

John Ishbister

**PROMISES
NOT KEPT**

**THE
BETRAYAL OF
SOCIAL CHANGE
IN THE
THIRD
WORLD**

Second Edition



KUMARIAN PRESS

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in the Third World

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John Isbister



Kumarian Press

*Dedicated to my parents
Ruth and Claude Isbister*

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Preface to the Second Edition

A GREAT DEAL HAS CHANGED in the world in the two years since the first edition of this book appeared. Most importantly, the Soviet Union has disappeared, and with it so has the cold war. For almost half a century, the cold war dominated international relations, including relations between the rich and the poor countries. The cold war set the terms of the competition between east and west in the Third World. It created the context for the end of imperialism, for the nationalist movements of independence and for the struggles of Third World countries for economic development. With its demise come new opportunities, but also new dangers and new uncertainties. It is too early to tell whether Third World people will fare better or worse in a world which has shed its principal conflict. The early signs are ambiguous.

This edition has been revised to take account of the end of the cold war, to bring the various sections on current events up to date, and to use the latest available data. Chapter 7, North-South Relations, has been extensively rewritten, and other changes have been made throughout the book.

The basic message of the book is unchanged. Most of the promises made to the people of the Third World—from their own leaders and from abroad—relating to peace, human dignity, human rights and the prospect for freedom from poverty, have not been kept. One can find pockets of progress, but for most of our fellow human beings the future is not bright.

Preface to the First Edition

OFF AND ON for over 20 years I have been one of a group of people designing and teaching an interdisciplinary “core course” at Merrill College in the University of California at Santa Cruz. The course is entitled “Social Change in the Third World,” and it is taught to first-year undergraduate students in the college.

Our small group who founded the college in 1968 wanted to create a new kind of course and a new kind of curriculum focused on the problems of the world’s majority, the people living in the Third World countries of Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. We wanted to reach all of our students, not just those few who were making a major commitment to Third World studies, but also the physics and the art majors, and all the others. We wanted to engage the students’ intellect and challenge their minds, and we also wanted to speak to their hearts.

So we designed a course that was to transport students quickly into the center of many Third World people’s basic concerns. We revised the readings each year, but we insisted that they all be immediate and compelling. We read, for example, the diary of a poor woman living on the edge of a garbage dump in Brazil, an autobiography of a rural guerrilla, an ethnographer’s account of a Pygmy tribe, a revolutionary’s manifesto, a novel about Gandhi’s impact on an Indian village, a village study conducted just after the Chinese Revolution, a novel of a mother’s burdens in Nigeria, an account of a peasant’s life in the Nile valley and many similar pieces. Some of these readings are the bases for the case studies in Chapter 2.

The course has been a success; in fact, some of our former students have come back to tell us that it remains the most vivid memory of their undergraduate years. But there was always a problem with it. The students came to college, and the course, with little background in the subject, little understanding of the basic history and problems of Third World peoples. Those of us on the faculty were uncertain how to address this problem. We wanted to retain the immediacy and the power of the readings and not to revert to social science-type texts. But at the same time, we saw that our students were having trouble with the context of the readings, with seeing how they fitted into a broader picture.

For years I looked for a book that we could add to our reading list that would fill the gap. It needed to be brief and attractively presented so that readers could get into it with minimum discomfort. It should deal with the great issues of Third World history, along with the present problems and future prospects. It should present conflicting viewpoints and argu-

ments. Most importantly, I was looking for a book that would help the students make sense of the incredibly challenging and confusing world of which they were becoming citizens.

Perhaps I did not search hard enough, but I failed to find just the right book. So I decided to write it myself, and this is the result. Drafts of the book have been used in the course for several years now, and I have revised the chapters extensively in response to the feedback from the students. I hope that it will now be of use to a wider group of readers. It is intended for undergraduate general education courses that emphasize international perspectives; for supplementary use in disciplinary courses such as economics, politics, sociology, anthropology and history that deal with Third World topics; and also for general readers who want to reflect a little more about their world.

In thinking and writing about the subject I have accumulated many debts. Thanks first to Philip W. Bell, the founding provost of Merrill, who invited me to join the college faculty and started this project. My colleagues Edmund Burke, a historian, and Walter Goldfrank, a sociologist, joined me in planning the first core courses in the late 1960's, and then years later helped me by reading drafts of the text. Others who gave generously of both time and insight were Dilip Basu, Paige Baty, Claude Isbister, Suzanne Jonas, Joseph Lubow, John Marcum, Sherri Paris, Sarah-Hope Parmeter, Daniel Scripture, Walter Smith, Patricia Sullivan and David Sweet. Hundreds of Merrill students have helped to sharpen my arguments by engaging me in seminar discussions. I am particularly grateful to my wife Roz Spafford, who helped me turn what were frequently inchoate musings into something approaching presentable prose. The remaining errors of fact and interpretation, I regret to admit, are mine alone.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

MOST PEOPLE ON the planet are poor. They live in the Third World countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, where the typical standard of living is so far below that of the industrialized countries as to be almost unimaginable to those who have not experienced it. Many lack adequate nutrition, shelter and clothing. They are susceptible to disease and early mortality. They are insecure, since the margin separating them from catastrophe is thin.

One of the myths that is prevalent about Third World people is that they are unchanging, that their societies are static. One often hears the word *traditional* used to describe the network of relationships in which they seem trapped. But the opposite is true. The Third World is undergoing rapid and sometimes chaotic social change: populations are growing and becoming more urbanized. Public health measures are lowering death rates. Within recent memory, the nationalist independence movements created dozens of new sovereignties. Since then, governments have changed often, revolutions and counterrevolutions have been instigated, warfare has ensued. Modern technology has penetrated the Third World and transformed production. Education at all levels is spreading.

The lives of people in the Third World are changing. There is little evidence, however, that they are improving, at least for the great majority. Here and there one finds privileged groups, or even entire countries, where economic conditions have progressed and where human and political rights are respected. But these are the exceptions; most people in the Third World are desperately poor. That is to say, for most people the promises of social change in the Third World have not been kept. The dreams of independence, a more comfortable life, security and human rights have been betrayed. In this respect, the Third World shares the fate of the entire world in the twentieth century, where prospects that seemed all but certain have been distorted and lost.

Throughout the world, twentieth-century people have known moments of intoxicating optimism: in Europe and North America, the century opened in a spirit of almost infinite expectations, as the indus-

trial revolution seemed to bring the promise of comfort and even opulence to ordinary people. In the second decade of the century, the Russian Revolution promised the overthrow of oppression and the creation of a new society in which the human personality would be free to flourish. As the midpoint of the century approached, the people of the Indian subcontinent were the first of the nonwhite world to emerge from colonialism and assume their equal place in the community of free nations, while the Chinese Revolution promised liberation for the most downtrodden of social groups, the peasants. In the 1960's, the young American¹ president John F. Kennedy brought to the western world a sense of limitlessness, while a new generation of young people committed themselves to the remaking of their societies. Science and technology developed exponentially, and with them the hope for prosperity for the entire world. What marked these moments, and others, was the sense of freedom, the collapse of the past's boundaries.

To recall these moments now is to recall, however, how exceptional they were. While they seemed to those in their midst to be universal, they were in fact closely circumscribed, in both time and place. The heady enthusiasm of the first decade of the century was exploded by the guns of August 1914, as Europeans settled into the incredibly destructive First World War. A decade after that conflagration ended, the world was plunged into the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression of 1929-39. The Russian revolutionaries degenerated into tyrants and mass murderers. The Second World War, beginning in 1939, was truly a worldwide war in contrast to the First, which had really been just a European war. The Second World War unleashed not only unbelievable military carnage, but this time genocide, as the Jews of Europe were destroyed in the Holocaust. With the end of the Second World War came an era of relative peace, but it was a peace with dangerous forebodings. Nuclear technology and the cold war brought with them the prospect of global winter. As science advanced, people became aware of the limited capacity of the globe to absorb ecological change. Improvements in world health conditions led to a population explosion that threatened to overrun the world. Regional conflicts produced warfare, terrorism and even further genocide. Political regimes that had seemed to promise liberation in fact delivered despotism. The twentieth century has turned out to be a century of potential dangers and actual disasters, as the power of scientific technology has raced wildly ahead of the wisdom of human beings in harnessing it.

The subject of social change in the Third World shares this grand theme of the twentieth century: the betrayal of the promise of progress.

For almost all of known history, prior to the twentieth century, most ordinary people were poor: that is to say, sick, insecure, poorly clothed and sheltered and vulnerable to an early death. At times the twentieth century, with its extraordinary technology, has seemed to promise an

end to the human condition of poverty. And, in fact, some countries have reduced poverty substantially—in Europe and North America, as well as Australia, New Zealand and, more recently, Japan. While pockets of poverty remain in those societies, and shamefully so, still the great majority of the people there enjoy a comfortable life, reasonably secure and healthy, with enough income to cover not only the necessities but at least some of the pleasures and even luxuries of life. The victory over poverty in these prosperous countries has been one of the remarkable achievements of the twentieth century. It has been one of the promises of the twentieth century to extend this material progress to all of the world's people.

Yet, it has not happened, nor does it show signs of happening. The majority of the world's people, most of the people living in the Third World, remain poor. The gap between themselves and the rich is not closing. The number of poor people in the world is increasing, not decreasing. While most people in the Third World are healthier than were their forebears of a century ago, and are living longer lives, the quality of life has for the most part not improved, and has in some respects deteriorated. For hundreds of millions of people, rural poverty, which while hard was imbedded in a rich cultural network, has been replaced by the dislocation and alienation of urban poverty.

The plight of the Third World is not only economic; it is social and political as well. The independence movements and revolutions of the middle part of the century seemed to imply a new age of freedom and self-reliance for Third World peoples but often produced tyranny and terror. Democracy was usually intended but seldom attained. Millions were killed in regional warfare and internal repression: in Indonesia, in Cambodia, in Argentina, in Uganda, in China, in Vietnam and in many other countries.

This book shows how many of the promises of the twentieth century have been transformed and abandoned in the Third World.

The story is not a simple one of good and evil. There is no world-wide conspiracy to deny human rights, representative institutions and material security to Third World people. The Third World in the twentieth century is not enacting a morality play. While there are some villains, both in the Third World and in the rich countries, the plight of the world's poor has not been brought about fundamentally by a few imperialists, a few dictators or a few multinational companies. The history is more complex than that. Social scientists have struggled with the issue of causality in trying to explain conditions in the Third World, and they have come up with a variety of often contradictory theories, some of which are discussed in these pages.

Still it is the case that the promises that once seemed inherent in the twentieth century—the promises of technology, of material comfort, of democracy, of human rights, of fairness, of basic respect and decency

—have not been fulfilled in much of the Third World. Two major promises, in particular, have been violated.

The first was the promise made by the leaders of the nationalist, independence movements and the revolutions in the Third World. In the three decades following the end of the Second World War, the people of the Third World succeeded in dismantling the European empires to which they had been subjugated. A spirit of nationalism swept their countries. A new generation of leaders proclaimed that the poverty of the Third World was due to centuries of colonial exploitation; when the empires were cast off, the emerging autonomous nations would settle into the hard work of bringing prosperity, and not incidentally dignity, to their people. They promised that the people's labor would now be used for their own progress, not for the enrichment of foreigners.

Almost every one of the new nationalist leaders made this commitment. A few months after the independence of India in 1947, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru told his people in a nationwide radio address:

We talk of freedom, but today political freedom does not take us far unless there is economic freedom. Indeed, there is no such thing as freedom for a man who is starving or for a country which is poor. The poor whether they are nations or individuals have little place in this world. Therefore, we have to produce in order to have sufficient wealth, distributed by proper economic planning so that it may go to the millions, more especially to the common man. Then not only the millions prosper, but the whole country becomes rich and prosperous and strong.²

Kwame Nkrumah, the charismatic president of Ghana, wrote in his autobiography in 1957:

Once freedom is gained, a greater task comes into view. All dependent territories are backward in education, in agriculture and in industry. The economic independence that should follow and maintain political independence demands every effort from the people, a total mobilization of brain and manpower resources. What other countries have taken three hundred years or more to achieve, a once dependent territory must try to accomplish in a generation if it is to survive.³

The goal of an end to poverty, which was an explicit part of the independence movements, has been met only intermittently. In most cases it has been waylaid as the new political elites have entrenched their positions of privilege and have neglected the welfare of the majority of the people.

The second promise was made by leaders of the rich countries. As

they witnessed the nationalist movements of the Third World gain momentum and win independence for their people, some of them began to see the world through new lenses. At the end of the Second World War, when the victorious allies had sought to reconstruct a world that could sustain peace, they had been concerned about how to get the devastated countries of Europe back on their feet, but they had spared few thoughts for the majority of the world's people living in Asia, Africa and Latin America. By around 1960, with Europe now fully recovered, this blind spot was beginning to disappear. The international institutions that the rich countries had established, especially the World Bank, began to pay serious attention to the plight of the Third World. Foreign aid was increased. The motivations were not disinterested—the new attention paid to the Third World derived mostly from the cold war competition between the western and the Soviet blocs—but nevertheless there was a new spirit of cooperation between the rich countries and the poor, and promises were made that the rich would work together with the poor for economic development.

No one captured, and helped to create, this spirit better than President Kennedy. In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, he spoke to the people of the Third World:

To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom. . . .

To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge—to convert our good words into good deeds—in a new alliance for progress—to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty.

In the decades since his inaugural, the problems of the Third World to which President Kennedy alluded have not been resolved. The gap that divides the rich countries from the poor is still unconscionably large. About 15 percent of the world's population, living in the north, enjoy a standard of living that is extraordinarily more lavish than that of the world's majority.

Some people in the rich countries try to respond responsibly to this terrible reality. They support church missions and foreign aid; they assist human rights organizations and refugees. They endorse popular movements in Central America, in South Africa and elsewhere. They

argue for constructive government policies, and they would like to proclaim that their countries are being helpful to the world's majority.

For the most part, however, the rich countries are not fulfilling the promises that were made. Far outbalancing the helpful policies are the harmful ones they engage in: the geopolitical struggles, the economic policies, the debts and the many other ways in which the countries of the north make the struggles of the world's poor people harder not easier. While many individuals act in good faith, their countries largely reject their responsibilities to the world's poor.

Notes

1. Throughout I use the term *American* to refer to the people of the United States—with apologies to Latin Americans who believe the term should not be appropriated by just one country in the western hemisphere, and who prefer instead the term *North American*. My Canadian origins prevent me, however, from using *North American* to refer to the United States alone. Since *United Statesian* is not in use, and in the absence of another suitable adjective, I am stuck with *American*.

2. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Independence and After* (London: The John Day Company, 1950), 160.

3. Kwame Nkrumah, *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1957), x.

CHAPTER TWO

A World of Poverty

A poverty curtain has descended right across the face of our world, dividing it materially and philosophically into two different worlds, two separate planets, two unequal humanities—one embarrassingly rich and the other desperately poor.

—Mahbub ul Haq, *The Poverty Curtain*

“And what about the people of your household?” he asked Akuebue.

“They were quiet when I left them. There was no sickness only hunger.”

—Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*

Five Lives

The story of today's Third World is told best not in the statistics, nor in the treatises of the social scientists and the historians, but in the details of its people's lives. In the following paragraphs we will meet five real people whose lives have been documented either by themselves or by interviewers, five people chosen to convey something of the variety of human experience in the Third World.

In the urban slum, or *favela*, of Caninde in São Paulo, Brazil, a middle-aged mother of three, Carolina María de Jesús,¹ rises early in the morning from the battered mattress in her shack and sets out through the streets of the city looking for trash. The paper she collects she can sell for about one U.S. cent for every 4 pounds. The old clothes she saves for her family or for trading; the scraps of food that are edible she puts aside for her family. She keeps a diary on scraps of paper. The following are excerpts from that diary:

I didn't have one cent to buy bread. So I washed three bottles and traded them to Arnolodo. He kept the bottles and gave me bread. Then I went to sell my paper. I received 65 cruzeiros. I spent 20 cruzeiros for meat. I got one kilo of ham and one kilo of sugar, and spent six cruzeiros on cheese. And the money was gone.

I was ill all day. I thought I had a cold. At night my chest pained me. I started to cough. I decided not to go out at night to look for paper. . . .

I went to Senhor Manuel, carrying some cans to sell. Everything that I find in the garbage I sell. He gave me 13 cruzeiros. I kept thinking that I had to buy bread, soap and milk for Vera Eunice. The 13 cruzeiros wouldn't make it. I returned home, or rather to my shack, nervous and exhausted. I thought of the worrisome life that I led. Carrying paper, washing clothes for the children, staying in the street all day long. . . .

On a later day:

It finally stopped raining. The clouds glided towards the horizon. Only the cold attacked us. Many people in the favela don't have warm clothing. When one has shoes he won't have a coat. I choke up watching the children in the mud. It seems that some new people have arrived in the favela. They are ragged with undernourished faces. They improvised a shack. It hurts me to see so much pain, reserved for the working class. I stared at my new companion in misfortune. She looked at the favela with its mud and sickly children. It was the saddest look I'd ever seen. Perhaps she has no more illusions.

Carolina is a loner, suspicious of her neighbors, sometimes scornful of them. While some of her neighbors in the *favela* join together to form organizations, Carolina stays aloof. She works without stopping and jealously guards what she has for herself and her children. When a local journalist discovered her diaries and published them under the apt title *Child of the Dark*, she had a moment of respite from her hard life—but her fortune lasted only a couple of years, and soon she was back in the Caninde *favela* again.

Shahhat is a young Egyptian *fellah*, or peasant, living in the village of Berat on the banks of the Nile River, 450 miles south of Cairo. His father recently died, and he lives with his mother, Ommohamed, in a two-story house made of unbaked mud bricks with a roof of palm branches and palm leaves. Along with about half of the villagers, his family owns land, in his case 2 acres; the other villagers work for wages, or as sharecroppers, or in the local stores. The details of Shahhat's life have been recorded by Richard Critchfield, a British journalist who has written extensively about Third World peasants, and who lived with him for a year.

As Critchfield explains it, an extraordinary change has come over Berat village during Shahhat's short lifetime. For millennia, the annual flood of the Nile River determined the rhythms of agricultural life. The river flooded each September to November, then receded, leaving a fertile layer of silt. Crops of wheat, barley and lentils were then planted, to be harvested in April. There was just one crop a year, and summer was a time of rest.

But in the region of Berat, the Nile flooded for the last time in 1966;

thenceforth the flow of the great river was controlled by the towering Aswan Dam. The dam and its works provide continuous, planned irrigation of fields in place of the annual flood, and continuous cultivation is now possible, with up to three crops a year.

Shahhat and most of the *fellahin* were unprepared for this immense change in their lives. It was not simply that they now needed to work 12 months a year, without the summer rest; the whole technology of agriculture changed. Chemical fertilizers were required, to supplement the soil's fertility. Motorized pumps were installed. New high-yielding varieties of grain were introduced. A government inspector instructed the *fellahin* which crops to plant. Railway networks were expanded to gather the crops. Shahhat's people had been peasants for generations; overnight they were expected to become farmers, knowledgeable of the latest methods and the fluctuations of markets.

In a sense, all of this represented progress. It led to sharply increased crop yields per acre of land, needed by Egypt's rapidly growing population. More income was generated in the village.

Yet the process of technical change has not been smooth. Salinity levels in the soil have risen and threatened the fertility of the land. The government officials sometimes make crop choices that are unwise, in terms of the productivity of the crops or of the market for them. The railway boxcars are sometimes unavailable, and the crop has to be abandoned. In the old days the *fellahin* were dependent, as peasants always are, upon the vagaries of the weather. Now they are still dependent upon the weather and upon much more besides—chemical processes, international market forces and organizational structures that are far beyond their control, even comprehension.

So Shahhat has experienced wrenching changes in his culture, and in return for enduring these changes he has gained little, if anything. He is no more prosperous, although he works more continually than he once did. Distressed by the disruption of his life, he has left his village several times to seek his fortune in Cairo, but he has always returned. He has no savings, no protection from the uncertainties of his life. While some of his fellow villagers have taken advantage of the new technology to amass some wealth, Critchfield demonstrates that Shahhat has not. He is confused and passive. He and his mother both trust in the providence of Allah and do not plan actively for the future. Perhaps his children, who will grow up in the new world of scientific agriculture, will be able to cope with it more creatively, but Shahhat is at a loss.

Bernard Ledea Ouedraogo² is a Mossi tribesman from the Yatenga Province of Burkina Faso, formerly Upper Volta. Burkina Faso, one of the world's five poorest countries, is a landlocked, desert country of West Africa. It suffers from some of the poorest health conditions in