

Critical views of South Africa

In 'Beware Electocrats: Naomi Klein on South Africa' (the Commentary in RP 150, July–August 2008), Ronald Suresh Roberts plays sophist with your readers. First, Klein's *Shock Doctrine* chapter can and should be read directly. Second, Roberts makes repeated interpretive mistakes. If, as he claims, the African National Congress (ANC) government 'successfully litigated against intellectual property rights that had stymied cheap generic antiretrovirals', why did Mbeki get away with AIDS denialism for so long, and why did he fight (in the country's highest court) against the Treatment Action Campaign's insistence on making those medicines available to millions who need them?

If, as Roberts claims, the ANC supports dramatic land reform, why has less than 5 per cent of available land been redistributed and why was large-scale land expropriation removed from the party's legislative agenda in August 2008?

If, as he claims, the ANC 'privatized nothing strategic other than the telephone company', why was a \$1 billion apparatus (the Municipal Infrastructure Investment Unit) established at the Development Bank of Southern Africa with World Bank and US AID support, readily embraced by the water ministry Roberts worked for, specifically to promote public–private partnerships?

In reality, Mbeki's team tried to privatize a great deal – Telkom, two state airlines, electricity generation capacity, toll roads, a middle-class resort network, and many municipal services (water, bus transport, rubbish, electricity) – and in all cases, any objective observer would declare the result a failure.

Roberts is just as weak on macroeconomics, such as the feared 'cash crunch that [apartheid-era, inherited] debt repudiation would entail as retaliating banks shut down credit lines'. Argentina in 2002–03 proves otherwise, and in any case South Africa did not expand its foreign debt much after 1994, while mobilization of domestic resources could have been accomplished with prescribed asset requirements on local financiers, a well-tested strategy.

Roberts also reports that currency controls were 'thick on the ground, a result of the apartheid regime's earlier battles with capital flight', without revealing that the ANC lifted them in 1995 and 1999, allowing rich whites and big capital to permanently expatriate

apartheid-era loot, leaving South Africa with one of the world's highest current account deficits today.

Roberts mocks Klein for citing a 'supposedly' constraining IMF loan in 1993; indeed, explicit conditions included wage restraint and shrinkage of the fiscal debt ratio. The IMF also compelled Mandela to reappoint the apartheid-era finance minister and central bank governor in May 1994.

Third, politically, Roberts is a talk-left apologist for a walk-right neoliberal neo-nationalist regime that has, remarkably, worsened inequality, unemployment and the environment since 1994. Thus as 'a direct participant' in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission debates, Roberts 'explicitly advocated a systematic focus and rejected precisely the narrow torture-based approach that Klein criticizes' – but neglects to mention that he obviously failed, leaving the Commission absent in the struggle to rectify structural apartheid-caused inequality through reparations demands upon big capital.

In this struggle, Mbeki tellingly takes the side of the Bush, Brown and Merkel regimes, alongside three dozen corporations currently being sued for apartheid-era profiteering under the US Alien Tort Claims Act.

Fourth, descending to trivial personal insult, Roberts dismisses Klein as 'stubbornly Orientalist'. And, perhaps flowing from the rough treatment Percy Nkonyama and I gave his Mbeki biography (www.nu.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?2,40,3,1255), Roberts smears the Centre for Civil Society (CCS), which hosted Klein when she was drafting the South Africa chapter of *Shock Doctrine*. Roberts claims that CCS 'at times accepted money from USAID' (yes, once, for an activist-training project in 2002–03) but ignores the well-known fact that USAID defunded CCS soon after the then-director, Adam Habib, opposed the war on Iraq – and was later branded a 'terrorist' and banned from entry into the USA. Ford has not extended new funding to CCS since the time I arrived there in late 2004. Similar rebuttals can be offered regarding William Mervin Gumede, a far more reliable Mbeki watcher (according to Roberts, merely Klein's 'black native informant').

With less status quo bias, Roberts could put his considerable talents to better use.

Patrick Bond

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Reply to Bond

When I wrote that 'Klein is content to recycle the impressions of a small and like-minded clique of analysts' like Patrick Bond, I only guessed at what Bond confirms: his Centre for Civil Society (CCS) indeed 'hosted Klein when she was drafting the South Africa chapter of *Shock Doctrine*'. Klein's uncharacteristically weak South Africa chapter is a casualty of ideological capture.

Bond evades my central argument: in a book that seems to celebrate the wills of electorates, Klein strangely portrays electorates as susceptible to coma-inducing 'shocks' that paralyse their wills. He sallies forth instead on matters of detail, but argues principally by non sequitur. That the democratic government 'successfully litigated against intellectual property rights that had stymied cheap generic antiretrovirals' is not an 'interpretive mistake' but a fact easily verifiable at the Pretoria High Court (see, e.g., <http://academic.udayton.edu/health/06world/africa01.htm>). Bond's error is astonishing.

South Africa's property clause expressly contemplates and encourages land reform. Klein specifically wrote the opposite. Dodging what I wrote, Bond attributes to me the ill-defined suggestion that the ANC 'supports dramatic land reform' (which incidentally it does, but that was not my point about Klein's constitutional carelessness). Bond again hopes for a careless readership when he writes that Mbeki's team 'tried' to privatize lots. Klein of course wrote that the ANC in *fact* privatized massively. This fake 'fact' buttresses her entire 'shock' thesis. On debt cancellation, exchange controls, the pre-democracy IMF loan and the Truth Commission Bond similarly rewrites what I wrote. In each case he retreats from Klein's specifics, which I disputed.

Klein, I wrote, produces 'well-meaning and yet stubbornly Orientalist representations of African politics'. Bond rewrites: 'descending to trivial personal insult, Roberts dismisses Klein as "stubbornly Orientalist"'. The point is fundamental, not trivial or personal. '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.' Those words opened my commentary. Klein argues that shock jockeys in various times and places succeeded in reducing their victims to political passivity. Said,

by contrast, insisted that native submissiveness is a central trope of imperialism's own propaganda (hence imperialism's infamously premature 'Mission Accomplished' banner in Iraq). Despite her anti-imperialist intentions, Klein's account converges with empire's own story about itself.

I am a 'talk-left apologist for a walk-right neo-liberal neo-nationalist regime' (pew!). Posturing as 'independent' critic, Bond sniffs that I 'worked for' a government ministry. Actually, I was the minister's personally appointed counterweight to, and critic of, departmentally generated advice.

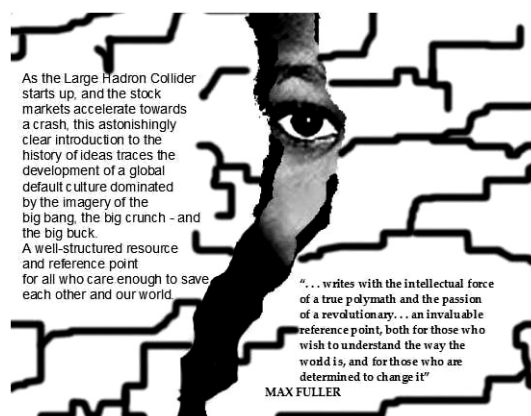
And here, caught red-handed in bad faith, is how Bond presented himself at a seminar on 3 September 2008, where he again attacked my *RP* commentary and, for that different audience, bolstered his credibility thus: 'I also worked for the water minister, as a budget advisor, at exactly the same time as [Roberts].' (Bond's own seminar notes are at www.nu.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?2,68,3,1597). Bond's cynical gyrations do Klein no good.

Ronald Suresh Roberts

Editorial note Roberts's *RP* Commentary misattributed Canadian citizenship to Patrick Bond as a result of an in-house error, for which the author bears no responsibility.

NEVER POINT AT A RAINBOW: An Introduction to Radical Philosophy

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