



**THE SHOCK DOCTRINE:  
THE RISE OF DISASTER CAPITALISM**

Naomi Klein. Alfred A. Knopf, 662 pages, 2007.

**THE END OF AMERICA:  
LETTER OF WARNING TO A YOUNG PATRIOT**

Naomi Wolf. Chelsea Green Publishing, 176 pages, 2007.

*Reviewed by Marty Roth*

There is some resemblance between these recent entries in the “big topic” sweepstakes: the same subject, the central metaphor of a crisis, and the coincidence of a common first name. But there are even greater differences. It’s rare for a work on current events to justify its length in this age of popular history and boilerplate journalism, but Klein’s book does full credit to its 561 text pages, while Wolf, who weighs in at a mere 155, fails badly.

Wolf’s book imitates the form and rhetoric of a revolutionary pamphlet, specifically Tom Paine’s “Common Sense” and “Crisis” papers. Her crisis, like his, is a hopeful state, the worsening of a fever as it is about to break. Klein’s crisis couldn’t be more different in its aspect: she means an event—like Hurricane Katrina, the 2004 tsunami or the Pinochet coup in Chile—that causes untold misery in its occurrence and its aftermath, even when it seems to be liberatory, as in the case of the ANC victory in South Africa or the break-up of the Soviet Empire.

*Shock Doctrine* is badly needed because it lays out the dehumanized logic behind the outrages committed by the U.S. government and its allies against human life and human rights since the end of the Cold War. The book is a secret history of the recent past, and the scarlet

thread running through it is not a clandestine history of espionage but of economic policy meetings—post-national politics as orchestrated by “free-market” conservatives. The story Klein tells is so different from the economic orthodoxy presented by the major media that reading it brings a thrill of recovery, of things dimly sensed or guessed at suddenly connected and illuminated.

Klein lays out a powerful case against the crimes of global capitalism and the military cadres and economic consultants who made them possible; these people gobbled up the common wealth of the world, made themselves fabulously wealthy, and condemned the majority of humankind to various degrees of misery (and intellectuals and activists to torture and summary execution). After the break-up of the Soviet Union, the number of Russians living below the poverty line jumped from 2 to 74 million.

Klein’s instruction to the teachable reader is to look at the economics, not the politics, because that’s where the action is. In South Africa in 1994 when the ANC sat down to negotiate with the outgoing apartheid government, they were so intent on gaining control of parliament that they negotiated away the economic basis of their future power. Caught up in a web of international agreements (a law to protect private property and the autonomy of the central bank, the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade which prevented them from subsidizing their industries, a World Trade Organization rights agreement which

prevented effective AIDS programs, etc.), they effectively lost the fruits of their long struggle and victory.

In every global catastrophe, Klein says, look in the back rooms; the Chicago School economists (neoliberal, neoconservative, whatever they are currently called) are there. From an economic perspective, we are back in the era of nineteenth-century progressive history where things can only get better. “Looking for an investment that could gain 2,000 per cent in three years?” the *Wall Street Journal* asked in 1993. “Only one stock market offers that hope . . . Russia.” The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may be military, political and humanitarian failures but on the spreadsheets of multinational corporations like Bechtel, Halliburton and Cargill, they are resounding successes. Former U.S. Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers described the “near complete disconnect” between politics and markets as something out of Dickens: “You talk to international relations experts and it’s the worst of times. Then you talk to potential investors and it’s one of the best of all times.” Read the shocking reversion to torture on the part of the Western democracies as a market tactic, Klein suggests, and it makes good sense. In her chapter on Israel, Klein’s angle on events illuminates the failure of the “peace process” in light of the arrival of Russians immigrants which reduced Israel’s reliance on Palestinian labour, and the expansion of the Israeli high-tech security economy which created an appetite for a “continual, and continuously expanding, War on Terror.” Israel doesn’t mind negative publicity about the Separation Wall because “security barriers” is a hugely attractive market at present.

*Shock Doctrine* explores the uncanny kinship between capitalism and disaster. Capitalism may claim that its operations bring stability to a system and

MARTY ROTH appeared in our September/October 2007 issue with a review of Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*.

that it works best in conditions of stability, but it does seem to thrive on disaster. This doctrine regulates the hollowing out of a government and its services through privatization and outsourcing while the nation is in a state of shock. All that's needed to play is the ability to treat disasters as so many exciting market possibilities. Caring about people is so twentieth century. And if the resulting free-market state is ever undone, as Pinochet's Chile, the Generals' Argentina or the National Party's South Africa were, make sure that the international monetary institutions (IMF, World Bank, WTO) saddle the new state with the accumulated debt of the previous regime ("debt bombs")—"New governments are, in effect, given the keys to the house but not the combination to the safe." The turning point and great example of this doctrine will, of course, be Iraq. No longer content to wait for crisis, the imperium provokes it in a criminal manner.

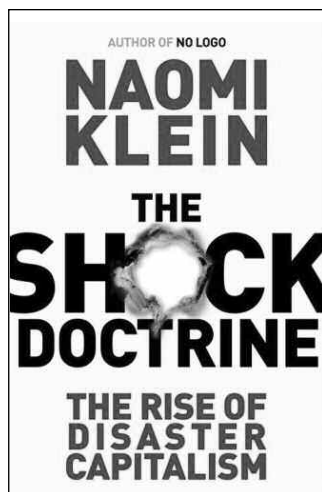
The book opens in New Orleans in 2005, and the two opening chapters introduce Klein's villains: the Canadian psychiatrist Ewen Cameron, who worked for the CIA to develop the shock therapy that provided the model for this whole world of pain, and the University of Chicago's Milton Friedman, who adapted the equivalent of shock therapy to market economics. Klein draws a direct line from their work to the last 25 years of U.S. foreign policy.

From country to country, from crisis to crisis, the model of shock capitalism has to be retrofitted, like Procrustes' bed. But Klein is dealing with the rough trade of history, not physics, and to this inexpert reviewer economics seems to be one of the most inexact sciences ever conceived. Klein convinces me that this paradigm is not only credible but the

deep shape of recent history.

By contrast, Wolf's book is not about anything. It is simply a call to alarm. Since I'm in full sympathy with the message, why did I dislike the book? Partly it was the melodramatic model of a free society threatened by a dark

force (the plot of fantasy fictions like *The Golden Compass*); Wolf is a victim of Manichaeism thinking. But it



was also the strident, uncritical repetition of terms like freedom, liberty and patriotism. (In Klein's book, "freedom"

means unfettered capitalism, markets that are free from any state interference.) Wolf's America is always the great good place; even if it becomes momentarily shadowed, a Hegelian spirit of liberty will cause the "pendulum" to "always swing." Compared to Klein's incisive analysis, Wolf's parallels to Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Stalinist Russia seem tired and trite. The address of Wolf's book is also wearing very thin: that young Americans need only to be told in the broadest terms what is happening for them to rise up and take action.

I don't know where Wolf's understanding of what America is and what it should be comes from. Probably nineteenth- and early twentieth-century exceptionalist histories—certainly not the actual track record. But her pen continually slips, as exam-

ples of **what should not have been** creep in from all periods of America's past (i.e., President John Adams labelling French refugees as traitors in the 1790s, the sentencing of Rev. Clarence Waldron to fifteen years in prison after the 1917 Espionage Act for passing out a pamphlet that said war was anti-Christian), so that a phantom subtext emerges, telling us that it was never much different, at least for the unfortunate and dispossessed.

There is also a great deal of deafness to language in Wolf's rhetoric; she still believes that "patriot" can be used as an honorific, after Patriot missiles and acts. By contrast Klein writes an easy and engaging journalistic prose. Wolf's rhetoric infantilizes her audience, while Klein throws us into the maelstrom. Both books are jeremiads, an American tradition inherited from the Puritans, where outsiders rail at the iniquities of the civil state: earnest moral ventures which attempt to say no in thunder to the devastating forces that run the world

and seem on the verge of destroying it.

For me, *The Shock Doctrine* made sense of my decision to leave the United States in 2000 and return to Canada. It is a scary book, but the changes that the Bush and Cheney gang have inflicted on the republic are even scarier. Klein's book uncovers a deep truth about the world by following the classic trail of the investigator who asks "*cui bono*?" Who profits? And she finds that there has been no catastrophe so dire that some group (the same group) hasn't made out like bandits. There is also an obligatory, "hopeful" last chapter in which Klein scours the world looking for current "blowbacks," the unintended consequences of covert intelligence operations, but it is scant comfort and can't exorcise the spectres she has raised. ♦

