

Climate Change Is a People's Shock - What if we decide to change everything?

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What if, instead of accepting a future of climate catastrophe and private profits, we decide to change everything?

About a year ago, I was having dinner with some newfound friends in Athens. I had an interview scheduled for the next morning with Alexis Tsipras, the leader of Greece's official opposition party and one of the few sources of hope in a Europe ravaged by austerity. I asked the group for ideas about what questions I should put to the young politician. Someone suggested: "History knocked on your door—did you answer?"

At the time, Tsipras's party, Syriza, was putting up a fine fight against austerity. Yet it was struggling to articulate a positive economic vision of its own. I was particularly struck that the party did not oppose the governing coalition's embrace of new oil and gas exploration, a threat to Greece's beautiful seas as well as to the climate as a whole. Instead, it argued that any funds raised by the effort should be spent on pensions, not used to pay back creditors. In other words, the party was not providing an alternative to extractivism; it simply had more equitable plans for distributing the spoils—something that can be said of most left-governed countries in Latin America.

When we met the next day, Tsipras was frank that concerns about the environmental crisis had been entirely upstaged by more immediate ones. "We were a party that had the environment and climate change in the center of our interest," he told me. "But after these years of depression in Greece, we forgot climate change."

This is, of course, entirely understandable. It is also a terrible missed opportunity—and not just for one party in one country in the world. The research I've done over the past five years has convinced me that climate change represents a historic opening for progressive transformation. As part of the project of getting our emissions down to the levels so many climate scientists recommend, we have the chance to advance policies that dramatically improve lives, close the gap between rich and poor, create huge numbers of good jobs, and reinvigorate democracy from the ground up. Rather than the ultimate expression of the shock doctrine I wrote about in my last book—a frenzy of new resource grabs and repression by the 1 percent—climate change can be a "People's Shock," a blow from below. It can disperse power into the hands of the many, rather than consolidating it in the hands of a few, and it can radically expand the commons, rather than auctioning it off in pieces. Getting to the root of why we are facing serial crises in the first place would leave us with both a more habitable climate than the one we are headed for and a far more just economy than the one we have now.

But none of this will happen if we let history's knock go unanswered—because we know where the current system, left unchecked, is headed. We also know how that system will deal with serial climate-related disasters: with profiteering and escalating barbarism to segregate the losers from the winners. To arrive at that dystopia, all we need to do is keep barreling down the road we are on.

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When I despair at the prospects for change, I think back on some of what I witnessed in the process of writing my book about climate change. Admittedly, much of it is painful: from the young climate activist breaking down and weeping on my shoulder at the Copenhagen summit, to the climate-change deniers at the Heartland Institute literally laughing at the prospect of extinction; from the country manor in England where mad scientists plotted to blot out the sun, to the stillness of the blackened marshes during the BP oil disaster; from the roar of the earth being ripped up to scrape out the Alberta tar sands, to the shock of discovering that the largest green group in the world was itself drilling for oil.

But that's not all I think about. When I started this journey, most of the movements standing in the way of the fossil-fuel frenzy either did not exist or were a fraction of their current size. All were significantly more isolated from one another than they are today. North Americans, overwhelmingly, did not know what the tar sands are. Most of us had never heard of fracking. There had never been a truly mass march against climate change in North America, let alone thousands willing to engage together in civil disobedience. There was no mass movement to divest from fossil fuels. Hundreds of cities and towns in Germany had not yet voted to take back control over their electricity grids to be part of a renewable energy revolution. My own province did not have a green-energy program that was bold enough to land us in trade court. China was not in the midst of a boisterous debate about the wrenching health costs of frenetic, coal-based economic growth. There was far less top-level research proving that economies powered by 100 percent renewable energy were within our grasp. And few climate scientists were willing to speak bluntly about the political implications of their work for our frenzied consumer culture. All of this has changed so rapidly as I have been writing that I have had to race to keep up.

Yes, ice sheets are melting faster than the models projected, but resistance is beginning to boil. In these existing and nascent movements, we now have clear glimpses of the kind of dedication and imagination demanded of everyone who is alive and breathing during climate change's "decade zero."

This is because the carbon record doesn't lie. And what that record tells us is that emissions are still rising: every year we release more greenhouse gases than the year before, the growth rate increasing from one decade to the next—gases that will trap heat for generations to come, creating a world that is hotter, colder, wetter, thirstier, hungrier, angrier. So if there is any hope of reversing these trends, glimpses won't cut it; we will need the climate revolution playing on repeat, all day every day, everywhere.

Mass resistance movements have grabbed the wheel before and could very well do so again. At the same time, we must reckon with the fact that lowering global emissions in line with the urgent warnings of climate scientists will demand change of a truly daunting speed and scale. Meeting science-based targets will mean forcing some of the most profitable companies on the planet to forfeit trillions of dollars of future earnings by leaving the vast majority of proven fossil-fuel reserves in the ground. It will also require coming up with trillions more to pay for zero-carbon, disaster-ready societal transformations. And let's take for granted that we want to do these radical things democratically and without a bloodbath, so violent vanguardist revolutions don't have much to offer in the way of road maps.

The crucial question we are left with, then, is this: Has an economic shift of this kind ever happened before in history? We know it can happen during wartime, when presidents and prime ministers are the ones commanding the transformation from above. But has it ever been demanded from below, by regular people, when their leaders have wholly abdicated their responsibilities? The answer to that

question is predictably complex, filled with “sort ofs” and “almosts”—but also at least one “yes.”

In the West, the most common precedents invoked to show that social movements really can be a disruptive historical force are the celebrated human-rights movements of the past century—most prominently the movements for civil rights, women’s rights, and gay and lesbian rights. These movements unquestionably transformed the face and texture of the dominant culture. But given that the challenge for the climate movement hinges on pulling off a profound and radical economic transformation, it must be noted that in the case of these earlier movements, the legal and cultural battles were always more successful than the economic ones. While these movements won huge battles against institutional discrimination, the victories that remained elusive were those that, in Martin Luther King Jr.’s words, could not be purchased “at bargain rates.” There would be no massive investment in jobs, schools and decent homes for African-Americans in the wake of the civil-rights movement of the 1960s, just as the 1970s women’s movement would not win its demand for “wages for housework” (indeed, paid maternity leave remains a battle in large parts of the world). Sharing legal status is one thing, sharing resources quite another.

There have been social movements, however, that have had more success in challenging entrenched wealth and forcing redistribution as well as massive public-sector investments. The labor and populist movements of the 1930s and 1940s are the most obvious examples. Two more are the movements for the abolition of slavery and for Third World independence from colonial powers. Both of these transformative movements forced ruling elites to relinquish practices that were still extraordinarily profitable, much as fossil-fuel extraction is today.

The movement for the abolition of slavery in particular shows us that a transition as large as the one confronting us today has happened before—indeed, it is remembered as one of the greatest moments in human history. The economic impacts of abolition in the mid-nineteenth century have some striking parallels with the impacts of radical emission reduction, as several historians and commentators have observed. As Chris Hayes argued in his essay “The New Abolitionism” in these pages last spring, “It is impossible to point to any precedent other than abolition” for the climate-justice movement’s demand that “an existing set of political and economic interests be forced to say goodbye to trillions of dollars of wealth.”

There is no question that for a large sector of the ruling class at the time, losing the legal right to exploit men and women in bondage represented a major economic blow. In the eighteenth century, Caribbean sugar plantations, which were wholly dependent on slave labor, were by far the most profitable outposts of the British Empire, generating revenues that far outstripped the other colonies.

While not equivalent, the dependence of the US economy on slave labor—particularly in the Southern states—is certainly comparable to the modern global economy’s reliance on fossil fuels. But the analogy, as all acknowledge, is far from perfect. Burning fossil fuels is of course not the moral equivalent of owning slaves or occupying countries. (Though heading an oil company that actively sabotages climate science and lobbies aggressively against emission controls, while laying claim to enough interred carbon to drown populous nations like Bangladesh and boil sub-Saharan Africa, is indeed a heinous moral crime.) Nor were the movements that ended slavery and defeated colonial rule in any way bloodless: nonviolent tactics like boycotts and protests played major roles, but slavery in the Caribbean was outlawed only after numerous slave rebellions were brutally suppressed. And, of course, abolition in the United States came only after the carnage of the Civil War.

Another problem with the analogy is that, though the liberation of millions of slaves in this period—some 800,000 in the British colonies and 4 million in the United States—represents the

greatest human-rights victory of its time (or, arguably, any time), the economic side of the struggle was far less successful. Local and international elites often managed to extract steep payoffs to compensate themselves for their “loss” of human property, while offering little or nothing to former slaves. Washington broke its promise, made near the end of the Civil War, to grant freed slaves ownership of large swaths of land in the South (a pledge colloquially known as “forty acres and a mule”). Instead, the lands were returned to former slave owners, who proceeded to staff them through the indentured servitude of sharecropping. Britain awarded massive paydays to its slave owners at the time of abolition, which many used to invest in the coal-fired machinery of industrialization. And France, most shockingly, sent a flotilla of warships to demand that the newly liberated nation of Haiti pay a huge sum to the French crown for the loss of its bonded workforce—or face attack. Reparations, but in reverse.

The true costs of these and so many other gruesomely unjust extortions are still being paid in lives, from Haiti to Mozambique to Ferguson. The reverse reparations saddled newly liberated nations and people with odious debts that deprived them of true independence while helping to accelerate the Industrial Revolution in Europe and North America, the extreme profitability of which most certainly cushioned the economic blow of abolition. A real end to the fossil-fuel age offers no equivalent consolation prize to the major players in the oil, gas and coal industries. Solar and wind can make money, sure. But by nature of their decentralization, they will never supply the kind of concentrated super-profits to which the fossil-fuel titans have become all too accustomed. In other words, if climate justice carries the day, the economic costs to our elites will be real—not only because of the carbon left in the ground, but also because of the regulations, taxes and social programs needed to make the required transformation. Indeed, these new demands on the ultra-rich could effectively bring the era of the footloose Davos oligarch to a close.

On one level, the inability of many great social movements to fully realize those parts of their vision that carried the highest price tag can be seen as a cause for inertia or even despair. If they failed in their plans to usher in an equitable economic system, how can the climate movement hope to succeed?

There is, however, another way of looking at this track record: the economic demands at the core of so many past struggles—for basic public services that work, for decent housing, for dignified work, for land redistribution—represent nothing less than the unfinished business of the most powerful liberation movements of the past two centuries, from civil rights to feminism to indigenous sovereignty. The transformation we need to make to respond to the climate threat—to adapt humanely and equitably to the heavy weather we have already locked in, and to avert the truly catastrophic warming we can still avoid—is a chance to change all that, and to get it right this time. It could deliver the equitable redistribution of agricultural lands that was supposed to follow independence from colonial rule and dictatorship; it could bring the jobs and homes that Martin Luther King dreamed of; it could bring jobs and clean water to native communities. Such is the promise of what some have called “a Marshall Plan for the Earth.”

The fact that our most heroic social-justice movements won on the legal front but suffered big losses on the economic front is precisely why our world is as fundamentally unequal and unfair as it remains. Those losses have left a legacy of continued discrimination, racism, police violence, rampant criminalization and entrenched poverty—poverty that deepens with each new crisis. But at the same time, the economic battles these movements did win are the reason we still have a few institutions left—from libraries to mass transit to public hospitals—based on the wild idea that real equality means equal access to the basic services that create a dignified life. Most critically, all these past movements, in one form or another, are still fighting today—for full human rights and equality regardless of ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation; for real decolonization and reparations; for food security and farmers’ rights; against oligarchic rule; and to defend and expand the public

sphere.

So climate change does not need some shiny new movement that will magically succeed where others have failed. Rather, as the furthest-reaching crisis created by the extractivist worldview, and one that puts humanity on a firm and unyielding deadline, climate change can be the force—the grand push—that will bring together all of these still-living movements: a rushing river fed by countless streams, gathering collective force to finally reach the sea. “The basic confrontation which seemed to be colonialism versus anti-colonialism, indeed capitalism versus socialism, is already losing its importance,” Frantz Fanon wrote in his 1961 masterwork, *The Wretched of the Earth*. “What matters today, the issue which blocks the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity will have to address this question, no matter how devastating the consequences may be.” Climate change—precisely because it demands so much public investment and planning—is our chance to right those festering wrongs at last: the unfinished business of liberation.

Winning will certainly require the convergence of diverse constituencies on a scale previously unknown. Because, although there is no perfect historical analogy for the challenge of climate change, there are lessons to learn from the transformative movements of the past. One such lesson is that when major shifts in the economic balance of power take place, they are invariably the result of extraordinary levels of social mobilization. At those junctures, activism becomes not something performed by a small tribe within a culture, whether a vanguard of radicals or a subcategory of slick professionals (though each plays a part), but an entirely normal activity throughout society—its rent-payers’ associations, women’s auxiliaries, gardening clubs, neighborhood assemblies, trade unions, professional groups, sports teams, youth leagues, and on and on. During extraordinary historical moments—both world wars, the aftermath of the Great Depression, the peak of the civil-rights era—the usual categories dividing “activists” from “regular people” became meaningless because the project of changing society was so deeply woven into the project of life. Activists were, quite simply, everyone.

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It must always be remembered that the greatest barrier to humanity rising to meet the climate crisis is not that it is too late or that we don’t know what to do. There is just enough time, and we are swamped with green tech and green plans. And yet the reason so many of us are greeting this threat with grim resignation is that our political class appears wholly incapable of seizing those tools and implementing those plans. And it’s not just the people we vote into office and then complain about—it’s us. For most of us living in postindustrial societies, when we see the crackling black-and-white footage of general strikes in the 1930s, victory gardens in the 1940s, and Freedom Rides in the 1960s, we simply cannot imagine being part of any mobilization of that depth and scale. That kind of thing was fine for them, but surely not us—with our eyes glued to our smartphones, our attention spans scattered by click bait, our loyalties split by the burdens of debt and the insecurities of contract work. Where would we organize? Who would we trust enough to lead us? Who, moreover, is “we”?

In other words, we are products of our age and of a dominant ideological project—one that has too often taught us to see ourselves as little more than singular, gratification-seeking units out to maximize our narrow advantage. This project has also led our governments to stand by helplessly for more than two decades as the climate crisis morphed from a “grandchildren” problem to a banging-down-the-door problem.

All of this is why any attempt to rise to the climate challenge will be fruitless unless it is understood as part of a much broader battle of worldviews—a process of rebuilding and reinventing the very idea of the collective, the communal, the commons, the civil, and the civic after so many decades of

attack and neglect. Because what is overwhelming about the climate challenge is that it requires breaking so many rules at once—rules written into national laws and trade agreements, as well as powerful unwritten rules that tell us that no government can increase taxes and stay in power, or say no to major investments no matter how damaging, or plan to gradually contract those parts of our economy that endanger us all.

And yet each of those rules emerged out of the same coherent worldview. If that worldview is delegitimized, then all of the rules within it become much weaker and more vulnerable. This is another lesson from social-movement history across the political spectrum: when fundamental change does come, it's generally not in legislative dribs and drabs spread out evenly over decades. Rather, it comes in spasms of rapid-fire lawmaking, with one breakthrough after another. The right calls this "shock therapy"; the left calls it "populism" because it requires so much popular support and mobilization to occur. (Think of the regulatory architecture that emerged in the New Deal period or, for that matter, the environmental legislation of the 1960s and 1970s.)

So how do you change a worldview, an unquestioned ideology? Part of it involves choosing the right early policy battles—game-changing ones that don't merely aim to change laws but also patterns of thought. This means a fight for a minimal carbon tax might do a lot less good than, for instance, forming a grand coalition to demand a guaranteed minimum income. That's not only because a minimum income makes it possible for workers to say no to dirty-energy jobs, but also because the very process of arguing for a universal social safety net opens up a space for a full-throated debate about values—about what we owe to one another based on our shared humanity, and what it is that we collectively value more than economic growth and corporate profits.

Indeed, a great deal of the work of deep social change involves having debates during which new stories can be told to replace the ones that have failed us. Because if we are to have any hope of making the kind of civilizational leap required of this fateful decade, we will need to start believing, once again, that humanity is not hopelessly selfish and greedy: the image ceaselessly sold to us by everything from reality shows to neoclassical economics.

Fundamentally, the task is to articulate not just an alternative set of policy proposals, but an alternative worldview to rival the one at the heart of the ecological crisis—embedded in interdependence rather than hyperindividualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy. This is required not only to create a political context to dramatically lower emissions, but also to help us cope with the disasters we can no longer avoid. Because in the hot and stormy future we have already made inevitable through our past emissions, an unshakable belief in the equal rights of all people and a capacity for deep compassion will be the only things standing between civilization and barbarism.

This is another lesson from the transformative movements of the past: all of them understood that the process of shifting cultural values—though somewhat ephemeral and difficult to quantify—was central to their work. And so they dreamed in public, showed humanity a better version of itself, modeled different values in their own behavior, and in the process liberated the political imagination and rapidly altered the sense of what was possible. They were also unafraid of the language of morality—to give the pragmatic cost/benefit arguments a rest and speak of right and wrong, of love and indignation.

There are plenty of solid economic arguments for moving beyond fossil fuels, as more and more patient investors are realizing. And that's worth pointing out. But we will not win the battle for a stable climate by trying to beat the bean counters at their own game—arguing, for instance, that it is more cost-effective to invest in emission reduction now than disaster response later. We will win by asserting that such calculations are morally monstrous, since they imply that there is an acceptable

price for allowing entire countries to disappear, for leaving untold millions to die on parched land, for depriving today's children of their right to live in a world teeming with the wonders and beauties of creation.

The climate movement has yet to find its full moral voice on the world stage, but it is most certainly clearing its throat—beginning to put the very real thefts and torments that ineluctably flow from the decision to mock international climate commitments alongside history's most damned crimes.

Some of the voices of moral clarity are coming from the very young, who are calling on the streets—and, increasingly, in the courts—for intergenerational justice. Some are coming from great social-justice movements of the past, like Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu, the former archbishop of Cape Town, who has joined the fossil-fuel divestment movement with enthusiasm, declaring that “to serve as custodians of creation is not an empty title; it requires that we act, and with all the urgency this dire situation demands.” Most of all, those clarion voices are coming from the front lines of the movement some have taken to calling “Blockadia”: from communities directly impacted by high-risk fossil-fuel extraction, transportation and combustion—as well as from those parts of the world already coping with the impacts of early climate destabilization.

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Recent years have been filled with moments when societies suddenly decide they have had enough, defying all of the experts and forecasters—from the Arab Spring (tragedies, betrayals and all), to Europe's “squares movement” that saw city centers taken over by demonstrators for months, to Occupy Wall Street, to the student movements of Chile and Quebec. The Mexican journalist Luis Hernández Navarro describes these rare political moments that seem to melt cynicism on contact as the “effervescence of rebellion.”

What is most striking about these upwellings, when societies become consumed with the demand for transformational change, is that they so often come as a surprise—most of all to the movements' own organizers. I've heard the story many times: “One day it was just me and my friends dreaming up impossible schemes; the next day the entire country seemed to be out in the plaza alongside us.” And the real surprise, for all involved, is that we are so much more than we have been told we are; that we long for more and—in that longing—have more company than we ever imagined.

No one knows when the next such effervescent moment will open, or whether it will be precipitated by an economic crisis, another natural disaster or some kind of political scandal. We do know that a warming world will, sadly, provide no shortage of potential sparks. Sivan Kartha, senior scientist at the Stockholm Environment Institute, puts it like this: “What's politically realistic today may have very little to do with what's politically realistic after another few Hurricane Katrinas and another few Superstorm Sandys and another few Typhoon Bophas hit us.” It's true: the world tends to look a little different when the objects we have worked our whole lives to accumulate are suddenly floating down the street, smashed to pieces, turned to garbage.

The world also doesn't look much as it did in the late 1980s. Climate change landed on the public agenda at the peak of free-market, end-of-history triumphalism, which was very bad timing indeed. Its do-or-die moment, however, comes to us at a very different historical juncture. Many of the barriers that paralyzed a serious response to the crisis are today significantly eroded. Free-market ideology has been discredited by decades of deepening inequality and corruption, stripping it of much of its persuasive (if not yet its political and economic) power. And the various forms of magical thinking that have diverted precious energy—from blind faith in technological miracles to the worship of benevolent billionaires—are also fast losing their grip. It is slowly dawning on a great many of us that no one is going to step in and fix this crisis; that if change is to take place, it will be

only because leadership bubbled up from below.

We are also significantly less isolated than many of us were even a decade ago: the new structures built in the rubble of neoliberalism—everything from social media to worker co-ops to farmers' markets to neighborhood sharing banks—have helped us to find community despite the fragmentation of postmodern life. Indeed, thanks in particular to social media, a great many of us are continually engaged in a cacophonous global conversation that, however maddening at times, is unprecedented in its reach and power.

Given these factors, there is little doubt that another crisis will see us in the streets and squares once again, taking us all by surprise. The real question is what progressive forces will make of that moment, the power and confidence with which it is seized. Because these moments when the impossible suddenly seems possible are excruciatingly precious and rare. That means more must be made of them. The next time one arises, it must be harnessed not only to denounce the world as it is and build fleeting pockets of liberated space; it must be the catalyst to actually build the world that will keep us all safe. The stakes are simply too high, and time too short, to settle for anything less.

Naomi Klein

P.S.

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