

# Viva Nacho!

## Liberating psychology in Latin America

SUSAN MEISELAS/MAGNUM PHOTOS

**A** UNIVERSITY campus, 16 November 1989. Eight people lie dead – six academic staff, their housekeeper and her daughter, all victims of an elite battalion of the El Salvador army, trained and funded by the United States government. Among them was the leading social psychologist from Latin America, Ignacio Martín-Baró (see Harris, 1990), who was also a Jesuit priest and vice-rector of the University of Central America. Known familiarly as Father Nacho, Martín-Baró had established a distinctive approach to psychology that is having an increasing influence in both Latin America and beyond.

Martín-Baró's liberation psychology (*psicología social de la liberación* – PSL: see Martín-Baró, 1985/1996a; Martín-Baró, 1986/1996b) sought to put psychology at the service of the poor and oppressed majorities of the American continent – to turn psychologists away from the internal problems of psychological research, or from practice oriented to a wealthy minority who could afford private services, and towards problems such as urban overcrowding, land reform and violence. But to do this implied a second task, the reconstruction of psychology itself from the standpoint of the excluded majorities of Latin America and other countries of the South. This meant careful searching through the dominant North American psychology for useful concepts and findings, but always with a critical eye for their limitations and their untrustworthy ideological content. Martín-Baró's two textbooks of social psychology (1983,



**MARK BURTON** on the contribution of Ignacio Martín-Baró and his followers.

1989b) written in the heat of the El Salvadorian civil war, are remarkable works of reconstruction, integrating orthodox psychological theory with a more sociological and political analysis. For example, his chapter on power starts from the classic French and Raven analysis of five forms of power (coercive, reward, legitimate, referent, expert), both offering a critique and adding in concepts from outside psychology.

It is now 15 years since Martín-Baró's murder. Yet his vision of a psychology of liberation lives on in the work of a network of psychologists, chiefly in Latin America, but also in South Africa, Europe, Australasia and North America. This article provides an overview for the English-speaking reader, as most of the relevant work is only available in Spanish.

### **Why consider liberation psychology here?**

Despite the differences between Latin America and our own context, there are a number of reasons for us to consider and learn from this Latin American body of work.

Much of the work of PSL developed in response to the 'crisis of social psychology' of the 1970s. That crisis was

experienced in Britain, and North America (Armistead, 1974), but also acutely in Latin America. Empiricist social psychology was seen as irrelevant to the concrete social problems both within the societies in which it was being developed and elsewhere. This was the result of its parochial context of discovery (investigations of particular populations in artificial settings). Despite this, it attempted to suggest general social psychological principles that would apply to all human beings in all contexts. There were also critical suggestions that the imitation of scientific neutrality meant a denial of the moral dimension – a supposed value-free inquiry.

However, the route taken by liberation psychology differed from that in both the English-speaking countries and continental Europe. There the academic field has settled into a broadly peaceful coexistence between empiricists and social constructionists, with little impact on psychological work in field contexts. Much of the critical effort remains within the academic community at a highly theoretical level. But Martín-Baró outlined an agenda that was to correct irrelevant scholasticism through the 'search for truth from the popular masses' – the oppressed majorities. New psychological theory

would be put into practice to transform people and society, using the broader liberatory model common to Latin American popular pedagogy (Freire, 1972) and liberation theology (Gutiérrez, 1997).

So liberation psychology potentially offers social psychologists a different road out of what some would see as a current impasse, and it does this by turning to a project of principled social change in collaboration with those marginalised by the dominant order. While PSL developed specifically in relation to the problem of the oppressed, marginalised, excluded masses in Latin America, we too have oppressed and marginalised populations. People are marginalised because of the way our society discriminates on the basis of disability, age, ill health, nationality, appearance, sex and sexuality, and poverty. Psychology as a whole has neglected this fact of exclusion, and it hardly makes an entry into the formal literature (Burton & Kagan, in press). In addition, the special conditions in Latin America, particularly the experience of state and paramilitary terror in many of the countries, also make PSL a valuable resource for our times, whether working with refugees fleeing persecution and torture, or trying to help rebuild fractured communities.

Liberation psychology also takes psychology into the public sphere: Latin American psychologists working with a liberatory orientation tend to see themselves as part of a broader movement for social and economic justice. Key areas addressed by psychologists working with a liberatory orientation include commitment, ideology, subjectivity and identity. These are fundamental to any collective action that mobilises people, and especially that which emphasises unity in diversity. The mass mobilisation of people in 2003 against what they perceived as the UK's collusion with the US neo-conservatives' wars, and the ongoing struggle to protect public services, are two examples of resistance to the globalising neo-liberal phase of capitalist expansion for which tools from liberation psychology could be a helpful resource.

### Core ideas

So far it might appear that there is a straightforward identifiable branch of psychology known as liberation psychology. Yet it is somewhat difficult to characterise all the psychological work from Latin America that has a liberatory

orientation. Not all those working broadly within this tradition would want to use the title – indeed it is unlikely that anyone would claim to be a ‘liberation psychologist’. Such a title would sound pompous and assumes the consequences of one's work.

Nevertheless, a number of themes do permeate the work both of those who have organised under this banner (for example at the annual international congresses of PSL, since 1998) and of those whose work would fit the paradigm. Since Martín-Baró's death liberation psychology has been taken forward by a core of committed workers from several countries (Maritza Montero from Venezuela would probably



Father Nacho – Ignacio Martín-Baró

be regarded as the leading theorist of the movement). Their work shares the following emphases.

### Latin American liberatory praxis

In Latin America, a notion of liberatory human development has developed with diverse roots, across a series of disciplines and social movements. A key idea is that liberation is not a *thing* that can be located at a moment in time. Nor is it something to be given, rather it is a movement and a series of processes. It has origins in the interaction of two types of agents or activists: external ‘catalytic’ agents (which could include psychologists) and the oppressed groups themselves.

Freire's concept of conscientisation (Freire, 1972) is a much-cited formulation of this. Martín-Baró (1986/1996b) regarded conscientisation as a key concept,

explaining it as a person or people being transformed through changing their reality, through an active process of dialogue in which there is a gradual decoding of their world, as the mechanisms of oppression and dehumanisation are grasped. This in turn opens up new possibilities for action. The new knowledge of the surrounding reality leads to new self-understanding about the roots of what people are and what they can become. Examples of the process closer to home would be the increase in confidence and self-understanding often experienced by activists in user or survivor movements through developing an understanding of the sources of their marginalisation and organising together to do something about it.

**Role of theory** Martín-Baró established a distinctive position on the role of theory, one that is broadly followed by those working within this paradigm.

*It shouldn't be theories that define the problems of our situation, but rather the problems that demand, and so to speak, select, their own theorisation.* (Martín-Baró, 1989/1998, p.314)

Theory therefore has a supportive but not a fundamental role, as a kind of scaffolding to guide action. This orientation he called *realismo-crítico*, but this is not naive realism: the nature of the social reality can be difficult to apprehend, not just for the people, but for psychology itself. It is therefore necessary to ‘de-ideologise’ reality, to peel off the layers of ideology (for Martín-Baró the disguised exercise of power) that individualise and naturalise social psychological phenomena. An example is the supposed fatalism of Latin American societies, which serves both as stereotypical description of Latin Americans and an internalised frame of reference even in those countries (Martín-Baró, 1987).

This orientation is broadly shared by those working in the field: even where a constructionist approach is claimed, it will typically have as its focus people's lived reality seen in relation to the ideologies that structure it (e.g. Estrada & Botero, 2000). We could see a parallel to *realismo-crítico* in Britain in the development of the social model of disability from the disabled people's movement: the theory was based on the real problems facing disabled people and served to counter an ideological

account that conflated impairment with the experience of segregation.

**A social approach** Throughout the work of those using PSL as an orienting vision, there is a thorough critique of the individualism found so strongly in North American (and indeed in British) psychology. Martín-Baró's two wonderful social psychology text books (Martín-Baró, 1983, 1989b) are perhaps the most sustained, thorough and engaged critique. This social or societal orientation is also historical, with a constant sense of how things got to be the way they are, and how this history is ever present in the subjectivity of the people. PSL practitioners have drawn on a variety of approaches here: Marxism, psychoanalysis, Vygotskian theory, social representations and social constructionism. But the social orientation is not just a matter of theory. Liberation psychology is a moral project, and this tends to distinguish it from the new paradigm approaches of the 1980s, and much of the 'critical psychology' of the 1990s. After all, the commitment is to liberation.

There are several aspects to this thoroughly social version of psychology. The recognition of the conflictual nature of society and the omnipresence of power is fundamental: there are distinct social interests that give rise to conflict. Conflict and power have economic, political and ideological dimensions, and concepts from psychology can contribute to their analysis.

Those working with a PSL orientation combine traditional techniques (e.g. surveys, use of official statistics) with new paradigm approaches (e.g. social representations, qualitative inquiry, drama, and collaborative photography; see Lykes, 2001), as well as 'ideology critique' that draws on Foucauldian and related approaches. There is, however, an emphasis on the cycle of reflection–action–reflection, central to Freire's approach, implying a close and evolving connection between social action and conceptualisation. Moreover, PSL emphasises the distinctive Latin American style of participative action research, developed initially in Colombia by the sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991).

### How is the liberatory perspective applied?

Psychologists with a liberatory orientation have focused on three overlapping areas:

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- community social psychology;
- work with victims of state oppression; and
- social analysis.

### Community social psychology

Community psychology in Latin America has differed from that in the other America (Montero, 1996; Quintal de Freitas, 2000; Sánchez & Wiesenfeld, 1991). Its roots are in social psychology, and there is less emphasis on the clinical and mental health tradition (one of the North American roots of the discipline). There has been an orientation to work with poor communities in settings as diverse as the poor urban districts of Caracas, San Juan or Sao Paulo, or rural squatter colonies in Costa Rica, or Mexico. Emphasis varies, but in general the psychologist is seen as a resource for the community, offering expertise in investigation, an understanding of leadership, organisation and group dynamics, and knowledge of the system (e.g. when trying to obtain resources).

Montero (1991) suggests that community social psychology provides a methodological and empirical base for the psychology of liberation, while participatory action research, dependency theory and popular education (together with the critical revision of traditional psychology) provide the theoretical support.

Community social psychology is established in Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Costa Rica, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Argentina. Several social issues are tackled, including health promotion, economic development and

anti-poverty programmes, housing, leadership development at the community level, community development, as well as the development of community intervention and support in the fields of disability, mental health and drug use.

In general, an approach that seeks to transform, rather than merely ameliorate, social conditions is either employed or aspired to along with the effort to understand local struggle and self-liberation within a wider societal and global perspective. In some cases the psychological specificity can risk being lost, although this matter has been addressed within the field. Quintal de Freitas (1994), for example, defines community social psychology as a position and practice that defends both the specificity of psychological practice and the understanding of social phenomena as sociohistorically determined. Setting out to demystify/de-ideologise difficulties faced by people (typically naturalised and psychologised), it employs both the use of psychological techniques already existing in psychology and also the participatory creation of new ones.

### Work with victims of state oppression

Latin America has been marked by oppressive regimes, military conflicts and the repression of liberation movements. There are still murders of activists, clearances of peasants from prime land, and other abuses in several countries. The experience has been diverse in scale and intensity, but the psychosocial experiences in what are very different

countries have been in many ways similar. To give some idea of the scale of the trauma, there were some 20,000 murders by the Argentinian junta, some 3000 in Chile, and as many as 200,000 in Guatemala. However, the bare numbers give little idea of the impact of state terror both on the population as a whole and on the political and cultural state of the country (Agger & Buus Jensen, 1996; Hollander, 1997). There have been several threads to the work, with survivors and those close to victims of torture, disappearance and murder.

An outstanding example of this is found in the work of ILAS – Instituto Latinoamericano de Salud Mental y Derechos Humanos (Latin American Institute of Mental Health and Human Rights). This is a non-governmental organisation working on the mental health of people affected by the violations of human rights during the military regime in Chile from 1973 to 1990 (see ILAS, n.d.). Extensive research has informed the work, covering violations of human rights, their effects on people in particular and on society in general. ILAS is also active in setting up and supervising other mental health teams that work with people who have experienced situations of political violence, nationally and internationally, for example in Angola.

In the work of ILAS and other teams, there is emphasis on making the suffering a social, shared thing, rather than secret distress, and on resuming active social roles. The use of testimonies is crucial, and the theme of recovering memories, of what happened and of those who have been taken away, is common to this and other work. This approach is important both in terms of the general emphasis in liberatory praxis on the role of collective memory as a political and social resource, but also because of the officially sanctioned denial of what happened. The therapeutic approach meets a community psychological one in work on delivering effective intervention to communities without access to mental health professionals (Sveaass, 2000).

A further dimension has been work to prosecute and end the impunity of those responsible, with psychologists working as a resource for lawyers, forensic archaeologists, human rights activists and community members.

**Social analysis** Given the emphasis on a macrosocial viewpoint, intimately linked

to human subjectivity, it is no surprise that psychologists working within the PSL approach have explored social analysis more broadly.

A large part of Martín-Baró's work was on Salvadorian public opinion (Martín-Baró, 1989a). Although this used conventional methods, it had a clear purpose of making explicit what the people thought, both for them and for those outside the country. The work was a form of counter-propaganda, undermining many of the arguments used to justify continued support for the government. It was also an independent source of information for peace activists outside the country, especially in the USA.

Psychologists working with a PSL perspective continue to analyse the social realities confronting their countries. Recent work has covered the use of terror by the Colombian paramilitaries and its effects on family life and subjectivity; psychological warfare in the Guatemalan counter-

insurgency and genocide; and the Bush regime's use of propaganda after the Twin Towers attack.

### Challenges

Despite its broader relevance to work with marginalised populations and the stature of its leading practitioners, social psychology for liberation is little known outside Latin America, and even there it is a minority tendency. Like any progressive social movement, it truly faces an enormous task in nourishing both opposition to the empire of exploitation and domination, and developing viable support systems both for itself, and with and for the marginalised and oppressed.

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