Hidden Agendas

By John Pilger. London: Vintage, 1998, 687 pp.

Those who admire the work of John Pilger, journalist and film maker, will find much to enthuse over in *Hidden Agendas*, his seventh book. At nearly 700 pages it is lengthy and its list of subjects includes Vietnam, East Timor, apartheid, English tabloid newspapers, Wapping, Rupert Murdoch, Burma, Hillsborough, Australian aboriginals, Kenya, Tony Blair and New Labour, the Gulf War, and Northern Ireland. Pilger's primary themes, however, are considerably fewer: media control, globalization, the military, capitalism, and, crucially, opposition to this ideology.

Pilger writes in the introduction: "This book is devoted to slow news" (p. 1). By "slow news" Pilger means those stories which have not received serious media coverage. He goes on to note: "When slow news is included, it is more than likely dressed in a political and social vocabulary that ensures the truth is lost" (p. 2). That Pilger knows what the truth is, is a central premise of his book. In his bitter criticism of global media coverage of the Gulf War, he writes: "The war was not a war at all. It was a one-sided blood-letting. Kate Adie [BBC reporter], like most of her colleagues, had reported the news, but not the story" (pp. 52–53). Pilger's real concern throughout this book is the story, not the news. This is an unequivocally political book appealing to the educated general reader. A substantial number of notes are employed and there is a useful index, but *Hidden Agendas* has no scholarly pretensions. Indeed, overall, Pilger can be cavalier, even irresponsibly so, with regard to referencing. For example, in the following assertion made in the introduction, at least seven claims are made, not one of which is substantiated:

> People rightly regard the "peace dividend" as a bad joke, but what they do not know is that all the nuclear powers are upgrading their nuclear arsenals at such a furious pace that the old Cold War might never have ended. The "first strike" nuclear arms programmes set in train by Ronald Reagan and George Bush have not missed a beat under Bill Clinton; only one relatively minor air-to-ground missile has been cancelled. Otherwise, billions of dollars are being spent on Reagan's favourite Star Wars anti-missile system, called Theatre High Altitude Area Defence, or THAAD. In response, the Russians are developing their own anti-ballistic-missile system, while both powers collude in the deception that their irresponsibility does not break the ABM treaty, signed in 1972. For the Americans, whether or not there is a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty is irrelevant; they have now developed a computer modelling believed to be every bit as reliable as an actual test. (pp. 8–9)

On a number of occasions a source is given in the text, but there is no additional reference. In a chapter on Kenya, for example, Pilger writes:

> The British ran concentration camps in Kenya in which the conditions were so harsh that 402 inmates died in just one month, June 1954. Torture, flogging, forced labour, the denial of rations and the abuse of women and children were commonplace. "The special prisons," wrote the imperial historian V.G. Kieman, "were probably as bad as any similar Nazi or Japanese establishments." A former rehabilitation officer noted that "Japanese methods of torture" were practiced by one British camp commandant. (p. 25)

Here, the opening assertion is unsubstantiated, the reader is not given a further reference to Kieman's work, and the words of a "former rehabilitation officer" also receive no further annotation.

Pilger's "slow news" is often grim news, and it is a tribute to his skill as a writer that he can maintain a reader's interest throughout so relentless and lengthy a catalogue of horrors; however, part of his readability is purchased at the expense of rigorous and consistent annotation. Pilger writes well, but there are times when he clearly surrenders to his own impassioned rhetoric. He can be slyly amusing, however, as when he writes of Iraqi civilian casualties in the Gulf War: "Perhaps, like the Vietnamese, Iraqi civilians were obliterated in order to save them" (p. 49). Similarly, he writes of one American state: "In the state of Georgia, always ahead in regression" (p. 71), and his account of an exchange with a salesman at the Paris arms fair is savagely amusing:

> I asked a salesman to describe the working of a "cluster grenade" the size of a grapefruit. Bending over a glass case, as one does when inspecting something precious, he said, "This is *wonderful*. It is state of the art, unique. What it does is discharge copper dust, very very fine dust, so that the particles saturate the objective.
>
> "What objective?" I asked.
>
> He looked incredulous. "Whatever it may be," he replied.
>
> "People?"
>
> "Well, er ... if you like." (p. 117)

Pilger is emphatic in his condemnation of capitalism. A central thesis of *Hidden Agendas* is that in Britain, the United States, and in much of Europe and Australia, the policies of the principal political parties have converged into single-ideology states with rival factions, which are little more than brotherhoods of power and privilege. Linked inextricably with capitalism, media technology, he writes, "is promoted as an extension of human consciousness, not as the most powerful tool of a new order controlled by the few at the expense of the many" (p. 9). This is a characteristic statement; Pilger has no interest in views which differ from his own. For Pilger, media technology *is* "the most powerful tool of a new world order," and any other understanding of it is, simply, incorrect. He describes the writings of the American "communitarian" Amitai Etzioni as "psychobabble" and writes contemptuously: "For this great thinker, the root of society's problems lay not in political and economic problems, but in the collapse of the family, in rampant moral confusion and social anarchy." The trouble with the world was that people had "too many freedoms" and not enough "responsibility" (p. 83). Pilger is even more contemptuous of

the work of Charles Murray, the American social scientist who has written extensively on the concept of "welfare dependency," arguing that welfare actively promotes unemployment and crime. Pilger simply ridicules the ideas of Etzioni and Murray, never engaging in any debate. For him, there is no point in debate: He is right and they are wrong. Whatever the individual reader might think of the ideas of both writers, the lack of respect Pilger affords their respective arguments points to the book's primary flaw: Pilger's persistent belief that political events can be interpreted in a wrong way and in a right way — his way.

He is critical of Christianity, invariably viewing it as a synonym for power, privilege, and corruption, but in common with the large majority of left-wing writers he is charitable about more "exotic" religions. In a chapter on Burma, for example, he writes eloquently and sympathetically:

> The sunlight refracted through mist reveals a city whose secular life has vanished, leaving buildings the equivalent of Chartres and as grand as anything the Greeks raised to their gods. Built in the eleventh and twelfth centuries by kings seeking redemption, this is Pagan, the ancient capital of Burma and described in its scriptures as its secret heart. (p. 155)

Western Christians, however, are dupes, as are, in fact, the great majority of people in Pilger's world. When discussing the death of Princess Diana, for example, he suggests that a "false consciousness" has been created in the public by a sinister collective of journalists, P.R. people, and "spin doctors" and then rhetorically asks: "Did it occur to those who gorged themselves on her death that the public's reaction might largely be that of a people despairing at the whole political class, politicians and media alike?" (p. 5). Equally, does it not occur to Pilger that numerous people might reject his view that their responses were manufactured for them? Pilger places himself here, by no means for the first time, in the classic left-wing bind: He is committed to a view of the "public" as decent and intelligent and so can only explain away their foolish behavior (buying the *Sun*, grieving over Princess Di, playing the lottery, voting Conservative) by constructing in opposition to them an elite group of powerful, ruthless, and very intelligent rulers who effortlessly manipulate them for power and profit.

Pilger is at his best, and then he is invaluable, in supplying information, not necessarily in analyzing it. His statistical breakdown and contextualization of Labour's 1997 victory is fascinating and is certain to contain surprises for those who do not normally have access to such facts and figures:

> In the 1997 election, the truth of Blair's "landslide" victory was that it represented fewer votes than John Major won in 1992. In inner-city seats, the

> vote was less than 60 per cent, extremely low for a British general election. In Liverpool Riverside it was less than 52 per cent; in the constituency of the future Social Security Secretary Harriet Harman, who had declined to send her son to school in the area, the vote was 56 per cent. The two million votes Labour gained on its vote in 1992 were mainly in middle-class marginals, which delivered more than 100 seats. (p. 85)

From this platform he launches a sustained and vitriolic attack on Blair's policies and, in particular, on his appointments in the area of Social Security.

The book contains a preface, an epilogue, and nine chapters: "The New Cold War," "Flying the Flag," "Inside Burma," "Australia," "We Resist to Win," "On the Famine Road," "The Rise and Fall of Popular Journalism," "The Media Age," and "Return to Vietnam." Each of these chapters is further subdivided, so that, for example, chapter 5, "We Resist to Win," contains six sections, each of which depicts an instance of resistance, represented by an individual or a collective. There are a number of photographs, most of which are linked to this particular chapter, including those of victims of the Hillsborough Stadium football disaster, the leaders of the Liverpool dockers' strike, Aung San Suu Kyi, elected democratic leader of Burma, Xanana Gusmao, leader of the East Timor resistance from 1882 to 1992, and Kelvin MacKenzie, editor of the *Sun* (1981–1990). In one of the best chapters in the book, "The Rise and Fall of Popular Journalism," Pilger writes of his early days on the *Mirror,* then gives the history of this remarkable English newspaper. It is a moving and elegiac chapter in which he laments the passing of responsible, popular journalism embodied by the *Mirror.* The tone changes when Pilger moves on to discuss the *Sun*, initially the *Mirror*'s rival and then, inevitably, its successor in the tabloid marketplace. The *Sun* embodies everything which Pilger dislikes about contemporary journalism, and he is particularly savage about the *Sun*'s owner, the Australian Rupert Murdoch, who emerges as the book's primary villain. In many respects it is inevitable that Murdoch should hold this position in Pilger's book. One of Pilger's central concerns, and few would deny it is a serious concern, is the increasing monopolization of the media. Pilger informs us that "Ninety percent of all world news and current affairs now comes to us from fewer and richer and more powerful sources" (p. 531). Three agencies: Associated Press, Reuters, and Agence France Presse, supply most of the world's "wire-service" news. In television there are just two agencies providing foreign news footage to all the world's newsrooms: Reuters Television and World Television Network (WTN). Reuters supplies 400 broadcasters in eighty-five countries, reaching an audience of half a billion people. WTN reaches an estimated three billion people. Another two Western broadcasters, CNN and BBC World, come second. Pilger's central thesis here is that as

media control becomes monopolized, the information released to the public will only be that which suits the ideological requirements of the monopoly. As the monopoly, by definition, is capitalist, it will suppress any information which reveals opposition to its hegemony. In some respects, therefore, *Hidden Agendas* can be read as an attempt to supply this relentlessly suppressed information to its rightful owners: the public.

Pilger is skillful at economically presenting essential historical background, as he does in sections on Burma and Northern Ireland, and many of the book's most successful pieces begin with an introduction to ordinary people whose situation Pilger then follows with an historical and political contextualization. For Pilger, people always come first and even the structure of much of his work mimics his passionate belief that human lives are far more important than the political ideologies to which they are far too often sacrificed. Pilger grew up in Australia and his views on that country are shrewd and stimulating, particularly his account of Pauline Hanson's election, as a Federal Independent, on "a provocative anti-Aboriginal, anti-immigration platform" (p. 233). Pilger notes that Hanson's electorate, the state of Queensland, has one of the highest rates of unemployment in Australia and that Hanson is simply indulging in the time-honored political activity of creating scapegoats. However, he also suggests that among Australia's politicians there is a shared anxiety about the threatening proximity of Asia:

> At the root of this lies an enduring, subliminal fear of Asia: that one day the "hordes" to the north will fall down on under-populated Australia as if by the force of gravity. This is not admitted, of course, and often disguised by a constant stream of pseudo-academic literature obsessed with whether or not "we" are "in Asia." Most Australians, in my view, do not share these anxieties. (p. 254)

Hidden Agendas' flaws are inseparable from its many virtues. It is impassioned, informative, courageous, and not totally without hope for the future. Among the many suggestions which Pilger makes to help reclaim the freedom of the press are for serious journalists to pay attention to the repeal of legislation passed since 1979 "which restricts and intimidates the right to report openly and without fear or favour: the 1981 Contempt of Court Act, the 1986 Police and Criminal Evidence Act and the 1994 Criminal Justice Act" (p. 546). In addition, he suggests abolishing the libel laws and instituting legislation, such as exists in France, which prevents huge companies like W.H. Smith and John Menzies (which have 53 percent of the distribution market) from withdrawing small-circulation magazines and newspapers from sale. Finally, he argues for a Freedom of Information Act unfettered by "exemptions"; the establishment

of a public body to provide start-up funds for newspapers, journals, and broadcasters independent of the monopolists; and a new Broadcasting Act. The last words of *Hidden Agendas* are these: "The fight has only just begun" (p. 610). Coming from any other writer but John Pilger, such a phrase might seem hollow rhetoric, but perhaps the most impressive aspect of *Hidden Agendas* is the way in which its sustained critique of capitalism is interwoven with its author's adamant, and ultimately admirable, refusal to accept that socialism has been beaten. For Pilger, contrary to Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, not only is the fight not over, it has "only just begun."

Dr Kevin McCarron
Senior Lecturer in American Literature
Roehampton Institute, London