

Fire and Falter

Book Review Essay

Naomi Klein, *ON FIRE: The Burning Case for a GREEN NEW DEAL*, Penguin, Allen Lane, 2019.

Bill McKibben, *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*, Wildfire, 2019.

Naomi Klein's latest book has another arresting title. In a theatre when someone shouts "fire!", the audience are not supposed to panic but leave swiftly and calmly. As more and more people now recognise, and know, our planet is burning - and, of course, melting and flooding - but there is still too little action. Some panic is long over-due. The Earth is not a theatre we can leave. We must stay and fight the fire. It is long-since time we awakened to the imminent dangers but also to the measures we know we have to take.

As the moral philosopher, Stephen Gardiner, writes, the "climate tragedy" is now an ethical problem, not a scientific one.¹ We know what is happening but we lack the will to act. It is a question of "practical", not "pure reason". The ethical questions the ancients asked are even more relevant today: what should we do? how should we live now we are in the midst of a climate emergency and the sixth mass extinction?

As we would expect, Naomi Klein graphically spells out the facts. In reference to striking school children in Australia in March this year, they have every reason for alarm.

Australians can no longer pretend everything is normal:

Not when, at the start of 2019, the South Australian city of Port Augusta had reached an oven-worthy 121 degrees F (49.5 C). Not when half the Great Barrier Reef, the world's largest natural structure made up of living creatures, has turned into a rotting underwater mass grave. Not when, in the weeks leading up to the strike itself, they had seen bushfires combine into a massive blaze in the state of Victoria, forcing thousands to flee their homes, while in Tasmania wildfires destroyed old-growth forests that are unlike any ecosystem in the world. Not when, in January

¹ Stephen M. Gardiner, *The Perfect Moral Storm: the Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

2019, a combination of extreme temperature swings and poor water management led the country to wake up to apocalyptic images of the Darling River clogged with the floating carcasses of one million dead fish. ²

As Klein describes, oceans are warming forty per cent faster than the UN predicted five years ago. The Arctic is melting, with implications for the rest of the planet. In May this year the UN Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services published their report about the loss of wildlife around the world, warning that a million species of animals and plants are at risk of extinction. CO2 emissions have risen by well over 40 per cent in the three decades since governments began to meet to discuss climate warming. The Earth has warmed by 1 per cent since we began to burn coal on an industrial scale, a rise which is predicted to increase fourfold by the end of the century: “the last time there was this much CO2 in the atmosphere, human beings didn’t exist”.

Despite the fact that we now know all this, we are doing too little about it. Which is why the schoolchildren are striking. On that day in March this year it was estimated there were nearly 2,100 strikes in 125 countries with 1.6 million young people participating - “quite an achievement for a movement that began just eight months earlier with a single fifteen-year-old girl in Stockholm, Sweden”.

Klein believes Greta Thunberg has “superpower”. As a mental health practitioner, I often thought that people we characterised as “obsessive”, as well as those “on the autistic spectrum”, were among our most creative and single-minded, often more in touch with reality than “normal people”. For someone who has described herself in the past as a “mute”, Greta Thunberg’s communicative powers have been remarkable:

It was as if by yelling “Fire!” on our crowded planet, she had given countless others the confidence they needed to believe their own senses and smell the smoke drifting in under all those tightly-closed doors. ³

² Klein, *On Fire*, 2019, p 4.

³ *Ibid.* p 13.

Her addresses to various official bodies have been “short, unadorned, and utterly scathing”. She asked British M.P.s if her microphone was turned on - to check whether they were hearing! - while to the rich and mighty at Davos who complimented her for giving them hope, she replied, as we all know: “I don’t want your hope....I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire because it is”. Her more recent address to the U.N. and tour of the US has taken her message to another level.

Questioning our deep stories

On Fire is a collection of Klein’s “long-form reporting, think pieces and public talks” over the past decade. In them she is trying to understand the economic and ideological barriers which lead us to act as if “our house” is not on fire when it so obviously is. This has to do with “the deep stories about the right of certain people to dominate the land and people living closest to it, stories that underpin Western culture”. Hers is an ethical concern. The essays return frequently to the kind of responses we might make to question and challenge our “deep stories” and how we might “weave seemingly disparate crises (economic, social, ecological, and democratic) into a common story of civilisational transformation”.

The chapters are arranged chronologically, in the order in which they were written and reflect the evolution of Klein’s own analysis as she responded to events and ideas as they happened and as she worked in collaboration with countless friends and colleagues in the global climate justice movement. Most of the chapters are as they were originally written, except the final essays about the Green New Deal, which have been expanded significantly.

She writes mainly about the “Anglosphere”, though the focus of her analysis is global. As an eco-socialist she is interested to explore how the nations of the Anglosphere “led the way in forging the global supply chain that gave birth to modern capitalism, the economic system of limitless consumption and ecological depletion at the heart of the climate crisis.”. This system needed its theories to rationalise “treating humans as raw capitalist assets to exhaust and abuse without limit” which, in turn, justified treating the natural world in the same way.

That the capitalist system could do this depended on the acceptance of the central delusion of the European Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century and the modern age. This was that material nature is an infinite, rather than finite source of energy. Klein refers to it as a “new idea that there was no limit to humanity’s ability to control the natural world, nor to how much wealth could be extracted from it without fear of consequence”.

This delusion drove the European and anglospheric powers in their colonialist expansion and in the myth of white supremacy that accompanied it. The huge natural wealth, for instance, of lands that would become the United States, Canada and Australia made up for - and disguised - the diminishing resources in the home countries. To quote Klein again:

With the “discovery” of these seemingly “new worlds”, God had granted a reprieve: *New England, New France, New Amsterdam, New SouthWales* - proof positive that Europeans would never run out of nature to exhaust. ⁴

The same could be said, of course, for the wealth of South America, Asia and Africa and their indigenous peoples.

People on fire

Along with the planetary emergency, Klein also senses that “something equally deep is also shifting, and with a speed that startles me...it is not only that our planet is on fire. So are social movements rising up to declare, from below, a people’s emergency”. She refers, of course, as one example, to the wave of nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience of Extinction Rebellion which has been able to shut down half of central London and to push the governments of the United Kingdom to declare a state of “climate emergency”. The spirit and action of ER is now spreading across the world.

At the same time the Sunrise Movement has emerged in the United States and occupied the office of Nancy Pelosi, leader of the Democrats in Washington, one week after the party had won back the House of Representatives in the 2018 midterm elections. They

⁴ Ibid. p 20

accused the party of having no plan to respond to the climate emergency and called on Congress immediately to adopt a rapid decarbonisation framework on the scale of Roosevelt's sweeping New Deal, designed to address the poverty of the Great Depression and the ecological collapse of the Dust Bowl.

Klein has been very active in the global climate movement for some years, but she senses this new surge of activity today. Environmentalists and climate activists are now having an effect beyond their own circles. In Klein's own words:

Our current moment is markedly different, and the reason for that is twofold: one sense having to do with a mounting sense of peril, the other with a new and unfamiliar sense of promise. ⁵

This is also reflected in the October 2018 report of the IPCC which unequivocally warned that we are currently on a path to warming the world by 3-5 degrees celsius by the end of the century. To limit warming to 1.5 degrees, the IPCC authors assert we need to cut global emissions approximately in half in twelve years - now eleven, and soon to be ten! - and reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. This needs to happen across the world, of course, but the West can give a lead. And it will require drawing down a great deal of the CO2 already in the atmosphere, whether by technical or natural means. Anyone who saw the recent film *George Monbiot* made with Greta Thunberg will recall Monbiot's passionate paean to the tree as one of the Planet's coolest and most magical of saving "inventions"!

The Green New Deal

In her most recent thinking and writing Klein emphasises the importance of finding an adequate response to the serious warning of the 2018 IPCC Report. She finds this in the growing call for a Green New Deal. "The idea is a simple one":

in the process of transforming the infrastructure of our society at the speed and scale that scientists have called for, humanity has a once-in-a-century chance to fix an economic model that is failing the majority of people on multiple fronts. Because

⁵ Ibid. p 23

the factors that are destroying our planet are also destroying people's quality of life in many other ways, from wage stagnation to crumbling services to the breakdown of any semblance of social cohesion. Challenging these underlying forces is an opportunity to solve several interlocking crises at once. ⁶

Hundreds of millions of jobs could be created around the world in tackling the climate crisis. A Green New Deal would also facilitate investment in excluded communities and nations, guarantee health and social care, including child care, while attending to housing and public transport and other components of our social and economic infrastructure. Even more importantly a Green New Deal would instil a sense of collective higher purpose - "a set of higher concrete goals that we are all working toward together".

As Klein points out, there is now a bloc of young politicians in the US, Europe and elsewhere "ready to translate the urgency of the climate crisis into policy and to connect the dots among the multiple crises of our times". She cites Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the States, for example, but one of her chapters is her speech to the British Labour Party Conference in 2017 where she will have had a sense of the Green ideas, including amongst the young and female, in British politics.

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the aftermath of the Great Depression and the Marshall Plan for Europe after the war were extraordinary achievements but they were implemented from the top down and did nothing to question the materialist assumptions of prevailing economic thinking. Innovative values and direct action today are arising in grassroots movements, such as the striking school children - and their teachers - and the growing nonviolent groups of Extinction Rebellion and the Sunrise Movement, rather than from the traditional political leaders.

But, as Klein entitles one of her later chapters: "Movements will Make, or Break, the Green New Deal". The forces of "climate barbarism" are intensified by climate disruption. War, terrorism, gang violence, sexual violence, deepening poverty and mass migration all contribute to the escalation of fundamentalist nationalisms, eco-fascism and neoliberalism. But the proponents of the Green New Deal, whatever level they operate on,

⁶ Ibid. p 26

can draw on a set of transformed values and resources which are potentially equal to all adversities. Klein identifies what these might be.

For instance, in this later chapter, she refers to the need for “a shift in worldview at every level, a transformation to an ethos of care and repair”, repairing our relationship with the earth and with one another. This involves, firstly, recognition of the damage done by the industrial revolution, not only to the Earth, but to the social fabric across the whole planet. Only then, and secondly, will we find a collective purpose, potentially stronger than any destructive forces. In fact delivering that sense of common purpose, Klein thinks, is perhaps “the Green New Deal’s greatest promise”.

In “The Art of the Green New Deal” Klein suggests we are beginning to see “the true power of framing our collective response to climate change”:

We are part of a long and complex collective story, one in which human beings are not one set of attributes, fixed and unchanging, but rather a work in progress, capable of deep change. By looking decades backward and forward simultaneously, we are no longer alone as we confront our weighty historical moment. We are surrounded by ancestors whispering that we can do what our moment demands just as they did, and by future generations shouting that they deserve nothing less. ⁷

This is the hopeful vision of the future a Green New Deal powerfully offers to many today. But it requires an understanding of the past and a feel for a future. Such a time horizon gives us a real sense of present opportunities.

In sum

In her epilogue Klein offers “The Capsule Case for a Green New Deal”. She knows that many on both right and left think it is unrealistic and therefore doomed, but she feels it isn’t as impractical as critics make out. In this final chapter she sets out nine reasons why it has a fighting chance. They are:

⁷ Ibid. p 279

1. It will be a massive job creator
2. Paying for it will create a fairer economy
3. It taps the power of emergency
4. It's procrastination-proof
5. It's recession-proof
6. It's a backlash buster
7. It can raise an army of supporters.
8. It will build new alliances - and undercut the right.

Her ninth reason - "**We Were Born for this Moment**" - argues against hopelessness and the feeling it's all too late and we'll never get the job done in such short time. That would be true if we were starting from scratch "but the truth is that there are tens of thousands of people, and a great many organisations, who have been preparing for a Green New Deal-style breakthrough for decades".

And her final word?: "when the future of life is at stake, there is nothing we cannot achieve".

BILL McKIBBEN

It is interesting that Klein ends her book on this note, as Bill McKibben, the father of the climate movement, as it were, and who is often linked with her as the senior of two of the preeminent climate warriors, has written a book this year with the title "Falter", as if a crack has opened up in his seeming legendary defiance and fighting spirit, a suspicion reflected in his subtitle: "Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out".

He opens *Falter* with "A Note on Hope", by pointing out that his original book, published thirty years ago in 1989, *The End of Nature*, sounded a gloomy note which has been more or less vindicated. Its basic point was that humans had so altered the planet that "not an inch was beyond our reach", leading to what scientists now call the Anthropocene. *Falter* is, in some ways, bleaker and gloomier because more time has passed and we are in a deeper hole than ever, despite the "progress" made in new technological fields. "Put simply"

between ecological destruction and technological hubris, the human experiment is

now in question. The stakes feel very high, and the odds very long, and the trends very ominous.⁸

By contrast he finds that scientists express “a tone of perplexed exasperation that any thinking person could perceive the present moment as dark”, given the amazing discoveries and inventions of science, and he quotes Steven Pinker, as the author of the “sanguine” *Enlightenment Now*, as an example: “none of us are as happy as we ought to be, given how amazing our world has become..... People just seem to bitch, moan, whine, carp and kvetch”.

Reading through *Falter*, with its documentation of human ignorance and greed, one feels sympathetic to Pinker’s view. McKibben, himself, is grateful for such books as Pinker’s since they show how much we have to lose if our world does falter. Our civilisation faces huge threats and these should not be overlooked but, at present, we are not coping with them.

Hope

In his epilogue McKibben ends his book on two further points that speak of hope, even as we are faltering. The first is “we really do live on an unbearably beautiful planet....even with seven billion of us, the planet remains an astonishing collection not just of cities and suburbs, but of mountains and ice and forests and ocean”. It’s infinitely more glorious than others we look to discover beyond the Earth at great risk and expense:

“the single most inhospitable cubic metre of the Earth’s surface - some waste of Saharan sand, some rocky Himalayan outcrop - is a thousand times more hospitable than the most appealing corner of Mars or Jupiter”.⁹

Secondly, and perhaps most curious of all, is human life, “*because we can destroy, but also because we can choose not to destroy*”.¹⁰ If all species, all animals have their own

⁸ McKibben, *Falter*, 2019, p 1.

⁹ Ibid. p 254.

¹⁰ Ibid. p 255.

special gifts, “ours is the possibility of restraint”. We can do incredible things, but we can also choose not to do them.

McKibben does not know if we will make these choices. He suspects we won't - “we are faltering now, and the human game has indeed begun to play itself out.....But we could make those choices. We have the tools (nonviolence chief among them) to allow us to stand up to the powerful and the reckless, and we have the fundamental idea of human solidarity that we should take as our guide”. As McKibben says, another name for solidarity is love and when he thinks about our world in its present form that is what overwhelms him:

“The love that lets each of us see we're not the most important thing on Earth, and makes us okay with that. The love that welcomes us, imperfect, into the world and surrounds us when we die”.

He adds: “Even - especially - in its twilight, the human game is graceful and compelling”.

11

“Leverage”

McKibben states at the beginning of *Falter* that he offers us honesty rather than hope but, at the same time, he wants his readers to know that he lives “in a state of engagement, not despair”. This we already know about him, but perhaps there is another human resource and possibility we shouldn't overlook. Part Two of his book consists of five chapters on the subject of “Leverage”. By leverage he is referring to the power, unimaginable wealth and ideology of the neoliberal right and traces it from its roots in the post-war fifties up until Trump today.

It's a shocking tale and he begins it by describing the simple-minded, one-dimensional novels of the Russian Ayn Rand, particularly *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*. Rand grew up in the time of the Russian Revolution and witnessed and suffered traumatically the beginnings of a totalitarian state where individual spirit and enterprise were ruthlessly suppressed. She fled to the United States in the early 1920s. Her novels

¹¹ Ibid. p 256.

were, unsurprisingly, an expression of extreme individual liberty and free enterprise values over and against any form of socialist regulation. But they became the gospel of forces hostile to government itself. As McKibben notes, the Thatcher-Reagan years were, in the words of the *Guardian*'s Jonathan Freedland, "the second age of Rand.....when the laissez-faire philosophy went from the crankish obsession of right-wing economists to the governing credo of Anglo-American capitalism".¹² The emotional core of her message was simple. In McKibben's words: "Government is bad. Selfishness is good. Watch out for yourself. Solidarity is a trap. Taxes are theft. *You're not the boss of me*". One biographer described her work as "the ultimate gateway drug to life on the right". For the *New York Times* she was the "novelist laureate" of the Reagan administration.

McKibben details her career as novelist-mentor to the neoliberal right, from Alan Greenspan's devoteeship - he was "the avatar of neoliberalism and the chief architect of the world's economy after the collapse of the Soviet Union" - to the men behind Trump today. Her writing helped to make neoliberalism as single-mindedly greedy, wealthy, destructive of society and planet and ethically barren as it is today. This is the "leverage" behind the fossil fuel, carbon economy we are now subject to.

The real leverage

But there is another leverage, challenging to the neoliberal right. It is a new wisdom that looks far beyond economics or purely material conditions. McKibben describes in detail the insane world of artificial intelligence and is incredulous at the extent now of robotic and automated technology. He also points to the deluded dreams of the super-rich in their attempts to defy death and their own mortality, so out of touch are they with the reality of the material and bodily impermanence of us all.

Knowledge of the reality of climate change can lead to a new enlightenment and the transformation of all our values, for it faces us with the truth of our own transience, both individually and collectively. Our denial of climate change may account for our collective paralysis in the face of the crisis, but a psycho-social understanding and analysis, for instance, enables us to explore the emotional, ethical, social, organisational and cultural

¹² Ibid. p 91.

dynamics that account for that paralysis and helps us towards a more integral view. An appreciation of our essential interdependency, for example, can begin to allay our fears.¹³

But at the same time we need to explore our individual responses to the emergency. As McKibben suggests we can no longer assume we will survive, individually or collectively. In fact, the most effective activists are often those who work while knowing that their efforts may fail to secure their aims. For they have learnt to act regardless of the fruits of their work. They go beyond both hope and despair because their engagement is based on other than selfish values. But where does the strength come from which enables engagement even without hope?

Robert Thurman

I have lately been re-reading Robert Thurman's *Inner Revolution*. Thurman is known for being the first Western Tibetan Buddhist monk, even though he disrobed only a year after ordination to take up an academic career. He has been a life-long friend of the Dalai Lama, meeting him in the 1960s in Dharamsala a few years after the latter escaped from Tibet after it had been overrun by the Chinese. Thurman learnt about Buddhism under the tutelage of the Dalai Lama and in turn taught him about Western culture.

Tibet, of course, was where the great tradition of Buddhism migrated after India was invaded by Moslem culture in the Middle Ages. It provided a safe refuge for Buddhism's profound interior science, to be treasured and cultivated for nearly a thousand years in relative peace and isolation, until the Chinese invaded in the last century. Thurman believed that while Europe and the West developed its scientific and material culture - its "outer modernity" - Buddhism in Tibet was able to secure and develop the inner wisdom of *Buddha-dharma* - the "inner modernity". As Thurman writes in his preface:

The tradition of nonviolence, optimism, and unconditional compassion that developed in Tibet is the culmination of a slow inner revolution, a cool one, hard to see, that began 2,500 years ago with the Buddha's insight about the end of suffering. What I have learned from these people has forever changed my life, and I

¹³ See the contributions in *Climate Psychology: On Indifference to Disaster*, edited by Paul Hoggett, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2019.

believe their culture contains an inner science particularly relevant to the difficult time in which we live. ¹⁴

Thurman coined the term “psychonaut” to characterise the Tibetan exploration of “inner space” in contrast to astronauts who are the heroes of a Western culture that looks to “outer space”.

With the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese the lamas who fled into exile have become a teaching diaspora across the world. They have not only shared their profound understanding of Buddhism and the realisation of a limitless and timeless Self but also encouraged us to explore our own perennial traditions, which have been ignored by material science. In doing this we might begin to think how inner and outer sciences can be viewed as parts of an integrated whole.

The belief of a gross materialistic view - certainly the neoliberal view, insofar as it has one - is that happiness is achieved through the accumulation of things. The more money you have, the happier you will be. In the Buddhist practice happiness is gained, first, through tragic awareness - the initial understanding of suffering - and then the realisation that there is a way through tragedy - to the cessation of suffering and its transcendence. This is reached by going within - the “inner revolution” of Thurman, open to us all. This is the supreme truth - the jewel - of Buddhism and of other perennial paths of wisdom. Christ himself taught simply that the kingdom of heaven is within.

The fact of climate change and global warming is already causing great suffering and anxiety in the world. Through our outer science we can understand and combat the material fact. We can try to mitigate it. Through an inner and ethical science we can develop the means - the resolve, strength of mind and resourcefulness - to face it. We can adapt. Outer and inner revolutions go together. This is true enlightenment.

The human race may be “faltering” and, in McKibben’s speculations, we may ask whether the human game has begun to play itself out, but we still cannot know what the future brings. But we can know the present. The Earth may be “*On Fire*” but the case for a Green New Deal is, as Klein fervently believes, now burning inside many. Hope is in

¹⁴ Robert Thurman, *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Happiness*, Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, London: Rider, 1998, p 21.

question and despair may wake us up from our complacency but only an inner revolution provides the means for an engagement which prevails over both.

October 2019