

Psychologists in El Salvador - A Target for Death Squads

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In Britain, psychologists do not expect to be tortured or assassinated for our work, but in El Salvador this has become a reality. On 16 November 1989, Ignacio Martin-Baro, lecturer in Social Psychology and Vice-Rector of The Central American University in San Salvador was taken from his home at 3.00 am by 30 men dressed in military uniform assumed to be one of the right-wing death squads operating in association with the armed forces. Along with five other Jesuit priests, he was tortured and then shot in the head.

His views on the dangers he faced in his work and the future of psychology in El Salvador are recorded by Allison Harris from an interview with him in Havana, Cuba 1st July 1987. At the time, the civil war had been raging for eight years between the right-wing government, backed by the United States, and the left-wing rebels of the popular liberation movement FMLN-FDR.

"I work in El Salvador at the Central American University. I did my graduate studies at the University of Chicago where I got my Masters and my PhD. Besides being Academic Vice President of the University I also teach social psychology. So many things you see! I also direct an Institute of Public Opinion which is affiliated to the University.

"Psychology in El Salvador has undergone different stages. At the beginning, in the late 50s, it was very much influenced by the psychoanalytic approach, as was the case in most Latin American countries and psychology was basically taught by psychiatrists or philosophers. Scientific psychology began with the 60s - some psychologists began working in schools, hospitals and clinics.

During the 70s we had good development, in terms of professional work. For the first time, we got into enterprises, industries, organisations. Some kind of community work was also being done.

In El Salvador I would say at present there are more than 700 psychologists. In academic settings 150 maybe, and the rest in applied work. (The population of El Salvador is 5,000,000.) The traditional areas of specialisation were clinical psychology, educational psychology and industrial psychology. Training is to the licence level. That's 5 years plus a thesis. I think I am the only PhD, as far as I know. Most of those with a Masters degree have obtained it in the US but there are some people who have been trained in different places like Mexico, Spain, England. Now there is a Masters being offered by one private university but it is a Masters in clinical psychology and it's an incredibly bad programme.

But with the outbreak of the conflict and civil war, there has been a terrible earthquake in every area of the social life in the country - several psychologists have been killed. Quite a

few good faculty members had to leave the country or "disappear".

Many jobs that were open for psychologists previously, were closed. Budgets had to be tightened and the first to go was the psychologist. So, at present there is a diminishing number of people asking to train as psychologists.

In addition the war confronted us with situations that we really were not prepared for - Like the problems of displaced people, tortured people, families with relatives disappeared or exiled, divisions within the family, one brother going to the armed forces and the other going to the guerillas, crippled people, traumatised people. Violence everywhere, state terrorism. I mean, so many problems. During this seven years of civil war we have been trying to catch up.

But the majority of psychologists are not even interested in paying attention to the problems of the war, so they keep on doing their clinical work, and they don't want to get involved.

The psychologists who oppose the regime would say they oppose the regime, but those who, in fact support the regime would never admit it. I would say that most psychologists, maybe 60-70%, probably consider themselves out of the struggle.

There is always danger in the country. I am a very public man, a well known person there. My house has been bombed 6 times, and there was a time when I had to go into hiding, but, for me publicity is more of a defence than clandestinity. So if I am in

danger, usually what I do is to go public. I've been on many TV programmes in the States and I very often make public comments to radio, TV, newspapers, which are quite opposite to what the Government is saying.

However, I must say, that today they asked me for an interview here (in Cuba) on TV and I said "no", because, although the government knows that I am here, I'm not here, and I cannot make myself very public because that association would be dangerous. So, I know the rules I can break and the rules I cannot break, without exposing myself to serious danger.

The war has had a big impact on the practice of psychologists. First of all in terms of the kind of work available and secondly, in the kind of issues we have had to face. Even those who pretend to stay out of the war have to face the consequences of war: stress, anguish, fear, traumas, division, hatred, terrorism. For instance, a friend of mine, a former student, was killed in October last year. She was working with popular movements, let's put it that way, but she was considered to be a guerilla woman and she was ambushed and ... (makes throat-slitting noise and gesture), twenty-eight years old ... but that's normal.

There are psychologists working in resettlements, where displaced people are taken in order to rebuild their lives. It's not a matter of saying we will move people and re-establish their social life, because it was that kind of social organisation that

triggered the war, but, they are attempting, with other professional people, to build up a different kind of community life. Also some people are working seriously with children of the war and that's extremely important work. But not many people, let me tell you. It's very unfortunate, there are many psychologists in the country and not many working seriously with those problems.

I know some psychologists who are working with union groups, which I think is very important in terms of the need for power of the workers.

A trade union has a lot of problems of organisation, of relations between leaders and followers, of training. Basically what they have been doing is trying to follow the process of the unions and to raise those problems that psychologists perceive as distorting or misdirecting the union activity. Initially the unions usually ask for things like talks and programmes for consciousness raising.

The war has given the opportunity to several people to work differently. Psychologists have been forced to look for different approaches. You cannot use the normal models, the predominant models because it's not that they are good or bad, it's just that they do not work. Period.

For those who work with children, there is money coming from international agencies. All kinds of institutions, governmental

and humanitarian, provide funds; church associations, institutions from Sweden, Holland, England, even from the United States. The country is a shambles, with not very much money. Those working with children of the war, basically would be paid by international agencies. Those working with the unions do that by themselves, in their spare time. So they have to look for other kinds of sources for money. It's not very common that; I know there is a group because I work with them.

Let me tell you also that there are people working with the armed forces. They are students of mine. [NB Ignacio was murdered by one of the death squads associated with the army.] In the end it's a kind of participation in the psychological war.

Clinical psychologists are self-employed in private practice. With private practice you pay attention to rich people; they are the ones who have the money. Some of them, very few, are employed by hospitals. Maybe 15-20 educational psychologists are employed by the State, the rest by private schools.

The first thing that psychologists in Britain can do to support our work is to be informed about what is going on there and the danger we have to face when we want to do something better for our country and our people. The information you get in England is filtered through the States, through the mass media and so on. It's completely biased, its completely deceptive information. We are in the midst of a real war. We are not a country in a process of democratisation. Secondly, sometimes it is possible

to encourage agencies to start programmes which take into account the social and psychological needs of the population. Some agencies which have the money only think in terms of rural development.

Also I think raising the awareness among your own colleagues that there are places different to Britain. It happens that those other places are the majority of the world population. The support that Great Britain is giving to the war conducted by the United States in all Central America is a sad thing.

A very concrete and significant way that you could help us is to obtain bibliography. We don't have the currency to buy journal subscriptions or books. They would not necessarily need to be in Spanish. Quite a few people read English. Spanish would be much better. Don't send books in German or Russian. We are always trying to get psychological abstracts, but it is extremely expensive. Even if I had the money, I cannot get the foreign currency. Send us books for the university library, even materials, for instance, some tests, and instruments for psychological work.

But the first thing is that basic solidarity - raising the awareness of psychologists who, you know, live in their own world.

Listen, I don't care very much about the future of psychology in El Salvador. I am concerned about the future of El Salvador. So what I am trying to do as a psychologist is to really build

up a psychology which can be of help to the needs and wishes and aspirations of the majority of the Salvadorean people. I think that if psychology can help significantly the historical fight of my people, then it will survive and have a future. If not, its better that it dies in my country. Because what for, a psychology that doesn't help? And that's my point:- either we can help or not. If we can help it will survive by itself, no problem. But if it contributes to alienation or maintaining control of the people, what is psychology for? People don't need any such psychology. As long as psychology does something significant for the future of the people, the people themselves will keep psychology alive."

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Everyday life in El Salvador is so traumatic that mere residence there since 1979 is as accurate a predictor of psychopathology as torture itself. According to research carried out in California, there is no significant difference between ordinary Salvadorean refugees and matched torture victims in terms of the number and persistence of symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder that they suffer (Aron, 1988).

Ignacio Martin-Baro wrote and lectured extensively on the relationship between state violence and mental health. He compared the psychological war in El Salvador - a parallel war aimed at civilians rather than combatants - with the continuing dirty war (involving disappearances, torture and massacres) in

terms of its objectives, methods and psychosocial consequences. The populace are given a continual 'dose' of fear, creating a climate of insecurity, isolation and helplessness. The realities of everyday life are constantly defined and redefined by official propaganda leading to a state of uncertainty, a loss of personal identity and a high incidence of psychosomatic illnesses. When psychological resistance caves in, people flee the country.

Ignacio chose to stay, even when, in the late 70's, the Jesuits were told to leave the country within 30 days or be ready to face death at the hand of death squads. Meanwhile, the U.S. Government is increasing its shipments of arms to the Salvadorean army units from which the death squads operate.

Ignacio will be remembered by psychologists around the world for the brilliant clarity of his social psychological analyses, and his profound commitment to social justice for which he paid with his life.

FURTHER READING

'From Dirty War to Psychological War: The Case of El Salvador' by Ignacio Martin-Baro is a paper in a collection called 'Flight, Exile and return: Mental Health and the Refugee' (1988) edited by Adrienne Aron. Committee for Health Rights in Central America: San Francisco. Obtainable from Alison Harris, Principal Psychologist, James Pringle House 73-75 Charlotte Street, London W1N 8AA.

DONATIONS to:

El Salvador Committee for Human Rights
83 Margaret Street
London W1

(Supports those groups that fight against human rights violations)

El Salvador Solidarity Campaign
20 Compton Terrace
London N1 2UN

(Presently sending medical aid to victims of government bombings and attacks - cheques payable to 'Victims of War')

A symposium entitled 'Before and after the Revolution: the status of Psychology in Central America' will take place on Wednesday 20th December at the London BPS conference. We will dedicate it to Ignacio.

Alison Harris