

Doppelgänger: A Trip into the Mirror World

Naomi Klein

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Naomi Wolf is a prominent American intellectual well-regarded with books that contributed to the feminist understanding, such as *The Beauty Myth* (1991), *Fire with Fire* (1993) and *Promiscuities* (1997). However, her book *Outrages* (2019) made a number of mistakes in the process of historical research which were debunked live on a Radio 4 programme (I remember listening to it, probably in the form of a podcast). Since then, she has increasingly embraced an unorthodox interpretation of reality that has led to her becoming a favourite on the Fox television channel and a supporter of various conspiracy theories commonly associated with the alt-right faction. It must be a little dispiriting and disconcerting to be regularly confused with her but this is the fate of Naomi Klein, who is herself a prominent Canadian writer with a number of books influential in the progressive politics tradition, most particularly *No Logo* (1999). She introduces the premise of this book, which analyses the various ways in which doppelgänger figures might interact with reality, by describing an overheard conversation in which two women in a public toilet actually did confuse the two while she waited in her cubicle to have the chance to correct them. She has clearly exerted a great deal of effort in extending this conceit to 400 pages, a fifth of which is given over to scholarly endnotes.

There are various ways in which the mirror world can insert itself in our daily lives. The first of these is the presence of a double, such as may have been brought to mind by Dostoyevsky's short story of the same name. In that story, Yakob Golyadkin finds his life being ruined by the presence of his double, which is a seemingly faultless replica but manages to be more sociable, more interesting and generally more successful. This drives him to distraction and the need to confront his own inadequacies becomes crippling. This would, I think, be a common reaction but it is not the only one. Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, after all, starts with a painting of himself which is a replica but his power is to be able to retain his own appearance while his counterpart begins to show the ravages of time and indiscretion. Meanwhile, in Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*, the other Roth (the one who is not the narrator) is a scoundrel who is using his doppelgänger nature to traduce the character of the original, who feels compelled to track him down and put matters to rights. However, as the action complexifies, Roth finds himself wondering whether the other Roth might have a stronger claim to be the real one. Roth, of course, was Jewish, as is Klein and this identity

is used several times to interrogate the nature of reality. It concludes with a chapter made more tragic by contemporary events in which the Jews of Israel consider their own doppelgangers of Palestinians. Klein writes in shadow of an earlier version of 'genocide' (which is her word) – would she now conclude that the result of that consideration of the self-other has convinced many that the only reasonable approach is to annihilate the other.

A second means by which the mirror world can make itself known is through the (mis)interpretation of events which leads to what is now generally called conspiracy theory. Since much of the book was written during the lockdown period of COVID-19 and its aftermath, it is not surprising that the issue of vaccination plays a prominent part. Anti-vaxxers, of whom there were quite a few in North America, believe various claims about the vaccines available, including that they provide a means by which ill-intentioned people would find part of the vaccine injected shedding off them with disastrous consequences for anyone in the vicinity. Many of these people also believe in other conspiracies mouthed by such as former president Trump that the Democrat party is going to ban cows and windows in buildings and that immigrants are the cause of all the problems faced by the country, whether real or imagined. One response to this form of belief is to laugh it off or to despair that people could fall for anything so obviously lacking in credibility. Klein, though, manages to avoid such shallowness and goes on to argue that such people do have a point, although it is not the point they think they have. The common point of the conspiracies is that a certain group of people – identities vary – are treating the majority unfairly and withholding resources of some sort. And this is in fact true, it is called capitalism. It is capitalism and the forces driving it that have been stripping us of the commons and forcing us to pay for what we once had for free. It is capitalism that forces us to work harder and longer for less and less while the captains of industry make off with ever greater tranches of the proceeds of our labour. It is capitalism that is destroying the environment and forcing the mass migrations of people that will destabilise all societies. The comedian Mark Steel has a nice and also relevant joke in which he surveys the damage done to the British economy by so many years of Tory party austerity, corruption and incompetence and then says it is clear who the real culprits are – libraries, which is why it is good so many of them are being closed down. It is the same situation.

A third aspect of the doppelganger effect is its ability to repeat history, generally in the form of tragedy but sometimes as farce. An example of this, Klein shows, occurred in Canada with a protest by truckers reacting to revelations of the treatment of the country's indigenous people, which has too often been disgraceful. The protest was named We Stand in Solidarity and aimed to build awareness in every community of what had happened. Yet knowledge of this convoy was almost completely eradicated by its rapidly assembled successor, the Freedom Convoy, which took the strapline Every Child Matters, by which they meant their own, who were apparently facing a 'second genocide' in the form of mask and vaccine mandates. This was not, of course, an isolated incident.

Klein has, as mentioned above, worked hard to bring all this together in a single book. Individual sections are interesting and can also be quite moving, as when she describes the progress of her son. However, it is difficult to avoid the sense that it does not quite all cohere into a whole. It is more of a form of movement through various facets than a systematic approach to a theoretical framework. No doubt some readers. Perhaps most, will prefer it this way but it becomes a little unsatisfying at the end, where there is a powerful exposition of the circumstances faced by Palestinians but no firm conclusion as to what it all might mean.

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