

## *Psicología de la Liberación:*

**Ignacio Martín-Baró**

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**M**ore than a decade after the assassination of Ignacio Martín-Baró (1942-1989), the Spanish-born social psychologist and Jesuit priest who literally dedicated his life to the people of El Salvador and Latin America, it is clear that his attempt to change the course of psychology was not in vain. Almost single-handedly, through his scholarly books and articles, editorial work, talks, as well as his joyful presence, he laid the foundations for what is now known as the psychology of liberation. His textbooks on social psychology are used widely in Latin American universities. His individual articles are being compiled in volumes such as this and, in English, in *Writings for a Liberation Psychology* (Aron & Corne, 1994).

The momentum recently jumped to a new level as annual conferences dedicated to the social psychology of liberation have already been held four years in a row on the anniversary of Martín-Baró's death at the hands of U.S. trained elite Salvadoran troops. The first was held in Mexico City in 1998, the subsequent ones in San Salvador, Cuernavaca, and Guatemala City. Human rights, social justice, and democratization are primary themes of the conferences, as well as models for community praxis and critical pedagogy. Each of these conferences has been attended by a hundred professionals and several hundred students, thus paving the way for a new generation of psychologists who begin

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their work with the goal of social transformation at the core of their professional and personal identities. Despite these advances, only the first steps have been taken on the road to fulfillment of the potential of liberation psychology.

This volume, artfully introduced and annotated by Amalio Blanco, distinguished professor of social psychology at the *Universidad Autónoma de Madrid*, reminds us that fulfilling the mission of a psychology of liberation will require not only energy and commitment for social change, but a great deal of careful strategic thinking. The powerful epilogue by MIT political theorist Noam Chomsky, will remind U.S. citizens of their government's complicity in the 1989 assassination of the Jesuit priests and of the need to continue monitoring U.S. foreign policy to prevent future atrocities.

Throughout his writings, Martín-Baró worked systematically on the question of how a science that has been dedicated primarily to explaining (not understanding) individual behavior in isolation from its cultural, societal, spiritual, and historical contexts could possibly contribute to radical social transformation that would eliminate economic exploitation and political oppression. How, he wondered, could the field of psychology move radically away from its individualistic and objectifying tendencies, rooted in Western culture, develop a new epistemology and praxis to address the suffering of the vast majority? Many socially-conscious psychologists have faced this question and have either resigned themselves to the prevailing modes of practice or have left the field entirely. Martín-Baró refused to do either. Knowing that his life would be in danger, given the years of death squad activity during the Salvadoran civil war, he nevertheless insisted on doing psychology in a way that gave voice to the voiceless and therefore incurred the wrath of the oligarchy.

The chapters in *Psicología de la Liberación* chart his steady work toward the construction of a psychology committed to the poor and the oppressed. His work takes us a great distance down a road that still needs many more travelers. It is not a road that can be summarized—it must be worked through, each from our own path, but knowing that we are not alone and that many millions depend on our steady commitment.

The lead chapters in *Psicología de la Liberación* are psychosocial analyses of Latin American fatalism, Salvadoran national identity, and the concept of character in general. Martín-Baró develops a line of analysis quite similar to that of Erich Fromm or Theodor Adorno, arguing that political structures and social relations characterized by domination and exploitation are internalized as "traits" such as passivity and submissiveness which are interpreted mistakenly by psychologists as merely "personality." These are some of the best writings on social character and national identity available, for they not only analyze the relations between psyche and society in a clear, but dialectical manner, exposing the myth of the happy, hard-working Salvadoran using empirical data, for example; they also consider all the mediating processes in everyday life, social institutions, and historical contexts that actually produce internalization— aspects often ignored in Fromm's and Adorno's sweeping analyses. Martín-Baró pulls no punches in his description of what is needed to transcend this internalization of oppression in character structure. He calls for "... a revolutionary change; that is, a change in the political, economic, and psychosocial structures underlying the marginalizing and pacifying order that bases the well-being of a few on the oppressive exploitation of the many" (pp. 100-101).

These chapters are followed by equally excellent chapters that outline the foundations and demonstrate the potential of liberation psychology. In general, these chapters demonstrate modes of de-ideologization, practices that expose and transform the worldviews and everyday practices that sustain oppression. An intriguing chapter reviews ways in which the practices of conscientization and critical pedagogy might inform radical transformation of university curricula. Here we find an early critique of community service as a pedagogical technique (widely required in Latin American universities long before "service learning" recently became the vogue in North America). Martín-Baró was concerned that students who had completed required community service would think they had satisfied their duty to society once and for all. Three chapters on psychopolitical aspects of religion boldly reveal the political function of churches

and the effects of state-church policy on the depoliticization of citizens. Martín-Baró's survey data showed, for example, that Salvadoran converts to North American evangelical pentecostal churches were much less likely to think that problems such as war and poverty could be solved through political action than members of Christian base communities. Missionaries for the former groups were welcomed by the Salvadoran government, while priests who served the latter communities were persecuted as part of a deliberate plan of psychological warfare. Martín-Baró thus moved far beyond Marx's blanket condemnation of religion as an opiate of the people to a much more nuanced position.

In the final chapters of the book, Martín-Baró systematizes further the conceptual and methodological bases for a psychology of liberation. These were written during the last few years of his life, in his mid-forties. Over and over again, Martín-Baró emphasizes the centrality of a commitment to and an engagement with those who are suffering oppression and exploitation. The psychologist who hopes to be part of the emancipatory process must know the people, understand their joys and fears, the history of their struggles, and their modes of everyday life and self-organizing. On the basis of these understandings, the psychologist can generate systematic knowledge that serves as a mirror, constructed by the people themselves, on the basis of which they can reflect and act. This cannot be done from the ivory tower. The engaged psychologist, sharing the fate of the popular majorities objectively, accompanies their struggles and participates directly in collective processes of de-ideologization and recuperation of historical memory.

Martín-Baró's proposal may sound utopian, but he personally demonstrated that it is possible to move radically beyond the narrow irrelevance of academia and the vague helpfulness of clinical and community work. His example presents a challenge to all of us who took up psychology with the hope of contributing to human betterment. His writings are cornerstones for a reinvention of the meaning and purpose of the psychologist. If we now hope to continue building the edifice of liberation psychology in ways that are not mostly illusory, we must use our psychosocial understanding, in solidarity with those who suffer

most, to confront the structures of power that sustain social injustice. Martín-Baró was obviously aware that we each will follow our own path as we try to do our part, but I sense that he would be more impatient than ever with our selfish attachments to personal comfort and professional privilege while surrounded by the misery that still haunts humanity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Read his work and reflect deeply.

#### References

- Aron, A., & Corne, S. (1994). *Writings for a liberation of psychology*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.