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Santos, Alessandra

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Memory as Antidote: Remembering Repression from Latin America to Katrina

KLEIN, NAOMI. *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Toronto: Knopf, 2007. 662 pages.

> All shock therapists are intent on the erasure of memory.
>
> Recollections can be rebuilt, new narratives can be created. Memory, both individual and collective, turns out to be the greatest shock absorber of all. (557)

Naomi Klein's new book *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* recently published in September 2007 is a testament to the importance of memory. The book addresses the rise of what she calls "disaster capitalism." Klein is a prize-winner Canadian journalist who became famous with her book *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Picador, 2000). In *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein explores how this new brand of economic activity has been on the rise since the 1950s, developed at the Chicago School of Economics, especially through the works of economist Milton Friedman, intellectual leader to the neo-liberal, free-market economy.

The author begins the book with an account of a North-American doctor who researched shock therapy in the 1950s, Ewen Cameron, who claimed that to maintain time and space image, two things are necessary: sensory input and memory (41), and that to erase both is to recreate a person. Klein draws a parallel between shock therapy and Friedman's economic shock treatment in the sense that both intend to erase perception and memory to create a blank slate, a *tabula rasa* in which to impose a "new personality," in the case of Cameron; and a new economical system, in the case of Friedman. The three tenets of Friedman's treatment are "[. . .] privatization, deregulation and cuts to government service" (534). According to Klein, the inauguration of a practical application of Friedman's doctrine started during Pinochet's authoritarian regime in Chile in 1973.

Despite being a journalistic account, Klein's new book is thoroughly researched, and among its most striking aspects lie the historical connections drawn between Latin American authoritarian regimes, Indonesia, South Africa, Poland, Russia, and China, in order

to arrive at the present moment: the Iraq occupation, Guantánamo Bay, Gaza strip conflicts, the 2004 tsunami in Asia, and the 2005 Katrina Hurricane disaster in New Orleans. The scope of the book is obviously wide. It is a critique of the disastrous aspects of economic globalization, and the use of technology to repress and censor, especially with the advent of a rapidly growing surveillance industry. The book stresses the importance of remembering history, and the many terrifying facets of historical amnesia. Klein's account follows the history of literal shock therapy and how the CIA conducted research on the subject, which was later applied to Latin American countries, such as Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Uruguay for interrogation through the means of torture. She also briefly mentions Nicaragua and Guatemala.

The importance of this book for Latin American Studies is not only to remember the thousands who were exiled, arrested, tortured, and disappeared during the military dictatorships, but this reportage also connects the political situation with economy. What is obvious to some in the field is, however, rarely stated: the free-market economy interest behind the military controlled regimes, and especially how debt accrued after the coups d'états. Those facts may be well known, but they are only recently remembered, especially when unmasking the strategizing of an intellectual elite directly connected to the corporate world. Since colonial times, Latin America has suffered the impacts of imperialism—political, economical and cultural—let alone structural poverty and racism, which have been reinforced by economical reforms that accompanied the shock treatment required by the Friedman's doctrine.

The economical shock treatment in Latin America was directly linked to a fight against developmentalism in the 1950s, which imposed too many public measures that benefited the people, and not the wealthy. The author comments that the "[. . .] most advanced laboratory of developmentalism was [. . .] the Southern Cone" (63), during a moment of expansion for the region; thus, the regime changes and direct military interventions in Brazil in 1964, Chile in 1973, Argentina in 1976, etc. Friedman helped Pinochet draw his economic plan for Chile, along with other plans sketched by Friedman's students, which resulted in the economical "miracle" in 1970s Latin America. It is a well known fact that the miracles were a mirage, and the results disastrous to those who were left to pay the debts under

strict impositions by the IMF and the World Bank. Those countries that suffered the shock treatment are still recovering at a price of massive privatization, and very few benefits.

There was a "[. . .] larger plan to impose 'pure' capitalism on Latin America" (142), and the lesson the military dictatorships taught us are of a collective trauma and devastating consequences of repression. Throughout the books' account of the Argentine, Chilean, and Brazilian military junta's impact on those countries, Klein points out to a rhetoric of cleansing, as though torture was a cure for sick countries, or at least a lesson to those who opposed their master plan of liberal economy. Klein also points out to a lack of connection between political conflict and economics in the general perception or representation of history. The imposition of authoritarian regimes is indeed connected to economical reforms, which only increase the disparity between the rich and the poor. This disconnect comes from an attempt to amnesia, which perpetuates the idea that the privileged few are spreading freedom and democracy to all.

Klein signals that the rise of the human rights movement was sponsored by the same institutions in the United States who had initially sponsored the dictatorships in Latin America (such as the Ford Foundation). In her account, human rights activism fails to take into consideration the economical origins of the abuses. Once again, Klein reports on a common detachment that seems to ignore the nuances between politics and economics. For instance, in the human rights sponsored books called "Never Again," which denounce torture during the regimes in Latin America, the author claims that only the Brazilian one has acknowledged the link between economy and the regime's atrocities. Klein's account presents the struggle for sovereignty in Latin America as suffering without poetic justice. She ends the book, however, on a positive note, especially with the recent resistance of further privatization in places like Bolivia, and particularly Venezuela.

Initially, the book seems to be symptomatic of its own medicine, since the images of shock therapy and brutal regimes provoke a certain discomfort in the reader. Her style is somewhat colorful, and even didactic at moments, given that she is non-partisan but engaged in activism against globalization and free-market economies. To say that Klein's book does not participate in academic argumentation is to take the book out of context. She makes her claim explicit by linking

the people involved in the authoritarian regimes in Latin America with those involved in the war industry, as best exemplified in Iraq. The United States interventions in Latin America through CIA support is well known in the field, and the connections Klein makes are part and parcel of her argumentation. Despite the journalistic tone and personal accounts, Klein provides facts hard to deny in the face of an industry that is clearly taking advantage of disasters caused by mismanagement—as was the case in New Orleans after the Katrina Hurricane disaster.

Overall, the book discusses the role of the intellectual in policy making, and how an economics doctrine may dominate the market, and its subsequent impact in the lives of people all over the globe. The shock doctrine is an exercise of "extreme privatization" (508), which not only helps to increase the gap between the rich and the poor to widen, but that also takes advantage of disasters, natural or political. Klein provides a sober account of a brutal history. This book is important to the intersections between academia and coherent journalism. In the field of Latin American Studies, the significance of journalists who braved authoritarian regimes is evident in those who were persecuted and disappeared during decades of horrors, and who had to masquerade their work in order to publish. Now, Klein has the freedom to denounce, as few had in the countries she reports on.

Forgiving might not play a role in Klein's account, but memory is essential and vital for reconstruction. Klein points out the importance of grassroots movements and community in countries like Argentina, Chile and Brazil to rebuild after a collective trauma that took many lives, imposed brutality, and bankrupted those countries. The old adage "never forget" has taking new meaning while facing an economic system that insists on effacing all memory. Klein compares the blank slate and erasure required by both the shock doctrine and religious fundamentalism: the first with its intentions of erasing history and starting anew with private investments; the latter with the intention of erasing memory for the sake of rapture (561). The book is a portrait of opportunism, and an ode to remembering.

Alessandra Santos
University of British Columbia, Vancouver