

Shock waves

Author Naomi Klein's new book "This Changes Everything," picks up where "The Shock Doctrine" left off — getting at the root of climate change politics and the potential to chart a better course

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Earlier this year the CEO of the world's largest oil and gas company joined an anti-fracking lawsuit because of plans to erect a 160-foot water tower near his Texas home.

Rex Tillerson of Exxon complained that the value of his property would be harmed.

This is the sort of exquisitely painful ironic detail to be found in Naomi Klein's new book. But it's also where she finds hope.

Companies like Exxon are addicted to extracting fossil fuels, says writer and activist Klein, even though the future of the planet depends on them staying in the ground.

But as the reserves of conventional oil are diminishing, the energy companies are seeking what they call more innovative ways of supplying gas and oil — including fracking, which involves blasting huge amounts of water and chemicals into shale rock to fracture it and release natural gas.

And this isn't only happening miles out to sea or in the distant, easily overlooked ancestral homelands of indigenous people. It's happening at the foot of the gardens of the likes of Tillerson — and they don't like it.

Far from being a cleaner alternative to conventional oil, recent research suggests

the methane emissions from fracking make it much dirtier than its advocates claim. Methane is a more dangerous global warming gas than CO₂.

Fracking is only making it harder to avoid the 2 degrees centigrade rise in global temperatures that most climate scientists agree could trigger catastrophic effects, including melting of the ice sheets and rises in sea levels. Seen like this, says Klein, fracking — which has also provoked protests in

Lancashire and Salford — looks less like innovation and more like the helpless behavior of desperate addiction. But if the crisis has forced even Tillerson to consult his lawyers, it's also an opportunity.

Klein's previous book, "The Shock Doctrine," charted the way political leaders seized on natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina or economic crises to push through right-wing policies of privatization, cutting public spending and lowering taxes.

Her new book, "This Changes Everything," picks up where "The Shock



PHOTO BY ED KASHI

Doctrine" left off but is "something different," she says. "It's about people shock and a progressive response to the crisis that gets to the root of why disasters happen. It's an antidote to the shock doctrine."

The antidote for Klein involves nothing less than the overthrow of the dominant free-market economic model, in which corporate power will be reined in, government spending is increased to build low-carbon economies and people seize back democracy from the grassroots up. This is not about just installing more efficient lightbulbs.

"It's too late to stop climate change from coming; it is already here, and increasingly brutal disasters are headed our way, no matter what we do," writes Klein. "But it's not too late to avert the worst, and there is still time to change ourselves so that we are far less brutal to one another when those disasters strike. And that, it seems to me, is worth a great deal."

In the book, Klein's vast sweep of research begins in Washington at the Heartland Institute's conference — "the premier gathering for those dedicated to denying the overwhelming scientific consensus that human activity is warming the planet." She hears a succession of speakers convinced that climate change is a Commie plot to overthrow the American way of life — and finds the evidence many are funded by big oil money.

But although she emphasizes how wrong the deniers are about the science, in another way she finds them more honest than some who profess themselves to be on the side of the planet.

She is particularly scathing about big environmental groups that have allowed themselves to be hijacked by corporate interests and relates the astonishing story of the Nature Conservancy, which took over some land in Galveston Bay, Texas, from oil giant Mobil to protect one of the last

remaining breeding grounds of the threatened Attwater's prairie chicken. In 1999, it sunk its own gas well inside the preserve.

It's as breathtaking a tale as Tillerson's anti-fracking protest, but big green groups further the energy companies' interests in other ways too, points out Klein, particularly in their support for "market-based solutions" to climate change "that have provided an invaluable service to the fossil fuels sector as a whole." The big green groups got seduced by the access they were given to the corridors of power, and started to back so-called win-win solutions they claimed would benefit the environment while allowing the pursuit of profit to carry on unfettered.

It's a dangerous illusion, says Klein, citing the opaque world of carbon credits and trading, and carbon offsets. These are not only a distraction from the priority of stopping pollution, she says, but actively contribute to global warming. She cites research finding "overwhelming evidence that manufacturers are gaming the system by producing more potent greenhouse gases so they can be paid to destroy them."

Klein's dispassionate prose in the book only heightens the nightmarish logic. She skewers the techno-optimists pushing geo-engineering ideas, such as space mirrors that reflect the sun's heat away from the earth and the "Pinatubo Option," which would mimic the effect of the Philippines volcano by blasting sulphuric acid droplets into the atmosphere to prevent the sun's heat reaching the ground. Coolly, Klein points out that this could make blue skies a thing of the past, prevent astronomers from seeing stars, reduce the capacity of solar power generators — "irony alert" — and create serious drought in Africa.

She then turns to philanthropists who

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