

Beware electocrats

Naomi Klein on South Africa

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With the Karl Marx epigraph at the front of his *Orientalism* ('They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented') Edward Said meant to caution not only against callow imperialists but also against benignly orientalist protectors who trample upon native political agency in the most well-meaning ways. Everyone knows how neocon invaders like Woodrow Wilson or Henry Kissinger tried to teach the natives to elect good men. We seem to have more trouble realizing what's at stake when liberal imperialists like Michael Ignatieff or Samantha Power protest against what Power sinuously calls 'electocracy'. Electocracy is Power's term for what she derides as a widespread and regrettable 'reification of elections'.

In the same week that she bailed out of the Barack Obama campaign over her relatively harmless description of Hillary Clinton as a 'monster', Samantha Power made a far more outrageous and predictably little-noticed defence of Wilson-style interventionism and selective respect for democratic outcomes abroad. Just because Hamas was an elected government doesn't mean that the United States has to talk to it, she told the *New Statesman*. 'You know, there is a long tradition in the US of, um, promoting elections up to the point that you get an outcome you don't like. Look at Latin America in the Cold War.'¹ Power uncritically cited the example of Salvador Allende, the elected president of Chile in 1970 who was overthrown in a CIA-backed coup on 11 September 1973. 'We were trying to figure out if we could promote that election, but we certainly didn't love the outcome. We played a role in assassinating an elected leader.' The difference that may divide people like Power from people like Kissinger, regarding this outcome, may boil down to little more than the rhetorical formulation of regret.

On the surface, Power's chilling political 'realism' might seem far removed from what Naomi Klein offers in her new and warmly received book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Klein's coverage of the Chilean coup and its aftermath is extensive and full of outrage, with good reason. Klein's critique of the 1973 coup is a cornerstone of her thesis, powerfully argued in parts, that autocratic violence and plutocratic economics often ride in tandem. When Klein emphasizes how electorates in Russia, Poland and elsewhere rose up to slap down 'shock therapy' economics, it is easy to believe that Klein would want to see electorates in the driver's seats of national destinies everywhere. She might seem to embrace that 'electocracy' at which Samantha Power scoffs. But upon an attentive reading Klein, no less than Power, seems happy with native electorates only so long as their collective decisions match her preferences. This is a particular weakness of her chapter on South Africa.

In her discussion of non-African countries, Klein confronts the articulated logic of decision-makers. But when she turns her attention to post-apartheid South Africa Klein is content to recycle the impressions of a small and like-minded clique of analysts such

as fellow Canadian activist Patrick Bond, described as someone 'who worked as an economic advisor in Mandela's office during the first years of ANC rule'. Bond is best known as an anti-government fundraising maestro within global 'social movements' circles. His Centre for Civil Society has at times accepted money from USAID and the Ford Foundation and has had links at board level with Ford, Kellogg and other such foundations.² Klein decries neocon 'transitionologists' as a 'hypermobile class' that intellectually dominates 'inherently inward-looking' native governments, softening them up for neoliberal restructuring. Yet she and some of her informants participate in the same condescension and hypermobility. To avoid duplicating the imperialism they supposedly resist, the 'social movements' elite may need to become a little more 'electocratic' than at present.

Ignoring the implications of her own excellent discussion of how the Ford Foundation channelled the economic interests of the Ford Motor Company in what was an obvious conflict of interest ('Ford on Ford', pp. 121–8), Klein uncritically recycles the Mbeki-bashing views of William Mervyn Gumede, a self-described Oppenheimer Scholar at St Anthony's College, Oxford, and a former employee of the London *Economist's* Intelligence Unit. The Oppenheimer dynasty, founders of Anglo-American and owners of diamond-dealing De Beers, is to South African politics and economics as was Ford to American economic and politics, except more so: their plutocratic dominance of the South African economy far exceeds Ford's influence within corporate and academic America. Before she published *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein had described Gumede's assault upon Mbeki, *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC* (2005), as 'a definitive account of how one of the greatest liberation struggles of our time failed millions of people in whose name it fought'.³

On page 184 of her book, Klein enthuses over global citizenry's 'hard-won democratic powers to become the authors of their national destinies'. But not all these new authors, it seems, have written equally compelling political texts. In South Africa 'the black majority were misled', John Pilger had argued of the 1994 election in an essay that anticipates Klein's argument, titled 'Apartheid Did Not Die'.⁴ But by the time Pilger published this essay in 2006 (based on a 1998 documentary), the electorate had given an even larger percentage of its vote to the ANC in 1999 (66 per cent) and then a larger still share in 2004 (70 per cent). If Pilger was correct, South Africa's black voters were not merely misled, but chronically misleadable. Pilger doesn't explain why that might be. Ah, the boundless stupidity of those millions. Klein's *Shock Doctrine* purports to remove the mystery: electorates, including black South Africans, were shocked into a kind of collective coma, so that what looked outwardly like freedom was really a new imprisonment.

Back in 1807, the liberal Lord Gloucester founded the African Institution, with a charter to advance 'the civilization and improvement of Africa' aimed 'to prepare and fortify the minds of the ignorant natives of Africa against the fraudulent and mischievous efforts of eager and adventurous traffic'.⁵ Apparently the natives still need such help, with people such as Klein and Pilger looking to supply it.

In an open letter of 1 August 2003, Mbeki addressed this fashionably radical contempt for the newly enfranchised:

We must free ourselves of the 'friends' who populate our ranks, originating from the world of the rich, who come to us, perhaps dressed in jeans and T-shirts, as advisers and consultants, while we end up as the voice that gives popular legitimacy to decisions we neither made, nor intended to make, which our 'friends' made for us, taking advantage of an admission that perhaps we are not sufficiently educated.

Matters of fact

The suggestion that millions of newly enfranchised blacks have been so quickly and so easily reduced to a quasi-comatose passivity is a proposition that must be expressed

with great delicacy, to say the least. Klein excels in this. Her favoured strategy is to find a black native informant who mentions the unmentionable, rendering it printable.

Klein slips between starkly different ‘shock’ notions as her text proceeds: the literal electroshocks of the torture chamber; the metaphorical ‘shock therapy’ of neoliberal economic theory; the military metaphor of ‘shock and awe’ in Iraq, all somehow subsumed within a loosely defined ‘shock doctrine’. When Klein describes Nelson Mandela’s release from prison in 1990, the ‘shock’ epidemic turns from fatuous to farce: ‘Mandela, for his part, was suffering from such an epic case of culture shock that he mistook a camera microphone for “some new-fangled weapon developed while I was in prison”.’

Klein suggests that electorates can become lobotomized by trauma. This is most explicit when she quotes the slain Argentine activist Rudolfo Walsh:

Before he was gunned down on the streets of Buenos Aires, Walsh estimated that it would take twenty to thirty years until the effects of the terror receded and Argentines regained their footing, courage and confidence, ready once again to fight for economic and social equality. It was in 2001, twenty-four years later, that Argentina erupted in protest against IMF prescribed austerity measures and then proceeded to force out five presidents in only three weeks. I was living in Buenos Aires in that period, and people kept exclaiming, ‘The dictatorship has just ended!’ At the time I didn’t understand the meaning behind the jubilation, since the dictatorship had been over for seventeen years. Now I think I do: the state of shock had finally worn off, just as Walsh predicted. In the years since, that wide-awake shock resistance has spread to many other former shock labs. (447)

In the South African context the question is: Why has the ANC’s vote risen in each election since 1994? Answer: the electorate is falling more and more deeply asleep.

And yet when it comes to plain factual matters Klein herself is frequently caught napping. At page 203 of her chapter on ‘South Africa’s constricted freedom’ Klein lists the apparent nets that descended upon the unwary natives and their political leadership. For instance she cites the Constitution’s property clause, which explicitly contemplates and allows for land reform, as though it absolutely bars land reform.⁶ Likewise, an ANC government that successfully litigated against intellectual property rights that had stymied cheap generic antiretrovirals gets faulted by Klein for upholding the very constraints they successfully fought down!⁷ Again, she emphasizes the interest bill on pre-democracy loans as though debt repudiation would have enhanced the democratic government’s cash flows for social spending, without addressing the cash crunch that debt repudiation would entail as retaliating banks shut down credit lines. She suggests that the World Bank succeeded in ‘making private-sector partnerships the service norm’. As strategy and policy adviser to the ANC minister who piloted the 1998 water law reforms, I personally insisted upon precisely the opposite bias, which is why section 19 of the 1997 Water Services Act establishes an explicit onus *against* public–private partnerships, of which there have been next to none.⁸ Moreover, section 3 of the 1998 Water Act effectively nationalizes water resources. Klein convinces herself that ‘currency controls’ needed to be imposed in 1994. Actually these were already thick on the ground, a result of the apartheid regime’s earlier battles with capital flight. Klein repeatedly mentions an \$850 million IMF deal ‘signed, conveniently enough, right before the elections’ of 1994; this deal then supposedly constrained the incoming government. But she neglects to mention that the IMF has been begging the ANC, with zero success in fifteen years, to take its money. She even believes the minimum wage was not raised. It was. Repeatedly.

Additionally, Klein implies that the ANC implemented a massive privatization plan. This is a major theme in *Shock Doctrine*; privatization is to political economy what sensory deprivation is to clinical psychology. In fact the ANC successfully resisted massive international pressure on privatization, and Mbeki took the steps that were required to allow such resistance to prevail. The ANC has privatized nothing strategic

other than the telephone company. While Patrick Bond at least quotes Mbeki's many and varied assaults upon the Washington Consensus before caricaturing them as lip service (as in his book *Talking Left, Walking Right*), Klein proceeds as though Mbeki's vigorous and long-standing critiques, such as his speech at the ILO Conference in June 2003,⁹ simply do not exist.

When Klein turns her attention to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which investigated the apartheid past, she suggests that the ANC played a role in limiting its political effects. She suggests that the ANC wanted a narrow torture-focused process that neglected apartheid's systemic aspects. Again I was a direct participant in the formative debates surrounding the Truth Commission, and at the time I co-authored a book with Professor Kader Asmal, the human rights lawyer and ANC minister who had first floated the idea in a 1992 lecture.¹⁰ We explicitly advocated a systematic focus and rejected precisely the narrow torture-based approach that Klein criticizes. We emphasized the role of business, which Klein claims the ANC tried to play down. Nelson Mandela wrote the book's preface; his successor, Thabo Mbeki, spoke at the book's launch. Rather than the ANC it was the Truth Commissioners themselves who dropped the ball on this, not least because of the influence of their deputy chair, Alex Boraine, a public relations executive during the apartheid years within the Oppenheimer-run mining conglomerate, Anglo-American. After completing his TRC work Boraine left for New York to set up 'Justice in Transition' programmes at New York University and Columbia University, massively funded by the Ford Foundation.

Permanent transition

The plain truth is that Klein's account of South Africa is clogged with propaganda. This is all the more poignant because of her undoubtedly progressive intentions. Many of the guiding assumptions of *Shock Doctrine* do not fit the South African situation, but rather than revise her theory Klein prefers to misrepresent the 'case'. In fact the last thing sought by the colonial status quo in South Africa is 'shock' of any kind. Instead, for obvious reasons, they seek a kind of continuity that was vividly described by one Anglo-American official in the 1980s as 'permanent transition'. He meant the continuation of state powerlessness: the powerlessness of the apartheid state, buffeted by sanctions and pariah status before 1994 ought to give way to a new powerlessness of the democratic state, which must be weakened by factionalism and delegitimized (not least by reckless internal talk of 'betrayal') so that private and international interests can continue to dominate the field as the only entities capable of collective action.

This is why the choice of Klein's chief source in this chapter, William Gumede, is so profoundly problematic. Klein thoroughly buys Gumede's anti-Mbeki line. In January 2005 the *Economist* had the following peculiar sentence (italicized below) in a hostile profile of Mbeki, based on Gumede's book:

Mr Mbeki and a team of friends [*sic*] – Trevor Manuel as finance minister, Tito Mboweni at the central bank – pushed through a set of tough economic reforms known as GEAR (the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Plan) to cut the deficit, lower inflation, cut tariffs and bureaucracy and privatize some state firms. These reforms left opponents reeling. *Those who wanted to see a state-dominated economy were barged aside.*

But since when has the *Economist* taken up cudgels on behalf of labour unions that were allegedly 'barged aside' by market measures? Klein's book itself demonstrates what everybody knows: the *Economist* traditionally proselytizes in favour of the sort of economic reforms embraced by Augusto Pinochet and other neoliberal 'modernisers'.

What, then, is going on? As Noam Chomsky has repeatedly said: it is not the self-styled left-ness or right-ness of governments that offends imperialism, but the extent of a government's capacity for coherent collective action or nationalist self-assertion. 'Left' regimes that sufficiently toe the line are tolerated, as was the China of the 1990s; 'right'

regimes that show too much independence quickly become anathema. The same regime can cross from initial client to subsequent pariah status, as in the cases of Saddam Hussein and Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega; alternatively, the fire-breathing devil of the Reagan years, Daniel Ortega, can retake Nicaragua if he cleans up his act. One hears far more vituperation over Mbeki's Zimbabwe and AIDS policies than one does refutation of his logic.¹¹ On AIDS policy, in particular, Mbeki has steadfastly resisted the Big Pharma disaster capitalist logic, peddled by Jeffrey Sachs himself, who advocates a medical form of shock therapy in the form of massive drug-buying binges – a strategy criticized by William Easterley in *The White Man's Burden*. And yet, despite her generally unremitting criticisms of Sachs, Klein gives Mbeki no credit here, scared away as she is by the propaganda that has caricatured his position as an ill-defined 'AIDS denialism'.

The rise of factionalism inside the ANC is not now and never was about the country's location on a policy spectrum between right-wing 'shock doctors' and left-wing progressives. Since the defenestration of Mbeki at the ANC conference last December, the new leadership has reiterated the old economic policy commitments.

On 22 April 2008 Bobby Godsell, a recently retired executive within the Anglo-American stable, and Mbeki's most vociferous 'left' critic, Zwelinzima Vavi, general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, co-authored an article in Johannesburg's *Business Day*. This unlikely duo voiced thoughts much more closely resembling Klein's 'disaster capitalism' than anything Klein cites in her book. After returning from a trip to London they wrote:

We met a financial advisory company specialising in energy and infrastructure which, frankly, saw our situation [of rolling electricity blackouts] as an opportunity rather than a problem. We were a little surprised to be told by them, and by the MD of the investment management arm of one of the world's largest investment banks, that our problems in this respect are little different from the power challenges of many other rapidly developing countries.

Klein would do well to answer a question posed by the 22-year-old Durban-based environmental activist Khadija Sharife: 'But whose fault is it that the media acts as a thin veneer for Empire's interest? Theirs or ours?' Klein herself is, of course, a powerful part of the global media, with her well-meaning and yet stubbornly Orientalist representations of African politics, complete with a 'culture-shocked' Mandela and a chronically paralysed native electorate, falsely unconscious of its authentic best interests.

Notes

1. Samantha Power, *New Statesman*, 6 March 2008: www.newstatesman.com/200803060030.
2. Stephen Gowans, 'Talking Left, Funded Right', *Panafricanews*, 8 April 2007, <http://panafricanews.blogspot.com/2007/04/talking-left-funded-right-more-views-on.html>.
3. Ginny Hooker, 'Take a Leaf Out of Their Books', *Guardian*, 25 November 2006.
4. John Pilger, *Freedom Next Time*, Bantam, London, 2006, p. 218.
5. African Institution, quoted by Rachel Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman*, Bloomsbury, London, 2007, p. 79.
6. See Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, section 25, which contemplates expropriation, requires those calculating the compensation payable to have regard to 'the history of the acquisition and use of the property' and also 'the nation's commitment to land reform, and to reforms to bring about equitable access to all South Africa's natural resources'.
7. The government passed a 1997 law permitting generic imports. The drug industry launched its challenge within months and the government finally won the case in 2001. See 'South Africa versus Big Pharma', www.nature.com/nm/journal/v7/n4/full/nm0401_390c.html.
8. Full text of the Act available at: www.wrc.org.za/downloads/legislature/WSA108-97.pdf.
9. Thabo Mbeki, Speech at ILO Conference, 11 June 2003, www.polity.org.za/article.php?a_id=37111.
10. Kader Asmal, Louise Asmal and Ronald Suresh Roberts, *Reconciliation through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid's Criminal Governance*, 2nd edn, James Currey, London, 1997, *passim*.
11. See my book, written with Mbeki's cooperation, *Fit to Govern: The Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki*, STE, Johannesburg, 2007.