

## Six

### IGNACIO MARTÍN-BARÓ AND THE 99%: FROM EL SALVADOR TO OCCUPY

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In the mid-1980s, as part of a human rights delegation to Central America, I was provided with a briefing packet on El Salvador, where the civil war that raged through the country had already claimed 60,000 lives. Delegates' packets were full of information on the conditions at the root of that war: the wildly disproportionate distribution of wealth, the impossibility of getting an education if you were poor, the lack of sanitation and lack of access to healthcare, the conditions that gave a man in El Salvador a life expectancy of fifty-one years at a time when the average man in the United States was living past seventy. Virtually all the wealth of the country that wasn't controlled by multinational corporations was in the hands of fourteen of the richest families.

The statistics put numbers behind the life experiences I was learning about at home, where I was interviewing Salvadoran refugees who had never learned to read, who had gone through long periods in their childhood when all they had to eat was tortillas with salt. Some were twelve or thirteen years old before they got their first pair of shoes. All of them were fleeing for their lives to escape from forced recruitment by the army or murder by paramilitary death squads. As a psychologist, I was documenting their trauma for use in their petitions for political asylum.

The army's strategy at that time, developed in collaboration with American advisors and funded with \$1 million a day from Washington, was to wipe out every single threat to the status quo, by any means necessary. The US policy was so well defined that its replication in Iraq came to be known as "The Salvador Option" (Fuller, 2005). The government ruled by terror, with state-sponsored torture and massacres, illegal detentions, rape, assassinations and kidnappings; the burning of villages and crops.

Dissent was completely outlawed. Anyone who stood up for justice and human rights was labeled as subversive, and, in the context of the terrorist state's institutionalized lie, *was subversive*, for, as psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró observed at the time, those who unmasked the "Official Story" subverted the order of the established lie (1990, p. 87). If you were caught carrying a Bible or attending the funeral of a slain catechist, you were at risk of being detained and tortured. If you belonged to the national student organization, you would be put on a kill list. The refugees I was seeing were telling me "to be young in

El Salvador is a crime.” They told me about signs plastered on buildings that read, “Be a patriot, kill a priest.”

That connection between doing what is good for your country and getting rid of the priests—by which was meant the clergy who embraced liberation thought and, most critically, the Jesuits—had been forged in 1980, in a Reagan administration position paper known as the Santa Fe Document. This paper, which was to go through several revisions over the years, spelled out the need for United States’ policy in Central America to counter the Preferential Option for the Poor—because it was “critical of productive capitalism” and therefore contrary to American interests. Nobody had to twist the arm of the government of El Salvador to look after Uncle Sam’s needs. As Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton put it, “the President of the United States is more the President of my country than the President of my country” (1969).

Ignacio Martín-Baró was a Jesuit and he was chair of the psychology department at the University of Central America (UCA), where he also served as Vice-Rector. In my information packet was an article he’d written, titled “War and Mental Health” (1994b). I would later find out that he was El Salvador’s most prominent psychologist, and that he was very well known throughout Central and South America. But I had never heard of him. That kind of embarrassing gap in my education and training had by then lost its shock value. Some years before, I’d been amazed to learn that the heroic scientist who discovered the cause of yellow fever was not the American Walter Reed, as I’d been taught, but a Cuban doctor named Carlos Finlay. Growing up in the Midwest, I’d learned all about the explorers and settlers in the Great Lakes region, but was never taught that the founder of Chicago, Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, was from Haiti, the world’s first slave-free republic. I was already out of college before I understood that people from places where the population is dark-skinned or poor tend to go invisible when history is being written.

Martín-Baró’s essay on war and mental health put words to ideas to which I had subscribed for a long time, though I’d never systematized them or understood them as part of a coherent whole. He explained, for instance, that we generally define mental health as signifying an absence of psychological disorders. However, this is an absurdly constricted definition that essentially puts mental health in a straitjacket and encourages us to think of it in individual terms, and *only* individual terms. As he put it:

Anyone who doesn’t suffer paralyzing anxiety attacks, who can go about his or her daily work without hallucinating dangers or imagining conspiracies, who attends to the demands of family life without mistreating his or her children or submitting to the mind-numbing tyranny of alcohol, would be considered healthy and normal. (1994b, p. 108)

When we accept this as our working definition, mental health problems affect only a small segment of the population—those people who have some per-

sonal shortcoming that prevents them from making a successful adaptation to their environment. In other words, conventional psychology understands mental illness as an abnormal reaction to a normal situation.

But something is missing in this definition, Martín-Baró argues. It leaves out history—the fact that human life takes within the framework of relationships, *historical* relationships. So, *it may be that a psychological disorder is an abnormal reaction to a normal situation, but it may also happen to be a normal reaction to an abnormal situation* (ibid., p. 111; emphasis added).

Back in California, psychological evaluations of Salvadorans fleeing the repression showed a clear correspondence between their symptoms and the persecution they had suffered. Submitted to Immigration Court, these evaluations provided critical evidence for the political asylum claims of people who often had no other proof of who they were or what had happened to them. (They had come across borders without papers; when your name is on a government hit list, how do you get a passport?) I understood their trauma. Something was wrong with them, not because there was some weakness in their constitutions, but because something was drastically wrong with the world from which they had come.

For the delegation, I had brought a big stack of articles and clinical resources that I knew would be useful to mental health workers attending to traumatized people in El Salvador. But, I knew there would be a problem in getting the materials to the people who needed them. Most psychologists who were working on behalf of the oppressed had been forced underground. They were in hiding. Most who were attending to the rich—a group comprising most of the psychologists in the country, as was the case in my own country—were not people I cared to meet or whom I could trust to put these materials to good use. The author of “War and Mental Health” was someone I knew I had to find.

I found Martín-Baró at the UCA, where he and his colleagues were educating students in liberation thought, at great risk, in between bombs exploding in the Jesuit house and death threats coming over the phone. All their teaching and research, and even their morning prayers and evening parties, were carried out on a precarious perch two millimeters this side of catastrophe. They had inserted themselves deep into the reality being lived by the great majority of the Salvadoran people, although as natives of Spain and members of an international religious order, they could have escaped from all that violence by taking positions in another country, a safe country.

Until the US-trained assassins of the Salvadoran army forced them from their beds on 16 November 1989 and murdered them in cold blood, they courageously stayed in their adopted country, working with their adopted fellow citizens. They did not do this out of charity. They, and brave Jesuits like Dean Brackley and Charlie Bierne, who left their comfortable posts in New York and California to replace them after the massacre, were acting in *solidarity*.

The difference matters. Charity asks, “How can I help these poor people?” Solidarity asks, “How can I work together with these people in our common struggle for justice?” And liberation psychology asks, “How can we use our psychological skills and knowledge on behalf of peace, and justice, and human dignity?”

Without realizing it at the time, I was a liberation psychologist.

I gave my stack of materials to Martín-Baró and he saw to it that they were delivered to the right places, where they’d be of use to the 99 percent who were the victims of El Salvador’s oppressive social structures—or, more accurately, 99 point-something. A few years before the war broke out, the journal *Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA)* had reported that in the Salvadoran countryside, 98 percent of the houses were without toilets. Half of them lacked potable water; more than half of the residents were unemployed. Sixty-five percent of them were illiterate and those who owned land were earning the equivalent of \$0.87 USD per day from their land, while the big landholders each had daily incomes of as much as \$6,197 USD.

These figures were furnished by Ignacio Ellacuría, *ECA*’s editor, who was the Rector at the UCA. He concluded his 1976 report saying, “Let us hope that we can begin to firmly take the first steps to prevent this sick country from exploding” (1991).

The explosion, of course, occurred, and Ellacuría, Martín-Baró, and four other Jesuits at the UCA who tried to prevent the civil war, were assassinated while trying to broker a negotiated settlement of it. Ironically, as lawyers of the Center for Justice and Accountability point out, “the massacre, which engendered an outpouring of outrage from across the globe, ended up catalyzing a political settlement to the conflict” (Bernabeau and Blum, 2012, p. 96).

In the United States, people had a general awareness of the tremendous disparities in wealth in countries like El Salvador, that allow a tiny minority of fabulously wealthy people to live in outrageous luxury while the vast majority of the population becomes increasingly impoverished. But those awful unemployment and literacy statistics we had seen in occasional magazine articles applied to places like El Salvador, or Haiti, not to the United States. That seemed obvious because, in fact, most of those North American men who were living past seventy had it pretty good.

Education and real wages—two solid indices of prosperity—had been rising in the United States throughout the twentieth century, in a trend that many people expected to go on forever. If people up north had looked really closely, of course, they’d have seen how that wonderful money tree up north got watered—by the sweat of the people in places like El Salvador and Haiti.

But North Americans were too busy at the mall to bother with a close look. They were going so fast in their big cars that they also missed a couple of important road signs that were pointing away from the optimism of the American dream toward the same kind of inequality they had always associated with *them*, the people of the Third World.

There's probably a name for that in Driver Education—when you miss what is right in front of your eyes because you are only using peripheral vision and the rearview mirror. In psychology, we call it “denial.”

The rearview mirror could pick up 1915, when the big pie of national income in the United States was sliced in such a way as to give 18 percent of the wealth to the richest 1 percent of the population. Well, it was a big pie, and this was a very rich country, so the 99 percent sharing 82 percent of the nation's wealth were not doing so badly. By 1968, the year Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated while he was organizing against poverty in America, the slice of the pie for the 99 percent had shrunk to about 70 percent of the nation's wealth—a smaller chunk, but it was still a big pie and it was growing. But then the money started to shift. Between 1973 and 2000, the income of the top 1 percent rose by 148 percent, while the income of 90 percent of the population *fell* by 7 percent (Domhoff, 2012).

More telling, the super-rich—the CEOs who by 1980 were making 42 times what the average worker was making—by 2005 were earning in a single day before lunch what the minimum-wage worker had to work an entire year to earn. Though the size of the pie was getting bigger, the increase was all going to the diners at the head of the table.

The AFL-CIO reports that today, it would take the average worker at Ford Motor Company fifty-one years to earn what the Ford CEO earns as a base annual salary, not counting the many millions of dollars paid in cash bonuses, stocks, airplanes, and other perks.

Still, the denial persisted. A 2010 study by Mike Norton and Dan Ariely, cited by G. William Domhoff in “Power in America: Wealth, Income, and Power” (2012) found that regardless of gender, age, income level, or party affiliation, Americans have little understanding of how concentrated wealth is in the United States. People surveyed by Norton and Ariely estimated that the poorest 20 percent of the population held between 8 and 10 percent of the country's wealth. Several academic economists in the survey guessed it was about 2 percent, a figure that was still drastically inflated, by a factor of seven. The bottom 20 percent of the population, in fact, holds a mere 0.3 percent of the wealth in the United States.

The year of the Norton and Ariely survey marked a milestone, according to Jeffrey Brainard, writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2010). In 2010, for the first time, the hundred most expensive colleges—charging \$50,000 or more for tuition, fees, room, and board—were joined for the first time by a public institution, the University of California at Berkeley (UC Berkeley). “A sticker price of \$50,000 is more than twice the annual income for a family of four living at the poverty line,” Brainard pointed out (ibid.). Larry Abramson, asking on NPR, “Why is College so Expensive?,” reported that Berkeley's tuition in the 1970s was about \$700 per year, and at the time of his report, it was \$15,000 per year—a 2,000 percent increase (2011). A student at UC Berkeley, demonstrating against the Regents of the University

of California, reported on *Pacifica Radio News* (18 July 2012) that during her four-year matriculation, tuition increased by 134 percent.

As the cost of higher education leaped by hundreds of percentage points, houses by the millions started reverting to the banks in foreclosures, and the cost of living went up but the number of jobs did not, people started to notice. An unprecedented number of families needed food stamps. More children were living below the poverty line than ever before. Wall Street corporations, “too big to fail,” got bailed out—with tax money the middle class paid from their reduced incomes. “THEY got bailed out, WE got sold out,” says one of the popular slogans of the Occupy Movement. “Whose streets? OUR streets!” people yelled as they marched to shut the banks and reclaim the commons.

In Central America, the perspective of liberation theology had helped people to see that gross disparities in wealth are not ordered by a God wishing them to go hungry so that the rich can live extravagantly; hunger was never on God’s agenda. Those disparities are not there by divine order, liberation theology taught; rather, they are caused by an unjust human-made system that violates the very concept of justice that religion embraces.

From that principle, Martín-Baró developed a liberation psychology, teaching that when the oppressed majority of the people try to adjust to a morally corrupt system, it leads not to good mental health, but to its antithesis: to feeling demoralized, depressed, alienated, and hopeless. When people organize to resist the corruption, however, as Martín-Baró observed happening in El Salvador, the effort to bring a *just* order to human society can have a salutary, energizing effect. Energized and optimistic, people grew hopeful about the future; they provided each other with healthy support and mutual assistance. In Jayaque, the rural community where he was the parish priest, a young woman gang-raped by government soldiers dared to appear on television to denounce the perpetrators. With her stood a group of older men from her village, in solidarity. For Martín-Baró, such acts of courage and mutual support exemplified the impressive virtues of the Salvadoran people.

In light of that kind of expression of a quest for justice, we should not be surprised that the Chileans’ cry of resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship, *EL PUEBLO UNIDO JAMAS SERA VENCIDO*, found its way up to the people of El Salvador. Nor should it surprise us that it found its way north to Madison, Wisconsin, and New York City, and Seattle, and Detroit, and big and little places all over the United States as, THE PEOPLE UNITED WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED.

Bruce Levine, a liberation psychologist in Ohio, describes the Occupy Movement as tapping into a supply of energy that is present and available for oppressed and exploited people everywhere. We discover it, he says:

*when we come out of denial that we are a subjugated people. We discover just how energizing it can be to delegitimize oppressive institutions and authorities. And when these oppressive authorities react violently to*

*peaceful resistance, their violence validates their illegitimacy—and provides us with even more energy.* (Levine, 2011, emphasis in original)

It is that energy, I think, that forges the connection between what the Salvadoran people have for so long been struggling to achieve and what their neighbors in the Occupy Movement have proclaimed as goals worth striving for in life.

In Occupy's horizontally structured general assemblies, *everybody* has a voice—the committed, the crazies, the inexperienced and the veteran activists, the person who has been working for decades for peace and justice and the Johnny-come-lately who just walked onto the scene. This is a new model for organizing human relationships, where it is not what you own that counts, but what you want your social existence to look like. It rejects the idolatry of consumerism and embraces the appreciation of simple pleasures such as music, an organic apple, a hike through old-growth forest. It's participatory, egalitarian, and full of surprises and innovation.

When the authorities denied one of the Occupy sites sound equipment, the human microphone was born. I stand up and make a statement, and you repeat it, so my words echo through the crowd not as a one-way line of communication, but as a thought that is processed through each and every person present. This "mic check" may resemble Call and Response, but it's different. It's a *collective call*, proclaiming a collective truth. THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE, the Occupiers shout, and that really is what democracy looks like! Another favorite slogan captures it in colors: DEMOCRACY IS NOT A SPECTATOR SPORT.

A complacency that we might not have realized existed had taken over our lives and even the lives of those who had strong objections to the way our world was ordered. It was similar, I think, to what Primo Levi and his young friends were experiencing before the Gestapo put an end to their glib discussions. World War II was in progress, the world was in flames. Levi and his friends all proclaimed themselves to be enemies of fascism, "But actually," he reflected, "Fascism had had its effect on us, as on almost all Italians, alienating us and making us superficial, passive, and cynical" (1984, p. 128).

I think that same kind of superficiality, passivity, and cynicism had been present in the United States for a long time. There was no widespread outcry, for instance, when, after the nuclear disaster at Three Mile Island, the American president told us to put duct tape on our windows. Instead, there was a run on duct tape. When another president told us, shortly after 9-11, that we should go shopping, people took out their credit cards. Even when torture became legal and the Bill of Rights began peeling off the Constitution, to say nothing of unprovoked wars of aggression and destructive interventions, the cries of the people were limited and sporadic. The Occupy Movement has turned on a mic check to transmit those cries—for justice, for equality, for a decent and unpolluted life. With the Occupy Movement, for the first time

ever, a questioning of the idol of capitalism has become part of the mainstream American conversation.

Martín-Baró wrote:

We must work hard to find theoretical models and methods of intervention that allow us, as a community and as individuals, to break with the culture of our vitiated social relations and put other, more humanizing, relationships in their place. (1994b, p. 120)

Hierarchy, patriarchy, racism, sexism, classism, have no quarrel with a plantation owner earning before lunch in one day what the worker on the place earns with a year's labor. They may have no quarrel with an alienated existence that resorts to duct tape, shopping, and antidepressants to get through the day and allow an adjustment to something called "a normal life." But I do, and I suspect many of my readers do, too.

The martyred Jesuits of the UCA and the heroic teachers such as Brackley who came after them subscribed to the tenets of liberation theology that held that God is a God of Life and the primordial task of the Christian is to promote life. The opposite of faith in God, they declared, is not atheism, but idolatry—belief in false gods, gods which produce death. What a Christian must search for are all those historical conditions that give life to people. In Latin America, Martín-Baró wrote:

this search for life demands a first step of liberating the structures—the social structures first, and next the personal ones—that maintain a situation of sin; that is, of the mortal oppression of the majority of the people. (1994a, p. 26)

He called it "the majority of the people." Nowadays we call it "the 99 percent." Dalton wrote a poem about it, referring to the 60 percent. I say, let us not quibble over what to call it. Let us instead get busy with those "first steps" that Ellacuría and Martín-Baró said we have to take, toward liberation.

**Six: Ignacio Martín-Baró and the 99 Percent**

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