



currents

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A PROPHECY OF PROFITS

BY TIM JOHNSON

NAOMI KLEIN AND THE RISE OF
'DISASTER CAPITALISM'



PHOTO BY RONNIE YIP

A rain that had threatened stopped, and a blue expanse began to yawn overhead. Bill McKibben stepped on to the stage as sunlight broke through, encouraging a crowd of more than 800 that had gathered on Fairhaven Village Green to enact their local values on behalf of the globe. Sometimes nature cooperates.

"This is the perfect place for this fight," the activist and author of *The End of Nature* told listeners, encouraging them to let their voices be heard on whether to site the nation's largest coal export facility here. Bellingham, he said, has earned a national reputation for supporting sustainable, living economies.

That reputation has brought a national or-

ganization to Bellingham for a conference this month. The Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, or BALLE, is North America's fastest growing network of socially responsible businesses, comprised of more than 80 community networks in 30 U.S. states and Canadian provinces representing 22,000 independent business members across the U.S. and Canada.

BALLE is organized around a principle that local, independent businesses and entrepreneurs are among the most powerful agents of change, builders of community builders and the starting point for social innovation, aligning commerce with the common good. Michelle Long and her husband Derek helped found a chapter in Bellingham in 2002. Michelle went on to become

BALLE's executive director.

The national conference will draw dozens of "amazing people coming to spread how localization is working to build community health, wealth and happiness," Long said.

Among them is Naomi Klein, who will keynote the event.

And while Klein will speak to concerns different from McKibben, and was invited to Bellingham for a wholly separate purpose, the pairing of the two at this particular moment in Bellingham could not be more fortuitous. Sometimes nature cooperates.

Klein and McKibben recently penned an article together, encouraging renewed action in response to one of the most imminent threats of corporate cronyism, the fossil fuel industry and its contribution to global climate change.

"The full power of the fossil fuel industry—the most profitable business in the planet's history—has been brought to bear on the fight, and they play hard and dirty," Klein and McKibben wrote.

"To us, the lesson is pretty clear. Since we're never going to have as much money as the fossil fuel industry, we need to rebuild the kind of mass movement that marked 1970: bodies, passion, and creativity are the currencies we can compete in."

It's not impossible, they wrote; but it is difficult.

Klein is the author of *Shock Doctrine*, a book that details the many ways in which corporate influences use crisis and catastrophe to rewrite laws in their favor, forming—she says—"disaster capitalism."

"Capitalism and democracy, free markets and free



ATTEND

WHO: Naomi Klein
WHAT: Living Economies 2011
WHEN: June 14-17
WHERE: Western Washington University campus
COST: \$595 general admission, discounts available
MORE: Klein keynotes and opens conference at 8:50am
INFO: www.livingeconomies.org

people, do not, as we've been told, go hand in hand," the 40-year-old Canadian journalist and author remarks. Free market advocates believe markets perform best when freed from interference, she notes, and support getting rid of tariffs, subsidies, minimum-wage laws, public housing, Social Security, financial regulation, and licensing requirements, including those for doctors—virtually every measure devised to protect people from the market's harshest edges.

Indeed, one wonders how enthusiastically the impacts of exporting hundreds of tons of coal to foreign markets would be embraced absent double-digit unemployment. Suffering

can break down resistance to unpopular ideas.

"What I'm talking about," she summarizes, "is using a crisis to limit democracy, to declare a democracy-free zone because it's a state of emergency."

Klein argues that the only circumstance in which a population would accept eliminating these protections is when it is in a state of shock, following a crisis of some sort—a natural disaster, a terrorist attack, a war, the collapse of an economy and the joblessness that follows.

"A person in shock regresses to a childlike state in which he longs for a parental figure to take control," Klein argues. "Similarly, a population in a state of shock will hand exceptional powers to its leaders, permitting them to destroy the regulatory functions of government."

Her work is not without critics, with some scholars complaining Klein conflates the casual opportunism of the marketplace with causal intent and design.

"Klein's thesis is that economic liberalization is unpopular and, therefore, can only win by deceiving or coercing voters," Johan Norberg, a fellow at Cato Institute, argues. "In particular, free market ideas rely on crises. In a time of a natural disaster, war, or military coup, people are disoriented and confused and fight for their own immediate survival or wellbeing, setting the stage for corporations, politicians, and economists to push through trade liberalization, privatization, and lower public spending without facing any opposition."

Hers is a novel take on opportunism, an inversion of the standard practice of putting protections in place following catastrophe. And whether by accident or design, one cannot argue that conversations are underway in places of power to

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-BILL MCKIBBEN AND NAOMI KLEIN

scale back social reforms, consumer protections and environmental safeguards in response to a collapsed economy.

"The New Deal is usually told as a history of F.D.R.," Klein says, "of reforms put in place following a great economic depression. But we don't talk enough about the pressure from below. Neighborhoods organized, and when their evicted neighbors' furniture was put on the streets they moved it back into their homes. It was that kind of direct action that won victories like rent control, public housing, and the creation of Fannie Mae." Environmental and economic protections were also part of this reform, she says.

A series of shocks and panics can force these reforms to be undone as an unsettled public casts about for new

models and corporate lobbyists exercise their influence in the nation's capital.

"Part of the shock doctrine is really a philosophy of power," notes Klein. "It's much more a political strategy, the premise of which is that there is total integration between corporate and political elites," a union of policy the Clinton Administration termed "The Third Way."

"This is a philosophy of power, understood at the highest levels, that the best time to push through a policy tsunami, sometimes called 'economic shock therapy'—a program of privatization, deregulation, cuts to government spending—is in the aftermath of a crisis.

"One could argue that all the disasters that I'm talking about are themselves market disasters in the sense of climate change being intimately connected to the quest for short-term economic growth, the inability of a market system to think and respond to crises and get off the disastrous ecological track that we're on, as well as the intersection between climate change and weak infrastructure.

"We've been starving the public sphere now for 25 years and the bones of the public state are now frail."

Her book, her philosophy was forged in the fires of Sept. 11, 2001.

"What were we talking about before we were so rudely interrupted?" she asks. "We were actually talking about capitalism, if I recall, before September 11. There was a really powerful global discussion going on and it wasn't about globalization; it was actually more and more about capitalism," she notes of response to the World Trade Organization in Seattle ten months earlier.

"There's been a lot of activism since that period but I feel like we on the left and we who were part of that moment, not really a movement but a moment, went in different directions.

"The more I understand shock tactics the more I realize that this was a classic state of disorientation in the sense of we lost our narrative, we lost our story and the discourse of the war on terrorists was incredibly effective at heightening that disorientation," she observes. "It had a really effective silencing effect on a lot of people. In terms of thinking about how we reorganize."

Moving forward, Klein says, "I believe it's about knitting together what it is that we know about war, natural disasters and profiteering now and what we knew before and our work will be cut out for us, really. I also believe that the level of dissent is so high but there's a lack of confidence, a lack of courage and I think part of that is about the effectiveness of fear."

A union of forces is required, Klein concludes. And, like the old New Deal, reform will arrive from neighborhoods. ☺

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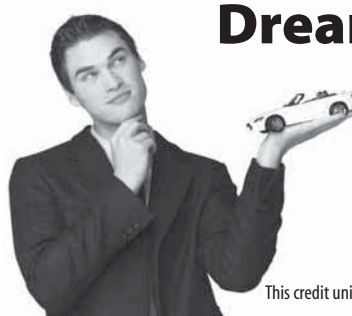
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