

THE NEW YORKER

PROFILES

OUTSIDE AGITATOR

Naomi Klein and the new new left.

BY LARISSA MACFARQUHAR

DECEMBER 8, 2008

The marquee outside the Bloor Cinema, in Toronto, advertised “The Last Mistress” at four, “Naomi Klein—the Shock Doctrine” at seven, and “Little Shop of Horrors” at nine-thirty. It was a warmish night. The falafel shop next door was doing a brisk business. A line of people holding tickets to the Naomi Klein event stretched to the end of the block and around the corner. Outside the entrance to the cinema, a middle-aged man and an elderly woman paced up and down selling copies of *Socialist Action* for a dollar. (The September issue included articles about capitalism’s contradictions, class war in Bolivia, and a commentary by Mumia Abu-Jamal—a regular feature.)

“We apologize for starting late, but it’s typical activist time, so I’m sure you’re used to it,” a young woman organizer said from the stage. The young woman wore a black necklace, black jeans, and black hoop earrings. She urged the audience to fight racism and poverty, and to work for education, international solidarity, justice for immigrants and refugees, and solidarity with Palestine and with the Mohawk of Tyendinaga and the Algonquin of Barriere Lake, on whose behalf the fund-raiser that night was being held. She squinted into the lights. “I’m glad you can’t see the audience from here,” she said, “because I don’t think I’ve ever spoken in front of eight hundred and fifty people except at a protest, and then you can always dissolve into a chant.” She consulted her notes. “To a different audience—to those that hold capital and power in this society—Naomi Klein’s words and her ideas are seen as a serious threat,” she said. “Her words are a source of inspiration . . . for those of us who were and are being radicalized by the anti-globalization, anti-colonial, and anti-



Responding to the financial crisis, Klein says, “This is a progressive moment: it’s ours to lose.” Photograph by Platon.

poverty movements and the demands to change the system totally and completely.”

Klein ascended the stage. “It’s been an eventful few hours,” she said, smiling. The first bailout package announced by Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson had been voted down that afternoon by the House. “The President went on television and informed us that there would be Armageddon, essentially, if they didn’t get this deal . . . but it didn’t work!” she went on, over rowdy clapping. She was wearing dark jeans tucked into tall brown boots, a crisp white shirt, and a long black blazer. She was dressed for a fox hunt. She looked terrific.

She had spent the day curled up on the blue sofa in her living room, watching CNN while she waited restlessly to hear what would happen in Washington. She fortified herself with cups of coffee and a smoothie. She checked her iPhone for messages from an economist friend who was keeping her posted on what was going on behind the scenes. She followed the Dow as it pitched downward, thinking how ridiculous it was for Paulson to believe that he could control it. “This is politicians acting like traders,” she said, staring at the television. “A government shouldn’t play the market—it should *govern*.”

The past couple of weeks had been a giddy time. Since her book “The Shock Doctrine” was published last year, Klein, now thirty-eight, has become the most visible and influential figure on the American left—what Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky were thirty years ago. She speaks every few days, all over the world, and hundreds of people turn up to hear her. They visit her Web site and subscribe to her newsletter and send her passionate fan mail. She has become an icon’s icon: Radiohead and Laurie Anderson promote her books to their fans; John Cusack’s comedy “War, Inc.” was inspired by her reporting from Baghdad. The Mexican film director Alfonso Cuarón felt so strongly about “The Shock Doctrine” that he made a short promotional film about it for free. Now, suddenly, she was in demand everywhere. The economic crisis had looked at first like a textbook enactment of her “shock doctrine” theory, and everyone wanted her to go on TV and explain it.

The central thesis of the book is that capitalism and democracy, free markets and free people, do not, as we’ve been told, go hand in hand. On the contrary, capitalism—at least fundamentalist capitalism, of the type promoted by the late economist Milton Friedman and his “Chicago School” acolytes—is so unpopular, and so obviously harmful to everyone except the richest of the rich, that its establishment requires, at best, trickery and, at worst, terror and torture. Friedman believed that markets perform best when freed from government interference, so he advocated getting rid of tariffs, subsidies, minimum-wage laws, public housing, Social Security, financial regulation, and licensing requirements, including those for doctors—indeed, virtually every measure devised to protect people from the market’s harsh logic. Klein argues that the only circumstance in which a population would accept Friedman-style reforms is when it is in a state of shock, following a crisis of some sort—a

natural disaster, a terrorist attack, a war. A person in shock regresses to a childlike state in which he longs for a parental figure to take control; similarly, a population in a state of shock will hand exceptional powers to its leaders, permitting them to destroy the regulatory functions of government.

Friedman once observed that much of the time societies are too paralyzed by the “tyranny of the status quo” to accept real reform, and that only a crisis can convince people that the way things are done needs to change. This idea is not particularly controversial. But from Friedman’s words Klein concludes that the Chicago School is “a movement that prays for crisis the way drought-struck farmers pray for rain.” Worse, Friedmanites are impatient—sometimes too impatient to sit around praying for acts of God. Natural disasters are tricky to engineer, but coups and terror are always possible. “Some of the most infamous human rights violations of this era,” she writes, “which have tended to be viewed as sadistic acts carried out by antidemocratic regimes”—Pinochet’s in Chile, for instance, or the Argentinean junta—“were in fact either committed with the deliberate intent of terrorizing the public or actively harnessed to prepare the ground for the introduction of radical free-market ‘reforms.’ ”

Klein first formulated her thesis in 2004, when she was reporting in Baghdad and noticed that Paul Bremer’s goal seemed to be to establish a perfect capitalist state in Iraq while its population was still reeling from the “shock and awe” bombing. Then she noticed that soon after the tsunami in Sri Lanka the coastline that had been inhabited by fishermen was being sold off to hotels. Then she noticed that Friedman had suggested taking advantage of Hurricane Katrina to replace New Orleans’s disastrous public schools with charter schools. The pattern was striking. But now that a shock had shaken Washington itself, something slightly different seemed to be going on. On the one hand, the initial reaction to the economic crisis followed her theory—the shock (the bank failures and the market’s nosedive) had inspired the government to attempt to seize unprecedented power (seven hundred billion dollars with no strings attached), claiming that in such a crisis everyone should simply trust it to do the right thing, even though the actions it wanted to take would seem to enrich the wealthiest at the expense of everybody else. That was the textbook part. But the plan wasn’t working. Constituents wrote thousands of outraged letters, and bloggers wrote about how this felt familiar, like the aftermath of September 11th, and how the bailout was the economic equivalent of the Patriot Act. It was just as she had written at the end of the book: memory was shock’s antidote. (Another difference, of course, was that the government wanted to enact not Friedman-style reforms but the opposite: enormous interference in the market. Still, since the point of this interference was to bail out banks, this difference did not strike Klein as of much importance.)

“Americans remembered that they thought Rudy Giuliani was their daddy after September 11th, which was why they’re a little less inclined to say that Paulson and Goldman Sachs were going to take care of them this time,” Klein told the audience at the Bloor Cinema. “I think actually their biggest

mistake with the bailout was how short it was. It's just two pages and three paragraphs, and so the weirdest thing happened: people read it." Everyone laughed. "It sounded like a coup."

She went on, "It's worth thinking about what the right has been doing for the past thirty-five years as a counter-revolution that has been waged against our victories." The New Deal is usually told as a history of F.D.R., she said, but we don't talk enough about the pressure from below. Neighborhoods organized, and when their evicted neighbors' furniture was put on the streets they moved it back into their homes. It was that kind of direct action that won victories like rent control, public housing, and the creation of Fannie Mae. The other thing that's important to remember, she said, is that the organizers were a threat—of socialist revolution—and it was that which allowed F.D.R. to say to Wall Street, "We have to compromise, or else we've got a revolution on our hands." Now, these market shocks are opportunities for the same reason that the crash was in the thirties, because we are seeing the failures of laissez-faire before our eyes. "It's time to say, '*Your model failed,*' " she said. "This is a progressive moment: it's ours to lose."

Klein was born in 1970, but the political stories in which she places herself all begin in the thirties. The thirties and forties were the last time in America, she feels, that social movements were strong enough to force radical economic change in a progressive direction. They were also the last time that a certain kind of grand, bold political hope existed in her family—the last time before events combined to extinguish all thoughts, among Kleins, of utopia.

Her paternal grandparents, Anne and Philip, met at the Jack London Club—a leftist artists' club—in Newark, New Jersey, sometime in the thirties. (Philip's older brother, Sol, was more committed—he moved to the Soviet Union after the revolution and never came back.) Philip wanted to be a painter, and in 1936 he got a job as an animator for Disney. He worked on "Fantasia" and "Snow White" and "Pinocchio." Disney animators had been trying to organize themselves in secret since the early thirties, but they didn't pull it off until after the bonuses they were promised for "Snow White" failed to materialize. In the late spring of 1941, they went on strike. Philip and Anne, ardent believers in the union, lived in a tent across the street from the studio, cooking over open fires and manning the picket line. Their first son, Michael, Naomi's father, was then three, and lived with them in the tent part of the time. The strike was settled in September, but a few months after that Philip was fired for being an agitator. In 1942, he and Anne moved back to New Jersey, and he went to work in a shipyard.

At the time they were ruining their lives for politics, Anne and Philip were experiencing the beginnings of a crisis of faith. Stalin had signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: that was the first betrayal. Then came news of gulags in the Soviet Union. By the time of Khrushchev's "secret speech" of 1956, in which he denounced the cult of Stalin and its consequences, Philip and Anne, along with many others, had bitterly abandoned Communism. They held on to their core beliefs in social justice

and racial equality, and taught their sons to believe in those things, but apart from brief forays—Anne took ten-year-old Michael canvassing for the Progressive Party in 1948, and marched on Washington in support of the Rosenbergs—they withdrew from politics. They began to spend time at Nature Friends (later Camp Midvale)—a retreat near Paterson, founded in the twenties as a place where workers of all races could congregate and enjoy nature. Nature Friends became their life. Philip built a house nearby, and Anne grew her own vegetables. They went to see leftist singers like Pete Seeger and Paul Robeson and Woody Guthrie. Philip sought to revive his early ambition of becoming a painter, but all his figures looked like Disney cartoons. He tried sculpting in metal, and after a while this brought him a measure of satisfaction.

In high school, Michael Klein was in the band and the student council and was the captain of the swim team, but he led a double life. He'd been sent to Socialist summer camp, and his real friends were other red-diaper babies who lived in New York, with whom he could discuss his home life without fear of exposure. It was difficult and frightening to be the child of Communists. One of his most vivid childhood memories was seeing buses arrive at Camp Midvale in the early fall of 1949 and disgorge dozens of bloodied people who had gone to a Paul Robeson concert and had been attacked with rocks and bats by a local mob. The electrocution of the Rosenbergs, in 1953, which left their two boys orphaned at the ages of six and ten, terrified Michael, who was not much older.

Michael Klein never deviated from the beliefs of his parents, but, like them, he stayed away from political parties. In medical school, he protested against the Vietnam War and joined Physicians for Social Responsibility. When he was drafted, he didn't sign the statement about not belonging to organizations with Communist ties, so the Army held a hearing to decide whether he was loyal enough to serve. Meanwhile, he had met a young activist filmmaker from Philadelphia named Bonnie Sherr, and got her pregnant. In the middle of his draft negotiations, she saw a documentary about American soldiers dropping napalm on civilian populations, commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. She said, "If a Canadian government agency can produce a film like this, we should get married and run away to Canada." So they did.

They ended up in Montreal. Michael worked as a pediatrician in a public hospital. Bonnie had studied film in California—the first film she shot was of César Chávez's first march in Sacramento. In Canada, she made a film in which welfare recipients interviewed one another about health care; she made a series of films about the community organizer Saul Alinsky; later, she made a film about women peace activists, at Greenham Common and in the Soviet Union. ("I had pretty simplistic political ideas about dialogue," she says now. "You know, an enemy is somebody whose stories you haven't heard.") In 1980, she set out to make a feminist film about sex, to be titled "Celebration," but instead made "Not a Love Story," about pornography. She was involved in a feminist film group at the

National Film Board called Studio D. Her friends at Studio D were into solstices and female spirituality, and at one point she confided to her daughter that she wanted to be a witch. “My mother was always saying things like that,” Klein recalled later in her mother’s memoir. “She always wanted to be more of a hippie earth mother than she actually was. . . . The Joan Baez fantasy ran deep. It would resurface every few years, and she would learn to play ‘Greensleeves’ again.”

Her parents’ careers, so very Canadian, give Klein’s commitment to public institutions an emotional force, beyond her sense that profit distorts certain functions, such as health care. “Both of my parents lived through a honeymoon period in the public sector,” she says. “My mother and Studio D were always furious because they weren’t getting the resources they thought they deserved, but from the outside perspective it was, like, Oh, my God. You were allowed to have a women’s studio making films about social change within a huge public institution! And my father was able to do something similar within the health-care system, starting the birthing room at the hospital”—he admitted midwives and alternative medicine, and waged a campaign against unnecessary surgical interventions in childbirth. “It’s easy to deride the idea of government in America, where people’s association with the public sphere is the post office.”

Naomi and her older brother, Seth, were brought up to be proud of the history of their family and of the left. “I can’t tell you a time,” Seth Klein says, “when I didn’t simultaneously know that I really liked Disney movies and that Walt Disney was a bastard.” When they drove to their cabin in Vermont on weekends, Bonnie and Michael would play tapes of a Pacifica Radio show that related American history through folk music—the story of McCarthyism through the Weavers, the civil-rights movement through the Freedom Singers. When Seth was little, he worried that all the good fights had already been fought, but Bonnie told him that she was sure he would find something that needed attending to, and from an early age he was on the lookout for what that thing might be—what fight would turn out to be his identity and his legacy. When he was in the sixth grade, his father took him to hear Helen Caldicott speak against nuclear weapons, and he decided that that was it. He started an anti-nuclear group, and after graduating he took a year off to travel around the country with the group, speaking to students.

While Seth was the good activist child, Naomi always resented being dragged to demonstrations. She found her mother’s feminism repellent. “She really didn’t like the way I dressed,” Bonnie says. “My crowd at Studio D wore long skirts, schlumpy clothes.” Naomi recalled that when she was eight or nine she spent “an entire journey through the Rockies conducting covert makeovers on everyone in the car. My father would lose the sandals and get a sharp, dignified suit, my mother a helmet hairdo and a wardrobe of smart pastel blazers, skirts and matching pumps.” She fought with her parents all the time. “Since I was an impeccable liar and rarely got caught,” Naomi recalled, “our fights were less

about actual transgressions than about my silence, my sullenness and, as my dad was always fond of putting it, my ‘refusal to be part of this family.’ ”

Naomi spent her adolescence in her room writing poetry or experimenting in the bathroom with makeup. Bonnie was appalled. She worried that Naomi was turning into a brat, thinking about clothes, spending time in front of the mirror. “I think we were overly concerned about the kind of typical teenage stuff she was into,” Bonnie says. “She read Judy Blume! I was beside myself. I was a feminist—I wanted my daughter to be good at math.” “They had imagined themselves to be breeding a new kind of post-revolutionary child,” Naomi wrote in her twenties. “Hadn’t they diligently mushed their own baby food? Read *Parent Effectiveness Training*? Banned war toys and other ‘gendered’ play?” Bonnie says now, “I think she thought, ‘What’s wrong with having a good time?’ And there was something in us—although I don’t like to admit it—something of the overearnest, you know? We were always fighting something. There were always people who were the bad guy.” In fact, it was worse than that. Naomi suffered from a kind of spiritual claustrophobia: she had glumly concluded that any path she chose in life—conformist or rebellious, lawyer or itinerant poet—would be equally hackneyed and ridiculous. And so even her parents’ idea of a good time, which usually involved getting out into nature and attending to one’s bodily needs under artificially primitive conditions (“another ponchoed picnic”), was to her just more proof of their irredeemable cheesiness and the vast gulf between them and herself. “All my parents wanted was the open road and a VW camper,” she wrote. “That was enough escape for them. The ocean, the night sky, some acoustic guitar. . . .”

Soon after she graduated from high school, two catastrophic events erased her animus toward her parents and their politics. First, her mother had a severe stroke that initially left her quadriplegic. Naomi quit her job and spent most of the six months that Bonnie was in the hospital at her side. Then, during her first semester at the University of Toronto, a gunman killed fourteen women at the École Polytechnique in Montreal, declaring, “I hate feminists.” She decided to call herself a feminist from then on.

Klein sat on a table, inside the MTV studios, in Manhattan. She swung her legs back and forth. She was wearing a long necklace and black high-heeled mini-boots. She may have made up with her parents, but in matters of style she stands firm against activism of the old school. She wears jeans, but she is groomed as flawlessly as an anchorwoman. She giggles, she makes jokes. She smiles a lot, especially onstage, though it is never clear whether she is smiling in amusement, politeness, irritation, or for some other reason. Her demeanor is friendly but guarded.

While they were waiting for the interview to start, the interviewer, a young man in a black T-shirt, asked her what she’d been doing lately. She told him that she’d been working on the movie version of “The Shock Doctrine,” which was being made by the director of “Road to Guantánamo.”

“Did you see ‘Road to Guantánamo’?” she asked.

“No. I heard about it, though.”

“It’s excellent—it’s intercut between interviews with the Tipton Three”—three young British men who were held in Guantánamo for two years—“and they’re just, like, *blokes*, you know? The best moment in the film was when one of them suggests going to Afghanistan because they’ve got massive naans there. That was the reason.”

The producer, a young man in jeans and an acid-lime polo shirt, appeared.

“We’ll be talking about China and the Olympics, about Darfur and intervention,” the interviewer said. “But also about you personally—how you became who you are—because it’s a young audience that looks up to each and every person on the program. The goal is to have them want to be like that person.”

“Are you going to ask me my favorite band?” she asked.

“We will, yes, I’m afraid.”

“I’m going to say M.I.A., just so you know.”

“That will definitely ingratiate you with the demographic,” the producer said.

“I’m sucking up, that’s why I’m here. D’you think I could get some tea?”

Klein has been a person whom young people look up to since she found herself in charge of emotional teach-ins right after the Montreal massacre. She spent most of her time in college on politics and journalism; she was the editor-in-chief of the university paper, the *Varsity*. Then, after her third year, the *Globe and Mail* offered her a job, and she dropped out of school to take it. At the age of twenty-three, she took over as the editor of *This Magazine*, the Canadian equivalent of *The Nation*. But after a little more than a year she started to get discouraged about the state of the left—she felt that it had run out of things to say, apart from being outraged by people it disagreed with—and she decided to go back to school.

When she arrived back at university in 1996, she discovered that everything had changed. During her previous stint as an undergraduate, she had spent all her time protesting the underrepresentation of women and minorities in the curriculum and the media; campus politics in 1989 had mostly meant identity politics. But students in 1996 weren’t interested in identity; what they talked about was economics. At the time, corporations were starting to make inroads into schools: soft-drink companies were negotiating exclusive deals; advertisements were appearing in bathrooms. There was a feeling in the air that corporations were getting too powerful—more powerful than governments, but not accountable to anyone except their shareholders. And, at the same time that big corporations were withdrawing physically from the United States and opening factories overseas, visually, even spiritually, they were everywhere, insinuating their logos into what had once been public space. Young

activists found this especially objectionable, perhaps because one of the places into which corporations insinuated themselves most effectively was youth and activism, folding mutiny into advertising so deftly that resistance seemed futile.

Klein dropped out of college again and started writing a book about the insidious new branding culture. She thought about how much she had loved shiny, plastic brand-name stuff when she was a kid—everyone had—and she concluded that a movement was doomed to hippies-only irrelevance if it condemned the longing and the pleasure that brands could create. “Soft drink and computer brands play the roles of deities in our culture,” she wrote later. “They are creating our most powerful iconography, they are the ones building our most utopian monuments.” She discovered that an anti-corporatist movement was brewing all over the world, in response to sweatshops abroad and brand encroachment at home. By 1999, she had finished “No Logo,” a book about brands and the new movement they had inspired. Then, in an extraordinary stroke of publishing luck, while “No Logo” was at the printer’s, enormous crowds of protesters suddenly materialized outside a meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle. The protest seemed to come out of nowhere—or, at least, that was how it appeared to the bewildered old left—and there was “No Logo” and Klein herself to explain it.

Klein lives with her husband, Avi Lewis, in a small house in Toronto, on a quiet street. Lewis is a host of political talk shows and a maker of documentaries; this year he is covering the U.S. elections for Al Jazeera English. Their house is very tidy, free of any sort of clutter. It is furnished simply, as though on one quick trip to Crate & Barrel. It does not look lived in, and, indeed, most of the time it is not: both Lewis and Klein are on the road so much that they estimate they have spent no more than two months in Toronto since they moved in, a year ago. Nonetheless, the house is important to her. “I come from such a line of wanderers that I wanted to stop wandering,” Klein says. “In Montreal, the city I grew up in, there’s no trace of us.” (Klein’s parents moved to British Columbia after Bonnie’s stroke, because the weather made it easier to get around in a wheelchair; Bonnie has become a disability-rights activist. Seth also lives in British Columbia, working on poverty issues for a think tank.) “I don’t like to go to the city I grew up in and feel like a stranger,” Klein says. “This is Avi’s city, he goes back generations here, and that’s as close to roots as I’m going to get.”

Although Klein and Lewis spend a lot of time apart, they make a point of preserving their dependence upon each other. Avi tries not to work when Naomi needs him. “He feeds her and takes care of her while she’s writing,” Bonnie says. “He edits things first.” He accompanies her on her book tours whenever he can. In 2002, Klein and Lewis concluded that their only hope of spending a long stretch together was to do a joint project, and they decided to make a film. They were tired of being against things all the time, and they were always being asked what they would suggest as an

alternative, so they started travelling, looking for something that they could feel good about. They settled on Argentina, and ended up making “The Take,” a moving documentary about a group of laid-off workers who broke into their shuttered factory and started it up again as a collective. At the time, Buenos Aires was in turmoil, and every now and again a protest they were documenting would turn violent and the police would start shooting, and there was an ongoing discussion about what to do. Lewis wanted to run; Klein wanted to stay. “I was trying to dissuade the cowboys in our crew from putting themselves in danger,” Lewis says. “I was, like, ‘Just be safe, guys, it’s not our country, we’re here at best in a capacity of solidarity, it’s not the time to die.’ But Naomi said, ‘Here’s the principle: if something is happening and we’re the only ones witnessing it, we have a responsibility to posterity.’ ”

Klein and Lewis agree on most political issues, but Klein seems more ready to break things; more cynical; angrier. “I think Avi is too quick to reject revolutionary movements,” she says. “I think that incremental change makes sense in the Canadian context, but it doesn’t necessarily make sense in the mountains of Chiapas. I don’t fetishize guerrilla violence, but I think there are situations where people are justified in taking up arms. We’ve had fights about that.” Unlike Klein, the descendant of embittered ex-Communists, Lewis comes from a distinguished political family that has always been Socialist rather than Communist, and so has kept its political faith. “My earliest memories are of conventions and election nights, seeing grownups crying or celebrating,” Lewis says. “We understood in my family that we were part of a cause, a movement, and the Party, capitalized, was a big part of that.”

The politics of the Lewis family have changed very little in the past hundred years. Avi Lewis’s great-grandfather Maishe Losz was the leader of the Jewish Labor Bund, a secular Socialist party, in his small town just east of Bialystok. The Bund was anti-Bolshevik; it believed that revolution should be achieved through democratic processes, even if that meant compromise. Thus, the Bundist maxim: “It is better to go along with the masses in a not totally correct direction than to separate oneself from them and remain a purist.” In 1921, fearing that he would be killed by the Red Army, Losz fled to Canada. Losz’s son David Lewis became the national leader of the Canadian democratic socialist party, the New Democratic Party. The N.D.P. never formed a national government, but it came to power in the provinces: in Canada, socialism was mainstream. David Lewis persuaded the Party to delete the eradication of capitalism from its manifesto, and he crushed movement dogmatism and indiscipline. (“When in heaven’s name are we going to learn that working-class politics and the struggle for power are not a Sunday-school class?” he asked.) David’s son Stephen, Avi’s father, also followed in the family tradition, and was elected the leader of the N.D.P. in Ontario at the age of thirty-two. (Avi’s mother, Michele Landsberg, is a journalist, who is well known in Canada for her feminism and her pugnacious left-wing politics—in her columns, conservatives are always “jack-booted” or

“henchmen.”) When, in the late sixties, a faction called “the Waffle” threatened to splinter the Party, Stephen Lewis crushed it, just as his father had crushed factions before. For Stephen and for David, loyalty to the Party was paramount. They would not permit the left to destroy itself.

Stephen Lewis left office thirty years ago, and David Lewis died in 1981, but the Lewises are still well known and beloved in Canada. “I live in that fantasy world in which you should say what you believe in and shouldn’t retreat because the electorate may not be receptive,” Stephen Lewis says. “That may explain why my own leadership was one of remarkable futility, almost legendary futility.” Recently, Lewis spent five years as the United Nations special envoy for H.I.V. /AIDS in Africa, but his respite from campaigning has not made him quieter. “I’m more fundamentalist now,” he says. “I have no patience for capitalism at all. I see now that there is almost nothing that is positive in this ugly international system, and that’s why I embrace Naomi’s view of the way the world works. I’m actually tired of my rhetorical outbursts—I’d like to engage in physical aggression.”

“I think there is, for my parents’ generation, a sense of defeat,” Avi Lewis says. “They grew up in a postwar period when it seemed like the world was changeable—a welfare state had been built and had to be protected and extended. But their adult lives have encompassed a long deterioration of the standard of living for the majority of people on this continent, and as they’ve seen the gains of the sixties and seventies largely erased, they’ve started to feel more and more hopeless. Whereas Naomi and I grew up in a time when the backlash was already well under way, so we may be just as pessimistic, but we don’t feel defeated, because we never had the luxury of hope.”

These days, Avi Lewis looks very much like the product of his family, but this was not always so. “I rebelled furiously, but without rebelling in the most hurtful way, which would have been to rebel politically,” he says. “I was a host on MuchMusic, which is our MTV. I knew that I wasn’t doing politics the way I was brought up to, and I was conflicted about that. My parents would ask me, ‘Are you sure you know what you’re doing? I know you love music, and it’s cool for you to hang out with Bowie, and you sometimes get to do a one-hour special on music and politics in South Africa, which is sort of political, but are you sure you’re doing the most you can?’ I was alienated from my own political inheritance. I had a tradition to fit into. I had a platform from the time I was four or five years old.” It was at this point that Lewis met Klein. They were both covering the Canadian elections in 1993—he for MuchMusic, she for CBC. When Lewis met Klein, he felt that she was freer of her family than he was of his, and this somehow relieved him of the urge to run away. “I always got the feeling that Naomi was the author of her own politics,” Lewis says. “And when I got close to her I started seizing the reins of my own political development.”

To Klein’s and Lewis’s parents, it seems that the only difference between their children and their families is style. “I remember Stephen’s father debating William F. Buckley when I was an

undergraduate,” Michele Landsberg says. “The place was packed to the rafters, and we went mad with joy when David trounced that snakelike William Buckley. Remembering David’s rhetoric, a lot of it was sentimental and heartfelt old Socialist lingo, talking about the poor working man in his tattered raincoat. Naomi would use more irony, because we’ve gotten past our romanticism about how we change the world.” But their parents never doubted what ought to be done to make the world better; Lewis and Klein are not so sure. “Naomi takes the responsibility of young people listening to her and looking up to her really, really seriously,” Lewis says. “Which is precisely why she refuses to say, ‘Here’s the alternative, here’s what we all have to line up and fight for.’ Suspicion of people who know what the answer is—that’s very characteristic of our generation, and that’s one of the reasons I’ve never gone into politics. It’s very difficult for both of us when people look to us for the kind of certainty that earlier generations had.” One of the few political leaders whom Klein really likes is Subcommandant Marcos, the head of the Zapatistas, in Mexico, who makes a fetish of his elusiveness and doubt.

In “No Logo,” Klein celebrated the anarchic formlessness of the anti-corporate protests—what she wryly termed “laissez-faire organizing.” Her generation of activists was “challenging systems of centralized power *on principle*, as critical of left-wing, one-size-fits-all state solutions as of right-wing market ones,” she wrote. “It is often said disparagingly that this movement lacks ideology, an overarching message, a master plan. This is absolutely true, and we should be extraordinarily thankful.” These days, the movement long gone, she is not so sanguine about it. “What I was responding to at the time was people on the left who I thought were opportunistically trying to impose their solutions,” she says. “I was hoping that more of an articulation would emerge in a grass-roots way, but it’s not happening—I think because the entire discussion was severed on September 11th. The mainstream N.G.O.s became frightened of being associated with people who seemed quasi-terrorist, and then we started talking about war.” Lewis has never been as enamored as Klein of the movement’s lack of discipline, and she admits now that he may have been right. “Seeing how easy it was for everything to evaporate, without institutions taking that energy and nailing it down—we were too ephemeral,” she says. “It was that experience that made me feel like we need to be more tangible, whether it’s political parties or putting it in writing.”

In the end, despite all his suspicion of leaders and certainty, Lewis loves and honors his family tradition. The N.D.P. regularly approaches him about running for office (as it does Klein), and he thinks seriously about doing so (she does not). During the recent election campaign in Canada, Klein advocated strategic voting—voting for either the Liberals or the N.D.P., depending on which had a better chance of winning in a particular district, to promote the greater goal of unseating the Tories. “I don’t believe enough in the N.D.P. to really care,” she says. Avi tried to talk her out of it, while her

father-in-law was appalled. “I don’t have one minute’s use for strategic voting,” Stephen Lewis says. “I just believe in the most intransigent of ways that you vote for your convictions.” But Klein doesn’t have much use for political parties. When she is asked about this, she explains that she has seen liberation movements betrayed by the politicians they fought to get elected, but her impatience appears to be rooted in something more than that: she seems to dislike parties and, indeed, governments, in a visceral way, almost the way that Milton Friedman does. In principle, she is a Keynesian, but she distrusts centralization, institutions, platforms, theories—anything except extremely small, local, ad-hoc, spontaneous initiatives. Basically, she really, really doesn’t like being told what to do.

It is clear, in “The Shock Doctrine,” just how deeply she disdains the political. She tends to conflate very different right-wing groups—neoconservatives, crony capitalists, libertarians. (In the end, “The Shock Doctrine” is not so much anti-Friedman as anti-corporate.) And in hunting down instances in which ideology has been used as a cover for enriching cronies and corporations, she slides into the position that politics is always and everywhere about enrichment. Her great strength—following the money; never taking ideology at face value but always questioning who benefits from it; helping to pull the left back to the economic analysis that it forgot during the era of “the personal is political”—is also a weakness. Her materialism is such that she sometimes seems scarcely to believe that politics exists at all. At one point, for instance, she argues that the Israeli élite lost interest in peace in large part because Israeli companies were doing a booming business in security technology, which benefits from war. She argues that the Chinese Communist Party cracked down on protesters in Tiananmen Square not in order to protect its power but in order to protect Deng Xiaoping’s economic-liberalization program (of which breach of orthodoxy, in fact, many in the Party were quite suspicious—a suspicion only reinforced by the pro-Western protests).

“I’m not a utopian thinker,” Klein says. “I don’t imagine my ideal society. I don’t really like to read those books, either. I’m just much more comfortable talking about things that are.” The only time she has ever felt a whiff of utopia was in Buenos Aires, in 2002, when the political system had virtually disintegrated—during the time that she and Lewis were filming “The Take.” “That moment in Argentina was an incredible time because a vacuum opened up,” she says. “They had thrown out four Presidents in two weeks, and they had no idea what to do. Every institution was in crisis. The politicians were hiding in their homes. When they came out, housewives attacked them with brooms. And, walking around Buenos Aires at night, there were meetings on every other street corner. Every plaza where there was a streetlight, people were meeting under it and talking about what to do about the external debt, I swear to God. Groups of one hundred or five hundred people. And organizing buying groceries together because they could get cheaper prices, setting up barter because the currency was worthless. It was the most inspiring thing I’ve ever seen.”

Klein believes that change comes about only when social movements become so large and disruptive that politicians can no longer ignore them. This is another of her ongoing arguments with her in-laws: whether social movements can really change things. Stephen Lewis is as susceptible to their allure as the next new leftist—he drove down to Little Rock in 1957, when Orval Faubus called out the militia, to witness the civil-rights movement firsthand—but in the end he remains a politician. “Naomi’s and Avi’s profound skepticism is not a skepticism I share, even though they have far more evidence than I do,” he says. “There was a period when people like Avi and Naomi actually thought that the social movements could sort of take over. But you may have a green movement which has influence on carbon tax, you may have a campaign for nuclear disarmament which lowers the temperature over the arms race, but you never have an over-all gestalt which can do everything from day care to foreign aid and see it as part of an over-all pattern to change the world. That has to come through politics.”

Both Klein and Lewis are skeptical about Barack Obama. “I’ve been at rallies and seen him speak, and I feel that feeling that one feels,” Lewis says. “It *is* thrilling. And it’s churlish not to allow yourself to be thrilled. We crave inspiration, and it’s a bleak life to always be dissecting things. But the main feeling that Obama creates in me is fear, because I see people fooling themselves. If you actually look at his policies, what they reflect is the triumph of the right-wing political paradigm since Reagan, and I think he could set things back dramatically, because for young people who are getting engaged in politics for the first time, for them to be disillusioned is very, very damaging.” Because Klein doesn’t expect much from any politician, she doesn’t spend time wishing Obama were more progressive. “I don’t want to appear too cynical, but when I first saw the ‘Yes We Can’ rock video that Will.I.Am made, my first response was ‘Wow, finally a politician is making ads that are as good as Nike’s,’ ” she says. “The ‘Yes We Can’ slogan means whatever you want it to mean. It’s very ‘Just Do It.’ When you hear it, you catch yourself thinking, Yeah! We’re gonna end torture and shut down Guantánamo and get out of Iraq! And then you think, Wait a minute, is he really saying that? He’s not really saying that, is he? He’s saying we’re going to send more troops to Afghanistan. He’s telling regular people what they want to hear, and then in the back rooms he’s making deals and signing on to the status quo. But if people don’t like where Obama is they should move the center.” To this end, Klein has been taking every opportunity to call for the nationalization of the oil companies. “It’s the job of the left to move the center,” she says. “Get out there and say some crazy stuff! And then, suddenly, it’ll seem more reasonable for politicians to take riskier positions.”

For someone who places so much weight on social movements, though, Klein can get dyspeptic when she finds herself in the middle of one. Activists are so earnest, so dedicated, so—like her parents. “Marches depress me,” she says. “Going for a walk and chanting—I get nothing out of it.” When she

began participating in the anti-globalization movement, she understood that protests outside trade summits were the main way that the movement was making itself heard, but they still seemed a little comical to her. “Is this really what we want?” she wrote in a column in the summer of 2000. “A movement of meeting stalkers, following the trade bureaucrats as if they were the Grateful Dead?” The World Social Forum in Brazil ought to have been a place where she felt at home, but there was too much chanting, and José Bové went around with bodyguards to protect him from the paparazzi, and the activists kept accusing one another of racism and classism, and the cultural interludes were hard to take. “A line of dancers appeared on stage, heads bowed in shame, feet shuffling,” she wrote, describing one. “[Then] the people on stage began to run, brandishing the tools of their empowerment: hammers, saws, bricks, axes, books, pens, computer keyboards, raised fists. In the final scene, a pregnant woman planted seeds—seeds, we were told, of another world.”

The only kind of protest she likes is the Yippie kind, theatrical enough to be entertaining and self-mocking enough to dilute the earnestness to a level that she can tolerate. At the protests in Quebec City during the Summit of the Americas in 2001, for example—when the officials surrounded themselves with a tall protective fence, a group of activists built a medieval-style wood catapult and lobbed Teddy bears over the top. “Quebec City was just madness,” she says. “It was one of those times when nobody knows what’s going to happen, and there are these breakthrough moments, these liberated moments, these moments of euphoria. It was mostly young people, and they were getting gassed, but they were still enjoying themselves tremendously, playing cat and mouse with the police. What I loved about it was that the whole city joined in—people working in cafés on the main streets, and neighbors got buckets of water to wash out people’s eyes. It was like an alternative reality.”

After the death of Milton Friedman, in 2006, the University of Chicago decided to set up an institute in his honor. The institute was opposed by many professors, who formed a group to protest it. Klein offered to debate someone from the institute’s board, but nobody would do it, so she agreed to go to Chicago and talk about her own objections to the project.

The evening was sponsored in part by the Platypus Affiliated Society—a student-teacher reading group that focusses on the Frankfurt School and the Second International period of Marxism—and a few of Platypus’s members, tall, thin, pale young men, had set up a table out front. Platypus was founded on the idea that the left didn’t have a proper sense of its own history, especially the bad bits, and that a study of that history would help it emerge from the troubled state in which it found itself. (“Protest has devolved into an insular subculture of self-hatred, frustration, and anxiety derived from a pathological attitude towards social integration,” a typically morose editorial in the *Platypus Review* declares.) Given its emphasis on self-criticism, Platypus was not a natural constituency for Klein’s work, but because she was coming to the campus the group read “The Shock Doctrine,” and also

Hayek and Friedman. “The conservatives engage the questions of freedom and utopia directly,” Ian Morrison, the editor of *Platypus*’s newsletter, said. “We were very struck that Klein seemed to back away from utopianism, because we feel that the left has liquidated itself in part because it’s conceded talk about freedom to someone like Bush.” *Platypus*’s interrogation of the past has led it in a variety of directions. Several of its members also belonged to the new Students for a Democratic Society, a revival of the new-left group from the sixties. In August, *Platypus* participated in a historical reënactment, in Grant Park, of the 1968 Democratic Convention, minus the police. “As a group of young, largely inexperienced activists it was the only organizing framework we could find which emphasized *active* participation,” read a writeup of the event in the *Platypus Review*. “Other forms seemed linguistically and ideologically flaccid. . . . We didn’t want to view our history—*our radical history*—as if from a riverbank, we wanted to jump in and splash around in it. . . . We debated, for instance, the ethics of nominating a live pig for the presidency: what should we feed it, and where would it stay?”

The *Platypus* men filed into the front row of Assembly Hall, and Klein stood at the lectern. There was a good crowd, not just people from the campus. Three anarchists had driven up from St. Louis specially to see her. “What we have been living since Reagan is a policy of liberating the forces of greed,” she declared. “I don’t think the project has actually been the development of the world and the elimination of poverty. I think this has been a class war waged by the rich against the poor, I think that they won, and I think the poor are fighting back.”

Klein never tempers her arguments in search of converts from the center; she rallies her base. She’s not interested in making the left part of the mainstream; she wants to convince the left that it doesn’t need the mainstream. “Part of what makes us less strong than we should be,” she says, “those of us who don’t believe that profit should govern every aspect of our lives, is that part of us accepts the narrative that neoliberal ideas have triumphed around the world because they were popular and our ideas failed.” For this reason, it is important to her, in “The Shock Doctrine,” that there be virtually no exceptions—that is, instances where radical market reforms are enacted with the consent of a people. (In passing, she concedes Reagan and Sarkozy.) But some of her examples are less plausible than others. She argues that the Falklands War—a ten-week venture whose main impact on Britain was an outpouring of jingoistic glee—was “a large enough political crisis,” creating sufficient “disorder” to enable Margaret Thatcher to “impose” her economic agenda. (It is true that, without the glee, Thatcher might not have won the next election, but ill-gotten popularity and traumatized regression are not the same thing.) Klein dismisses as a “propaganda exercise” a referendum held by Boris Yeltsin in which a majority of voters supported his reforms, on the odd ground that it was nonbinding. She maintains that the war in Chechnya was waged not in order to crush secessionism but in order to protect Yeltsin’s

economic policy. Thus, she concludes, it “contributed significantly to the Chicago School crusade death toll.” “Naomi is a pattern recognizer,” Lewis says. “Some people feel that she’s bent examples to fit the thesis. But her great strength is helping people recognize patterns in the world, because that’s the fundamental first step toward changing things.”

Throughout “The Shock Doctrine,” Klein is at pains to portray Friedman as a quasi-Satanic figure. The first chapter of the book describes the horrifying psychiatric experiments performed in the nineteen-fifties by one Donald Ewen Cameron, in which subjects were tortured by electroshock. She characterizes this work as a metaphor for the economic shocks performed in Friedman’s name; the next chapter, about Friedman, is titled “The Other Doctor Shock.” The promotional film that Klein made with Alfonso Cuarón is even cruder—a pastiche of disturbing footage of patients receiving electroshock treatment, images of prisoners being tortured, and the sound of a child wailing in an echoey room. “Unable to advance their agenda democratically, Friedman and his disciples were drawn to the power of shock,” Klein says in the voice-over, in the calmly terrorizing tone of a campaign attack ad. “Friedman understood that, just as prisoners are softened up for interrogation by the shock of their capture, massive disasters could serve to soften us up for his radical free-market crusade.”

Why does Klein place such emphasis on Friedman? Perhaps because she wants to draw a parallel between capitalism and Communism, to make their two histories look as similar as possible, and for that she needs not the messy, pragmatic, ad-hoc capitalism of corporations but the purist, utopian capitalism of the Chicago School. Violent autocrats of the free-market persuasion, though there have been many, have not soiled Friedman’s name in the way that Stalin soiled Marx; somehow, the misdeeds of a Pinochet or a Suharto or a Yeltsin are attributed to these men as individuals—to their lust for power, their greed, their drinking. But Klein holds capitalism guilty of all their sins. Friedman’s followers must no longer get away with shaking their heads when their advisees start killing people, she believes. They should feel themselves dupes, fellow-travellers, accessories: they should acknowledge their willed ignorance and complicity, as her grandparents and the Communists of their generation were forced to do.

“My grandparents were pretty hard-core Marxists, and in the thirties and forties they believed fervently in the dream of egalitarianism that the Soviet Union represented,” Klein told the audience in Chicago. “They had their illusions shattered by the reality of gulags, of extreme repression, hypocrisy, Stalin’s pact with Hitler. . . . The left has been held accountable for the crimes committed in the name of its extreme ideologies, and I believe that’s been a very healthy process. . . . When you start issuing policy prescriptions, when you start advising heads of state, you no longer have the luxury of only being judged on how you *think* your ideas will affect the world. You begin having to contend with how they actually affect the world, even when that reality contradicts all of your utopian theories.”

The day after the Chicago event, Klein taped an appearance on “The Colbert Report,” then went directly to the airport for a flight to France. She came back and went on a speaking tour to Texas, Colorado, California, and Wisconsin, did two panels in New York, and then later flew to Chicago for its humanities festival and to Miami for the book fair. She spent a week in Poland. Everywhere she went, she stuck to her theme. “The crash on Wall Street should be for Friedmanism what the fall of the Berlin Wall was for authoritarian Communism, an indictment of an ideology,” she says. It was clear to her that the past month had proved what she’d been saying for years. Now, if she could only speak often enough, to enough people, and explain things persuasively enough, maybe the left would stop wringing its hands and the right would start apologizing. It seemed unlikely, but she would try all the same. ♦

Subscribe now to get more of *The New Yorker's* signature mix of politics, culture, and the arts.
