

Hidden Agendas

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

Modern democratic society is a mixture of centralized state power, a powerful corporate/finance sector, a virtually monopolized media network, and various civil institutions, the underlying ideological themes of which are the freedom of an individual to participate in the decision-making process and to express alternative viewpoints in the political, economic, and social spheres. Freedom has always been a cherished ideal, and freedom of thought a hard fought-for reality which today symbolizes one of the outward hallmarks of modern, particularly Western, societies. Pilger's book highlights the fact that when this ideal — in essence the ability of a citizen to think, understand, and play a meaningful role in managing the public affairs of his own society — co-exists alongside the reality of a set of powerful groupings working toward a different agenda within the same society, then true participatory citizenship becomes meaningless and democracy a sham. In other words, privileged elites working for their own wealth and self-interests become the leading orchestrators of plans or "agendas" to maintain skewed power distributions, keeping the reality of matters so "hidden" from the public that a smoke screen of half-truths and propaganda is created, preventing those outside from understanding reality, and therefore, acting in their own interests. These hidden agendas can take the form of direct concealment or by the manufacture of consent (as defined by Noam Chomsky) whereby facts are manipulated and presented in such a guise as to obtain the firm support of the individuals making up society.

To the general reader, the title and subject matter of the book will undoubtedly have an almost conspiratorial ring about it, enough at least for most peo-

ple to approach the contents with a fair degree of caution and scepticism. Therefore, it is important to point out that *Hidden Agendas* is not a leftist anarchic concept but a term which contains a genuine, intelligent grasp of the true workings of a democratic system. It very realistically assumes that in a system where people are free to criticize or change a ruling, opinions of necessity have to be fashioned according to the requirements of the ruling apparatus, a principle summarized as long ago as the seventeenth century by David Hume in a chapter titled "Of the First Principles of Government" in the 1758 edition of his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*:

Nothing is more surprising to those, who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than to see the easiness with which the many are governed by the few ... When we enquire by what means this wonder is brought about, we shall find, that as Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. 'Tis therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, *as well as to the most free and popular.* (Italics mine).

This cardinal rule has been employed with great sophistry and levels of deception unheard of prior to this century, not to mention the scale of the crimes which it has sought to successfully camouflage under a barrage of technical information saturated in political speak and expert analysis. John Pilger's book is an intellectual crusade, an exposé of power structures and an indictment of the media's servility to the interests of power. It attempts to bring to light the realities behind some of the policies that have led to the death of so many people in the third world, places where terrible poverty, torture, and corruption have destroyed the fabric of society and where power distribution has become so skewed that wealthy elites live in splendor while the vast majority live in conditions not fit for animals. Images of traumatized people repeatedly flash across our television screens in an all too familiar way synthesizing our minds to accept their condition without question.

In an effort to stop this "flashing" imagery, Pilger describes his book as "slow news," a careful, detailed, impartial examination of many of the issues which we are familiar with today as well as many which we may not have come across. Much information in this media age, he argues, is simply "infotainment" or "infoadvertising," where a moving belt of images flows seamlessly into commercials. To defend an indefensible reality, the author claims that we are daily inundated with a barrage of information steeped in double-speak terminology and other forms of verbal manipulation used in societies by politicians, powerful elite groups, and the corporate finance sector to promote

opinions beneficial to their interests and to maintain political and economic control of the underlying population. All this, he argues, is achieved by the implicit collaboration of the mass media who are seen to be prime exponents of the concept (see sections VII and VIII).

The increasing encroachment of third-world-style poverty and income distribution into the industrialized West is also examined as the world opens up to free trade, and mobility of capital, and firms locate in countries offering the cheapest labor and production costs.

Following the analysis through, Pilger tackles a wide variety of issues in the book listed under the following ten section headings, each section being subdivided into a number of 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," "Return to Vietnam," and "Epilogue." If a theme of sorts can be woven out of this huge collection of essays, it is one of political and military domination, economic exploitation, and media control.

In a chapter titled "Unpeople 1," Pilger examines the effects of military domination in the first real major action of the New World Order, the Gulf War. This was a war unlike any other, the anti-Iraq coalition had few casualties, the whole thing was over very quickly, and it was televised from beginning to end like some kind of Hollywood movie with good guys and bad guys and a happy ending. Battles were enacted like computer games, and in all the euphoria and jingoism whipped up by the press, the suffering and death of such a terrible number of men, women, and children went unnoticed. The hidden agenda (protection of Western oil interests) to this war was easy for any journalist honest enough to report it, but very few did. What follows is an analysis of the media's (mainly British) coverage during the war, the truth which emerged once the war was over, and the aftereffects on the Iraqi people.

The first graphic result of the "surgical precision" was the American bombing of the Al-Amiriya bunker in Baghdad, in which 300 to 400 women and children died; most of them burned to death. The *Sun* reported this as a fabrication of Iraqi propaganda. ... Like most of the *Sun's* reporting of the war, this was false. What was instructive was the speed with which the respectable media promoted the same falsehoods. ... Six months later, the unedited CNN and WTN "feeds" of footage ... showed "scenes of incredible carnage ... rescue workers collapsed in grief, dropping corpses" [which included at least six babies and ten children].

In a very interesting chapter titled "The Terrorists," Pilger asks, "How is it that Western establishments can invert the public truth of their own power and

terrorism? The answer is that it is apostasy in Britain and the United States to describe the democracies as terrorist states." Against the convenient stereotype of Muslims as terrorists, Pilger claims that the Muslims have in reality been responsible "for a tiny proportion of deaths," but in recent years they have been the greatest sufferers from state terrorism: in Palestine, Bosnia, Iraq, Chechnya, and Somalia. In fact, argues Pilger, it is often the victims who are targeted with the label of terrorist (pointing to the plight of the Palestinians as an example whilst Israel is the only nuclear power in the Middle East), our violent actions are always justified as being in the pursuit of noble objectives and the common good. Letting facts speak for themselves, he conversely points to the devastation of the American invasion of Vietnam and Cambodia and the subsequent genocide under Pol Pot; the brutal/repressive pro-American dictatorships set up by the CIA in South America, and the clandestine warfare undertaken against Nicaragua's democratically elected government by the American trained terrorist army, the contras; and British atrocities in such places as Diego Garcia illegally taken over for largely American air base benefits (although the colony had been granted independence from Britain in 1965) and Malaya, which British forces attacked between 1940 and 1960. The ineffectual role of the United Nations is examined throughout.

Moving closer to home and in a chapter entitled "The Dockers," Pilger illustrates the war of business on the labor rights of working people; the third world scenario of economic exploitation and insecurity increasingly being enacted in the industrial West today. Although the miners' strike and Thatcher's attempts at breaking the unions had been extensively covered in the eighties, for some reason a conspiracy of silence reigned over this important industrial dispute which had the support of international dockers and unions the world over. Pilger examines the history of the dispute with its terrible repercussions on the workers involved and the deceptive, underhanded techniques employed by the management to break them. This chapter should be read in conjunction with one titled "A Cultural Chernobyl," which examines the rise of Rupert Murdoch's media empire and focuses on a similar dispute, this time with the print unions in Britain. While stalling, by giving them "assurances" that their jobs were secure, he had secretly been moving nonunion staff into his new Wapping plant for months and, looking for the cheapest way possible to sack the thousands of workers with whom negotiations had been held and with whom agreements were on the point of being signed, Murdoch decided on the advice of a senior solicitor to take advantage of Thatcher's new anti-trade union laws which stated that workers who struck during "negotiations" could be sacked instantly, losing their redundancy entitlements in the process. When the unions realized that Murdoch's "assurances" had been false and their agree-

ments worthless, they were tricked into going on strike as Murdoch had planned, with the result that under the new law he was able to sack almost 5,500 people with no pay, saving him a small fortune.

I started the review by stating that this book was an intellectual crusade on the part of John Pilger. By this I mean that the realities of the media and information age are such that we should not place the onus on government and media to spoon-feed us correct and truthful information. Although capitalism has opened a valuable door in allowing its citizens to think critically, evaluate all sides of an argument, and form an opinion themselves, the truth is that we do not avail ourselves of this right and make an awful assumption in *thinking* that we are reading critically, that we are making decisions for ourselves, when in actuality we are not. In reality we are all insecure and rely heavily on others' explanations of events. It is an undeniable fact that news analyzed with "a built-in point of view" does the thinking for the reader, sets the course of government policy and legitimizes consequent events and ultimately, as the author illustrates, history itself. We should aim to apply a little intellectual criticism, read widely, and not be afraid of the findings and writings of such journalists as John Pilger. The book also shows a great faith in human endeavor and solidarity to bring peace and justice to the world.

There are many such examples. In almost every country today — even in blighted Haiti — people's solidarity with each other in the form of vibrant grass-roots organizations enables a form of democracy to function in spite of and in parallel with oppressive power often dressed up as democracy ... If this book is something of a "J'accuse" directed at journalism claiming to be free, it is also a tribute to those journalists who, by not consorting with power, begin the process of demystifying and disarming it. "Truth is always subversive," an Indonesian journalist friend told me, "otherwise why should governments spend so much energy trying to suppress it?"

This powerful critique makes an important contribution to our understanding of the political and economic realities of the world today. A thoughtful and caring man has labored hard to give voice, care, and attention to the plight of others, and there is much that we can learn from him.

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