Letters on review of Naomi Klein's The Shock Doctrine

3 March 2008

The following letters were sent to the World Socialist Web Site *in response to Nick Beams' "A superficial analysis of global capitalism", a review of Naomi Klein's book,* The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism. *The review can be found here:* Part One *and* Part Two.

Thanks for the informative article. I offer my observations.

Nick Beams provides a very enlightening analysis of Naomi Klein's Keynesian perspective. He could not be more accurate in characterizing the needs of the present political system for such icons of the left. More a celebrity than a real leader, she deflects the aspirations of those affected by the economic depredations.

Even though Naomi Klein's parents were strong in the anti-Vietnam War movement, her husband's influence seems of particular note in defining her political trajectory. Avi Lewis' father was head of the Ontario wing of the New Democratic Party. He made an effort to discipline the party against leftist tendencies. Avi's grandfather, David Lewis, was head of the New Democratic Party in Canada. Throughout his career, Lewis fought against Marxism.

At best Klein carries on a perspective of social democracy. Although, when it comes to detail, she seems short on elaborating a program. Significantly, she is at her best when describing how the CIA and its adherents have applied their torture program. She would no doubt find comfort with Norman Thomas, another contributor to *The Nation*, who once complained how Franklin Roosevelt had stolen key elements of Thomas's socialist platform. Trotsky had no patience for this style of illegitimate reading of the Marxist perspective: "[They] adapt every week new haphazard fragments of Marx and Lenin to their current needs. Workers can learn nothing from these people."

Klein is making a concentrated effort to position herself as the conscience of the left. This is particularly the case in her recent piece in *The Nation* on Barack Obama. The article more or less assumes Obama is the voice for those suffering under the present political system. Her role is to chide Obama under the belief that he is open to such reasoned appeals as hers. As a writer for *The Nation*, she plays an indispensable part in confusing the young and the disaffected who have been awakened to their political power. She makes them believe that the American two-party system actually accommodates their point of view. All the while, Klein maintains a comfortable distance from the debate so that she can wash her hands when the Obama campaign does not deliver on its messianic promise.

It is sometimes difficult for the casual reader to detect Klein's slant. Whether she writes on the use of tasers or torture by American authorities, she seems like a welcome spokesperson against the smugness of the mainstream media. In fact, her superficial analysis is all too welcome in the media. Nowhere is there anything resembling a labor theory of value. She talks vaguely about trade unions, but has little conception of a labor struggle or the actual productive power of the workers themselves. Instead, she hardly misses an opportunity to push her "shock doctrine". Without a clear concept of the role of the working class, her appeals are at the mercy of bourgeois nationalists for their implementation. Instead of recognizing the shock doctrine as part of a larger strategy of the management class, she believes that political change comes from an over-application of the shock. The initial hysteria wears off and the subject becomes inspired by his own pain. Not only does she exaggerate the significance of torture, her method enshrines the shock as a critical influence in developing a political consciousness. There is no reference to workers coming to understand the forces of production. Her method is entirely negative in its application. This is muddled and leads only to elevating Naomi Klein as a high priestess of the Left.

Thanks,

KH
1 March 2008

You are right on the money in your challenge to Naomi Klein's Keynesiasm. In fact, there is nothing inherently progressive about its application even during its so-called golden era of the Roosevelt administration. Hitler was implementing exactly the same program under Finance Minister Schacht.

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Having got into power by the narrowest of margins and with his Brownshirts in open revolt against him, Hitler ditched the economic program on which he campaigned for over a decade to invest a bundle, as Roosevelt had done, on a program of public works and work camps for youth under semi-military conditions. Just like Roosevelt, he funded the arts and brought them to the people, not always in a distorted form. Hitler had orchestras perform at factories, for instance. This gave hope and the appearance of something being done. Had Hitler died in 1938, he would most likely be remembered as a rather progressive figure.

There are problems in this picture. The lives of most people were miserable throughout this period in both the United States and Germany—the Hungry Thirties. Besides, just as today and in the 1970s, the financing of social programs to relieve the unbearable tensions of an economic catastrophe global in scope had to be supported by a productive economy, but the economy never caught fire. By 1938, the American working class was waging its powerful union drive in open revolt against the profit system, while the German working class was near to revolt, Hitler's own lieutenants on the labor front told him. That was the main reason for Hitler's desperate grab for territory, resources, and slave labor leading to the World War, which brought both the United States and Germany out of the Depression and into much, much worse.

AL
Toronto, Ontario
27 February 2008

Very good analysis. Klein is dealing with the consequences of capitalism and not the causes of the problems. You cannot reform capitalism, only eradicate it. You have to change the property relations. Well done. Keep up the good work.

LP
UK
28 February 2008

Thank you for this cogent analysis of Klein's book. I am glad someone finally wrote it. I read the book and was persuaded by much of it, but there was just something lacking, something not said, some depth not penetrated, and I knew it was that she was hoping, in her way, that capitalism could be reformed. Your analysis makes it perfectly clear that has never been the case, and will never be the case. Pity Klein could not put her considerable talent for amassing information to better, clearer use.

CD
Erongaricuaro, Mexico
28 February 2008

Thank you for your review of Klein's book. After reading your exposé, I'm furious, just furious with so-called "left" writers like Klein. I should follow her political prescriptions, calculated to lead me into a capitalist scrap heap?

Well I've got a shock for Ms. Klein: There is an alternative to the sci-fi scenarios being peddled by her and her ilk. As Mr. Beams noted in his review, the alternative is based on "...the working class—the overwhelming mass of humanity—[taking] conscious control of the vast productive forces, science and technology, which it has created, and [utilizing] them for the advancement of civilisation...."

Scrounging around in the trash, or reaching up to the stars. Unlike Klein, I know a noble (and realistic) political path when I see it.

DP
Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada
28 February 2008

In some publications, a response to a critique proves to be most interesting. I have not read Naomi Klein's book, as reviewed in the WSWS, so I lack some a perspective there (and the older I get, the more perspective I seem to be able to give myself), but I wonder if she would be so inclined. I realize the WSWS is a format for the SEP, and its political philosophy, and is not like, say, *The Nation*.

Thanks for the analysis. The more I read articles on the WSWS, the more I have come to see its vision as the highest form of expression for socialism. Maudlin, I'm sure might be regarded the compliment of respect for it, but I'll put that forward to you.

MS
Santa Rosa, California, USA
28 February 2008

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