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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | [John Denvir](http://docs.google.com/bios.htm#denvir)     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0318462/)  [All Movie Guide](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:291108)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback3.htm#commotor) |           The "smart" reaction to the suffering of others will always be to ignore it. But that's a form of intelligence that some people refuse to embrace. | **The Injustice Gene**  by John Denvir  I have always wondered what makes some people respond to the sufferings of others while most of us do not. For instance, only about 2% of German gentiles took any action to aid German Jews in the Nazi era. We are sensitive to injustices we personally experience, but some people seem to be blessed with a greater imaginative capacity that allows them to picture and respond to the experience of others.  I call this capacity the "injustice gene", although I recognize that I am talking metaphor rather than biology. Gandhi had it, as did Martin Luther King. And a lot of less famous people have it too, many of them entering law students. Whether the gene remains dormant or shapes their careers in large part is determined by their early professional experiences.  Walter Salles *The Motorcycle Diaries* illustrates this point. It's a "road" picture, telling the tale of a 8000 mile motorcycle trip taken by two young Argentineans in the early 1950's. One, Alberto, is chubby and gregarious; the other, Ernesto, quietly handsome. Their goal is to live a great adventure to remember in their old age. The first half of the movie consists of the endless mechanical problems the motorcycle suffers and various hustles the two chums engage in to keep housed and fed.  We know little about these two young men other than one is a bio-chemist graduate and the other a medical student and that they have the romantic plan to end their trip volunteering at a leper asylum up the Amazon. But we slowly get to know them. Alberto is the more easy going, willing to say and do whatever is necessary to keep the show on the road, Ernesto is more intense, sometimes showing a streak of brutal honesty in telling a potential host that the cyst on his neck is actually a tumor or an amateur novelist that his chef d'oeuvre is a pack of clichés. But Ernesto also manifests a capacity for compassion when he leaves his asthma medicine with a dying woman or gives the twosome's reserve funds to a migrant couple.  The trip turns out to be more than a series of amusing anecdotes; it becomes a life-transforming experience for both Alberto and Ernesto. They have left their cocoon of middle class comfort to witness the reality confronting the common men and women of Latin America "So much injustice" as Ernesto puts it. They also meet a doctor at the leper colony who treats them as valued professionals. They respond positively to his confidence and spend three weeks not only treating lepers with dignity as well as drugs. A key moment in the film is when both Alberto and Ernesto refuse to wear gloves they know are medically unnecessary while treating their patients. We are in the presence of the injustice gene.  Salles is too good a filmmaker to get preachy. He allows his images to tell the story. And he keeps a certain distance from his protagonists. The viewer knows coming in that the young Ernesto will become that icon of 60's revolutionary romanticism, Ché Guevara. Salles is generous in his portrayal of Ché, but not uncritical. We note a tendency to extremism in Ernesto's very dangerous and wholly unnecessary decision to swim the Amazon at night for one last visit with his leper comrades.  If Alberto and Ernesto had not visited the leper colony (or met a supportive mentor there) they might have ended up in Buenos Aires forty years later boring people with accounts of their great adventure. Instead Alberto practiced medicine in Cuba for forty years and Ernesto Ché became one of the most admired revolutionaries of the second half of the 20th Century.  Mainline reviewers of the *Motorcycle Diaries* have been quick to disassociate themselves from Ché who they are quick to dismiss as a Stalinist totalitarian. This seems to me to miss the point. First, it ignores the important question of to what extent the Cuban revolution's "Stalinist" tendencies were forced upon them by the United States insistence upon overturning a democratic revolution. But even if one decides that difficult factual question against Ché, results are not determinative from an injustice gene perspective. If hindsight shows that our efforts to fight injustice were failures, or even wrong-headed, that fact does not detract from their nobility.  The "smart" reaction to the suffering of others will always be to ignore it. But that's a form of intelligence that some people refuse to embrace. We have no reason to doubt that the same ideals that inspired Ernesto to refuse to wear gloves in treating lepers in 1952 remained with Ché when he died a revolutionary's death in an ill-fated attempt to overturn a manifestly unjust social system in Bolivia in 1967.  There is a lesson here for law students (and law schools too). Maybe clerking for large law firms is not the best use of short summer vacations. Here at USF Law School some students (with law school support) spend their summer working on death penalty cases in Texas. Happily so far no one has tried to swim the Rio Grande.  Posted December 15, 2004  **Would you like to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm#Submit%20your%20own%20comments) |  |  | | --- | | [Top of page](#gjdgxs) |  |  | | --- | | [Home](http://docs.google.com/index.html) | [Silver Screen](http://docs.google.com/silver_screen.htm) | [Small Screen](http://docs.google.com/smallscreen/small_screen.htm) | [News & Views](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm) | | |