lack a thorough understanding of the philosophical and economic doctrines she seeks to depose. This leads her to set up a false choice between the flawed versions of capitalism existing in the world today, and a radically non-capitalist alternative.

Many thoughtful political philosophers and economists over the centuries have defended certain economic principles, collectively named ‘capitalism’, as necessary for a just and flourishing society. By not engaging with much of this extensive literature, Klein presents her readers with a strawman form of capitalism that is easy to sweep aside in pursuit of the greater good.

According to Klein, capitalism consists of two axiomatic principles that are irrevocably inconsistent with the flourishing of humanity. The first principle is that nature is merely a passive slave to humanity’s whims, and the second is that capitalism depends on the doctrine of ‘extractivism’.

NATURE AS THE SLAVE OF HUMANITY

Klein traces the human desire to ‘bend nature to our will’ to Francis Bacon, the revered pioneer of the scientific method. His bold idea that the earth is completely ‘knowable and controllable’ was a key inspiration of the scientific revolution, as it represented a profound shift away from earlier pagan notions of nature as a kind of benevolent, all-powerful, maternal figure.

She argues that this was a key part of the ideological shift bringing about an illusion of ‘total power and control’ over nature, which propelled the widespread destruction of the natural environment, as well as colonisation and slavery.

The first thing to point out is that the kind of ‘control’ Bacon had in mind was over the impersonal forces of nature—a line of thinking that helped to inspire the natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry, geology, and biology. When it came to the ‘humane sciences’, however, he was explicitly anti-slavery, and pro-womens rights. It is quite a stretch, to say the least, to draw a straight line from his philosophical contributions to the promotion of colonisation and slavery.

THROUGHOUT THE BOOK KLEIN CONFUSES ECONOMIC GROWTH WITH EXTRACTIVISM

One can definitely say that Bacon, and many who followed him, lacked an appreciation for the complexity of certain aspects of nature—especially when compared to the knowledge we have today. Had he been able to take a course in modern chaos or complex systems theory, he would have appreciated that many natural processes, including the climate, cannot be deterministically modelled and thus fine-tuned via surgical interventions.

But Klein is not merely accusing Bacon and similar thinkers of failing to grasp the hidden complexities of nature. Her primary complaint is not scientific, but ethical. By ceasing to treat nature as a morally salient entity, Klein argues, Bacon failed to adequately revere it.

It is one thing to care about the well-being of conscious creatures, but Klein strays into the mystical territory of reifying ‘nature’ into an intentional being. Indeed, she explicitly seeks a return to the pre-enlightenment conception of nature, where we see ourselves as merely a ‘porous part of the world’. But this is simply to deny a fundamental fact about humanity: we are not merely part of the world. We are profoundly distinct from any other known natural entity, possessing as we do

the capacity for reason.

In fact, far from being inherently destructive to nature, our unique capacity is the only thing that can ultimately protect living systems. Before humanity arrived on the scene, more than 99 per cent of all species that ever lived had become extinct. Nature, contrary to much wishful thinking, is not a beautiful harmony of living systems. Fresh disturbances— from volcanic eruptions, asteroid collisions, to mutated bacterial strains—will always upset its ‘balance,’ and species are only safe to the degree that they can adapt quickly enough.

Given this fact, why would anyone recoil against our responsibility to exert control over nature? One strong reason, which seems to motivate Klein especially, is the belief that such control inevitably manifests itself in the form of ‘extractivism’.

ECONOMIC GROWTH AS EXTRACTIVISM

Throughout the book, Klein confuses economic growth with ‘extractivism’. Extractivism is the process of ceaselessly converting natural resources into waste to satisfy our own insatiable desires, conceiving of nature as, in Klein’s words, a ‘bottomless vending machine’.

But is economic growth, and the ‘capitalism’ that drives it, inextricably tied to this doctrine? The most sophisticated advocates of capitalism argue that its core tenets are the private ownership of scarce resources and laws that permit the transfer of property through voluntary trade.

Under this definition, nothing about capitalism implies extractivism. Extractivism is just a particularly unimaginative and short-sighted activity that some capitalists might choose to engage in, but the vast majority of clever capitalists do not.

A ‘good capitalist’ is driven by one key underlying force: the discovery of how to do more with less. Or to put it another way, how to make labour more efficient. Thus, the best measure of economic progress is not the quantity of raw materials we are digging up and consuming, but how much labour it takes to produce the same amount of valuable goods or services. If this is decreasing, then genuine economic growth is occurring.

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The common confusion that ‘economic growth cannot continue indefinitely on a finite planet’ depends upon acceptance of the premise that all economic progress is extractive in nature.

But what we actually do is develop technologies that increase the productive uses of the same quantity of physical matter and energy. Under this view, economic growth can indeed be infinite even on a planet of finite resources, because there is no upper limit to how advanced our technology can become.

Once we are able to harness nuclear fusion, for example, suddenly four litres of sea-water (which contains the required deuterium fuel) would provide more energy than a thousand litres of



gasoline. It is counter-intuitive but true nonetheless—real economic growth actually increases the energy and resources available to human beings.

THE SEEN & THE UNSEEN

Advocating for widespread social and economic change is appealing, especially to young and idealistic people. The injustices surrounding us seem so obvious. Why should we allow *private* interests and wealth to get in the way of immediate and pervasive action on climate change?

But appearances can be deceiving. To a child, the injustice of a painful vaccination is a matter of raw, infallible perception. It is so clearly *wrong*, and must be avoided at all costs.

Likewise we cannot condemn economic policies and political ideals merely on the basis of observed hardships or inequalities. We must also include that which is unobserved. We must include the harm that does not occur, as well as that which does. We have to look at the incentives that an economic system creates and perpetuates, not just the intentions of those who would bring these systems into being.

Ditching capitalism because of climate change would be like trying to fix one's dishwasher by burning down the kitchen. The point is to improve our conceptions of private property and the laws regulating it; and to do that, we have no choice but to depend on our most compelling fundamental political and economic theories of how it actually works.

To the extent that Klein was seeking to persuade a majority of citizens to pay attention to the science of climate change, she has unfortunately made a serious strategic error.

Her fundamental argument will not build broader coalitions, but rather alienate from the conversation many of those who may accept the idea of climate change but who also see much to preserve in the ideas of political liberalism and free-market economics.