

We must not return to the pre-Covid status quo, only worse

Naomi Klein
Guardian Books
Monday 13th July



What kind of world will the coronavirus crisis leave us with? Interviewed for a Guardian Live event, the activist and author insists that the climate, equality and fairness must be at the heart of the post-pandemic recovery.

Katharine Viner: How are you finding lockdown?

Naomi Klein: For those of us who were teaching our students by Zoom, as I was – home schooling, doing that juggle and figuring out how to bake – we had it really cushy. Now I am back in Canada for the summer with my family, in

quarantine because in Canada, if you come from the US, you have to be in very strict quarantine. I have not left the house in almost two weeks. I am actually developing some phobias about leaving lockdown.

Katharine Viner: There is a great quote in one of your recent essays from a tech CEO, who says: “Humans are biohazards, machines are not.” It chilled me to the bone and made me fearful for the future. And you have written interestingly about the “Screen New Deal”.

Naomi Klein: Silicon Valley had this pre-existing agenda before Covid that imagined replacing so many of our personal bodily experiences by inserting technology in the middle of them.

So for the few spaces where tech is not already mediating our relationships, there was a plan – to replace in-person teaching with virtual learning, for instance, and in-person medicine with telehealth and in-person delivery with robots. All of this has been rebranded, post-Covid, as a touchless technology, as a way of replacing what has been diagnosed as the problem, which is the problem of touch.

And yet, on a personal level, what we miss most is touch. And so we need to expand the menu of options about how we live with Covid, because we do not have a vaccine; it is not about to arrive. Even if there is a breakthrough, it’s going to be many, many months, possibly years before it can be rolled out at the scale we would need it.

So how are we going to live with this thing? Are we going to accept pre-Covid “normal”, only much diminished, without the relationships that sustain us? Are we going to allow our kids to have all of their learning mediated by technology? Or are we going to invest in people?

Instead of pouring all of our money into a Screen New Deal and trying to solve problems in a way that diminishes our quality of life, why do we not go on a teacher-hiring spree? Why do we not have twice as many teachers with half-the-size classrooms and figure out a way to do outdoor education?

There are so many ways we can think about responding to this crisis that do not accept this idea that we have to return to the pre-Covid status quo, only worse, only with more surveillance, more screens and less human contact.

Katharine Viner: Do you see any governments talking like that?

Naomi Klein: I was heartened to hear Jacinda Ardern talk about a four-day working week as a solution to the fact that New Zealand is very dependent on tourism dollars, and yet New Zealand is probably the country that has dealt with the pandemic better than any others in terms of its fatality rates. It can’t fling its

doors open to tourists in the way that it has in the past, so there's this idea that maybe New Zealanders should work less, be paid the same and have more leisure time to be able to enjoy their own country safely.

How do we slow down? This is what I am thinking a lot about. It feels like every time we slam our foot on the accelerator marked "business as usual" or "back to normal", the virus surges back and says: "Slow down."

Katharine Viner: We all love those moments of slowing down, but the UK government is hellbent on getting back to normal, come what may. Everything opening, pubs opening, it is desperate to get us to go on holiday. There is an urgency not to change anything about how we live, just get back to how it was before.

Naomi Klein: And it is madness. It is a very small percentage of the population that wants to just fling the doors open. It is a majority that actually is much more concerned about returning to work before it is safe, sending their kids to school before it is safe. It's sometimes framed as giving people what they want, but this is not what the polling shows.

There are similarities between the way Donald Trump has handled it and the way Boris Johnson has handled it. They are turning it into some test of masculinity, even in Johnson's case after having the virus. Jair Bolsonaro was talking about how he was an athlete so he knows he will handle it. Trump was talking about his good genes.

Katharine Viner: I was interested in your views on why you think the civil rights protests, in light of George Floyd's death, have happened now? It seems intriguing, in the midst of one crisis, that, around the world, there are these huge demonstrations against racism.

Naomi Klein: This is not the first uprising of its kind. But I think there were certain aspects of it that were unique because of Covid and the outsized impact of the pandemic for African Americans in cities like Chicago where, by some counts, 70% of the fatalities from Covid were African Americans.

Whether it's because they are the ones performing those at-risk jobs, without protections, or because of the legacies of environmental pollution in their communities, stress, trauma, unsafe workplaces and discriminatory healthcare, black communities are bearing a disproportionate burden of the fatalities from the virus, defying this idea that we were all in this together.

In the midst of this moment of profound trauma, those killings – of Ahmaud Arbery, of George Floyd, of Breonna Taylor – slice through that.

But then there is a question that a lot of people are asking, which is what are all these non-black people doing at the protests? That is what is new, certainly at this scale. Many of these demonstrations are truly multiracial; black-led multiracial demonstrations. Why is this time different?

I have a few ideas. One has to do with the softness that the pandemic has introduced into our culture. When you slow down, you can feel things; when you're in that constant rat race, it doesn't leave much time for empathy. From its very beginning, the virus has forced us to think about interdependencies and relationships. The first thing you are thinking about is: everything I touch, what has somebody else touched? The food I am eating, the package that was just delivered, the food on the shelves. These are connections that capitalism teaches us not to think about.

I think that being forced to think in more interconnected ways may have softened more of us up to think about these racist atrocities, and not say they are somebody else's issue.

Katharine Viner: There's a great line in the new introduction to *On Fire*, your latest book, when you say: "whatever was bad before the disaster downgraded to unbearable" – it's an unbearable situation the way black men are treated by the police.

Naomi Klein: There is always this discourse whenever disasters hit: "Climate change doesn't discriminate, the pandemic doesn't discriminate. We are all in this together." But that is not true. That is not how disasters act. They act as magnifiers and they act as intensifiers. If you had a job in an Amazon warehouse that was making you sick before, or if you were in a long-term care facility that was already treating you as if your life was of no value, that was bad before – but all of that gets magnified to unbearable now. And if you were disposable before, you're sacrificial now.

And we are only talking about the violence that we can see. What we have to talk more about is the violence that's hidden, and that's domestic violence. To put it bluntly, when men are stressed, women get it in the face and so do kids. These lockdowns are so stressful because families don't have any reprieve from each other and even the best family needs a little bit of space. Then you add layoffs, economic stress. It's a very bad situation for women right now.

Katharine Viner: I know you spent a lot of the last year working on the Green New Deal and the Bernie Sanders campaign. How does it all look now? Do you feel more or less positive about the potential?

Naomi Klein: On some level, it is harder. You mentioned Bernie and certainly my preferred outcome would be a presidential candidate who is running a campaign

with the Green New Deal at its centre. I do believe we will only win this with an interplay of mass-movement pressure from the outside, but also a receptivity from the inside. I think that we had that chance with Bernie.

It is harder with Joe Biden, but not impossible. At the end of *On Fire*, I gave 10 reasons in favour of a Green New Deal and why it is good climate policy. One of those reasons is that it is recession-proof. We have this really bad track record in the climate movement of winning gains when the economy is doing relatively well, because the kind of climate solutions we get from governments tend to be these neoliberal, market-based solutions, like climate taxes or renewable energy policies that are perceived to make energy costs more expensive, or carbon taxing that makes the price of petrol more expensive. As soon as you have an economic downturn, the support for these policies reliably evaporates. We saw that after the 2008 financial crisis. Climate has got a reputation as being a bourgeois thing – the issue that you care about if you don't have to worry about putting food on the table.

What is important about a Green New Deal is that it is modelled after one of the greatest economic stimulus programmes of all time, during the greatest economic crisis of all time, and that is FDR's New Deal during the Great Depression. Because of this, the biggest pushback that I got when I released *On Fire* a little less than a year ago was: "But we don't do things like this when the economy is doing well."

The only times that we can point to – and this is a hard truth – when our societies have moved fast and changed big and catalytically are moments of great depression or war. Yet we now know we can change quickly. We have seen it. We have dramatically changed our lives. And we found out that our governments have trillions of dollars that they could have marshalled this whole time.

All of that is potentially radicalising. I do feel we have a chance. I would not describe myself as optimistic, because this is a future we have to fight for. But if we just look at moments in history when we have won big changes, they are moments like this.

Naomi Klein is the inaugural Gloria Steinem chair of media, culture and feminist studies at Rutgers University. The paperback of her 2019 book 'On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal' is published by Penguin on 24 September.