

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

NAOMI KLEIN: TACKLING THE “DOPPELGANGER”, DISINFORMATION & LIES

LAURA FLANDERS: Roughly halfway through her new brilliant book "Doppelganger", Naomi Klein describes doubting herself. It was early on in COVID. She had published her concerns about the for-profit response to the pandemic, and that's what you'd expect from the author of "The Shock Doctrine," a book all about the way that private firms and authoritarian regimes use disasters to their own advantage. Klein was being Klein, doing what she's known for, but suddenly another Naomi, Naomi Wolf, was all over Fox News spinning a scary conspiracy theory about a fascist takeover. Wolf's version of events wasn't the same as Klein's, but it was enough like it as to confuse some people. At that moment, as Klein writes, she backed off, not completely, but too much, she says. "I couldn't see how a serious discussion of actual disaster capitalism could avoid getting blended with truly dangerous anti-vaccination fantasies and outright coronavirus denialism." If you recognize that problem, you will have lots of aha moments reading "Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World." In it, Naomi Klein, author of "No Logo", "This Changes Everything" and so much more, describes her doppelganger experiences with Naomi Wolf and the painful catch-22 of defending one's personal brand or deciding not to. In it, she lays out the myriad, mostly sinister ways in which shadow selves show up in our lives and in our society at large and leaves us with a big question, how do we reconnect with one another and prioritize collectively as we need to to address our shared problems in an era when divide and conquer has become so granular and our personal identities so fragile and so seemingly all important? No doppelganger, I am proud to welcome the real Naomi Klein. It is a pleasure to have you back and thank you for another great book.

NAOMI KLEIN: So great to have an excuse to talk with you.

LAURA FLANDERS: So take us back. I mean, there you were. At that time, you had an appointment at Rutgers University in New Jersey. You hadn't been there all that long. Suddenly the pandemic hits. I remember talking with you early on, you're wondering where to be, what to do. But boy, have you been on a journey since. Have you been, as you say, on a trip into the mirror world? What took you there?

NAOMI KLEIN: Like many Canadians who found themselves in the US, those of us who were able to return to Canada, no offense, we chose to. It was a better place to ride out the pandemic. I was able to do my teaching for Rutgers from our home in British Columbia. Like so many of us who were fortunate enough to isolate, I went online more than I usually did. I'm just going to, I'm just going to confess to this Laura. You know, I try to keep my social media use under control. I block Twitter on my phone and, you know, but, you know, in the isolation of the pandemic, I realized that so many of the external forces that tell me who I am, and I think ourselves come

from a mix of the internal and the external, right? We are social animals, we mirror each other. And so I went online to try to get a little of that kind of validation. Who am I? And I experienced this vertiginous thing of having just, you know, I could scroll forever at a certain point during the pandemic and just hear the denunciations and the excommunications and how could she say this? How could she do this? And they were not talking about me, though they were naming me. They were talking about the person who I've come to refer to as my doppelganger Naomi Wolf, because during COVID, she became a kind of doppelganger of herself. And I think this is also something that might be familiar to some of your viewers and listeners, this feeling of like, what happened to this person? Like I used to know who they were, but suddenly, they seem very different. I used to be able to trust this person's analysis and now they're sucking up to Elon Musk. I'm not going to name any names.

LAURA FLANDERS: It wasn't you, it was Naomi Wolf, but your name was being used. That must have been kind of horrifying.

NAOMI KLEIN: I think the most horrifying moment was when somebody tweeted something to the effect of, you know, "What the hell happened to Naomi Klein? I used to respect her. Now she's comparing COVID vaccines to the yellow star." One of my doppelgangers activities that I have the most trouble with, I do not like the Holocaust analogies, you know? And so I looked at what he was linking to and it was an article that clearly said Naomi Wolf in the headline, you know, so I, you know, I wrote, I responded. I said, "Are you sure about that?" And so he went back and he reread what he had shared and saw that he had been reading so quickly that he saw my name in a headline that had her name in it, right? And so he said, you know, "Damn, auto complete." And that's what I realized that we were getting confused so much that the algorithm, the AI fueling these platforms was now prompting it. And that meant that however I responded would only fuel it because the algorithm is not smart, right? Even though it's called 'intelligence', all it's doing is seeing these two names are constantly referred to together, so anything I do gets conflated with her. And that's when I realized I had a problem on my hands.

LAURA FLANDERS: I would love to say it isn't true any longer, but when we've started typing in Naomi, both of you show up. Just saying, sorry.

NAOMI KLEIN: Well, look, there's two ways you can respond to something like this, Laura. You can be horrified by it, and I was for a while, and then something happened. Instead of being horrified, I just got interested, I got interested in the phenomenon of all of our kind of interchangeability on these platforms, right? The fact that we're all not really ourselves. We're creating an avatar, a double, a doppelganger of ourselves to represent us. AI, you know, can create deepfakes of us. I started reading books about doppelgangers. I started reading, you know, everything from Dostoevsky to Philip Roth, to Ursula Le Guin, looking at the role of doppelgangers in mythology, Catherine the Great, and one thing that became clear is that

doppelgangers often are warnings. They're often telling us, they're offering us something that is hard to look at directly, so they give us a kind of mirror to look at instead of looking at the thing directly. And so I thought, well, instead of just pushing this away, what if I draw it close? What if I really give it my attention and try to understand the messages?

LAURA FLANDERS: And so you did, so you did.

NAOMI KLEIN: I had fun doing it, Laura.

LAURA FLANDERS: Just quickly.. Well, you clearly did and it's a real thought provoking book and you travel as you say and you take a real trip and you take us on a trip. One of the places you go is into history and the origin of doppelganger. Just for people that aren't familiar with that term, where does it come from? What's it refer to?

NAOMI KLEIN: So it's a German word and it translates literally as double 'doppel', ganger 'goer' or 'walker', right? And some of the mythology around doppelgangers holds that all of us have a double walking around somewhere. My doppelganger is less that kind of doppelganger in that I don't, when I look at her, I don't see myself, but other people clearly do, or they see our digital representations as interchangeable. Where the book ends, because it takes these winding, it takes a winding road, but it does go somewhere, antisemitism is often referred to as the socialism of fools, right? Because it offers a false analysis of power, right? So you know something is unfair. You know that there are people who are profiteering, who are enriching, you know that you're getting a raw deal, but instead of offering a socialist analysis of capital that says this is what this system was built to do, you say, "No, it's just this group over here." Capitalism is fine, but there's an aberration. There's this cabal and that's why conspiracies tilt to the right and why people like Steve Bannon and Tucker Carlson understand that they serve their project and why they've platformed my doppelganger quite a lot precisely because it protects the system, right? If you are deflecting away from a systemic analysis towards this idea that there's a cabal, then the system is safe.

- [Narrator] When I look at the mirror world, I don't see disagreements over a shared reality. I see disagreements about what is real and what is a simulation. And with AI generating more and more of what we see and hear, it's only getting harder to distinguish the authentic from the synthetic. After all, artificial intelligence is a mirroring and mimicry machine. We feed in the cumulative words, ideas, and images that our species has managed to create. And these programs mirror back to us something that feels uncannily lifelike, but it's not life. It's a forgery of life.

LAURA FLANDERS: So there's two things I'm hearing going on. One is this kind of vacuum at the heart of our understanding of the world which you could say is kind of left by red baiting and

anti-communism and fear of talking about systems and power and class and all the things you talk about. There's also the other side of the story which is there's a lot to be gained from telling certain stories and less so from others. So what's the difference? Which one of those do you want to pick up on first? You've touched on the first and I blame the media a lot for failing to give us enough airtime to clear complex analysis like yours.

NAOMI KLEIN: The media, the education system, right? I mean, capitalism is treated like the air we breathe. It's not really generally identified as a system that has its own logics. And that these outcomes, including outcomes like the real conspiracies that I mentioned earlier, you know, are produced by the logic of a system that is designed to pursue profit at all costs and growth at all costs, right? If we think about the conspiracies that I wrote about in "The Shock Doctrine," like the overthrow of Allende, there was a conspiracy to overthrow Allende. It wasn't about draining children of their adrenochrome, you know, or some sort of nefarious demonic goal, it was to protect, you know, the US copper mine sector who were angry that Allende had nationalized the copper mines, and it was US telecoms who were worried about him nationalizing the telecoms. So real world conspiracies tend to have a more kind of a banal end goal, but they are real. And I think that yes, we don't learn about those systems, we don't learn about those logics. In fact, we're lied to about them and we're told that actually, you know, a rising tide is going to lift all boats and that this is the best system imaginable and everything else has been tried and failed. And so because we lack this systemic analysis and people are experiencing true hardship on many different fronts, they're looking for answers. And the conspiracies come along and say, aha, I have them. It's Bill Gates. It's the World Economic Forum. And look, I'm no fan of the World Economic Forum, but my analysis of the World Economic Forum is it's just a logical outgrowth of capitalism.

LAURA FLANDERS: So then that brings us back to COVID in a sense because at that moment, you had this perfect kind of nexus of people needing healthcare that they couldn't afford or they thought they couldn't afford, their own personal economies being in danger. No clear story for what was really happening and an awful lot of time online. How do you see those things as coming together? And what about that profit motive piece at the center of this where there's a lot to be, a lot of money to be made selling crank cures and remedies?

NAOMI KLEIN: In the attention economy, which is, you know, one of the largest parts of our economy now, engagement is money. Engagement is the path to monetization. And, you know, there's little else that will generate more engagement than telling people that the job, the shot that they're told that they have to take or their kids have to take is going to kill them or is already causing a genocide. I mean, that's a good way to get clicks. And so the conspiracies themselves are an industry in a way that we haven't seen before because of the attention economy.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what do we do about that? I mean, you describe, and it rang so true, that when you hear a story that makes sense, an analysis that makes sense like the one that you just laid out about why did 50 years ago the Chilean coup happen, there's a kind of aha and you exhale. When you hear, "Oh my God, there's evil abroad in the world and it's out for your children," you get excited, it almost feels like a physiological phenomenon that your friend Johann Hari might describe or talk about.

NAOMI KLEIN: It's to instill panic, that seems to be the main outcome that is being sought. And, you know, when people are panicked, they can't think straight. And like I said, I think we have a right to be mad, but we should do our best to get out of that panic state and to get into a more lucid state.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that takes me back to the attention economy that you mentioned earlier. I mean, time is a minutely measured thing in the attention economy. Billions of clicks in fractions of a second can be generated by things, lies as they used to say, you know, can travel around the world before the truth has got its boots on. Well, now the truth doesn't even have a chance to like click. It does seem to really make a difference, doesn't it?

NAOMI KLEIN: It does make a difference. And I think it's easy to feel helpless about that because we don't control these social media platforms. And I think that people because we know that to be true very often we think that the solution to this is deplatforming, right? Just get them to shut up. Don't let them do it. What I've seen is that that actually kind of supercharged the movement. People really wear it as a badge of honor. Like, you know, Wolf was suspended from Twitter for about a year until Elon Musk brought her back and the first thing she tweeted was, "Deplatformed seven times and still right." And, you know, this is its currency in conspiracy culture. How many times have you been deplatformed? That's how right you were, right? Because the powers that be don't want you to be heard. And, of course, there are, you know, what I call mirror world platforms, right? When you get deleted from Twitter, you go to Gettr. When you get deleted from YouTube, you know, you go to Rumble and so on. So I am less interested in how we control speech and much more interested in how we drain conspiracy culture of its energy, of its power. I don't think, you know, it's not about changing Steve Bannon's mind, but it is about looking at why he has such a following, how he is attracting people who would, you know, just a few years ago have identified as being on the left, as being progressive. What stories can we be better at telling that replace the, you know, socialism of fools with the socialism of facts, if you will. I do think that we can do that better. And, you know, you started the interview talking about that moment where I felt like, well, can I write an article about Bill Gates without it not just fueling this? And the conclusion I come to is absolutely, we must write about Bill Gates, we must write about Davos. We must not seed this territory to conspiracy culture because if they are the only ones who are talking about the hoovering up of wealth during the pandemic, if RFK is the only one talking about how billionaires massively enriched themselves during the

pandemic and he's hitching that to all kinds of dangerous and untrue things, then we are in very bad shape. So I believe that right wing conspiracy feeds off of left wing silences and we need to step up.

LAURA FLANDERS: Get louder.

NAOMI KLEIN: Yeah, get louder and more confident.

LAURA FLANDERS: The other side of the doppelganger story that you lay out so interestingly in the book is since when did we only have one self anyway, you know? You know, what is our attachment to a rigid brand, if you will? And you talk about how you identify a lot of this in "No Logo" and it's sort of been updated for the moment. What are the plus sides of saying we have, you know, Walt Whitman, I include multitudes.

NAOMI KLEIN: It's not fun being confused with somebody who's spreading all kinds of dangerous medical misinformation. I actually feel weirdly grateful for the experience because it has taught me to hold onto myself a little less tightly which I think we all honestly need to do if we're going to do real collective work.

LAURA FLANDERS: Elaborate on that.

NAOMI KLEIN: Well, so you know, we live in this age where we're told that we have to optimize ourselves in all these different ways even if we don't use that language. And that is, you know, the ultimate expression of the success of capitalism and the neoliberal phase precisely because we are uncared for, precisely because we are isolated. We put everything onto the self, right? We need to polish ourselves up, we need to perfect ourselves, we need to optimize ourselves, we need our families to be perfect, we need our kids to be perfect. And the pressure that we're putting on the self I think is part of why we're seeing so many people crack. I don't think the self can support the amount that we are putting on it because, you know, it's our income, it's our retirement, you know, it's our safety, it's our lifeboat in this wild world, right? And it's an illusion because we cannot protect ourselves from the forces that we're up against. Our only hope of protection is through collective work and collective movement building. So we can either try to respond to that by kind of armoring up and doing more to armor up ourselves, or we can kind of embrace it and say, "Well, if everything I've done to build up my public self can be undone because countless people are confusing me with someone else who is doing things I am horrified by, well, I may as well just give up," and there is joy in giving up.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, it also takes people to buy into the bait and switch or into the confusion. And I think that's where I come at the end of your book is we all need to connect better in person or at least remember what we know about people. I recently had a chance to talk

to Shirley Sherrod, the Georgia Agriculture Department Development Director who was forced to resign under the Barack Obama administration when she was slandered basically by Andrew Breitbart in a whole trumped up video, but somebody in the Obama administration believed more thoroughly, more quickly than they believed Shirley Sherrod, long history civil rights, that one video led somebody with some smarts on a dime abandon what they knew about her and believe instead the lie. And apparently, they didn't even ask her for her side of the story before asking her to resign. That story sits with me because it speaks to how quickly we can abandon one another. And that's where I end your book in the sense that how do we connect in a way where we're not so vulnerable to lies about one another, where we actually believe what we know to be true about Naomi Klein, that she is not about to be sitting there with Steve Bannon.

NAOMI KLEIN: So we have to, I think, be real about the fact that we don't know each other just by following each other on Twitter. But I also think that it, you know, the example you gave that was a lie, but it's also true we make mistakes, you know, and that we're very quick to believe the worst about people. And this is another aspect of doppelganger analysis and literature that is interesting, Freud wrote about doppelgangers that they represent, they represent the vast potentialities of ourselves, right? You know, we know that we are all leading lives that are the result of a series of choices made by us and made by others about where we live, what families we were born into, what job we took, whether we had kids or didn't have kids. So I think we need to look at this from a systemic point of view. These are people who believed the lies capitalism told them that all they needed to do was play by the rules, you know, make, you know, make their money, protect themselves, protect their families. And now suddenly they were being told that they lived in a community and in a society and they had to care about all kinds of people, including people who didn't look like them, and I think that that made a lot of brains break. But the other side of it is a lot of people embraced it and we can't forget that, that so many people had been waiting to be asked to check in on their neighbors, you know, to form mutual aid networks. And I'm just worried we're forgetting that.

LAURA FLANDERS: Naomi, thank you so much. What a pleasure. And congratulations on another really important book.

NAOMI KLEIN: Thank you so much, Laura. So much fun to talk with you.

LAURA FLANDERS: At the end of "Doppelganger", Naomi Klein talks about the benefits of activism, not just winning or losing campaigns, but the experience of coming together with others outside of our digital worlds to pursue a goal together. The relationships you build in those kinds of struggles often last a lifetime. And I look back on my own life and I am grateful that I had those experiences in my youth, many of them in the anti-nuclear movement of the early 1980s. In thinking about that, I'm curious what would happen if we took time out of time to find people in our close community who remember living in a pre-digital and perhaps differently

capitalist world. Have you spoken to the oldest person in your neighborhood? Perhaps ask them about their grandparents, what they remember? I'm resolving to do that again because I think we need to be reminded that what we live with today has not always been with us. We not only can live differently, but we have, and people in our closeup vicinity can remember how things used to be. I'm going to talk to some old folks I think in the next few weeks and see what I can discover. In the meantime, if you want to hear my full uncut conversation with Naomi, subscribe to the podcast. It's free and it'll come to you directly in your inbox. I'll be back next week with more. But 'til then, stay kind, stay curious, and thanks for joining me. I'm Laura.

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