

Democratic Energy and Climate Change

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In her book *This Changes Everything*, Naomi Klein demonstrates the limitations and disadvantages of centralized energy sources such as nuclear energy and natural gas, and argues for transition towards localized, democratically managed renewables that will prioritize human and environmental needs.

Climate change, caused by human activity, is forcing its position at the center of public debates. And that shouldn't surprise us since the crisis it's about to cause is of much bigger magnitude than any other economic or refugee crisis we have experienced by now. If such a crisis occurs it is possible that it will change the face of the planet entirely, possibly making it uninhabitable for humans as well as for most animal species. This gives new strength and importance to the debate about how we will continue the development of our societies, without endangering our very existence.

The carbon emissions, being released into the atmosphere as a result of burning fossil fuels, are amongst the main factors responsible for global warming. And the fact that the energy of our highly technological societies is being delivered mainly through these non-renewable and polluting resources, raises furthermore questions about what could replace them and what would it take such a change to occur.

In her book *This Changes Everything* Naomi Klein investigates in depth these urgent questions. She demonstrates the limitations and disadvantages of centralized energy sources such as nuclear energy and natural gas, both embedded in the contemporary corporatist, top-down model. She argues for transition towards localized, democratically managed renewables, that will prioritize human and environmental needs before profit and autocratic interests – i.e. they will be turned into commons. The proposal of a commons based system beyond the dogma of constant economic growth is being shared by a growing number of thinkers, social movements and communities.

Business, The State and The Ecological Crisis

However, for such a transition to be initiated we can't rely on business, as Klein demonstrates in length in *This Changes Everything*, reviewing the fruitless, often even harmful to the ecologic cause, collaboration between the big green organizations and the corporate sector.¹ No private company will dedicate its resources to a developmentalist model that prioritizes human lives and nature before profits. By design these entities are based on growth through profiteering and expanding markets by all means necessary. For example, even when they do engage with renewables they use them in the frames of the capitalist growth doctrine, creating environmentally harmful and excluding, but highly profitable in capitalist terms, gigantic, centralized solar or wind parks. Furthermore, the energy sector, she notes, is temporarily constrained from turning to renewables on larger scale because of the exponential growth it is currently enjoying amidst the shale gas boom².

The state, on the other hand, is traditionally seen as the sole alternative to the private sector, thus a potential ally against the polluting multinationals. But statist entities have proven to tend towards centralization, bureaucracy and unaccountability, and thus disconnected from local needs and experiences. The very states are deeply embedded in the growth based extractivist imaginary of capitalist globalization, as Naomi Klein points at state-owned companies, ranging

¹ Naomi Klein. "Magical Thinking" in *This Changes Everything*. Penguin Books 2015. pp. 191–290

² *Ibid*, p. 130

from scandinavian ‘social democracies’ to ‘pink tide’ governments, like the one of Ecuador, that wreck nature for extracting resources which to trade in global markets.³ The top-down socialist states of the past, with their five-year plans, were equally destructive of nature, as well as remote from the societies, whom they were supposedly ‘developing’. This is ever more evident from today’s China, whose Communist Party is easily and eagerly adjusting its policies to the extractivist agenda, sacrificing even the air its subjects breathe in the name of economic growth.

Instead a new approach is needed for such a crisis to be tackled efficiently. It cannot be resolved by mere reforms — as we saw, the capitalist economic model and the statist top-down decision-making processes are essentially predisposed towards enforcing, not preventing the ecological crisis. This poses the need of holistic systemic alternative, compelling us to think outside the dominant institutions and come up with new ones or such that already exist in the margins of society.

Towards a new energy paradigm

One such proposal is the creation of utilities like energy cooperatives or commons which are democratically managed by the communities that use them. Such model strives at local sustainability and satisfaction of human needs (reflected by the participatory character) instead of profiteering and growth. This will enable communities to have control over their energy sources in contrast with other ones managed privately or by the state, thus directing them away from dirty fossil fuels and towards much needed renewables. Naomi Klein notes that such type of commons based renewables can be cheaper than dirtier alternatives. One of the reasons: they can be source of income for their communities when unused power is being fed back to the grid.⁴

Decentralization and communal participation are of great importance for the successful acceptance of renewables by society. Klein speaks⁵ of many reasons why communities would rebel against large-scale, be they privately or state-owned ones — from the noise of densely positioned wind turbines to the threat of inflicting damages to wild life and ecosystems posed by gigantic solar parks. In contrast, communally owned, locally based renewables are hugely accepted by local residents due to their smaller, human and environmentally friendly scale, the energetic autarchy they provide for their communities, revenues from selling back to the grid.

Germany’s energy sector has long been exemplary for the establishment of many such utilities.⁶ Nearly half of its renewable energy is coming from sources, in the hands of farmers and citizen groups. Amongst them are many energy cooperatives, which amount close to the staggering nine hundred. These utilities play dual role: simultaneously they produce clean power and generate revenue for their communities by selling back to the grid.

Germany’s predecessor in this field however is Denmark.⁷ In the 1970s and 1980s, more than 40 percent of country’s electricity was coming from renewables — mostly wind. And roughly 85 percent of them were owned by farmers and cooperatives. As in Germany, Denmark’s most committed to sustainable energy were not statist entities or privately owned companies but local

³ Ibid, pp. 176–182

⁴ Ibid, p.133

⁵ Ibid, p.132

⁶ Ibid, p.131

⁷ Ibid, p.131

communities. In the last years many multinationals have entered the energy sector of the country, creating difficulties for the communal renewable utilities.

Transitional strategy

As we observed above, we can't overcome the ecological crisis through the private sector and the nation-state. Dimitrios Roussopoulos, coming from the tradition of social ecology, emphasises firmly that the overcoming of the ecological crisis can be done through stateless and direct-democratic manner. In a way Naomi Klein's thought intersects this logic by emphasizing on the potential grassroots social movements and communities have to resist and initiate bottom-up solutions to the climate crisis.⁸

History shows us that the main enforcer of emancipatory social changes were not artificial managerial mechanisms like the nation-states but society itself. The abolition of slavery, the introduction of universal suffrage rights, the eight hour work day were all product of struggles waged and won by social movements over governments and authorities. The environmental cause is no different; however, as Klein and Roussopoulos also suggest, it has to be understood as part of a wider emancipatory struggle, in order to overcome the weaknesses that temporarily entails: the messianism it often embraces, the neglecting of other causes and the elitist attitude, it sometimes has.

One way to approach these and many more weaknesses, is for the ecological movements to be radically democratized. Thus professional "negotiators" will be replaced by assemblies of rank-and-file activists and concerned citizens, creating healthy human relationships and linking these movements with society — i.e. emphasizing on the squares rather than the luxurious corporate or government offices and dimming the separation between "activists" and "ordinary people". With no top-down "professional" leadership to collaborate with political and economic elites, the messianism and elitism couldn't easily find fertile soil to grow. And since the environmental matters are interlinked, the social movements that deal with them should have intertwined character. This would imply the establishment of network of groups, each leading its fight, collaborating however on global level with other ones.

The interaction of the ecological movements with other social movements is of crucial importance. One of the reasons is that all spheres of human life are interconnected, and this includes humanity's relationship with nature. As we have seen above capitalist economics, mixed with top-down bureaucracy, influences our health as well as that of the planet and so on. Thus anti-capitalists, ecologists and direct democracy movements should all collaborate with one another, transfusing from one struggle into another.

Such collaboration could prove very fertile especially for the ecological movements. For example the growing number of municipal platforms participating in local elections, like the one recently established in Spain, *Network of Cities for the Common Good*, could provide a friendlier environment for communally owned and managed renewable co-ops. The *Olympia for All* municipal platform in Olympia, Washington, USA, for instance, has made environmental commitments in its platform, showing an ecologically friendly face. In a globalized system, hostile towards grassroots initiatives, as we saw from Denmark's experience where the liberalization of the mar-

⁸ Ibid, p.459

ket gave a hard time to energy co-ops, the radicalization of municipalities could provide much needed breathing space for collaborative experiments.

The climate crisis is quickly unfolding and we hear about it ever more often from scientists, journalists and even Hollywood blockbusters. We see its signs in the form of natural disasters to appear with greater frequency and destructiveness. But the dominant institutions are unable to tackle it successfully. This is not due to lack of political will, but a consequence of the growth-based top-down politico-economic system which nowadays squeezes all of the Earth. The resistance takes global shape: activists from the US, experienced in the anti-shale gas struggle, share their experience with Canadian communities resisting fracking, who on their part share their know-how with French movements struggling against shale gas extraction,⁹ leading to some major victories in the form of bans on fracking in municipalities across Canada and USA and in all of France.

However, for the effective tackling of the climate crisis, a more holistic approach is needed. This struggle has to be integrated into a political, direct-democratic project, one that goes beyond “ecology” alone. Otherwise, as Cornelius Castoriadis warns us, ecology can potentially give strength to neo-fascist, messianic ideologies, excusing the establishment of authoritarian regimes, who to impose draconian restrictions on a panic-stricken and apathetic population.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid, pp.303–304

¹⁰ Cornelius Castoriadis (2003). *The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)*. p.116.

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