



Naomi Klein - Summit 2020 Keynote - The Years Of Repair

This transcript may not be 100% accurate due to audio quality or other factors.

Naomi Klein: Friends, comrades, fellow internationalists, wherever you are on this planet, welcome to this inaugural and historic summit of the Progressive International. I think we can all agree on the importance of the international part of this mission. All around the world, far-right strong men wield chauvinistic nationalisms and supremacist identities as their deadliest weapons, distracting and dividing populations so elites are liberated to hoard unimaginable sums of ill-gotten wealth. In this poisonous context, it is imperative that we reclaim and revive the rich internationalist traditions that have always been part of the most radical left traditions. As borders harden, it is we who must committedly tear them down. Building from below our movement of movements. United across all boundaries of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, religion, physical ability and, yes, national borders. But what about the progressive part of the Progressive International? What do we mean by progress? Now that can be a bit trickier, which is why we must define, as sharply and precisely as we can, the kind of progress we mean to embrace and the kinds of bullying, life-annihilating, pseudo-progress that we must reject. Indeed, far too often, the imperative for progress has been wielded as its own deadly weapon, its own supremacist ideology. For imperial Europe, the supposedly divine mission to civilise cultures cast as lower down an intensely hierarchical chain of being is as blood-soaked a rhetorical cudgel as any in human history.

And neither is this ancient history. To this day, the progress imperative is a weapon routinely trained on farmers, indigenous people and anyone who stands in the way of some profitable and planet-destabilising industrial project,

whether logging in the Amazon or fracking Australia's interior or laying a new pipeline on indigenous lands in Canada. Again and again, the idea of progress is invoked as a knee-jerk embrace of change, development and forward propulsion for their own sake. Underlying it is the familiar assumption that nothing is valuable unless it is changed, disrupted, expanded. It is this imperative, inseparable from the economic growth imperative, that is at the heart of the climate crisis, amongst so many other crises we face. To question this obsession with growth and developmentalist progress is not the same as questioning the need for deep change. Far from it, because here we all are. So many of us isolated from our loved ones because of COVID. Too many of us breathing air thick with ash from devastating wildfires. All of us confronting a world that is ravaged by famine, more fascism and extinction. To say we need change, to progress to somewhere much better than this, is an absurd understatement. To get out of the hole we are in, we need to change pretty much everything about our political and economic systems. Either that or accept a future marked by an unending series of overlapping and intersecting shocks: climate, health, economic; all exploited by authoritarians for further pillage. To put it in the language of my book titles, either we change everything to arrest climate disruption or we are stuck in a rolling shock doctrine ad infinitum, each shock leaving our societies more robbed and ravaged than the last one. A global Green New Deal. A vision at the centre of the Progressive International project is about choosing that first option, the option of deep systemic change.

It grows out of many years of organising and theorising within the international climate justice movement in the Global South and in the North. Over time, it has gone by many names and under many banners. Just transition. System change, not climate change. A Marshall Plan for planet Earth, as Bolivia's climate negotiating team under Evo Morales called it more than a decade ago. It has been called "Rights of Mother Earth", dating back to a historic convergence in Cochabamba. And five years ago, almost to this day, we in Canada kicked off a people's platform called the Leap Manifesto. More recently, the idea of a global Green New Deal has captured the imagination of a new generation of young activists and insurgent politicians, successfully breaking down many barriers between left movements and developing a common vision that protects our common home while creating good green jobs and investing in deliberately impoverished communities. All of these projects share something in common: a

commitment to getting off fossil fuels while building a far more democratic and inclusive world. They are rooted in the need to repair the damage done to the earth and still being done and to make reparation to those whose land and labour were stolen or drastically devalued over the long centuries of plunder. But in these discussions of wartime levels of green mobilisation, there has always been attention, because whether we call it a Green New Deal or a Marshall Plan for Planet Earth. These are sweeping industrial projects that call for a great deal of speed, construction and economic activity. They are, after all, about changing everything. Anything on that scale will, of course, charge up GDP growth, which in our society is intimately connected to consumption, which is intimately connected with pollution and the devouring of the natural world. Creating green jobs that pay a family-supporting wage is great and needed. But if all that income gets spent inside our wasteful consumer cycle, we will still be living in the sixth mass extinction, and we probably won't reduce carbon emissions fast enough. In short, we can call something "green" all we want, but on a planet as ravaged as ours, if we aren't tackling the fundamental problem of overconsumption amongst the wealthiest 20 percent, then we will remain in crisis. For a time, there was some hope that we could defer this tricky, sticky conversation, focus first on supply, building out that shiny new green infrastructure: the light rail and the renewable grids and the zero-carbon housing. And then once the jobs have been created and everyone saw the quality-of-life benefits, focus on the harder part, which is contracting demand using far less energy, eating less animal protein, rationing air travel. Yes, the hard stuff. Now, that was never true. We don't have time for that kind of PR-oriented sequencing. We do have to do it all at once. And the good news, if there is any, is that COVID changes these calculations dramatically. First, because it's a lot harder to talk about rationing air travel when the skies are crowded with planes than when the airlines are in crisis and begging for new bailouts. Similarly, it's easier to talk about the costs of fast fashion when people are vowing never to get out of their sweat pants or to talk about the benefits of shrinking the human footprint on the natural world when so many have so recently taken solace during these grim months from plant life and birdsong. If there was ever a time to have these hard conversations about overconsumption within our movements and in the broader society, about the things that matter and the things that most emphatically do not, it is surely now, when so many are

questioning the lopsided priorities of their pre-COVID lives. Most fundamentally, it may even be easier, easier, still not easy, to have that long-deferred debate about growth as a measure of progress. Because here is an interesting thing about this novel virus. Every time our system returns to anything like business-as-usual, packing aeroplanes, flinging open universities, crowding workers into warehouses, seniors into for-profit care facilities, partying like it's 2019, we see new outbreaks, new deaths. It's September and back-to-normal is spreading hand in glove with the plague. There will be school and parties and shopping, and every time, quote unquote, normal wins, the virus wins. When we heed the calls to get back to growth, that's when people die. It's just that simple. On the other hand, New Zealand's economy has contracted by a staggering 12 percent, and that is intimately related to the fact that it has seen only 25 COVID deaths since March. To put that in perspective, the US state of Ohio had twenty five COVID deaths on Wednesday alone. If there is a bottom line, it may be this. When we speed up to how we were living before, so does the spread of the virus. When we slow back down, paring down our activities to only the most essential, being deliberate and careful, as in "full of care", the virus slows down too. Our political leaders, centrists and rightists alike, almost all talk of being at war with this deadly virus, positioning themselves as Churchillian leaders doing battle against an unseen enemy. Certainly there is much to be done, much to mobilise in order to save lives, but what if we embraced a different metaphor than that of the evil enemy?

When I was researching the wreckage from Hurricane Katrina a couple of years ago, several Puerto Ricans I met referred to the massive storm that ravaged their islands not as an enemy, but as our teacher, a tough teacher, certainly, but a good one with many lessons to convey: lessons about what matters in life, not stuff, but loved ones; lessons about the true enemies the island faced, the pollution that made storms so much more lethal, the decades of austerity that made energy and health infrastructure unable to withstand those storms. For many on the island, Maria was a crash course in the lethal dangers of dependency on imported food and energy. It carried lessons about the benefits of food sovereignty, agroecology, renewable micro-grids and communication networks that connect neighbours, even when the Internet goes down. Ultimately, the hurricane carried cruel lessons about the total indifference to life on the part of the ruling class: not just Trump tossing paper towels so

memorably, but also the governor of Puerto Rico. After he and his team were caught cracking jokes about dead bodies, the governor was overthrown in a popular uprising. My suggestion is this: perhaps we should take our cue from Puerto Rico and think about COVID in a similar way, not as an enemy to dominate, but as a particularly tough teacher carrying important diagnostic lessons about how to live in times of serial shocks and crises. Lessons like this: nobody belongs in a warehouse. Indeed, wherever humans are crammed together at inhuman scales and inhuman ways: in Amazon warehouses, in prisons, in meat-packing plants, in detention camps on our borders, in factory-like old age homes, that is where the virus spread. It spreads where human lives are already being sacrificed, locked away or treated as mere extensions of machines for profit. Another early COVID lesson: a lot of people who were told their entire life that their labour was unskilled and eminently replaceable are our most essential, least replaceable workers. That is the labour that keeps society fed, cared for, clean. And there is huge power in that knowledge. More COVID lessons: As in Puerto Rico, community saves lives. Checking in on our neighbours, shopping for the most vulnerable. Another lesson: humans don't belong in boxes. Whether Zoom boxes or isolated single-family homes. It makes us miserable. All the research has shown that we are becoming more lonely, anxious, depressed. Community is our best technology. To get through crisis, we must find our people, our pods, our bubbles, our packs, our tribes, and have each other's backs. Another COVID lesson: attacks on nature come back on us. That's why we are getting more and more of these diseases, hopping from other species to our own. They aren't attacking us. We are attacking them. To be healthy, we have to respect the rights of the more-than-human world, the rights to exist and have their homes. On the other hand, isn't it interesting that as soon as lockdown is lifted, so many of us who were privileged enough to have stayed home, many of us didn't rush to go shopping. We flocked to parks and trails and beaches. Some part of us still knows that nature is medicine, and the science backs this up. COVID spreads in stale indoor air. Being outdoors, reconnected with the natural world is how we stay healthy. None of these are new lessons, of course. The wisest among our species have been trying to get us to pay attention to these lessons for a very long time. But sometimes it does take a crisis to get people's attention, especially when we are also busy moving at the velocity of late capitalism, a

system that has systematically waged war on the fabric of our communities, on the essential work of care and on the natural world. Which brings me to what may be the most important COVID lesson of all. Slow down. Slow down to stop the spread, yes. This is a virus that strikes us down whenever economic activity speeds back up and whenever we go back to that crisis known as normal. But that is not the only argument for slowness, because many of us have also discovered that when the roar of capitalism-as-usual begins to quiet a little bit, when the velocity of a society addicted to perpetual growth and speed for their own sake is forced to decelerate, interesting things start to happen. There is more space for care, more time for relationships, for noticing the state of our natural systems and our place in that. More capacity, I would argue, for feeling a great many repressed and suppressed and denied emotions, including grief and rage and terrible loss and injustice. Even when it doesn't seem that that injustice directly impacts us. Some call it empathy. I prefer solidarity.

And I know that it is what capitalism has always tried to exterminate. When we are moving at the speed of perpetual growth and unexamined so-called progress, endlessly climbing that ladder to nowhere, there isn't much time for these kinds of inconvenient feelings of solidarity. No time to think about what makes our stuff and where our trash goes and what our wars do, domestic and international. No time to question on whose stolen land we stand and certainly no time to look back at the crimes of history that took us to this place and attempt to make things right. We are in the midst of the deepest and most sustained public reckoning with white supremacy and the racist underpinnings of modern capitalism, what Cedric Robinson termed racial capitalism, than at any point in my half-century life, which is not to say it is anywhere deep or long enough.

There is no one answer to why this reckoning is happening now, when it could have happened and should have happened so many times before, and there are many factors that led up to this moment. Still, it can hardly be a coincidence that we are in the midst of a pandemic, one that has forced us to confront so many of the brutalities of business as usual and shown how race is a risk multiplier for a disease of this kind as it is for every other large scale crisis that we face. A pandemic that has exploded the capitalist myth of the individual as self-made island and exposed our porousness and our interdependencies. A pandemic that

has pushed us off that ladder to nowhere for long enough to be able to imagine looking behind us and even perhaps keeping that long delayed rendezvous with history's most brutal crimes. If COVID is our teacher, this may be its most crucial lesson. We may well be learning that slowness and deep progress, the hard and rewarding kind, are intimately connected. One may make the other possible. And if that is true, it's probably also true that we aren't going to win a global Green New Deal and then have those tough conversations about capitalist growth and profligate consumption. On the contrary, if we are going to do what is required to pull the planet back from the brink of uninhabitability, then we very likely need to slow down to a speed that makes deliberateness and solidarity possible, which brings me to the title of today's talk, "The Years of Repair". COVID, as many have observed, has been a great unveiling, indeed, a time of unceasing and unsparing revelation. What it has revealed, laid bare, is a broken world. I have talked about some of that brokenness already, and you all know it in your experiences wherever you live on this broken planet. Our collective relationship to history, at least where I live, is impossibly broken, a quicksand of flattering and dangerous lies. The way we treat our fellow humans in the here and now, the lethal costs of convenience, are tied to that history and utterly, unspeakably broken. The infrastructure of care, our hospitals, public schools, long-term care facilities, the places that are supposed to care for the vulnerable. These have been broken and broken again by decades of deliberate and organised neglect and the ruthless logic of capitalist efficiency that arrived hand in glove with privatisation. Our information ecology, broken, too polluted to carry the most vital, lifesaving information. Our political class, well, we wouldn't be here if that wasn't broken, too. And as Yanis has said, capitalism has devolved into something utterly unrecognisable from anything its boosters and theorists have claimed it to be. The super profits of the corporate world have nothing to do with anything being produced in the real world right now. For our billionaire class, this moment of crisis is not, as some have claimed, a Great Depression, but rather an insatiable, great gorging as they feed on the entrails of this failed state and on the poor and the sick. During the Great Depression, desperate bankers jumped from windows. During this great gorging, they jump for joy. It is all so broken. And then there is the unbearable state of our natural world, the broken ice sheets, the burning forests, the rising and warming seas. I speak to you from a part of North America which has not

seen the sky for well over a week. It's choked in smoke and the particulate matter of once majestic forests. Scientists report that, south of here, migrating birds are falling from the sky, possibly in the tens of thousands, seemingly exhausted because there is no safe place to land. Of course, none of this should come as a surprise. Many of us have known for a very long time how broken things were. Many of us were born into that brokenness. But this is not a time for I-told-you-so's. It is a time to open our arms and welcome and dramatically expand our ranks. More importantly, it is a time for urgent collective mission, for telling new unifying stories about our common purpose. What is the point of an economy in 2020 with everything crumbling around us? What are we here to do? We, the humans who happen to be alive at this moment with the highest possible stakes, those of internationalism or extinction, as this gathering is called. I believe we are here to repair. Indeed, I propose that we think of this time we are living through as the years of repair, that we should let that imperative shape our collective priorities in relief, reconstruction, in our labour, education, communication, even celebration. Repair is a framework that unites the simultaneous brokenness of our social, economic, political and ecological spheres. It challenges us to engage in repair work on multiple intersecting fronts, to repair our broken infrastructure, to repair the damage done to the natural world, to repair the broken stories of supremacy and dominance that got us here, to repair the many extractive ways that we have been trained to live. And as part of that, begin to repair our stuff, what some have called the right to repair rather than participating in the cycles of ever-accelerated planned obsolescence. The work of repair is intensely concrete and civic, but it is also inward and ephemeral.

It is the practise of re-pairing, or reconnecting, dangerously severed relationships between the heart and mind, between individuals and communities and between humans and the more-than-human world. So many false dichotomies and binaries need to be re-paired. And through it all, as we engage in the labour of repairing broken schools, transit systems and hospitals, we must be deliberate in another kind of repair, the hardest and most important repair work of all, repairing from the wreckage of white and Christian and male supremacy. Connecting this repair work to the calls that have come so clearly from black-led movements in the streets to defund the police and decarcerate the state and end the endless wars and move those resources to the infrastructure

of repair, care and regeneration. Part of a process of making reparation for slavery, legalised discrimination, colonial land theft and so much more. These rifts, what is owed to the descendants of enslaved people the world over, what is owed to indigenous people the world over, have been left unrepaired for so long, left to fester and deepen, thus demanding ever more violent and supremacist ideologies to justify or seemingly justify these sprawling injustices. This is a history too long deferred. However, when we stop hiding from this work, when we have the courage to look back with open hearts, to make amends psychically and financially, that is when true collective liberation becomes possible. There is so much freedom and strength in no longer hiding from the truth that we know from no longer lying. This is well understood by our opponents. It's why only yesterday, Donald Trump declared war on the late, great people's historian Howard Zinn and signed an executive order to establish a, quote, national commission to promote patriotic education. So afraid is he by the power that we might rebuild on solid ground rather than the historical quicksand of cheap patriotism and glorified imperialism. An ethos of repair can be our guide in a great many things, including the urgent question of how we should live with this highly contagious virus with its sudden surges and staggering body counts.

Because as we are seeing around the world, we cannot do everything we used to do, not without seeing more surges, but neither can we hide at home and wait for a vaccine, because isolation is its own crisis and the vaccine may be years away and there is no guarantee that it will come at all. So we must learn those lessons from COVID about how to live. Put another way, in the face of a capitalist insistence that we all return to grim business as usual, never mind the growing mountain of bodies, never mind the wildfires raging in the background or the fascists marching in the foreground, never mind the lack of any kind of credible plan to address any of these crises. It is urgent that we develop and advance our own vision for how to live right now, ways of living that do not put true progress on pause until this still notional vaccine arrives, but actually moves us steadily and skilfully to a place solid and repaired enough to support an actual global Green New Deal. In the context of COVID, that means we need to make hard choices, prioritise what actually matters for the survival of life, demand of our governments that any recovery, relief and stimulus programme

be governed by the transformational imperative of repair.

That must be the measure of our success. Not whether our economy is growing or not, but whether or not we are healing, whether we are repairing, getting to that solid ground. An ethos of repair also calls for a different relationship to time. It does not pretend that we can magic the new world from scratch, that we can undo centuries of historical wrongs and decades of deliberate vandalism to our public sphere in an instant, nor that we can arrest the ravages of climate disruption overnight. The truth is that too much damage has been done. If nothing else, COVID has surely taught us that. There have been so many rounds of economic shock therapy that, when an all too real shock came around, we could not withstand it. Repair work takes time. It tells us that before we can race forward with our shiny green things, we need to stop, look back and clean up our messes. This is intergenerational work, which is why capitalism has so much trouble with the very concept, why it is forever steering us towards the illusion of everyday being a fresh start, a reboot, a clean slate. But there are other ways. And fortunately, feminist, anticolonial and racial justice movements have been thinking about those other ways for a long time, figuring out what repair, reconnection, reparation and true social reconstruction can and should mean, developing models that address multiple reparative means simultaneously. Let's think about what that could mean in our present moment. Right now, parents, particularly in poor areas, are facing wrenching decisions between sending their kids to dilapidated, overcrowded schools with broken ventilation systems and windows that barely open. Part of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has described as systems of organised neglect, organised abandonment. Or they can keep their kids home, depriving them of connexions with other kids, interfering with parents' need to work, and if they are fortunate enough to have a spare digital device and reliable connectivity, we all know that parking kids in front of screens for five hours a day is its own kind of hazard. But there are more than these bleak choices, or there should be. Instead of pretending that decades of austerity can be fixed in a few weeks of summer vacation, we should be closing those schools for an entire year and using that time to repair and reimagine them as linchpins for a Green New Deal. Meanwhile, teachers with the help of a youth corps of assistants could be running year-round outdoor education, helping young people to learn about and rehabilitate their local ecosystems. Outdoors is where it is safe. That is what all the science is telling

us. And in settler-colonial states, the process must be led by local First Nations as part of a vast land-back programme, if it's going to happen at all. We should imagine similar programmes that employ college-age students to plant billions of trees and rehabilitate wetlands, sequestering carbon and protecting endangered species at the same time. All, once again, under the leadership and guidance of indigenous peoples. Participants would need to be tested and retested and work zones would have to be COVID bubbles. If we did it right, it could be multiple wins: staying outside, repairing the land, repairing the economy, reconnecting with nature and each other, moving money from incarceration, surveillance and war to this repaired and reimagined economy of caring for people and the natural world. We really can do all of this and more. And we cannot be afraid to dream big. COVID has already ushered in changes none of us imagined or foretold a year ago. Entire high carbon consumption industries are on their knees. Cruise ships, airlines, fashion. The old stories have all collapsed. We must be fearless in advancing radically different and spiritually meaningful ways to organise ourselves and our resources. We must be healers now, all of us, young and old. Because if we aren't working to heal this planet, then what on earth are we doing here? The hard truth, one of so many, is that as we do this work, we will be confronted with many more shocks, many more losses, many more extinctions and more tragedies. And our ethos of deep repair can guide us here, too, because in being willing to look unflinchingly at our state of brokenness, there is room and space for grief. Indeed, a society guided by the need for repair and moving at the speed of repair is skilful at grieving and caring for one another as we do this transformative work. And finally, if we understand that our mission is repair, then we must find joy, play and rest at every stage, because all of this, especially the joy, is how we will repair ourselves. And that is what will keep us going during these long and rewarding years of repair ahead. Thank you.

END