

... elderly man with a poor memory' (as one journalist said of Biden) seem to speak an essential truth about the whole thing, then this is perhaps a reflection not of the loss of value of political language but of the irrelevance of all existing systems of value to our own intellectual and political endurance. Toscano's book's open approach to degradation implies this. We may not have our own

conceptual space, free from mirrors and rabbit holes and irresponsible desires, but we relate to dead and degraded materials including ourselves with the aim of helping each other to live. Degraded as it is, the anti-fascist Ship of Theseus offers to you, without conditions, as Frank O'Hara once wrote: 'my hull and the tattered cordage of my will'.

Danny Hayward

## Farce squared

Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (London: Penguin, 2023). 416pp., £10.99 pb., 978 1 80206 195 6

In my initial read of Klein's spiral through a web of mirrors, doubles and doppelgangers, Zionism seemed to be just one instance among many of a right-wing ideology corrupting the language of liberation. But the more I sat with Klein's book, the clearer it seemed that Klein's analysis of Zionism contained the key to all of the other issues of interest. In one way, it is unsurprising that I couldn't get away from Zionism: this piece was written in April and May of 2024, when students and faculty at campuses across the United States, including my own, initiated an impressive protest wave against the continued investment of our educational institutions in profiting from the atrocities unfolding in Palestine. It has been nigh impossible these last seven months to focus on anything else, to write on anything else, to think about anything else. The brutal repression of Palestine has become a filter through which we must see everything else.

At the end of *Doppelganger*, Klein focuses on the rise of Zionism as a perverted double of Western imperialism, 'a doppelganger of the colonial project, specifically settler colonialism'. While it may seem to some that the Israeli state's current atrocities in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon are exceptional, Klein sees them as the replication of the repressed atrocities that made the modern world: European colonialism, in all its forms, which used genocide, land theft, racial hierarchy, religious zealotry and capitalist domination to remake nearly every corner of the globe. The truth about Zionism, from Klein's perspective, is that it reflects the normative rule of global power, rather than representing a novel regime of brutality. Tracing a long history of doubles from

the extermination of Indigenous peoples in the Western hemisphere to the Nazi death machine to the West's attempted *mea culpa* for antisemitism, Klein reveals the present settler colonial regime in Palestine to be a return of the repressed of Christian, Occidental, liberal societies. Klein could not have anticipated how timely this analysis, which neither exculpates nor exoticises Jewish Israeli domination, would prove to be, as the events of October 7 set in motion a new level of extreme violence on Gaza.

One of the most famous accounts of historical doubling comes from Marx, who wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* that 'Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.' The farcical is a theme that recurs throughout Klein's readings of many unsettling twin stories over the course of the book, and the case of Zionism is particularly acute. At the crest of decolonial movements for independence after World War II, the Western community coalesced around the demand for Jewish people to be granted a national state, and for that national state to be placed in Palestine. While contemporary right-wing commentators try to debate the accuracy of calling Israel a colonial state, Zionists from the 1880s through the 1950s were quite clear that they were colonising Palestine, and despite the growing global resistance to colonisation, many Zionist institutions directly described themselves as a colonial force:

The tacit argument many Zionists were making at the time was the Jews had earned the right to an exception

from the decolonial consensus – an exception born of their very real extermination. The Zionist version of justice said to Western powers: if you could establish your empires and your settler nations through ethnic cleansing, massacres, and land theft, then it is discrimination to say that we cannot. It was as if the quest for equality were being reframed not as the right to be free from discrimination, but *as the right to discriminate*. Colonialism framed as reparations for genocide.

This twisted strategy emerges as a paragon example of a tendency Klein sees rising to prominence in the contemporary age: a distorted mirroring that the right wing uses to appropriate and reconfigure ideas and strategies traditionally associated with the left. And what better metaphor than an eerie double that is familiar, and yet also somehow *wrong*, than the doppelganger?

*Doppelganger* arrives at the analysis of Zionism through meditations on a wide range of doubles: pop culture, social media, the alt-right, ‘far out’ new age spiritualists, trucker convoys and more all emerge as manifestations of a troubling tendency toward distorted doubling. But perhaps the most narratively compelling case is the one that anchors the narrative of the book: Klein’s attempt to understand and respond to her own case of mistaken identity. For over a decade, Klein has been repeatedly mistaken for ‘the Other Naomi’ – Naomi Wolf. Wolf, the once-vaunted feminist author of *The Beauty Myth* and now right-wing media darling, emerges not only as Klein’s double, but also as exemplar of the entire ‘Mirror World’ of far right politics, conspiracy theories and science denialism that has become a centrifugal force in contemporary politics, not only in the United States, but around the world. In tracing Wolf’s political backsliding, Klein touches on an all-too-familiar experience that many of us experienced forcefully through the pandemic: family and community members being swept up in conspiracies about vaccines, child trafficking rings, and 5G seemingly overnight. Wolf, once the face of (a certain kind of) feminism, now serving as a talking head on Bannon’s *War Room* provides a compelling case study in a broader transformation of social relations.

But Klein has a more personal investment in Wolf because, even after the latter’s rightward run, the two Naomis are repeatedly confused for each other. In a stark episode recounted in the book, Klein recalls how, at one point, the two authors were mistaken for each

other so frequently that Twitter’s auto-complete function routinely *prompted* users to make the mistake. In an attempt to understand her own doppelganger experience, Klein turns to many of the great thinkers of the double: Sigmund Freud, Charlie Chaplin, Carmen Maria Machado, Robert Louis Stevensen and others. The book’s narrative meditates on how it feels to literally ‘have a double walking around’, one possible translation of the German word *doppelganger* (more traditionally, ‘double-going’). The reader feels with Klein the anger, frustration, helplessness, humiliation and exasperation of being mistaken for someone else and hence of being, in public, misrecognised and misunderstood.



Circulating through the text is a self-reflective anxiety about uncovering the cause of this conflation: *why* did Klein and Wolf keep getting mistaken for one another, despite agreeing on almost nothing? Klein’s gracious explanation – that they are both middle-aged women writers with books on big ideas – feels as unsatisfying to her as to her readers. Klein’s mother offers another explanation: antisemitism, pure and simple. It’s not that the world can’t distinguish two people with the same name or two women writers, it’s that in the popular cul-

ture both women stand in for another type of doppelganger altogether: the racial or ethnic doubling of the stereotype. Klein's mother's suggestion that no matter how much assimilation Jewish people subject ourselves to, we will always be seen through the projection of an antisemitic double is, of course, the same conviction that underpins Zionism.

In one sense, Jewish people seem to be as assimilated as any minority group could be. At the same time, I lived through frequent bomb scares at my Jewish elementary school as well as a traumatic white supremacist shooting at the Jewish Community Center summer camp at which I was a junior counsellor and where my sibling and cousins were campers. As the far right concretises visibility and power, openly antisemitic chants ('Jews will not replace us!'), hate crimes (the Tree of Life Synagogue Massacre) and conspiracy theories (Elders of Zion, Great Replacement, Soros, etc.) have become more normalised. The gamble made by many in my parents' and grandparents' generation – that assimilation would deflate the haunting double of the Eternal Jew – seems to have failed.

What accounts for this failure? Klein argues that the Western societies we live in are fundamentally unable to confront the violent and traumatic conditions that structure collective life, and that inability creates the condition for the emergence of doppelgangers. Ultimately Klein's diagnosis is analytic (in both senses): a society that needs doubles is a society that cannot bear to look itself in the mirror. Doubling cleaves off uncomfortable truths about ourselves and projects them onto others, turning our own anxieties into monstrous others. In order to deflate the power of the 'Mirror World', Klein suggests, we have to create a world where we can confront all of the insufficiencies and dark tendencies that structure of American and Canadian society – settler colonialism, capitalism, oppression and ecological devastation.

The fact that real antisemitism is on the rise (and that it might in fact play a role in Klein's own doppelganger experience) thus is not due to an eternal, ontological antisemitism, but is a political effect of Western society's inability to confront the oppressions at the heart of its own history. And this is what Zionism fundamentally misunderstands and misrepresents about the character of ethnic doubling in general and the case of antisemitism in particular: what Jewish people, like all people,

need to be truly liberated would be a real reckoning with the violences of Western colonialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchy, not the creation of a violent, Western society 'of our own'. Liberation is not joint partnership in domination.

Of all of the doppelganger tales explored in Klein's book, Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock* proves the most insightful (despite Klein's lifelong loathing for the author's incapacity to write multi-dimensional women characters). *Operation Shylock* tells the story of an author (called, in the story, Philip Roth) and an imposter who, using the name Philip Roth, critiques the Zionist project as a world historical mistake, and founds a movement called 'diasporism', urging Israelis to return to the European countries that had attempted to exterminate them less than a century ago. Far from a principled anti-Zionist text, however, Fake Roth more closely resembles a farcical caricature of actual diasporist and anti-Zionist Jewish politics, taking them to 'fanatical and cartoonish extremes'. The author Roth (who Klein calls 'Real Roth') travels to Jerusalem to confront anti-Zionist Roth ('Fake Roth'); hijinks ensue. In order to introduce some distance between himself and his doppelganger, Real Roth 'refus[es] to call him [Fake Roth] by their shared name and instead renam[es] him Moishe Pipik – pipik being the catch-all diminutive given to naughty kids and schlemiel-like characters in his childhood home; the name literally means 'Moses Bellybutton' (fitting for all the navel-gazing)'. Real Roth describes the pipikism of his double: 'the anti-tragic force that inconsequentializes everything – farcializes everything, trivializes everything, superficializes everything.'

If Marx in the nineteenth century could already identify history's doppelganger story – first as tragedy, then as farce – what comes after the farce? Klein's suggestion is that we might be living through a kind doubling of the farcical, a kind of farce squared, in which the outlandish and outrageous and brazenly trivial become so meaningless that the very concept of meaning is thrown into doubt. For Klein, the primary upshot of pipikism is its dangerous evacuation of seriousness and meaning. But for Klein, pipikism does more than simply appropriate the terms of the left for deployment on the right; pipikism appropriates in order to toxify. It degrades the ideas and analyses so far that they become unrecognisable and unusable: 'it doesn't just farcialize what they

say; it farcicalizes what many of us are willing and able to say afterward.'

Here is where the idea of pipikism significantly diverges from some of the other theories circling around this problem. While many decry the 'appropriation' of left ideas by the right or the 'incorporation' or 'domestication' of these ideas by powerful institutions, all of these concepts emphasise the *usefulness* of what is stolen. In each of these other ways of thinking about the problem, we could imagine a terrain on which we argue about whose use of these ideas or concepts is right; at the very least we can still use what they take from us. Pipikism is a different concept altogether; it is a use that destroys – for all parties involved. Klein gives a helpful example:

For instance, when Bannon states that his armed and authoritarian posse is being 'othered' by leftists and liberals, he is appropriating an important term that analysts of authoritarianism have used to describe how fascists cast their targets as less than human, making them easier to discard and even exterminate. But he is doing more than that, too. He is also making a mockery of the whole concept of othering, which in turn, makes it harder to use the term to name what Bannon does as a matter of course – to migrants, to Black voters, to trans and nonbinary youth.

One of the more impactful scenes of online pipikism emerged out of the antivax movement. Vaccine skeptics appropriated language from the feminist movement: 'my body, my choice' – even as some of the same people were vehemently pushing for the rollback of reproductive rights. They also started to wear yellow six-pointed stars, the infamous mark the Nazis forced on to Jews in the Ghettos as a precursor to the 'final solution' of total extermination.

As a disabled Jewish person, witnessing this strategy was (and still is) truly enraging. When the pandemic hit, I was already immunocompromised, and I spent many, many months inside a one-bedroom apartment with only my partner. In the first year of the pandemic, I almost never saw friends – most people who had previously been close to me did not want to take the precautions necessary to be part of a pod with us – and all of those rare social events were outside, masked, at 6-10 feet of physical distance. It was a dark and lonely time in which my predominant feeling was a deep and overriding disappointment: disappointment in the people and insti-

tutions in my personal life who couldn't seem to make small changes to protect my life, and disappointment in the larger structures of collective life that failed us all so greatly, so many times. And here was a group of people trying to use this symbol of violence against my people in order to make me less safe.

I can't help but think that the pipikism of real antisemitic violence in this moment of rising antisemitism is laden with more specific import than Klein attributes. For her, the yellow star wearing is yet another instantiation of a general trend of pipikism; it is true that, for example, COVID-denialists, including Klein's doppelganger herself, have also appropriated the language of the Black liberation struggle, likening vaccine passports and mask mandates to Jim Crow laws.

But there is something about the specific conjunction of the pipikism of 'fascism' combined with the creepy philosemitic appropriation of Jewish pain that returns me specifically to the question of Zionism. Over the past few years, there have been increasing attempts to legislate the equation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism. Several US states and European countries have formally adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, which explicitly defines almost any criticism of Israeli policy as an act of hate. Recently, the US House of Representatives voted to pass the Antisemitism Awareness Act (AAA) which repeats this same fallacy. A bill is being debated that would strip non-profit status from any organisation that critiques Israel, and students, faculty and staff across campuses are facing brutal repression for their bravery in denouncing acts that, if committed by any other world power, would be roundly condemned by all. In the context of rising *real* antisemitism of the far right, the craven pipiking of the antisemitism poses a unique danger – a danger that has been, for a long time, unleashed on Palestinians, and is now being hurled at activists, students and academics, including Jewish ones.

In January, I had the opportunity to assemble with other activist leaders in Jewish Voice for Peace. Around a campfire, Klein herself led a discussion about how her analysis might be useful in the current moment of uprising against the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Donned with masks and shirts with revolutionary slogans, the conversation, though rife with loving disagreement, focused on the practical ways to try to manoeuvre around



the right-wing deployment of pipikism in the form of Zionism. As Jews demanding an end to the onslaught in Gaza as well as the longer-term apartheid in occupied Palestine, we were daily confronting a deranged deployment of the slogan 'Never Again', in which our community's commitment to stop genocide anywhere was being used to justify an ongoing genocide. From legislative houses to corporate policies to universities, we were (and still are) trying to fight the degradation of the term 'antisemitism' beyond recognition to mean *any* critique of the Israeli state – and we were constantly being attacked with vile terms like 'antisemite', 'self-hating Jew', 'kapo' and 'Judenrat' for holding fast to Jewish values like social justice (*tikkun olam*), the sanctity of life (*pikuach nefesh*) and solidarity with others (the most frequently commanded law in all of the Torah – an auspicious 36 times!). In the midst of an uprising, a cross-class, intergenerational group of activists saw in Klein's book a more helpful diagnosis than mere appropriation. The Jewish community was being pipiked by Zionism as we spoke.

Critiquing the appropriation of leftist ideas by institutions is not new; activists have warned for decades about the dangers of pursuing social justice in collaboration with state governments, corporations, large nonprofits, and universities, even when they seem to generate real successes. For example, the establishment of new programs of learning, in Women's Studies, Black Studies, Critical Ethnic Studies, Queer Theory, and others, constituted a real achievement for identity-based social movements, to say nothing of the ways that queer, feminist, anti-racist and decolonial topics and methods became available for study inside some of the more traditional disciplines. In conjunction with other strategies of power-building outside of the academy, the institutionalisation of new departments and areas of study massively transformed public discourse. Klein discusses how new proximities to institutionalised power, alongside new social media technologies, gave grassroots organisers larger audiences than ever before, leading to 'huge victories in transforming the way we talk about all kind of issues – billionaires and oligarchic rule, climate breakdown, white supremacy, prison abolition, gender identity, Palestinian rights, sexual violence – and I have to believe that those changes represent real victories, that they matter'. These changes have been so widespread that

nearly every institution of collective life – universities, governments, boardrooms – have adapted themselves to the new lingua franca, hiring a new coterie of consultants and vice-chairs to integrate this language into their operations. The wide uptake of some left ideas is not nothing. It is a win of a certain kind. But, as Klein remarks, these wins have been coupled by a real rollback in the material rights and entitlements that, for lack of a better term, make words *matter*. We seem to have won the discourse war, Klein laments, 'at the precise moment when words and ideas underwent a radical currency devaluation ... [in] a torrent that assiduously amplifies the more operative forms of virtue performance and the most cynical forms of pipiking'. To borrow a distinction from Gramsci, we are winning the war of position, but losing the war of manoeuvre. And as Gramsci knew well, successful revolutions need to win on both fronts at once.

As much as Klein's analysis of pipikism and the 'Mirror World' clarify the current political conjuncture, she often places the boundary between 'our world' and the Mirror World in a surprising place, folding liberal politicians and institutions into 'our side' of the divide. But I think many on the radical left see more continuity between Biden and Bannon than Klein's analysis allows. Certainly, we live in a time of political polarisation, but on many of the key questions of our time – capitalism, environmental protection, abolition, Zionism, decolonisation, etc. – there aren't many real *material* differences in policy or analysis, but rather what Freud called 'the narcissism of small differences' over relatively minor tweaks to what French philosopher Jacques Rancière once diagnosed as a fatal 'consensus' of governing parties. It was, of course, Biden and Trudeau governments who presided over the mangled 're-opening' procedures that caused so much confusion and left frontline workers exposed to death, often without even meagre labour protections. Some of the most consistently violent police forces run basically unchecked through democratically-controlled cities like LA, Chicago and New York. And it has been Biden and Trudeau who have continued to send money and weapons to the Israeli military actively perpetuating a genocide in Gaza. I do not disagree with Klein that 'our side' is fighting against another side that views the world in completely distorted terms, but I am not sure we agree on who constitutes 'our side'. I am mindful (and agree) with Klein's wise caution against the left tendency to-

ward fracture into ever-smaller political echo-chambers of agreement. Movements must hold spaces for substantive disagreement, and litmus-tests of ideological purity limit the power and appeal of movements that need broad participation to be successful. In their best moments, I have witnessed the transformation of people's politics that comes from simply working in proximity and trust with a heterogeneous cross-cutting coalition of groups and interests, working toward a common goal. But I fear there is more pipikism on the so-called 'left' than Klein seems to admit. As the strategy has been taken up across the radical right, it has also become mainstreamed, with politicians, pundits and party strategists on both sides leaning in to pipikism. This is nowhere more evident than in relationship to Zionism and antisemitism, in which the pipikism I have outlined here is being touted as justice by a bipartisan consensus.

For Klein, the ultimate political devastation this form of pipikism unleashes on the world is its evacuation of meaning, or, in her terms, 'the all-out war on meaning that this new stage of progressive-cloaked capitalism represented.' This is the heart of the problem for Klein: 'If nothing means anything and nothing follows from anything else, then, as Hannah Arendt warned, everything is possible. Reality is putty to be shaped and molded at will.' While I am sympathetic to Klein's frustration over the death of meaning in some ways, I'm not convinced that this is the real problem. Nearly every generation has dealt with its own version of the crisis of meaning. Perhaps the most famous retorts to the death of meaning came nearly a century ago with the rise of existentialism. In the face of the wanton violence of the World Wars, the obvious failures of capitalism in global crashes and rising agitation against the coercive institutions of state and church that had previously provided stable meaning, philosophers like Sartre, Fanon and de Beauvoir responded to the death of meaning with a defiantly glib, 'so what?' If meaning is up for grabs, if it is no longer moored to unwieldy institutions of power, might that not, in the end, work in our favour?

If, as Klein says, 'everything is possible', isn't that ultimately the single, most necessary development for

revolutionary thinking? In an age conditioned by post-Soviet, neoliberal malaise in which, as Frederic Jameson famously wrote, 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism', the idea that anything is possible might be the most precious idea imaginable. Marxist analysis reopens the question of just such a possibility. The upshot of Marx's analysis is that capitalism as a social system and the domination it entails is fundamentally a social system, not a natural one, one that human beings made and continue to reproduce. The conviction that, because we are the ultimate authors of our circumstances, 'anything is possible' means that we have the power (or at least the potential) to make a world beyond domination, beyond oppression, beyond fate.

For Klein, all doppelganger stories can figure as a kind of portent, a sort of future anxiety. She writes, 'For centuries, doubles have been understood as warnings or harbingers'. The warning of Zionism might be that the Era of the Mirror World is quickly coming to a close. There may no longer be a clear or easy separation between those of us living in reality and those who see the world through the distorted lens of denial, repression and pipikism. In this sense, the formation of Zionism as a pipikism that cuts across both sides of the mirror world may contain the seed of a future made all the more dangerous.

But a warning is also a possibility. We do not have to imagine that we greet the harbinger as Cassandra, doomed to see the future but powerless to change it. The political organising around Palestine these last months provides a different orientation. If the world we live in is built on settler colonialism, capitalism, racism and antisemitism, then we must join together to interrupt these processes. In doing so, we can try to build a different world and in that process, address and repair the repressed past that violently haunts the present. If we can see and name clearly the path we are on, that is always the first step in being able to shift course. Klein's theory of pipikism provides an important tool – it sounds the alarm of the world we are living in. It will be up to us to decide how to respond.

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