

# Ignacio Martín-Baró's Social Psychology of Liberation: Situated Knowledge and Critical Commitment Against Objectivism

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In his book *Acción e Ideología. Psicología Social desde Centroamérica* [Action and Ideology: Social Psychology from Central America] (Martín-Baró, 1983), Ignacio Martín-Baró defined his critical social psychology as a discipline whose objective is to examine the ideological component of human behavior. It assumes that all significant human action attempts to bring society's interests in line with those of the individual. Thus, social psychology represents the moment in which society's interests become one with the individual and individual interests become one with the society.

In Latin America, a critical social psychology would demonstrate how an oppressive social system is enabled and justified by elites who promulgate the belief that people are passive, submissive, and fatalistic in regard to the prospect of changing society toward a more socially just arrangement. This would be his contribution to a critical social psychology and to a vision of a true democratization process that is both participatory and popular. Deideologization occurs when the assumptions of the ruling class are exposed.

## Critical Commitment and Social Science

As proposed by Ignacio Martín-Baró (1985b), *deideologization* assumes a critical commitment which gives back to the people the knowledge they have gained of their reality. It assumes that power and knowledge are of the same substance. If social psychology studies the ideology in human behavior, its best contribution to democracy in Latin America would be to unmask all kinds of elitist ideology; that is, the assumptions that are treated as common sense (or in Garfinkel's words, quoted by him, common culture) and which justify and operationalize an oppressive system as normal and natural, being the main ground of ruling ideology. In short, the task of a liberating social psychology is to uncover the alienation in

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daily life, the roots of people's passivity, submission, and fatalism (Martín-Baró, 1985b). Thus, in cases where public opinion polls are used as a tool, "deideologization" implies a monitoring of public opinion which gives that opinion a voice. This is not the same as opinion publicized in the media by the powers that be. Ignacio Martín-Baró (1985a) developed a critical use of neopositivist research methods to confront those powers. He considered neopositivist methods very useful once they were separated from their epistemological assumptions. For example, Martín-Baró viewed opinion polls as a tool that could contribute to such a process, allowing social organizations to enter into a constructive dialog aimed at the formation of a new collective identity (Martín-Baró, 1985a). He thought that one contribution social psychologists could make was a "deideologization," the aim of which was conscientization of the collective conscience (to inform and educate, making people aware) by challenging the ruling ideological discourse and by activating the dynamics of a dealienating process. The role of the social psychologist must be defined according to the circumstances of the people in question, not to solve their collective problems, but to search for a solution with them and from their own perspective as a way of helping the people overcome their alienated personal and social identities by transforming the oppressive conditions of their context. Consequently, psychologists must adopt the perspective of the popular majorities and follow them on their historical path toward liberation (Martín-Baró, 1985c).

Drawing on Liberation Theology, Martín-Baró (in Dobles interview, 1986) pointed out that Latin American psychology must identify the virtues of the oppressed people and adopt a critical commitment, defined as identification with the oppressed, and at the same time, a necessary distance to examine with critical eyes the proposals emerging from their own praxis (meaning a conscious practice): A psychology of the oppressed, in the same manner as the Freirean pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1970), must fight for a liberation which goes beyond individual oppression but which includes the whole people in a shared practice. This involves breaking the chains of social oppression as the general aim of a psychology of liberation.

As in the action turn of participatory research going beyond the linguistic turn in social sciences, liberation psychology must recognize the importance of combining both the knowledge of academia and of the people in popular praxis and struggles. This critical commitment combining the logic of action with the logic of research is the basis of a new ethics. As Fals-Borda (2000) puts it, it is important to recover altruism and solidarity by learning how common people resist adverse circumstances through their use of cooperative practices that build countervailing forces and leadership at the grassroots level in communities, villages, and slums.

Montero (2004) has described the characteristics of an altruistic community leader from a low-income Venezuelan community, as a person who goes beyond duty, who sees his own leadership status as part of a collective movement having a specific role, and who encourages others to participate. These leaders are respectful of people and have altruistic feelings, expressing their solidarity with others in the community, sharing joys and sorrows with demonstrations of fraternity within a deep religious framework. They are creative and imaginative people who display a great deal of energy. They have an optimistic view of the future, a strong desire for knowledge and

they reject authoritarianism, exclusion, and exploitation. These virtues are extraordinary but they do exist amidst the heroes of everyday life. Ignacio Martín-Baró found altruistic community leaders in his work with the poor, but he was also an example of it, according to those who knew him at the university and in the poor villages where he worked alongside the people (Pacheco & Jiménez, 1990).

In a coherent manner, Martín-Baró (1985a, 1985b, 1985c) redefined traditional categories of social psychology such as prosocial behavior with a critical and a historical sense, proposing instead typologies more consistent with the daily experience of the poor in El Salvador. From a sociohistorical perspective, he distinguished three kinds of prosocial actions: acts of cooperation, which contribute to social unity and give priority to the common rather than individual good; acts of solidarity, which contribute to the development of just structures through the support of the weak; and acts of altruism, which contribute to the sustenance of society by solving difficult problems.

Ignacio Martín-Baró understood very clearly the difference between political activism and his own commitment to social reality as an academic. In particular, he said that scientist political neutrality was ethically unacceptable. However, he also said that political commitment endangered the social psychologist's objectivity (Martín-Baró, 1990b). He made that remark the year he died in 1989. In other words, he was clearly aware that objectivity must not be confused with impartiality. One cannot be impartial in the face of injustice. However, in order for our efforts to be effective and to fulfill their aims, we must not collapse into a subjectivity, which leads to political pamphleteering or mere public catharsis. Ignacio Martín-Baró's experience led him to believe that political activists' lack of independence and their obedient adherence to a party line can leave them with only one eye at best, if not completely blind. Precisely because a political party splits us into two, it separates us from the flow of reality, which is continuous and changing. Reality does not generally fit into an airtight compartment of party discipline. Moreover, Ignacio Martín-Baró believed it was necessary to integrate the politics of psychology with the psychology of politics in order to overcome that obstacle.

A few years later, at the formal opening of the World Congress for Participatory Convergence in Knowledge, Molano (1998) argued that participatory action research (PAR) had survived the wreck of the grand theories because it had been alert to unsatisfied needs and to the reconstruction of ordinary people's lives, thereby putting ethics in research as advocated by Martín-Baró. One consequence of this is to go beyond the dominant idea that political parties are needed for any form of action and intellectual work. Instead, researchers were interested in walking next to ordinary people rather than one step ahead. Molano also reported how difficult it had been during the 1980s to the 1990s to be among the opposition and to criticize the powers that be for their involvement in torture, disappearances, and the killing of activists. This meant that action research was not just a scientific challenge but practically also a suicidal endeavor in countries like Colombia at that time, when a weak political system trying to strengthen its position gave gangs of hired killers license to kill, which ironically further weakened the political system. Many human rights activists were killed just for reporting on the situation.

Researchers had to be cautious observers from afar; otherwise their lives would be in danger. In the case of Martín-Baró, he did not accept the position of observing from afar although he was conscious of the risks – indeed, he was advised by his own colleagues and friends from other countries that he should leave the country for a while.

Martín-Baró was not even doing action research, but rather practicing in a peaceful way his own situated definition of social psychology as a social science committed to the poor using the empirical tools at his disposal at that moment to unmask the repressive character of the government and to challenge the lies of the State through opinion polling. This was the real reason for his assassination by an elite force of the Salvadoran Army.

His vision was that the Latin American social scientist should assume a critical commitment to the process of change; “commitment” because we cannot ignore the injustice which affects the majority, but “critical” because we must establish both a way to analyze reality and to develop a process to change it. If commitment demands participation, then the critical stance demands independent criteria. Thus, what is important is not impartial, aseptic objectivity (which in practice becomes just the opposite), but a systematic respect for the historical realities of ethical and political choices. The critical nature of scientific commitment implies an ongoing deideologization. This would be the equivalent of objectivity, and it consists both of dismantling the justifications, which mask historical reality, and of removing the rationalizations of everyday social life.

According to Martín-Baró (1990a), critical commitment entails a new kind of rationality, based on the sociology of knowledge, focused on understanding and interpreting concrete and historical beings from within the social process, rather than explaining and formulating general principles. This alternative perspective shows that all reason is situated and that the locus of one’s knowledge determines not only how someone perceives things, but also which things are perceived. As Haraway (1988) clearly established from a feminist perspective, all vision is embodied, particular, locale and finite – thus only an *embodied objectivity* is possible and only *partial perspectives* and *situated knowledge* promises an objective vision.

## Objectivism and Psychology

According to Martín-Baró (1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1990a), objectivity is different from impartiality and the conflict between science and commitment is a false dilemma, because objectivity is simply to be faithful to reality in itself. In the social sciences, this means, clarifying the interrelation between the researcher as a person and social being with a reality that is also human and social. In other words, this refers to the well-known concept of reflexivity in social science and qualitative research.

This critical perspective coming from the sociology of knowledge has been developed in an original and convincing way by Bruno Latour in his sociology of studies in science and technology (STS). In one article, Latour (2000) says that

psychologists and other social scientists who adopt natural science methodology as a model fall unwittingly into a chain of errors. Because such scientists put their faith in philosophers of science, they accept their version of the scientific method without ever having applied their tools to natural objects. They believe the great superiority of physics and natural scientists lies in their having been able to dominate the objects of their studies. But the objectivity social scientists are dealing with has a very different nature. Objectivity does not involve a specific state of mind or an internal sense of justice and impartiality. Rather, it involves the presence of objects that are capable of *objecting* to what is said about them. According to Latour, the paradox is that when social scientists copy natural science methodology, they block out precisely those characteristics that would make their disciplines truly objective. In order to achieve scientific objectivity in psychology, traditional researchers seek out cases in which human subjects will have the minimum amount of influence on the results. The solution is not to tell the subjects what kind of manipulation they will be subject to. This scenario appears to be ideal for producing hard science using human subjects; that is, a kind of science that is comparable to the sciences that study natural objects, because the human subjects have no influence over what is said about them. But, as Latour concludes, although these methodologies smell and taste like pure science, they are all-terrain approaches that actually result in a farce, a cheap imitation. There is a very simple reason for this: If the object loses influence over what people say about him or her, as the quantitative researchers so proudly proclaim, what we also lose is objectivity.

In the words of Martín-Baró (1986), the natural science methodology is methodological idealism. It is idealism because theory is giving priority over a situated analysis of social reality, not going beyond the content of the hypothesis in question. For him, practical truth has primacy over theoretical truth.

The role of experimental subjects is that of idiotic objects. In order to be fully compatible with the critical perspective to research advocated by Ignacio Martín-Baró (1985a, 1985b, 1985c), a social scientist who wishes to be objective would need to find a complex environment in which the subjects of the study could object to what was said about them, an environment in which they could be as disobedient as possible within the experimental protocol. Furthermore, the subjects must be able to pose their own questions on their own terms, not on the terms of the scientist whose interests they have no reason to share. What Latour teaches us is that there is not a single way of conceptualizing objectivity or science, but different political and epistemological perspectives and some of them come to be dominant in certain periods.

Based on the critical perspective of Martín-Baró, objectivity is necessarily redefined as a matter of ethics, such that the researcher takes a situated standpoint on the side of the oppressed, and includes reflexivity and subjectivity as alternative to individualism and ahistoricism in mainstream psychology. Value neutrality serves only the interests of the ruling ideology. Social psychologists must abandon the notion of objectivity or of neutral value objectivity, but rather explore subjectivity in a reflexive and conscious manner. The illusion of full researcher objectivity and an approach to social analysis produces both a subject and a researcher who is a statistical artifact amputated from social relations, history, and context (Fine, 2004).

As Martín-Baró stated, to be truly emancipatory, psychology must be first liberated from its own ideological chains; thus, a psychology of liberation inspired by the theology of liberation needs first to be liberated from psychology itself (Martín-Baró, 1986). Something similar has been proposed by Sampson (1999, a critical psychologist Martín-Baró used to quote) who argues that a psychology useful for the majority of the world's peoples, must be liberated from the form it has adopted in serving the interests of the ruling power. We must liberate psychology in order to build a liberating discipline.

## Theology, Philosophy, and Psychology of liberation

The closeness of Martín-Baró's perspective to that of the theology of liberation is quite clear. His psychology of liberation makes a preferential option for the poor like the theology of liberation. According to Duque (2001), the theology of liberation is a concrete theology. It is a reflection on poor communities' stories of faith, hope, and their experience of God amidst them. Theology of liberation speaks from outside the institution. A liberating theological reason is a critical reason, situated within the poor and speaking from their location, not that of the *status quo*, because it is a tool for liberation.

A known criticism of the theology of liberation is that it could be seen also as teleology of liberation. As Montero (2003) explains from a secular perspective, there is the danger that researchers and practitioners believe they are instruments directed by the left hand of God. That is, they want to do good, no matter what people may think, say or do, because they know better and are able to decide what is needed, by whom, where, when, why, and how much.

This is reminiscent of well-known populist political practices in Latin America political history. However, it can be applied also to the populist strand within the philosophy of liberation and the moral figure of the prophetic philosopher, Enrique Dussel (1985, 1988, 2003) and his philosophy of Latin American philosophy, recently regarded by his fans as "the" philosopher of liberation. He argues that the ethics and the popular culture of the oppressed should be taken as the foundation of a Latin American philosophy of liberation, which would be the philosophy of the dominated, as contrasted with western philosophy, which would be considered the philosophy of the dominant countries. But, he is rather cosmopolitan and draws liberally on European philosophy (Kellner, 2001), mainly on Levinas first philosophy ethics. He has been strongly criticized on this point in the debates between the different versions of the Argentinean philosophy of liberation, as has been narrated by Cerutti (1983), who identifies himself with the transformative subsector. The problem, according to Cerutti, is Dussel's ethicist self-image of moral superiority and his religious leanings which prompted Dussel and his "populist sector" to advocate their philosophy of liberation as an alternative to Marxism and substitute class analysis with a careful philosophical analysis based on the populist rhetoric of "the people."

This debate has been presented in English by Barber (1998), quoting also the criticisms of the feminist writer Ofelia Schutte (1991). According to them, Dussel

defends a self-sufficient and fundamental knowledge (like Heidegger's fundamental ontology), a first philosophy superior to the sciences and immune to their critique. But, as Kellner explains, philosophy is an expression of the philosopher limited by his own experience and history. He gives an example of Dussel's (1985) statement on eroticism, where he sees base human sexuality in a natural relation between man and woman and also, to ground heterosexuality, marriage and child-raising in a discourse of nature, suggesting that abortion (and also divorce in Schutte criticism) is against nature. Schutte accuses Dussel of a tendency to set himself as the errorless Other, as against an evil oppressive system. In that line, philosophers identifying with the Others (the people) of that system become uncritically deified and ethically and "politically correct" in the name of "God," "liberation," and so on. Schutte goes beyond and says that the Other is used symbolically by Dussel as a "God-substitute." Paradoxically, the Others (the people) are also seen as weak and incapable of thinking by themselves and the experts assume the role of speaking for the Others (Barber). Dussel adopts an attitude of superiority over science, unlike well-known pioneers of liberation theology like Gutiérrez, according to Cerutti (1983).

In Kellner's view, the articulation between theory and practice is the most unsatisfactory part of Dussel's philosophy of liberation. Thus he is often scholastic and highly expository. Gutiérrez (1971) rejects the idea that theology is a systematic collection of timeless and culture-transcending truths that remains static for all generations. Rather, theology for him is in flux; it is a dynamic and ongoing exercise involving contemporary insights into knowledge, humanity, and history, coming mainly from the critical social sciences. In his thinking, praxis is the starting point for liberation theology. A "preunderstanding" of a preferential option for the poor is the very heart of liberation hermeneutics. The new political context in many parts of Latin America has led liberation theologians to talk about building a "participatory democracy" from within civil society (Rhodes, 1991). Therefore, a possible solution to the dilemma of teleology in the case of theology and praxis in the philosophy of liberation could be to assume that the oppressed must liberate themselves first, be open to criticism, avoid dogma, and incorporate the symmetrical communication and extended epistemology of PAR, as Martín-Baró has done in his proposal for constructing an emancipatory psychology. Fals-Borda (1998) quotes Girardi who stated that participatory methodology in his turn should be part of an alternative and liberating culture based on the propositions of commitment with social justice found in the theology of liberation to avoid the tendencies to co-opt PAR coming from institutions from the first world.

## **Participatory Action Research and Psychology of Liberation**

The psychology of liberation set forth by Ignacio Martín-Baró complimented the cultural and popular psychology proposals of Jerome Bruner (1990). However, Ignacio Martín-Baró focused on the debate within social science about how to resolve the dilemmas of commitment and relevance through PAR. He had previously established that psychology must go beyond a scientist obsession with objectivity and instead focus on the urgent needs of the poor majorities in Latin America and find

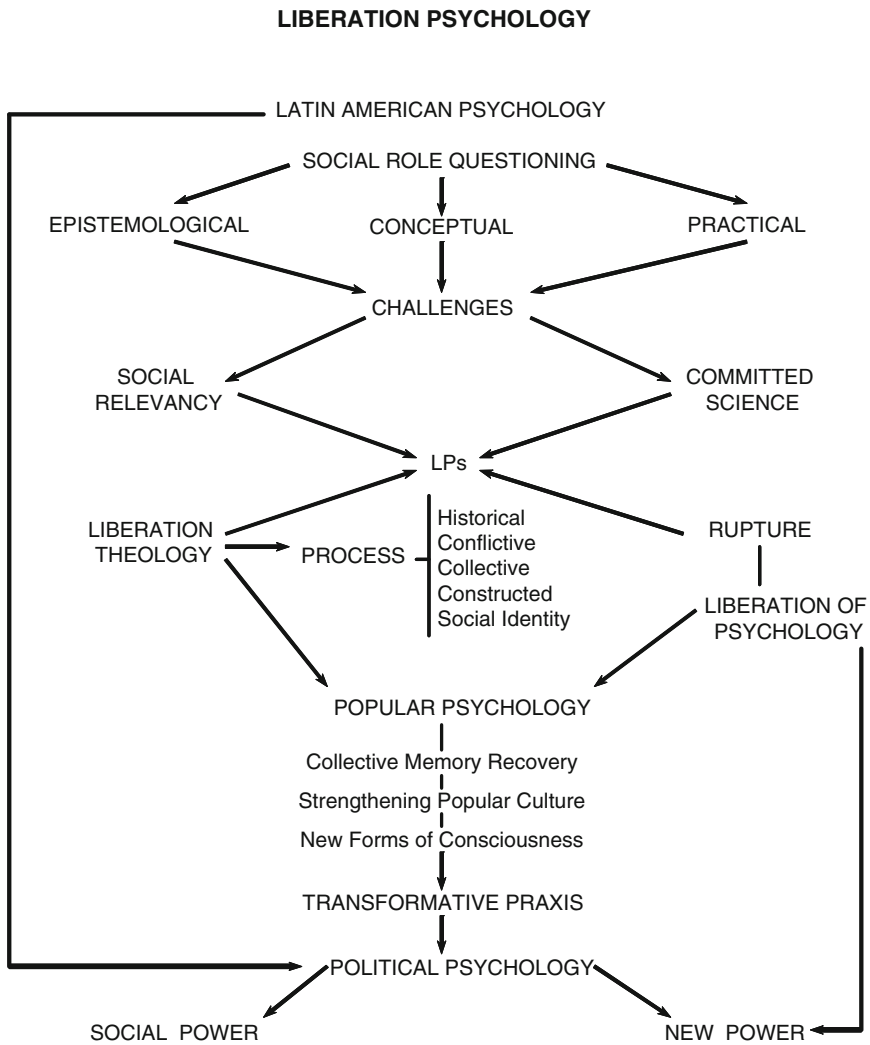
new ways of (re) searching the truth from their own perspective. Thus he defined a new praxis for psychology linked to social transformation (Martín-Baró, 1986). Although he did have reservations about activism in research and the scarce production of PAR in psychology, Ignacio Martín-Baró was convinced that participatory research was the correct path for his proposal of a popular psychology and the proper alternative to the positivist, aseptic tradition that continues to dominate the training of Latin American psychologists today. One of the books he brought with him to Guadalajara in 1989 and that he recommended highly was the anthology by the sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda: *Conocimiento y Poder Popular* [Knowledge and Popular Power], in which Fals-Borda discusses experiences with PAR in Mexico, Nicaragua, and Colombia.

In this field, Ignacio Martín-Baró's vision has been borne out in practice, because PAR has been used extensively in various disciplines and applied to various problems. Much has happened since the first international symposium on PAR in Cartagena, Colombia, in 1977. At that time, the primary emphasis was on activism, about which Ignacio Martín-Baró had his reservations, and these reservations were borne out in subsequent critical evaluations (Martín-Baró, 1990a). Twenty years later, the international symposium on PAR was held once again in Cartagena, chaired by Orlando Fals-Borda and attended by 1,850 people from 61 countries. Fals-Borda then published a volume of symposium proceedings, *Participación Popular: retos del futuro* (*People's Participation: Challenges Ahead*), which appeared simultaneously in Spanish and English in 1998. It is interesting to compare the prologue of this book with that of the 1977 proceedings, because it allows us to see very clearly the changes and developments in the theory and the practice of PAR. There has not been any move to abandon PAR itself, although there have been changes in the dominant conceptualizations of activist commitment. There is no single interpretation of PAR concepts, it does not follow one line of thought, nor is it based on one unique and universal truth. PAR was presented as a new approach that was more critical and closer to reality, a new way of looking at things and, above all, a new way of listening. PAR has survived the collapse of the great theories to which it was linked, and it has survived alongside popular movements. Of course, we must recognize that there are other, more aseptic versions of PAR that are used in institutional, multinational environments. According to Fals-Borda (1998), participatory research combines an evaluative structure with a critical attitude toward the use of knowledge, the social context and cultural patterns in need of change, using varied methods based on a holistic approach. Participatory research is defined by him as a method both of study and of action with an altruistic philosophy of life aimed at improving collective situations. The participatory researcher must base his/her conclusions on living and sharing the community's experience when producing situated knowledge, while keeping alive the existential commitment to social change. If PAR is looking not only to explain but also to change situations, its holistic or extended epistemology refers to dialectic where *what is* can only be defined in the context of *what should be*.

Martín-Baró (1990a) discussed the international debate triggered by Gergen's (1973) argument that social psychology could only be a way of doing history. He said that this was quite obvious, if we assume that the human beings are essentially historic then, there is no other way of learning about them. On whether we should explain



or comprehend, Martín-Baró argues that comprehending – and even better, interpreting – is the best way of doing psychology. At an early stage then, Martín-Baró called for the kind of reflexivity and qualitative epistemologies that now form part of the core of critical social psychology. Martín-Baró again quotes Fals-Borda when he says that “science doesn’t have an absolute value”, science is, instead, a “valid knowledge useful for certain goals working with relative truths” put to the service of “those that produce and control it.” Psychology in that sense must be rebuilt on the basis of the interests, suffering, and historical hopes of those majorities. Figure 1 is a summary of the proposal for a liberation psychology according to Martín-Baró (1990a).



**Fig. 1** Liberation Psychology (Based on Martín-Baró, 1989, 1990a)

According to his proposal (see Fig. 1), to develop a liberation psychology in Latin America demands, first, the epistemological challenge of the liberation of psychology itself to transform it into a committed science with social relevancy. He acknowledges that this proposal is inspired by the teachings of theology of liberation in its deep link with the Latin American reality of oppression. From here he goes to propose the configuration of a popular psychology with the aim of studying systematically all those aspects of the psychology of our peoples that could contribute to their historical liberation. This psychology implies the recovery of the historical memory of our people, along the same lines proposed by Fals-Borda's PAR. Second, psychology must recognize and strengthen the virtues of our peoples. Third, psychology would explore new forms of conscience in a transformative praxis of the social world. This must go beyond political parties in order to produce a political psychology, a psychology of social power and the development of a psychosocial identity for our peoples and a new power. In other words, we would see a popular psychology that could contribute to the historical liberation of our peoples.

## **Bombings, Killing, and the Peaceful Work of Ignacio Martín-Baró**

Ignacio Martín-Baró wrote a letter to me in August, 1989. About 2 months after the June 22, 1989 bombing that largely destroyed the printing equipment at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) Press. He told me how costly the bombing had been because of the extensive damages in the print shop. However, he said: "we have moved forward and will continue to move forward. These attacks confirm that our activities at the university, which we have conducted peacefully, are challenging our oppressors at their very core." At the end of the letter he told me how he had used his own personal computer to complete the process of analyzing the data from the last opinion poll he had conducted. "Not bad, is it?" he remarked. He said, "We have moved forward," because since 1976 the paramilitary groups had set off bombs in the UCA library, print shop, and computer center, and in 1980 the Jesuit residence was machine-gunned and later raided four times, dynamited twice and bombed once again in 1983. All of these attacks took place prior to November 1989 when the military, frustrated by their inability to silence the Jesuits' voice, decided to literally "blow their brains out" to try to end their intellectual critical but peaceful work. Thus, did El Salvador's army dispose of the priests who had so obsessed "natural-born" killers such as Roberto D'Abuisson, a fanatical though mediocre soldier who was behind the death squads. These death squads were the only effective tool that the country's various security forces had been able to create in the name of what, ironically, was known as "military intelligence." Ignacio once told me, sarcastically, that D'Abuisson had tried to get into the UCA but had been unable to pass the entrance examination.

But what was it that turned peaceful people like Ignacio Martín-Baró into such fiercely persecuted enemies? In an environment of psychological warfare, the

media were key to winning the hearts and minds of the people through a partisan framework for presenting facts. This consisted of silencing public opinion and viewpoints through opinion polls, which were a way of presenting a particular ideological framework as something objective, as a truth constructed by the powers that be. When the UCA decided to create the Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP), it did more than simply create a source of truthful, valid, and reliable information. It also created a channel for Salvadorans to express what they felt without partisan filters or interference. In this way, the public opinion polls that the government had used to maintain the established order were refashioned into a tool to thwart official discourse, its lies and deceptions. Ignacio Martín-Baró saw the public opinion poll as a powerful tool in the confrontation of ideologies. He explains this concept in the first book that the IUDOP published in a series on Salvadoran public opinion, which he composed on his own computer in 1987, thanks to the technical support provided by a German foundation (Martín-Baró, 1987). It must be said that Ignacio was always up to date with all aspects of computer science (and in this he was ahead of his time and environment). That very knowledge enabled him to continue publishing despite the bombs and the attacks. When he was in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1989, he set aside time to contact computer companies, and he also sought donations and found people who would assist him with his academic projects. He was not satisfied with conventional wisdom. Moreover, he was open to innovation, and he had the capacity to integrate everything that would strengthen his critical work despite the polarized context of his adopted country.

Seventeen years after Ignacio Martín-Baró's senseless death, the example here does more than bear witness to a particular situation and validate his conceptual recommendations and methodologies concerning a professional practice applicable to our reality. It also shows us that his methods constitute a living school of thought, but one that must be brought up to date – and creatively so – on an ongoing basis. That is precisely what the International Congresses of Social Psychology of Liberation have been demonstrating since the first congress in Mexico in 1998 up to the eighth one in Santiago de Chile in November 2007. The content of these congresses demonstrate that it is not enough to repeat his words ritually, like gospel truth. Through the works of creative colleagues and through students who are educated actively and with a sense of “situation” – that is, students who are not simply passive recipients of information – the challenge left to us by the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró (1990b) remains alive. As Martín-Baró explained:

It involves bringing to the task of psychology a clear consciousness of its political repercussions, as well as bringing a consciousness of the psychological dimension to the task of politics. We would say that it means creating a political consciousness for psychology and devising a psychology for political consciousness. The problems are vast, both in theory and in practicality, and we have barely begun to take the first steps. It is not easy to combine commitment with objectivity, to combine practical involvement with the necessary calm and critical distance for theoretical reflection. Beyond that, the need for an interdisciplinary approach is easier to propose than to carry out. And to make matters even more difficult, we know from experience that encouragement of this discipline can give rise to problems, at least for those who do not put it to the use of the established power structure. Psychology

does not stipulate, nor does it try to contribute to, suitable solutions for the serious structural, group and individual problems that overwhelm most people. Still, it does have a contribution to make, however minimal. Whether we Latin American psychologists make this contribution depends, without a doubt, on the future of the discipline of psychology in our countries. Above all, the integrity of the liberation we achieve may hinge on that contribution, and, therefore, on the human quality of the collective word pronounced by our people. This constitutes not only a challenge, but also – and in a very primordial sense – a historic responsibility to psychology in Latin America (1990a, pp. 112–13).

Ignacio Martín-Baró was a visionary who traced out possible, situated routes and courses of action that – based on the deconstruction of mainstream psychology – could form a starting point for the creation of a critical social psychology which would be situated and emancipatory, thus following in the tradition of our own culture and history.

## Conclusions

In Martín-Baró's vision, Latin American psychology must identify the virtues of the oppressed people and adopt a critical commitment, defined as identification with the oppressed, and at the same time, a necessary distance to examine with critical eyes the proposals emerging from their own praxis. If commitment demands participation, then the critical stance demands independent criteria. This critical stance implies an ongoing deideologization. It would be the equivalent of objectivity, and it consists both of dismantling the justifications, which mask historical reality, and of removing the rationalizations of everyday social life. This alternative perspective shows that all reason is situated. Thus, only partial perspectives and situated knowledge promises an objective vision.

In the case of Martín-Baró, he did not accept the position of observing from afar although he was conscious of the risks. He was not even doing action research, but rather practicing in a peaceful way his own situated definition of social psychology as a social science committed to the poor using the empirical tools at his disposal at that moment to unmask the repressive character of the government and to challenge the lies of the State through opinion polling. Social psychologists must abandon the notion of objectivity or of neutral value objectivity, but rather explore subjectivity in a reflexive and conscious manner.

The closeness of Martín-Baró's perspective with that of the theology of liberation is quite clear. A liberating theological reason is a critical reason, situated within the poor and excluded and speaking from their location because it is a tool for liberation. The concept of liberation in Ignacio Martín-Baró comes from this context not from the philosophy of liberation. He focused on the debate within social science about how to resolve the dilemmas of commitment and relevance through PAR. His main proposal is that for psychology to become a tool of liberation, it must first liberate itself from its own chains and configure a popular psychology based on the recovery of the historical memory and a political psychology of power of our peoples to contribute to the development of their conscious identity and historical liberation.

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