

Shock doctrines as the capitalism disaster politics essay



The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism is a 2007 book by the anti-corporate activist Naomi Klein, in which she advances the theory that free market economic policies are pushed through at times of great upheaval when the citizens of a country are focused on dealing with disasters. The book received a great deal of attention upon publication, and in the subsequent debate over the economic crisis (the first signs of which appeared in late 2007) The Shock Doctrine was taken by many as a valid explanation of how the banking system had been able to accumulate massive amounts of debt with little corporate oversight. The book goes even further, however, by suggesting that some international events – including conflicts such as the early 1980's Falklands War – are engineered by governments in order to provide the kind of distracting disaster that allows certain economic policies to be implemented with little fear of being challenged. In this context, Klein is arguing that the public can be fairly easily induced into a state of widespread shock which precludes their attention being turned to matters that they might ordinarily resist. Criticised by some as a paranoid overreaction, The Shock Doctrine has nevertheless become one of the defining texts of the modern anti-capitalist movement.

Klein argues that the strategic decisions made by society have been based on high-level and sophisticated manipulation. She supports her arguments in The Shock Doctrine by tracing what she sees as a clear history of economic manipulation over at least the past three decades, going as far back as the controversial US involvement in South American revolutions and weapons trading in the 1980's. Klein likens the use of the shock doctrine to the literal use of psychiatric shock therapy, which seeks to remove undesirable

elements of an individual's personality, in effect creating what Klein calls "a blank slate of personality upon which to build the new, desired structure of the individual" (Klein, 2007, p. 51). Klein equates this with the policy of "resetting" (Klein, 2007, p. 55) societies in South America during the 1980's so that a new, western-backed economic system could be introduced. There are two clear elements to this stage in Klein's argument: firstly, the idea that modern western government-backed economic policy is in some ways directly influenced by the activities of US organisations such as the CIA; and secondly, the idea that experiments in using the shock doctrine in South America (and elsewhere) in the 1980's were so successful that they were eventually deemed ready to be transplanted to the US and other western countries in the 1990's and 2000's.

For Klein, society's strategic decisions have therefore been made in "a void of real information" (Klein, 2007, p. 61) that has been carefully constructed. She suggests that one of the key ways in which the shock doctrine is implemented involves the direction of foreign policy towards conflict with other nations that are seen by the general US population as in some way abstract. For example, she points out that while a US conflict with the UK, Canada or Australia would be seen by the domestic US population as a 'real war' with obvious and very visible results, a conflict with Afghanistan, Iraq or Iran would be less real. In this reading of the situation, she is undoubtedly relying at least in part on the work of Jean Baudrillard, whose 1991 book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* argued that such conflicts tend to use simulacra in the place of real victims, in which case – for example – the US population can view a conflict through the lens of television (and now the internet)

without ever having to connect the ‘avatars’ on the screen (of real people suffering) with actual real human beings. This is made easier, in Klein’s opinion, by the fact that many in the US have very little awareness of the cultures of countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq or Iran, and therefore find it easier to ignore the consequences of war. Baudrillard argued that the Gulf War did not happen because, from the point of view of US and western audiences, there were no consequences – everything happened on television.

Klein attempts to demonstrate the impossibility of society continuing on this course. The priority for the US government and for leaders of the western economic system, during the 2000’s, has in Klein’s view been to maintain the current levels of disengagement with the reality of conflict while simultaneously maintaining the sense of shock. This is why, for example, the Pentagon resisted allowing photographs and videos of returning US soldiers’ coffins to be broadcast (Bumiller, 2005), since it threatened to pierce the barrier of reality between the wars as they unfolded on television and the real life experiences of people in the US. If the shock doctrine as Klein envisions it is to work effectively, it is necessary to carefully manage such events so that they do not damage the overall cause but in fact contribute to its overall success. Klein returns to the analogy of the shock doctrine with psychiatric shock treatment, arguing that not only was the psychiatric practice shown to be far from universally effective, it was also only ever designed to be used in the short-term. She argues that the economic shock doctrine practiced by the US government has been used almost constantly

for a number of years, and that this makes it untenable in the long-term because of the damage that it will cause.

Klein is therefore suggesting that an alternative is vitally important, and that the shock doctrine cannot be perpetuated for much longer. She notes the impact of the September 11th 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks and describes them as “the ultimate use of the shock doctrine, and one that is highly sophisticated because it created a shocking event that has seemingly lasted forever” (Klein, 2007, p. 105). In Klein’s reading of recent history, 9/11 is an event that began on a single date nine years ago but has never ended, its implications and impact playing out continuously. Again returning to the analogy based on psychiatric shock treatment, Klein posits this as a kind of shock therapy that begins with a massive shock and then keeps the current running indefinitely. This, she is arguing, is one of the main reasons why the shock doctrine – although successful so far – will ultimately not work in the long term, because the population will become desensitised. Klein admits that it is difficult to conceive of ways to prolong the shock doctrine without there being another event that is even more shocking than 9/11, which would almost inevitably have to involve nuclear weapons. However, it is possible to argue that in this regard the threat of nuclear attacks on the US basically serves as a significantly horrific deterrent that it in fact amounts to a kind of hypothetical shock, the reality of which most people in the US are desperate to avoid.

Klein extends this argument to show how only a very narrow section of society has truly profited from the implementation of the shock doctrine to date. She suggests that this creates a narrow group of extremely rich people
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who will inevitably move to live in gated communities, cut off from the majority. At the same time, this narrow group will seek to maintain and extend their wealth, and Klein suggests that it is here that they may find their powers and influence fading. She suggests that the 'winners' from the shock doctrine have some powerful tools at their disposal, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and that these massive global institutions claim to be acting for the best interests of the majority but are in fact directed by, and for the benefit of, the world's global power elite. In this regard, Klein is presenting the current economic system – based on the shock doctrine – as untenable in the long term because it will not allow the majority of the population to develop their own economic wealth. Klein was writing before the impact of the recent economic crisis, but it is not difficult to fit her theories and arguments to recent events: banking institutions had to be bailed out by governments, yet as the crisis eases it is clear that restrictions on the future activities of such institutions are relaxed and are unlikely to have any real impact. In other words, the shock doctrine has survived its own shock and is realigning itself to continue from where it left off. This disproves Klein's contention back in 2007 that the system she describes cannot continue indefinitely.

Klein's account of how the shock doctrine works and why it is so successful is convincing. She notes the impact of Disaster Capitalism, and the ability of the capitalist system to absorb disasters and profit from them rather than being damaged by them. Traditionally, as Klein notes, a major disaster (such as 9/11) would rock the foundations of the dominant economic system and present a challenge, yet Klein notes with some success that the capitalist

system in the west is so advanced that it was actually able to profit from 9/11 in many ways. Extending this argument to the recent financial crisis, it is possible to argue that the major banks have successfully negotiated the fallout from the disaster and have emerged, if anything, stronger than before (with one or two major names having become bankrupt along the way, effectively being sacrificed so that the overall system can stay in place). Klein also argues that the state's mismanagement of natural and manmade disasters serves as a rationale for the private sector to take over. As Tharoor (2007) notes, "the disaster of Hurricane Katrina demonstrated vividly the inadequacy, indeed incompetence, of the state, and so provided a ready rationale for the private sector to take over" (Tharoor, 2007), in which case it can be seen that one of the ultimate aims of the shock doctrine is to grant new levels of power to the private sector and, at the same time, to roll back the power of central government.

Klein's overall theory is that the global capitalist elite is using the shock doctrine as a means of maximising their profit from both natural and manmade disasters, and that the boundary between these two types of disaster is blurring. A system that is able to survive disasters has, Klein contends, developed into one that is reliant upon them, and will evolve into one that actively seeks them in order to maintain its own power. Although her analogy with psychiatric shock treatment is effective, she perhaps over-extends it in a way that invites criticism that some of her arguments are a little over-dramatic. Furthermore, as Stiglitz (2010) points out, "one human tendency is to see patterns in chaos, to determine free market actions as promoting, rather than reacting to, global events" (Stiglitz, 2010, p. 205).

While the free market and its major players do seem to have more influence over global events than perhaps is commonly realised, Klein might be seen to be going a step too far in suggesting that this is the result of a genuine, ‘joined-up’ global conspiracy. When she argues that “the global power base is attempting to construct a long-lasting mechanism for generating and profiting from disaster” (Klein, 2007, p. 118), this seems to an extent to fall into what Stiglitz has argued is “a rational but misguided attempt to portray capitalism as a single economic entity” (Stiglitz, 2010, p. 207). While Stiglitz and other critics recognise the influence and ambition of the capitalist free market system, they do not agree with Klein’s assessment that this leads to global manipulation on such a massive scale.

It is clear that Klein’s arguments are compelling and based on a convincing assessment of the activities of the world’s leading corporate forces. Free market economics have undoubtedly ‘moved with the times’ and learnt not only to absorb disasters and shocks but to profit from them. Having established this point, Klein moves on to suggest that the next logical step for a system with “no innate sense of moral limitations” (Klein, 2007, p. 125) is to promote disasters and generate shock in a way that can be controlled. In this context, the attitude of the free market would seem to be that since shocks are going to happen anyway, they might as well happen in ways that can be predicted and controlled. While Klein makes a number of convincing points regarding this system, she falls short of providing a persuasive and potentially viable alternative system. Most new political and social doctrines gain ground by offering something new rather than solely attacking the old system, and as yet Klein and her supporters have failed to demonstrate a

convincing and enticing new system. This does not mean that they cannot do so in the future, merely that for now they seem restricted to making points about the old system. The shock doctrine might seem over-dramatic to some critics, but this is merely testament to how well its ways of working have been contextualised by those who stand to benefit from them.