

Neoliberalism's Double Lives

Naomi Klein on creating an “unselfing” to establish solidarity & community

Max Reynard

2025

a review of

Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World by Naomi Klein. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023

Naomi Klein's most recent book is a worthwhile analysis of fascist and reactionary organizing that began with the Covid-19 pandemic and continues to the present. Encompassing both liberatory and electoral politics, her jumping off point is the persistent confusion in public between herself and highbrow feminist-cum-MAGA acolyte, Naomi Wolf. But this is like the McGuffin in a detective story: it's the animating ghost—doppelgangers often showing up as poltergeists—that takes us through a much more interesting journey than the initial question portends.

Klein first examines the “diagonalist” alignment in the Covid pandemic between wellness quasi-progressives and the anti-government Right. She's incisive here about the mainstream political failing during this time period. While the summer of 2020 saw the largest civil rights movement in U.S. history—the George Floyd protests, primarily built and organized by women of color—both progressive and radical responses to the pandemic were often incoherent. Appalled at the Hobbesian everyone-for-themselves attitude of the Right, many mainstream progressives overcorrected, ceding moral authority to the state and the scientific establishment.

For instance, in decades past, both progressives and radicals had correctly organized against exploitations like patenting-and-profiting from medications and had long and legitimate suspicions of public health campaigns that disregarded or actively harmed—purposely infected, systematically sterilized—people of color and poor communities. But when individuals were worried about receiving new vaccines backed by both Big Pharma and the state, the only place discussing their fears was the conspiratorial Right.

While some activists mocked those who saw smartphone vaccine passport apps as an arm of the Deep State, they often were the same people who had spent the previous decade raising alarms about the power of billionaire tech moguls and the state's surveillance apparatus. Is it any wonder that some people mapped those concerns onto imaginary schemes by Bill Gates and the World Health Organization?

Conspiracies, Klein argues, identify the symptoms, but misdiagnose the sickness. It's capitalism and state power, in the form of neoliberalism, that generate our accurate feelings of being alienated and regulated.

It was capitalism that so effectively convinced USers to prioritize self-reliant individualism above all else. So, the idea of communal sacrifice, doing something for your potentially immunocompromised neighbors would be anathema. There was no prominent alternative vision during the early pandemic—mainstream progressives saying little when private corporations got public funding and still got to patent and profit from their vaccines.

As a result, the only outlet for frustration with the experience of a worse-than-necessary public health crisis was a radio show like Trump booster Steve Bannon's. And he, with others on the Right, welcomed their erstwhile political enemies like Naomi Wolf as proof of the rottenness of the system.

For some in the United States, the pandemic offered a momentary glimpse of another kind of society, where the state made direct cash payments to keep people afloat, expanded public food and nutrition programs, provided

nationwide lifesaving treatment while legally barring ruinous bills from hospitals and insurance companies, and paused the effects of onerous educational debt (belatedly forgiving a small portion).

Many “essential workers” did not get to spend 2020 learning to bake bread, and too many families said final goodbyes to isolated loved ones over video chat. But the seeds of something better had been planted, demonstrated as workable to a huge swath of people in the United States.

During this time, social justice activists were consumed with fighting battles over public masking. Instead, Klein argues, they could have spent that energy in demanding improved air filtration systems in schools or in paid sick leave regardless of one’s occupation: projects that would have built societal resilience, rather than putting the onus for public health on a solitary person’s actions. She effectively connects this lack of communalist approach to the continuing rise of noxious and fascist policies:

“...[C]onspiracy theories detract attention from the billionaires who fund the networks of misinformation and away from the economic policies—deregulation, privatization, austerity—that have stratified wealth so cataclysmically in the neoliberal era. They rile up anger about the Davos elites, at Big Tech and Big Pharma, but the rage never seems to reach those targets. Instead, it gets diverted into culture wars about anti-racist education, all-gender bathrooms, and Great Replacement panic directed at Black people, nonwhite immigrants, and Jews.”

Klein skillfully weaves together the politics of Othering—excusing racist police violence and murder, the denial of health care (or humanity) to diverse sexualities or genders, and the continuous undercurrent of anti-Semitism. In a crucial section on the history of Jewish exclusion and the apartheid and public humiliation of Palestinians under Israeli control (written before the current war on Gaza), she unpacks the seductions and failures of Zionism.

Using an analysis of the problematic Philip Roth novel of doppelgangers, *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, she describes the “ethnic doubling” that people in excluded communities have to live down: Jews as a global cabal, Arabs as terrorists-in-waiting, and Black USers as inherently dangerous. Klein connects W.E.B. DuBois’s familiar idea of the “double consciousness” to technological regulation for “predictive” policing, and political regulation like punitive refugee policies, both examples of individuals “being overtaken by the lethal racial double.”

She uses all of this to construct a political project of “unselfing.” First, she reminds us of novelist Daisy Hilliard’s conception of a “second self” that benefits from far-off wars, ecological footprints of fast fashion and global shopping, privilege born of historical financial and genocidal advantages. Klein then adds DuBois’s idea of the (dangerous) projected double of marginalized people:

“So many forms of doubling are ways of not looking at death/trouble. And death feels awfully close these days, as close as a fentanyl-laden pill, a heat dome, a hate crime, an intake of virally-loaded breath...So, how do we stop averting our gaze?”

Unselfing, in the end, is a form of solidarity: rejecting the atomization of neoliberalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, and reaching towards connection. It is turning away from solutions that force individuals to protect their own health, and to solutions that build collective well-being.

Does Klein sometimes seem too accommodating of electoral politics? Yes, in some brief detours to the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign. And, her career-long project of packaging radical ideas for a more mainstream audience might seem too reductionist to some, eliding the breaking points between reformist and revolutionary organizing. But the value in her book is that it reconstitutes ideas purposely scrambled by the rise of opportunistic fascism, and underscores that some aspects of an eroding world deserve to crumble.

“If there’s one thing I admire about the diagonalists... it’s that they still believe in the idea of changing reality, an ambition that I fear too many on this side...have lost. We shouldn’t make up facts like they do, but we should stop treating a great many human-made systems, like monarchies and supreme courts and borders and billionaires, as immutable and unchangeable.”

I suspect many readers have never lost the belief in the need for transformative change. With critical excavations like Klein’s, we can see how reactionary forces took advantage of unacknowledged fears to marshal a successful movement around fascist policies. This type of analysis will be invaluable moving forward, in order to shift the social environment from populist fascism to popular solidarity.

Max Reynard is currently incarcerated in a federal prison and is working on a zine about LGBTQ+ prisoners called *Queer on the Inside*.

fifth Estate

Max Reynard
Neoliberalism's Double Lives
Naomi Klein on creating an "unselfing" to establish solidarity & community
2025

<https://www.fiftheastate.org/archive/416-spring-2025/neoliberalisms-double-lives>
Fifth Estate #416, Spring 2025

fiftheastate.anarchistlibraries.net