Reflections on Naomi Klein's Pandemic Shock Doctrine

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In her 2020 essay 'Screen New Deal' Naomi Klein compels us to think critically about the role of big tech corporations such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon in the global fight against Covid-19. Rather than providing technical solutions to a global health crisis, the turn to Big Tech signals the emergence of a 'pandemic shock doctrine' the result if which is the creation of a privately owned, digital surveillance apparatus that track, trace and store our every move. But while Klein's essay successfully distils seemingly disparate events into a haunting exposé of how Big Tech companies are reshaping contemporary societies, she fails to fully develop the social- and political consequences of her perhaps most important observation: namely that the mode of production promoted by Facebook, Google, and Amazon 'claims to be run on "artificial intelligence" but is actually held together by tens of millions of anonymous workers tucked away in warehouses, data centers, content moderation mills, electronic sweatshops, lithium mines, industrial farms, meat-processing plants, and prisons, where they are left unprotected from disease and hyperexploitation'.

Drawing on and expanding Klein's argument, this essay seeks to expose the all-to-human consequences of the emergence and expansion of digital capitalism. It begins with a summary of Naomi Klein's article, emphasising the main arguments. Next, I discuss Klein's essay in relation to Shoshana Zuboff's work on surveillance capitalism to show how they are both essentially criticizing a biopolitical turn in digital capitalism. Finally, I invoke Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics to supplement such biopolitical analyses of digital capitalism with an attention to the distant 'zones of death' where the precarious workers that form the material bases of the digital-capitalist mode of production are left unprotected and exploited

Google, Netflix, Facebook. These are all tech corporations whose products services have allowed us to work from home or have entertained us during the corona pandemic. The reason for their popularity is simple. As CEO of Steer Tech, Anuja Sonalker, puts is: 'Humans are biohazards, machines are not' (Klein 2020). As a consequence, the Covid-19 pandemic has allowed tech corporations such as Google, Facebook, and Microsoft to reposition themselves 'as benevolent protectors of public health and munificent champions of "everyday hero" essential workers' (ibid).

Yet, according to Naomi Klein, these companies are not only in the business of improving our lives. They are also the torchbearers of an emerging form of disaster capitalism in which the Covid-19 pandemic is seen as a form of societal shock therapy which promises to consolidate and expand the social, cultural, and political influence of Big Tech. This is what Klein refers to as the Pandemic Shock Doctrine (PDA). At the heart of this emerging doctrine, Klein argues, 'is [the] seamless integration of government with a handful of Silicon Valley giants – with public schools, hospitals, doctor's offices, police, and military all outsourcing (at a high cost) many of their core functions to private tech companies' (Klein 2020). More worryingly perhaps, if unchallenged, the emergence of the PDA might result in the realisation of a dystopian future 'in which our every move, our every word, our every relationship is trackable, traceable, and data-mineable by unprecedented collaborations between government and tech giants.'

Taken together, the PDA – as defined by Klein – can be understood as an extension of an increasingly dominant logic of accumulation known as 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2015, see also Zuboff 2018). Surveillance capitalism, according to Shoshana Zuboff, is a distinctly digital-capitalist logic of accumulation inasmuch as it relies on the automated collection of vast amounts of digital data and aims to predict and modify human consumption through

targeted forms of online advertising. According to Zuboff, the forms of power and authority employed by digital capitalists cannot simply be described as the ability to command and control individuals as consumers or citizens.

Even the panoptic architecture of the modern societies described by Foucault comes up short since the panopticon 'was a physical design that privileged a single point of observation.' (Zuboff 2015: 82). While, for decades, this was an 'apt metaphor' for the kind of power relations that characterised the workplace and public institutions, the world forged by major tech corporations is one 'saturated with data and produce radically distributed opportunities for observation, interpretation, communication, influence, prediction, and ultimately modification of … action.' (ibid). Unlike the gaze of the state, the institution or industrial production manager, there is essentially no escape from the gaze of digital capitalism since, as shown by both Klein and Zuboff, there are increasingly few places left where our behaviour is not observed.

The benefit of reading Klein's essay through the work of Zuboff is that it enables us to reconsider 'who participates' and 'who decides' in digital capitalist economies during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Whereas, according to Zuboff, the answer to 'who participates' in digital capitalism is 'those with the material, knowledge and financial ressources' to collect, analyse and commodify digital data (ibid), the Pandemic Shock Doctrine seems to be putting at an advantage the companies who are willing to make these capabilities available to governments through private-public partnerships. Similarly, while according to Zuboff the answer to 'who decides' is the companies that most successfully commodify and manipulate our behaviour as consumers(ibid), the emergence of the Pandemic Shock Doctrine raises questions about the ambition of corporations and governments to know and shape our behaviour as citizens.

The emergence of the Pandemic Shock Doctrine thus urges us to consider digital capitalism not just as a logic of accumulation adopted by private tech corporations but also as a logic of government increasingly adopted by (neo)liberal democracies. More specifically, the Pandemic Shock Doctrine can be said to mark a *biopolitical* turn in digital capitalism. According to Foucault, biopolitics is less concerned with the behaviour of individuals than with knowing and acting upon populations more generally: 'Where discipline is the technology deployed to make individuals behave, to be efficient and productive workers, biopolitics is deployed to manage population; for example, to ensure a healthy workforce.' (Foucault 2003: 239). While Foucault himself located the emergence of biopolitics in the 18th century, it's also possible to locate a biopolitical logic in the emergence of the Pandemic Shock Doctrine. More specifically, the Pandemic Shock Doctrine can be said to be biopolitical inasmuch as it is 'sold to us on the dubious promise' that the services and products provided by big tech corporations 'are the only possible way to pandemic-proof our lives, the indispensable keys to keeping ourselves and our loved ones safe.'

While Klein skilfully exposes the potentially damaging effect the emergence of the Pandemic Shock Doctrine might have on the social-, cultural- and political organisation of liberal democracies it is worth noting that the kind of digital economy that this doctrine seems to promote also involves the labour of child workers in the lithium mines of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the raw material needed for the production of computer chips is collected, and the labour of assembly-line workers in factories such as Foxconn in China where many of these devices are assembled (see Parikka 2015: 89-90, see also Boltanski & Esquerra 2016: 31).

Klein seems to be aware of this when she acknowledges that the digital economy is 'held together by tens of millions of anonymous workers tucked away in warehouses, data centers, content moderation mills, electronic sweatshops, lithium mines, industrial farms, meat-processing plants, and prisons' and that these workers are often 'left unprotected from disease and hyperexploitation.' In spite of this, however, she ultimately chooses to focus her essay on how Covid-19 is paving the way for a private-public surveillance apparatus that challenges legal- and social rights related e.g. to individual privacy and freedom. Instead, I want to analyse the PDA and digital capitalism more widely, as it should also be analysed as a symptom of a *necropolitical* turn in the social-, political-, and economic organisation of our world, the aim of which defines and divides populations in order to decide who must be protected and, more importantly, who can be sacrificed in the process.

Necropolitics – as defined e.g. by Achille Mbembe – goes beyond Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and biopower to show how sovereign power is now enacted not only to ensure the health of populations and make life prosper but

also through the creation of (geographical and cultural) 'zones of death' where the imminent presence of death and suffering becomes the ultimate exercise of domination (see also Dillon & Reid 2009). Contrary to traditional forms of sovereign power which Mbembe, drawing on Foucault, defines as the right to kill, necropolitics is thus more accurately defined as the right to expose certain people to death. Taken together, necropolitics offers a framework in which to analyse how 'contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death' forces some bodies to remain in a permanent state between life and the possibility of death (Mbembe 2003: 11-40).

Analysed through the conceptual prism of necropolitics, the question one must ask of digital capitalism is thus: 'What place is given to life, death, and the human body' and '[h]ow are they inscribed in [its] order of power?' (Mbembe 2003:12). In answering these questions, it becomes obvious that digital capitalism and its associated mode of production relies on the physical, cultural and social division between consumers of digital commodities, and the countless couriers, moderators, miners and assembly line workers which produce our technological devices and digital commodities. So while, the logic of power embodied by surveillance capitalism is partly exercised through the biopolitical governance of individual consumers in affluent countries, surveillance capitalism relies just as much on the exercise of a necropolitical form of power that reduces people (or workers) to precarious conditions of life in places such as the Congolese lithium mine or the Chinese assembly line.[1] Put differently, the Pandemic Shock Doctrine – and digital capitalism more widely – does not simply substitute measures of violence and oppression with a biopolitics whose technologies of control aims at ensuring the health of populations. Rather, the emergence of digital capitalism represents the *relocation* of violence and oppression away from the centre of Western knowledge-based economies and towards its (postcolonial) frontiers (see also Mezzandro 2011).

By supplementing Klein's analysis of the Pandemic Shock Doctrine with an attention to the necropolitical dimensions of digital capitalism, it has become obvious how the digital-capitalist logic of accumulation and its associated mode of production relies, first and foremost, on the exploitation of human bodies. All of this is not an attempt to take anything away from the relevance of Klein's critique of digital capitalism and Pandemic Shock Doctrine. There is no doubt that both pose a serious threat to our democratic institutions and civil liberties. It is simply a reminder that, for others, the emergence of the Pandemic Shock Doctrine as well as the particular mode of production it promotes poses a fundamental threat to their well-being and survival.

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Note

[1] The high number of suicides observed at the Foxconn factories of China is a case in point: As Mbembe (2003) shows through the example of suicide bombing, when governed by necropolitical forms of sovereignty, the only

possible form of resistance is choosing the terms of one's own death (36-39).

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