

**A second Psychology of Liberation?  
Valuing and moving beyond the Latin American.**

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## Ignacio Martín Baró and the Psychology of Liberation

Liberation psychology is an orientation to psychology that originated in Latin America. It drew on a number of currents of radical and critical praxis from the continent and will be forever associated with the name of Ignacio Martín Baró who first articulated its distinctive orientation. Martín Baró was based at the Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas" (UCA) San Salvador, El Salvador and it was the context of poverty, oppression and civil war in Central America that made his intervention so necessary. As I described his project in an earlier article (Burton, 2004a: 584), Martín Baró...

*"...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, 1989a) written in the heat of the 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."*

In his programmatic article, 'Towards a Liberation Psychology' (1986/1996) Martín Baró identified "three essential elements for the construction of a psychology of the liberation of the Latin American peoples: a new horizon, a new epistemology and a new praxis". Accordingly,

*"1) Latin American psychology must switch focus from itself, stop being preoccupied with its scientific and social status and self-define as an effective service for the needs of the numerous majority .... which should constitute the primary object of its work...*

*2) The objective of serving the need for liberation ... requires a new form of seeking knowledge: the truth of the Latin American people is not to be found in its oppressed present, but in its tomorrow of freedom; the truth of the numerous majority is not to be found but to be made. ... The new perspective*

*has to be from below, from the numerous oppressed majority... Assuming a new perspective does not suppose, obviously, throwing out all of our knowledge; what it does suppose is its being made relative and critically revised from the perspective of the numerous majority. Only from there will the theories and models demonstrate their validity or deficiency, their usefulness or uselessness, their universality or provincialism: only from there will the techniques that have been learned demonstrate their potential for liberation or subjugation. ..*

*3) All human knowledge is conditioned by the limits imposed by reality itself. In many respects reality is opaque, and only by acting upon it, only by transforming it, is it possible for the human being to gain knowledge of it. What we see and how we see it is certainly conditioned by our perspective, by the place from which we look at history; but it is conditioned also by reality itself. So to acquire new psychological knowledge it is not enough that we base ourselves in the perspective of the people; it is necessary to involve ourselves in a new praxis, an activity that transforms reality, allowing us to know it not just in what it is but in what it is not, so thereby we can try to shift it towards what it should be.”*

Martín Baró was in touch with critical psychologists from Venezuela, Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico and Cuba and this group, with others, has kept the approach alive through regular congresses and publications. There is an email group with (in September, 2011) 938 members (<http://es.groups.yahoo.com/group/psicliberacion/> ) and a website <http://www.liber-accion.org/> both initiated by Ignacio Dobles and associates in Costa Rica.

Liberation Psychology as an orientation, in Martín Baró's original statement and in his wide ranging work (1983, 1989a, 1989b, 2000, and the collections edited by Aron and Corne, Blanco, Blanco and de la Corte, and Jiménez and Pacheco), and in the work of others who have followed (see Burton and Kagan, 2005; Montero and Sonn, 2009), is particularly distinctive in three ways

- 1) Its critical and realist philosophy (see Burton and Kagan, 2005 for a discussion of *realismo crítico* in Martín Baró).
- 2) Its societal orientation, and
- 3) Its connection to other areas of Latin American liberatory praxis (Flores Osorio, 2009, 2011), within and beyond psychology. See tables 1 and 2 for a

summary of the tributaries of 'Latin American Praxis' and the wider influences on this family of approaches.

Together these features distinguish it from much 'critical psychology' in Europe, North America and Australasia which tends to be more theoretical and less practical and to be heavily influenced by poststructuralist theory (Burton, 2004b; Parker, 1999, 2006).

### ***The significance of Latin American Praxis in the search for alternatives.***

It is worth considering briefly what it is about the Latin American context that makes it such a fertile source for liberatory praxis. At least five factors can be identified (Burton, 2011).

1) The special situation of Latin America. While it is in the periphery of the World System it enjoys good cultural and intellectual connections with the Core countries. At the same time there is a strong indigenous tradition – in two senses, that of the indigenous peoples of the continent and that of the cultural and intellectual production that arises from within those countries and is original to them.

This double or overlapping identity sets the scene for reflection on dualities such as inclusion/exclusion, totality/externality, us/them, centre/periphery, that problematise both Eurocentrism (and its variant Yankee-centrism) and self-determination in, by and of the global South..

2) Within Latin American societies there is a co-existence of very different forms of life, for example very modern and very traditional cultures in close proximity, and high levels of inequality so that there are wealthy communities living very close to those that are very impoverished. This forces the question of economic and social exclusion and oppression (and of relations of alterity) into the thinking of progressive intellectuals.

3) There is a generally good educational system, not always well integrated into the neoliberal priorities of state and economy, so there is often a critical mass of relatively independent intellectuals (and interestingly, the term 'intellectual' is not an insult as it often is in the English speaking countries).

4) The tradition of Latin American thought was mentioned in relation to the dual and overlapping identities. The innovative approaches of intellectuals and leaders such as Bolívar, Martí and Mariátegui are being revisited today, while the currents documented in the forgoing tables also indicate the capacity for independent praxis – not always realized though as there can also be a tendency to imitation and over-valuation of what comes from the Core.

5) There is also widespread recognition that solutions to the social problems of Latin America need come from the continent and not be slavishly imported from Washington, Paris, London – or come to that Moscow or Beijing.

Latin America is distinct from both the core and other peripheral areas – much of Africa and Asia in that counter-systemic forces are less likely to be under the domination of reactionary ideologies (postmodernism, fundamentalist religion, neoliberal orthodoxy). (There are of course exceptions – see the leadership of African intellectuals such as Samir Amin, or the example of the Peoples Science Movement and Left Democratic governments in Kerala, the Maoist movement in Nepal and the red shirts in Thailand.

What stands out in progressive Latin American praxis though is the emphasis on the relationship between committed intellectuals and the oppressed (the excluded, the poor and those subject to other dimensions of oppression), and the way of thinking and articulating this relationship in the context of a system with its levels of exploitation, power and exclusion.

It is this that tends to unify the various tributaries and influences, and that can be said despite the risk of spouting so much hot air or falling into the trap of romanticizing the exotic.

## **The Psychology of Liberation now**

The Psychology of Liberation despite the sustained interest remains a relatively marginal interest even in Latin America. At the same time, however, outside Latin America, contributions have been made from South Africa, the Philippines, Australia, Ireland, the UK, Canada and the USA. Correctly speaking, it is not a branch of psychology but an orientation to its theory and practice: it would require some arrogance to describe oneself as a Liberation Psychologist (Montero, personal communication) but not to aspire to work in liberatory ways.

### ***Areas of application***

Three main areas of application were identified by Burton and Kagan (2005).

- 1 Community Social Psychology
- 2 Work with victims of state oppression (disappearances, genocide)
- 3 Social Analysis, including policy analysis and ideology critique.

This categorization appears to remain substantially accurate although Burton and Kagan (2009) also note that there is work in the arena of critical disability studies that can also be seen as fitting the Liberation Psychology model.

### ***New challenges***

However, while the thematic areas are not very different from those that Liberation Psychology was concerned with from the outset, the context in both Latin America and globally has changed significantly.

Dobles (2009) identifies four challenges for Liberation Psychology in Latin America. However, these problems can also be interpreted as challenges for a Psychology of Liberation in any location. 1) A 'globalised national security' in which State terrorism is a principal arm, whereby human rights are abused in the pursuit of human rights and social movements are criminalised. 2) The imposition of a market fundamentalism, which commodifies social goods and public services. 3) The problem of securing authentic democracy, through both participative processes and through making representative democracy more accountable. 4) Ecological issues including the impact of 'unnatural disasters' on vulnerable populations.

Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom and Siddiquee (2011: 340) identify further challenges arising as a consequence of the continued neoliberal phase of capitalism's perennial crisis: organised gang violence and the drug trade, people trafficking, and climate change.

### ***Limitations***

The above challenges do not make Liberation Psychology irrelevant, but they do indicate the need for continual renewal. González Rey (2009, in press) argues that in effect Latin American Liberation Psychology ran out of steam. He attributes this to the early death of Martín Baró (victim of planned assassination by the military), the economic crises of the 1990s, a fragmentation of effort and the influence of social constructionism "an option that exerted a great fascination in our continent at the eighties, reducing the richness and complexity of social realities to discursive practices", the effects of careerism and the use of the label Liberation Psychology as a platform to support certain political projects. Without agreeing that the movement is a spent force his description of the staleness that can affect any critical movement rings true.

Dobles (2009) suggests a number of necessary guidelines for the Liberation Psychology movement.

*“1) A Psychology of Liberation should establish opportunities for meeting with organised social movements, benefiting from their experiences and relating to them as valid interlocutors, as a way of situating its own praxis.*

*2) It must be necessarily a collective effort that involves psychologists from diverse countries in continuous exchange and dialogue using all available means.*

*3) It must be opposed to the logic and structures of domination, addressing not only the consequences of the structures of power and domination but also the very articulation of those structures of domination.*

*4) It must avoid falling into false dichotomies: the counter-position of the clinical to the social, of the qualitative to the quantitative. The important thing is to set out in the right direction to construct the new praxis.*

*5) It must avoid restrictive regionalism. In other words it is necessary to explore the efforts of psychologists in countries of the developed capitalist world who also make and have made their own history of opposition to the structures and logic of domination.*

*6) It must be an effort that doesn't make itself comfortable, academically, institutionally or culturally in defensive postures, settling down complacently in marginal spaces. Rather it should act in varied settings where crucial questions are settled concerning the life of our people and the consequences of the actions of psychology itself.*

*7) It must promote an explicit social ethic for psychology, fighting against the mechanisms that are used to delimit ethical discussion to the individual level, or even worse focusing it exclusively like a hedonistic self help guide on the professional psychologist.”*

If Liberation psychology has value in the Latin American context, then so to does it elsewhere. As Dobles points out in the fifth point above, there is a common cause with comrade psychologists in other locations, including the countries of the capitalist core and other regions of the periphery. There is indeed much to learn in both directions.

Here I part with some in Latin America by not wanting to emphasize an *essential*/Latin American-ness of either Liberation Psychology. As Dobles (2009) points out, Martín Baró's was a social psychology from Central America, not a Central American social

psychology. Instead, the suggestion is that the core of both liberation psychology and the wider movement of Latin American liberation praxis is *analectical praxis* as outlined by the Liberation Philosopher Enrique Dussel (in various texts, see Burton and Flores Osorio, 2011): the critical ana-dialectical challenge and reformulation of theory, method, plans, proposals, policies reforms.....from and by the excluded (within and without the system) in critical relationship with the organic intellectuals of the disparate movement for social justice. That is exactly what Martín Baró was arguing for in the key quotation cited above (see especially point 2). This process, through the critical interpellation of the excluded other confronts and transcends the false universalism of dominant (Eurocentric) social thought AND moves beyond a relativistic particularism that rejects the possibility of universal values and standards, "...to know how to discern the positive in the critique of the postmodernists, the positive in modernity, and the valuable affirmation of the exteriority of the life world of the South, to imagine a project of liberation, alternative, ethical and necessary for the majority of humanity...." (Dussel, 2002:63).

The *Second Psychology of Liberation* is no longer specific to the "popular majorities" of Latin America, but is relevant to the dynamics by which persons are societally constructed through a set of processes characterised by reification, oppression, incorporation and socialisation, *and* exclusion as well as resistance. As Burton and Kagan (2009: 58) wrote:

*"There is a need to test psychology against the experiences of those whose lives are distorted by the accumulation process and its correlates – the excluded, the marginalised and the oppressed included (Dussel, 1997, 1998). But it is also important to recognise that those groups are diverse and fragmented. Disabled people in an urban suburb, migrant workers in a country town, 'surplus' people in a poor neighbourhood, victims of domestic violence, Indonesian textile workers producing cheap clothing for a high street chain ..., Iraqis and Palestinians bombed by weapons from the [core capitalist countries], or traditional farmers ... impoverished and displaced by cheap grain imports from the US: all these are part of the oppressed majority that are the proper focus of engagement for a globally literate [Liberation Psychology] ..."*

In the best, already existing, work within the framework of the second psychology of liberation, an analectical approach is taken, where the oppressed other constructs, with the specialist, a liberatory praxis comprising both *understanding* and *action* – to transform lived reality. Kindred examples of work within this emergent paradigm are

surveyed and analysed in recent books: (Watkins and Shulman, 2008; Montero and Sonn, 2009; Afuape, 2011; Kagan et al. 2011; Roberts, 2007). This is not a difficult idea but it is one that is quite alien to the dominant approaches in psychology. It is an approach that needs to be spread much more widely, and for that task the idea of a second psychology of liberation, a global, really social liberation psychology, is an idea whose time has come.

**Table 1: Some key tributaries of Critical Latin American Psychological praxis, and critical approaches in Latin American Psychology. 1**

<b>Framework</b>	<b>Countries of origin and major development</b>	<b>Key innovators</b>
Critical / Militant Sociology Participatory Action Research	<b>Colombia</b>	<b>Orlando Fals Borda, Camilo Torres Restrepo, La Rosca group</b>
Theology of Liberation	<b>Argentina, El Salvador, Brazil, Peru</b>	<b>Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Camilo Torres, Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuria, Oscar Romero, Enrique Dussel, Franz Josef Hinkelammert</b>
Philosophy of Liberation	<b>Argentina, Mexico</b>	<b>Enrique Dussel, Horacio Cerruti, Juan Carlos Scannone, Leopoldo Zea, Augusto Salazar Bondy, Hans Schelkshorn</b>
Popular Pedagogy	<b>Brazil, Chile, Guinea Bissau, US</b>	<b>Paulo Freire, Donald Macedo, Myles Horton, Peter MacLaren</b>
Community Social Psychology	<b>Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Mexico Colombia, El Salvador, Panama, Peru, Dominican Republic, and others</b>	Maritza Montero, Esther Weisenfeld, Euclides Sánchez, E Rivera Medina, Irma Serrano-García, Teresita Cordero, Luis Escovar, Silvia Lane, B Sawaia, Enrique Saforcada, Fátima Quintal de Freitas, José Miguel Salazar, María de los Angeles Tovar and many others.

**Some key tributaries of Critical Latin American Psychological praxis, and critical approaches in Latin American Psychology. 2**

Psychology of Liberation	<b>El Salvador</b> , Venezuela, Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica and others	<b>Ignacio Martín Baró</b> , Maritza Montero, Ignacio Dobles, Jorge Mario Flores, Bernardo Jiménez
Community therapy	<b>Brazil</b>	<b>Adalberto Barreto</b> ,
Organisation workshop	<b>Brazil</b> , Honduras, Nicaragua	<b>Clodomir Santos De Moraes</b>
Theatre of the Oppressed / Forum Theatre	<b>Brazil</b>	<b>Augusto Boal</b>
Revolutionary Psychology / Cultural historical approach	<b>(Soviet Union), Cuba</b>	<b>Lev Vygotsky</b> , A Bernal de Riesgo, Gustavo Torroella, Diego González Martín, Fernando González Rey, Carolina de la Torre, Manuel Calviño, L García Averasturi, Monica Sorín, Albertina Mitjans, Mara Fuentes and others.
Social psychotherapy	<b>Chile, Argentina</b> Nicaragua, Guatemala, Colombia	<b>Elisabeth Lira, David Becker, Maria Langer.</b>
Argentinian Social Psychoanalysis	<b>Argentina</b>	<b>Enrique Pichón Riviere, José Bléger, Marie Langer</b>

## **Table 2: Some Wider Latin American Influences on Liberation Psychology.**

### **Theory of Dependency**

Raúl Prebisch, Theotonio Dos Santos, Andre Günder Frank, Ruy Mauro Marini, Celso Furtado, Enzo Faletto, Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

### **Innovative Latin American Social Movements and Resistance struggles**

– against dictatorship, imperialism, neoliberalism, racism, narco-violence, impunity.

Mothers of the Plaza Mayo (Argentina), EZLN (Zapatistas Chiapas, Mexico, mandar obediciendo – leading while boeing, indigenous autonomy), APPO (Oaxaca Mexico), Mapuche in Chile, Cocaleros in Bolivia, Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST), Indigenous movements, especially in Guatemala, Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador, Social Forum 'Pachamama' and Living Well'.

### **Revolutionary and related experience**

Mexico, Cuba, Nicaragua, Chile.

Land reform, Literacy campaigns, Community health, Economic development and management: Endogenous development (Guevara), Socialist cybernetics (Allende, Beer, Varela, Maturana, Espejo), Participatory democracy, popular mobilization.

### **ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana para las Américas) ("Alba" means "Dawn")**

Alliance of Progressive governments: Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (and formerly Honduras before the coup).

Mutual aid and trade union, providing alternative to the IMF/World Bank.

<http://monthlyreview.org/2010/12/01/alba-and-the-promise-of-cooperative-development>

### **Cultural influence**

**Committed poetry:** Neruda, Cardenal, Vallejo, Guillén, Benedetti, **Nueva Canción, Film, Popular culture.**

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