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PAULINA AROCH FUGELLIE


Naomi Klein’s The Shock Doctrine was published in seven languages simultaneously and quickly became an international bestseller. This popularity is doubtless related to the accessibility of the author’s style which is characteristic of proficient investigative journalism. Yet the easy flow of Klein’s writing is the outcome of years of rigorous historical research grounded in extensive documentation and supported by a wide team of researchers, specialists and fact-checkers across the globe, from Argentina to Iraq. By concentrating the bulk of her archival data in a separate section – endnotes in fact constitute a sixth of her book – Klein manages to grip her reader without sacrificing the historiographical basis of her argument. This very strategy, however, has played a role in mitigating the impact of her book within the academy. Judging The Shock Doctrine to be a necessary dialogical counterpoint for anyone working in the humanities today, I unravel here some of the crucial and critical questions that the author poses for the academic reader. In particular, I address those questions related to the problematic addressed by this issue of Kaleidoscope, “Being Human”. As the Call for Papers points out, scholarship is missing “a historical perspective, allowing the significance of contemporary developments to be measured against past interpretations of what it is to be human”.

The Shock Doctrine is a comprehensive historiography of the rise and consolidation of global capitalism, beginning in the 1950s, but focusing on the years from 1973 to 2007. The period that it covers thus coincides not only with the virtualization of human experience through the proliferation of communication technology in every-day life, but also with the advent of the so-called linguistic turn in contemporary academic practice, and the subsequent decentring of the human subject as determined by her inscription in language. Likewise, the period coincides with the formal end of colonialism and the emergence of Postcolonial Studies, a field characterized by an exploration of subjectivity and power that, while addressing the state as a site of power, tends to leave aside its entanglement in the global market as well as the role of economics in subject constitution. By tracing economic history from the Cold War era to the new world order, Klein succeeds in articulating not only two historical periods, but also the two intellectual paradigms associated with those.

The central aim of The Shock Doctrine is to document the complicity between the imposition of authoritarian states and the free market, thus discrediting the hegemonic belief that
neo-liberalism and democracy go hand in hand. In an epigraph, Klein quotes Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano: “People were in prison so that prices could be free” (144). But it is in the actual case studies that Klein exposes the incommensurability of human freedom and the freedom of capital, which are conflated by free-market ideology. She documents the direct participation of the so-called “Chicago Boys” - a group of neo-liberal economists formed at the University of Chicago - in coups and other forms of suppression of democracy across the globe. At the juncture of economic interest and institutional politics, the author examines the contemporary phenomenon of the “corporatist state” as an increasingly hollow structure at the service of trans-national economic interests.

The Shock Doctrine historicizes the consolidation of the hegemonic understanding not only of “democracy”, but also of other key concepts in contemporary academic debates, such as “human rights”, “race” and “cultural difference”. Tracing the interests that have historically intervened in the shaping of these concepts, Klein’s exploration takes us from the military coup orchestrated by the CIA in Chile in 1973, to the USA’s more recent intervention in the Middle East; passing through the establishment of corporatist states at the service of trans-national capital in the former Second World - Poland under Lech Walesa, Russia under Boris Yeltsin, China under Deng Xiaoping passing on to the granting of political independence at the cost of economic surrender in Mandela’s South Africa; the vertiginous rise and collapse of the so-called Asian Tigers; and the exploitation of catastrophes by neo-liberalism, from the tsunami, to “9/11”, to hurricane Katrina.

Klein argues that all these crises – whether political or economic, natural or manufactured – were exploited not only to maximize profits at the cost of the victims, but to clean the slate and seize the opportunity of shocked societies to “return them to a state of pure capitalism, cleansed of all interruptions – government regulations, trade barriers” (60). This method, devised by Milton Friedman, whose thought constitutes the foundation of Chicago School economics, is also known as the shock doctrine.

As Klein argues, the imposition of a tabula rasa on invaded societies, or the exploitation of such a condition in those societies already shocked by natural disasters, is the basis of the Chicago School doctrine and finds a parallel in the CIA-funded experiments with torture in psychiatric hospitals during the 1950s. These new methods of alleged psychiatric treatment included sensory depravation and overexposure, stripping, electro-shock therapy, and drug inducement. The central aim was to erase the subject’s memory as well as her historical, sensorial and affective articulations, to deprive her of that which constituted her sense of being and was therefore her source of resistance. As Klein documents, these traumatic experiments were entirely counterproductive as a form of psychiatric cure. Nonetheless, they were a successful investment for the CIA, which would institute such methods in the Kubark torture manual, and continue to practice them in economic interest zones across the globe.

Klein traces not only the teleological, but also the analogical relationship between experiments with psychiatric torture and the imposition of the free-market model. She contends that the underlying logic of these groundbreaking torture techniques and that of the economic shock doctrine is one and the same: once shocked into disconcertion, the individual or society will be unable to oppose the aggression to which it is subjected. Not unlike the psychiatric endeavour to reprogram the subject, Friedman’s doctrine unleashed “a perpetual quest for clean sheets and blank slates on which to build model states” of unrestricted capitalism (589). Towards such an end, a crucial element was the breaking up of pre-existing narratives by the eradication of collective memory - the dissolution of the cultural and historical articulations of a society through economic, political and military violence.
Ideological indoctrination also played a part. Klein’s account of the project that took place at the department of economics at the University of Chicago and its infiltration into economic and military practices across the world puts into question the generalized conception of the academy as an institution abstracted from everyday concerns, an ivory tower. Such questioning comes from outside the academy, in the shape of a bestseller. *The Shock Doctrine*’s title, narrative style and introduction correspond to the demands of a marketable product. Yet the rest of the chapters and the meticulous historiography in which they engage remind us of those other conventions and associated economic and political demands to which our own production as scholars is subject.

In her dismantling of the myth of the academy as an ivory tower, Naomi Klein does not deal with humanities departments, nor do I consider these spaces to be as clearly connected with the external world. Yet, as sites of ideological production and legitimation, they are not exempt from Klein’s implicit critique. Let me illustrate this with the force of an example. Few statements have marked contemporary reflection in the humanities as has Francis Fukuyama’s declaration that we have reached the end of history. As *The Shock Doctrine* notes, Fukuyama’s statement was first pronounced during a lecture that took place at the University of Chicago in 1989, funded by Milton Friedman’s associate John Olin. Fukuyama’s statement has provoked and may continue to provoke meaningful reflection. Yet, to forget its site of enunciation is also to forget the role of our own forgetfulness in our present understandings of what it is to be human.

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