

**CORRUPTION, DEVELOPMENT AND
UNDERDEVELOPMENT**

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**POLITICAL CHANGE AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT: A Critical Introduction to
Third World Politics (*with Vicky Randall*)**

Corruption, Development and Underdevelopment

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To my mother and to the memory of my
father, and to Alma and Arthur

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Preface

At the beginning of 1983 I was sitting shivering in my office at the University of Jos – it was the coldest harmattan season for twenty-five years – when I became conscious of the fact that the lecture rooms opposite, normally in continuous use, were unusually quiet. Looking out of the window I was surprised to discover that they were totally deserted. Some kind of spontaneous strike seemed to be taking place although for what reason I knew not. About an hour later I was to find out for a huge body of students surged by singing repeatedly to the tune of John Lennon’s ‘Give Peace a Chance’: ‘All we are saying, Shagari must go!’ What prompted this outburst, it transpired, was the news that the Nigerian Telecommunications Building in Lagos – the country’s main link with the outside world – had been deliberately set ablaze in an attempt to conceal a multi-million naira fraud involving telephone bills. It is certain that the students’ demonstration articulated the profound disgust felt by the overwhelming majority of ordinary Nigerians over an act which displayed a quite appalling degree of irresponsibility and total disregard for public property. Not only had the culprits stolen large amounts of public money, they were prepared to go to the lengths of destroying a crucial national asset in order to escape detection.

For me, however, this was not the most shocking affair in what was a generally atrocious period. Some months later, just before the general election of that year, I read in the newspaper that armed guards had had to be placed on government-owned flats in Lagos in order to stop departing assemblymen stealing the furniture and fittings. Here was one of the most highly-paid and privileged groups in the country apparently stooping to make off with relatively minor items they could easily have afforded to buy. To be fair, however, it is likely that it was probably not the assemblymen themselves who were doing the pilfering but less well-off members of their followings. It is also likely that what had been a few cases had been blown up into a full-scale scandal by anti-government newspapers. None the less even had there been only one case the fact that it could be presented as normal behaviour for politicians is indicative of the contempt in which they were popularly held.

What I found particularly depressing about such incidents was the contrast between the conduct of the politicians and their hangers-on and that of ordinary Nigerians. In my experience not only were the vast majority of market people, traders and even the much-maligned taxi drivers extremely open and above board in their dealings, but I encountered a number of examples of exemplary honesty, ironically usually on the part of people who were obviously poor. Furthermore I had frequently to deal with minor public officials as well as policemen and soldiers at roadblocks, never bribed anyone and was invariably met with courtesy and cooperation. How then was one to explain this awesome contrast between the Nigerian masses and the people who were supposed to represent their interests and administer their society?

With this kind of question in mind I embarked upon a lengthy journey which has taken me, in terms of the literature I have had to cover, well beyond the bounds of Nigeria. Originally I sought an understanding of the roots of corruption in the more developed countries of Tropical Africa. However I soon found my field of study extending beyond that continent to the third world generally and ultimately to developed countries. The more I examined corruption the more it seemed best to treat it as a universal phenomenon which manifests itself in ways that vary with specific social and economic backgrounds. After more than five years of reading books and articles I believe that I have clarified my thinking about corruption, and the related phenomenon of patrimonialism, to a degree which I hope will be of interest not simply to those concerned with corruption, but to that wider academic body which is preoccupied with development and political change generally. I should emphasise that this is not a detailed study of corruption as such in either developed or underdeveloped parts of the world. Many such studies already exist and without them this book could not have been written. Rather this is an attempt to understand the interrelationships between the private appropriation and abuse of public authority on the one hand, and the course of social and economic change on the other.

My greatest debt in writing this book is to my wife Elizabeth and my three sons Wally, Ernie and Dave for their stoicism and good humour in the face of exceptional provocation. I must also thank my colleagues at the PCL – Bob Freedman, Vicky Randall and Len Shackleton – for reading and commenting on various parts of this work. Thanks also to PCL librarian Martin Faulkner, for extending to me over many years the benefit of his encyclopaedic knowledge of social science publica-

tions. In addition I am extremely grateful to Alan Doig for reading and supplying many acute observations on an earlier piece, as well as to Luis Roniger for his generous comments on an article I wrote some years ago, as well as for subsequent help. Naturally none of the above bears any responsibility for what follows.

ROBIN THEOBALD

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