

Latin America's fight for freedom

The War on Democracy, dir: John Pilger

John Pilger's latest film, *The War on Democracy*, documents the revolutionary social movements currently sweeping Latin America and the shadow of US imperialism that haunts them. Pilger describes the experience of making the film as "humbling". He says, "For most of the filming I simply listened to ordinary people saying extraordinary things". Indeed the hard-won confidence and dignity of the ordinary people of Venezuela and Bolivia radiates from the screen. These are people who are fighting to impose their agenda of democracy, justice and freedom on their continent and their pride in what they have already achieved is palpable, and moving to behold.

Mavis Mendez, a 95-year-old Venezuelan woman, epitomises the mood in the streets when she describes the impact that the mass movement for democracy has had on her life. "We didn't matter in a human sense [in the past]. We lived and died without real education and running water... When we fell ill, the weakest died. Now I can read and write my name, and so much more; and whatever the rich and their media say, we have planted the seeds of true democracy, and I am full of joy that I lived to witness it."

Pilger shows us some of the reforms - such as skyrocketing literacy levels due to new education programs - that have taken place in Venezuela since a mass movement defended democratically elected President Hugo Chavez against a coup attempt in 2002. But he also makes the point that the Venezuelan ruling class, though disgruntled by the reforms, have lost none of their vast wealth, and poverty is still rife in this oil-rich country.

As its title indicates, *The War on Democracy* is also about the dangers faced by those who struggle for freedom in the shadow of the US's imperial domination. Pilger raises the spectre of history repeating itself, by juxtaposing the terror of the 1973 US-backed coup in Chile (where moderate President Salvador Allende was deposed by the brutal Pinochet regime) with today's events in Venezuela and Bolivia.

Pilger shows us that the US empire will stop at nothing to defend its interests but its victory is never inevitable. He asserts that the struggles in Latin America show that revolutions are not only possible today, they are essential. And they are happening now, before our eyes.

Allyson Hose

{mosimage}The disastrous nature of the system

Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Allen Lane

As a journalist working on the ground in war zones and sites of devastation, Naomi Klein helps to shape "the first draft of history". *The Shock Doctrine* - conceived on the battlegrounds of Iraq, in the refugee shelters of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and in the eerie, washed-out landscape left in the wake of the Asian tsunami - is Klein's attempt at a second draft that theorises and explains the human suffering she has seen. *The Shock Doctrine* is "about how countries are shocked - by wars, terror attacks, coups d'état and natural disasters. And then how they are shocked again - by corporations and politicians who exploit the fear and disorientation of this first shock to push through economic shock therapy. And then how people

who dare to resist this shock politics are, if necessary, shocked for a third time - by police, soldiers and prison interrogators."

Klein explores contemporary examples of her shock theory, documenting the relatively well-known scandal of the "reconstruction" of Iraq, where billions of dollars have disappeared into the coffers of US corporations. But she also covers lesser-known examples of how big business has exploited whole populations after natural or human-made disasters. Three months after the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, right-wing economist Milton Friedman notoriously wrote, "Most New Orleans schools are ruined... This is a tragedy. It is also an opportunity to radically reform the education system." Klein notes that, while the population was left to rot, the school system was "auctioned off with military speed and precision" with the result that today only four of the 123 public schools that existed before the disaster remain. Klein cites many other examples, such as the takeover of prime beachside land after the Asian tsunami that left devastated populations without homes or livelihoods. This "disaster capitalism", Klein argues, has become a feature of the global economy.

Klein's impassioned, searing analysis is an important contribution to our understanding of how modern capitalism imposes its agenda on the world. She maps a clear line through the history of the Chicago School's neo-liberal economic experiments and the practices of governments and big business today. Klein's weakness is that she presents disaster capitalism as some newly malign form, rather than the logical extension of a system that relied on human misery for profit long before the Chicago School spawned their nightmarish theories. While she acknowledges that "shock wears off" and people regroup and fight back - as they have in Iraq - Klein fails to make clear that capitalism has always been a disaster, and will be for as long as it exists.

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