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Newness and Responsibility:
Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*

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It is in these malleable moments, when we are psychologically unmoored and physically uprooted, that these artists of the real plunge in their hands and begin their work of remaking the world. (Klein 2007, 21)

The systemic economic change to a fundamentalist free-market does not happen naturally, nor has it, according to Naomi Klein in her latest book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, occurred peacefully or to democratic ends. Klein's argument is that over the past 50 years, shock is the context within which unpopular free-market policies are able to penetrate democratic institutions and buffer themselves from democratic resistance. The privatisation of state enterprise, the reduction of tariffs, taxes and protectionist economic policies, the unfettered flow of capital in and out of the country, and an open and fluctuating currency, all tenements of the 'Chicago School crusade... [that] has created a permanent underclass of between 25 and 60 percent of the population' (405). If the democratic process were rallied and strong, this underclass would likely vote against the government that brought on such 'economic crimes' (185), or in the accusatory words of André Gunder Frank against fellow Chicago economist Milton Friedman, Klein's antagonist par excellence, an 'economic genocide' (239). And so, through varied articulations of violence, be it state, economic, political or physical, Klein inculcates political leaders, economists, businessmen, military regimes, NGOs and human rights activists, among others, in the undemocratic repression of significant populations, all in the name of 'personal liberty, free trade, low taxes, and minimal government intervention' (185). From the outset, Klein transparently argues that

This book is a challenge to the central and most cherished claim in the official story—that the triumph of deregulated capitalism has been born of freedom, that unfettered markets go hand in hand with democracy. (18)

Through the words of Anatoly Chubais, the privatisation minister in Boris Yeltsin's administration, and a 'freedom fighter' in Jeffery Sachs' eyes, Klein evokes the curious confused collusion between free-markets and democracy: 'In order to have a democracy in society there must be a dictatorship in power' (232). The phrase seems counterintuitive, unless we recognise the truth of Klein's statement, that the majority of free-market enthusiasts fervently believe that 'freedom,' 'democracy' and 'unfettered markets' not only go hand in hand, but are exchangeable terms, to one and the same end. Chubais might have said, 'In order to have a *free-market* in society there must be a dictatorship in power.' Suddenly the wool is drawn from our eyes, and we begin to recognise the tactical reverence of semantics. Suddenly the 'shock' of a dictatorship is a 'must' if we are talking about a free-market, and not a democracy.

The context of this shock, as Klein sees it, lay within a history of psychological treatments. Early in the book, she investigates the mutually beneficial development of techniques of torture and the covert CIA funding of Ewen Cameron's psychiatric shock therapy experiments at the McGill University in Montreal during the 1950s. She outlines how both the physical techniques of torture, and the mindset behind it—to breakdown and erase your subject so as to imprint a new blueprint for a personality (read society)—become the tactics used in the last five decades of economic intervention. In the geo-political sphere, these psychiatric shock therapies translate into the *modus operandi* of Gen. Pinochet's military coup in Chile, the National Party's economic policy hijacking in the ANC's post-apartheid South Africa ('Hey, we've got the state, where's the power?' (203)), and the adoption of 'shock and awe' tactics in the Iraq war. In

Klein's words, shock produces an 'unstoppable hurricane of mutually reinforcing destruction and reconstruction, erasure and creation' (71).

Former Chief Economist of the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz, speaking in 1992 on Russia's undemocratic transition to 'capitalism' at the time, cements the functional metaphor between the conditions of consciousness operating on a personal level when induced by torture or psychiatric shock therapy, and the collective social body politic operating in a similar state of shock after a calamitous event:

'Only a blitzkrieg approach during the "window of opportunity" provided by the "fog of transition" would get the changes made before the population had a chance to organize to protect its previous vested interests.' (224)

Like pickpockets, a plan at hand, waiting in dark corners, ready to pounce at the onset of confusion, Klein illustrates Friedman, using his own words, as an orchestrator of economic change by means of a thief in the night:

'Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.' (140)

For Friedman, 'real' change cannot happen without crisis. History is a series of crises, opportunities for change, and when they occur, he and his minion of 'Chicago Boys' (77) would offer the most soluble 'solutions' to the problems at hand.

And yet change may not depend on crisis. Klein's discussion raises the interesting theme of, as Homi Bhabha put it relating to post-colonialism, 'How newness enters the world' (Bhabha, 303): 'Cataclysmic revolution' (Klein, 224), shock, coup d'état—all means by which 'new' ideas get put in place, into practice. The ways in which we tend to understand history are riddled with crisis, flush with dramatic before and after images of societies, epistemologies and religions. Change happens like a gruesome spasm, we are told, confined to a few brutal years of revolution, war, repression, inquisitions, colonial expansion—call them growing pains. Short-term pain for long-term gain.

Much more interesting than the rupture dividing societies in two, the old and the new, and much more powerful in the ways in which they shape human societies, are the *continuities*. In South Africa, nearly all the main economic posts, from the head of the Central Bank to the role of Finance Minister were held by the same National Party, apartheid era politicians before and after Nelson Mandela's sweeping political victory for the ANC in 1994. Blinded by the situational, Klein warns us that 'extreme violence has a way of preventing us from seeing the interests it serves' (327). On the ground in Iraq and asking colleagues to point her in the direction of Iraqis angry about the privatising of their economy, an Irish peace activist grounds her: 'No one here cares about privatization, [...] what they care about is surviving' (325). And so, rather than ask the question of how newness comes into the world, perhaps Klein answers a separate, but equally imperative debate: how newness *stays* in the world.

If collective torture of various scales and methods created the conditions of chaos, Stiglitz's 'fog of transition' as Klein argues, and if there was some human cost, be it death, repression, dictatorship, call it 'un'-freedom in the process of keeping 'newness' in the world, then the question of who is responsible remains paramount.

A continuing thread through her thesis, Klein asks the question of who is responsible when the policies of economic modernity result in repression, poverty or in many cases, death. Richard Sennett evokes this ethical ambiguity, reminding us of Robert Oppenheimer's guilt for having created some 'thing' that,

while never himself deploying, would go on to kill hundreds of thousands of civilians and guide international relations for generations to come—the atomic bomb. That Oppenheimer felt guilt ('I am become [sic] Death, the destroyer of worlds,' (Sennett, 4) he would write in his diary), suggests that experts, advisors and academics, craftsmen in Sennett's terms, do recognise consequence and responsibility, whether or not reflected in law and punishment.

Orlando Letelier, the Ambassador to Washington for then assassinated Chilean President Salvador Allende, who himself would later be assassinated in Washington on direct orders of Gen. Pinochet, claimed that Milton Friedman was 'prepared to supplement the brutality, which the [Chilean] military possessed, with the intellectual assets it lacked' (Klein, 71). In the defence against calls that he be held personally responsible for the atrocities required to implement his economic policies, Friedman argued he was but a 'technical advisor' (113). Consistent in 'expressing his displeasure with [their] human rights violations' he was, however, always quick in 'praising their bold embrace of economic shock therapy' (273). Friedman's lack of personal guilt, or responsibility for the abuses related to the implementation of his 'intellectual assets' is stressed to a considerable degree as Klein evokes the deliberate (un)intention that is captured in the unnerving words of Guillermo Bedregal, Planning Minister during Bolivia's most trying and violent time and key actor in Bolivia's economic shock therapy:

'We have to be like the pilot of Hiroshima. When he dropped the atomic bomb he didn't know what he was doing, but when he saw the smoke he said: "Oops, sorry!" And that's exactly what we have to do, launch the measures and then: Oops, sorry!' (147)

In an attempt to decipher how the causal links between economic policy and violent repression remain unclear, Klein courageously negotiates the tenuous relationship between free-market economic practice and the discourse of human rights. Amnesty International won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976 for exposing the disappearances and torture rampant in Argentina. That same year, Milton Friedman would win the Nobel Prize for Economics for his work on unemployment and inflation. As Klein puts it, 'the shock of the torture chamber was to be forcefully condemned, but economic shock treatments were to be applauded' (118). Klein argues that the rise of human rights discourses allows the disconnection of the actual mass scale economy from political violence. Klein applauds Amnesty International's report on Argentina as 'a breakthrough account of the junta's atrocities and worthy of its Nobel Prize,' but then goes on to lament that 'for all its thoroughness, the report sheds no light on *why* the abuses were occurring' (119, emphasis mine). Human rights discourse allows the side effects of economic violence to be seen as existing in a vacuum, as 'random, free-floating bad events, drifting in the political ether, to be condemned by all people of conscience but impossible to understand' (120).

What is most convincing in Klein's argument is that the drive to implement the economic and social transformations of various states around the world from state centred economies into the 'free market miracles', as christened by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, were implemented through the use of shock, distraction and confusion, usually maintained through some form of violence (economic, physical or otherwise), and articulated by various actors from the state, to coalitions in international warfare or by the increasingly privatised 'security' industries. Klein's argument holds echoes of David Harvey's insight from his book *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*:

Capitalism, in short, is a social system internalizing rules that ensure it will remain a permanently revolutionary and disruptive force in its own world history. If, therefore, "the only thing about modernity is insecurity," then it is not hard to see from where that insecurity derives. (Harvey, 107)

Where Harvey, following Marx, saw this insecurity driven by increasing flows of capital, Klein sites the responsibility in economic growth, constant and unrelenting growth. In a chilling conclusion linking the shocks themselves to this new economy, Klein states: 'An economic system that requires constant growth, while bucking almost all serious attempts at environmental regulation, generates a steady stream of disasters all on its own, whether military, ecological or financial' (Klein, 426).

That shock is the element of confusion, the 'window of opportunity' for free-market economic policies to be forced into political practice, is all of a sudden a unit of cyclical machination. With the above quote, Klein has moved beyond her apotheosis on the Iraq war that showed that the responses to the shock, that is to say the operation, has been privatised by private security forces and an expanding industrial complex led by innovations to deal with the insecurity, fear and repression, itself caused by the *response* to the original calamity. *Now, the shock itself is privatised.* Klein brings us full circle; the shock doctrine has become a closed system.

This is disaster capitalism: the initial shock, the military response and repression, the economic interventions, every stage of the cycle is privatised—a carefully developed script, now nearing perfection. 'If Iraq was a laboratory of extreme privatization,' Klein argues, 'the testing phase was clearly over' (422). Far from a conspiracy theory, a criticism that Klein expertly rebukes, this is a closed system, a 'newness' that Klein likens to any fundamentalist ideology: 'The ideologies that long for that impossible clean slate, which can be reached only through some kind of cataclysm, are the dangerous ones,' (19) she says.

In the last chapter of her book, Klein talks with the survivors of these disasters, concluding that '[m]emory, both individual and collective, turns out to be the greatest shock absorber of all' (463). Klein challenges us to steer clear from the myth of the fresh start and the clean slate, asking us to resist our dependency on *newness from rupture* to dwell in the far richer, more complex, and unique challenges of *continuity*. A colleague of Ewen Cameron speaking on the psychiatrist's attempt to rip through the layers of a patient's personality in the hopes to reprogramme anew laments, 'But as we later discovered, the layers are all there is' (372). Klein leaves us with the following advice, to strengthen and engage with 'movements that do not seek to start from scratch but rather from scrap, from the rubble that is all around' (466). In the cycle of disaster capitalism, the violent and undemocratic task of maintaining 'newness,' of constant crisis remains. What is imperative, then, is to redefine the scope of the new, to reimagine how newness enters the world, and to be the bricoleurs of continuity.

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