

A draft translation¹ of the **Prologue to Martín-Baró, I. (1983). *Acción e Ideología: Psicología social desde Centroamérica I. San Salvador: UCA Editores. [Action and Ideology: Social Psychology from Central America I.]***

Prólogo [Prologue] (pp vii – x)

For some years Central America has been transformed into one of the most critical sites in the world. Understandably there has been fear of a 'Vietnamization' of the area, above all since the external policy of the US President, Ronald Reagan, has made El Salvador the front where 'Soviet expansionism' will be halted and a paradigmatic arena for its particular conception of the East-West confrontation. Certainly the Central American countries have been, and continue to be the stage not of an ideological confrontation between communism and capitalism, much less between totalitarianism and democracy, but rather of the rising of the dispossessed peoples that, tired of promises and deceits, weary of servitude and repression, have taken up arms as the last resort for liberation.

The massive violations of human rights that have taken place over this period, in nearly all the countries of the region have been the object of derision by the civilised world. The brutality of the Somoza regime toward the civilian population is well known, comparable only with its insatiable greed. Both factors led to its defeat by a multi-class force, united under the flag of Sandino. But the neighbouring regimes haven't been any less brutal and have even been crueller. The widespread killing of indigenous Guatemalans or of Salvadorean peasants, the continual recourse to the 'disappearance' of workers and professionals, the murder of more than twenty priests, including an Archbishop, the proliferation of corpses, beheaded and flung into the public waste tips, are some of the chilling

1 Translation is not an exact, 1:1 process. Some expressions have no direct equivalent, or the literal translation sounds awkward. I have therefore tried to represent the meaning of the work, doing what is known as 'repair' work to the violence of forcing the author's words into English. Footnotes indicate where the choice made is particularly difficult, or where there is a potential loss of meaning.

depths of this wave of repression by the Central American regimes, faithful emulators of the doctrine of 'National Security' practised in South America. Forty thousand victims of political repression in just three years and in one country, like El Salvador, with a population less than 5 million, are testament to a new genocide, carried out under the cover of a hysterical anticommunism, a disguise for exploitative interests.

As a social scientist, it is not easy to live within such a convulsive process, for many reasons, some extrinsic and some intrinsic. The most obvious difficulty comes from the risk run by those who try to illuminate the problems at the root of the conflict, or who contribute to the search for their solution. It is of no interest to be familiar with the reality, when that reality is so clear in its meaning that the mere act of describing it truthfully constitutes a 'subversive act'. If by calling the reality by its true name Archbishop Romero became a prophet for his people, speaking for those without a voice, it also made him a subversive revolutionary in the eyes of the established powers. Three days after his moving call to the police "In the name of God: stop the repression!", he was murdered while celebrating the Eucharist.

The less obvious difficulty confronting the social scientist in the Central American context is of an intrinsic nature: the theoretical and technical luggage of the social sciences. The greater part of the available knowledge and certainly the greater part of social psychological knowledge has its roots in the viewpoint that stems from established power. Now, the sociology of knowledge has taught us that the viewpoint determines what is seen, and that the interests of those that define reality condition and limit what can be seen. As a result it would be almost impossible to understand revolutionary violence if one starts from the assumption that all social resentment is degrading. Likewise it would be impossible to understand the solidarity of the oppressed if it is thought that underlying all human relations is the search for individual satisfaction. Many social scientists have tried to take on popular causes and identify with the demands of the poor, and this has been the best evidence of the consciousness enhancing properties of social knowledge. Far fewer, however,

have managed to subdue their scientific baggage and transform its intrinsic logic of domination into liberatory frameworks. The basic problem does not lie so much in the will to help, as in discerning if there are adequate tools to make a significant contribution without abandoning the specific terrain of the social scientist.

For the academic, the most acute problem comes from the responsibility to teach social psychology. What should be taught and how? The easiest solution is to reach for some available text and to try and apply it to one's own situation. Sometimes that's the only possibility. But often that's a dangerous option, a subtle way of eluding scientific responsibility in the face of the specific problems of one's own social reality. It isn't a matter of constructing "from point zero" or to cast aside all the available knowledge: that would be so simplistic as to be presumptuous. It is more a question, instead, of building, "from our own reality" and, in our case, "from Central America", from the conflicts and problems that beset the lives of the Central American peoples, going from that particular perspective, weaving together the basic themes of social science.

It has been said that social psychology is a kind of history, and there is much to be said for that point of view. But that's exactly why it is necessary to situate psychological knowledge in time and place, and not try to sell as universal that which is local and partial. Furthermore, it is necessary to reintroduce history into social psychology, which is too inclined to analyse phenomena as formal categories and timeless schemes. The contemporary history of the Central American peoples constitutes a process that is both painful and fascinating, as it articulates between alienation and consciousness², and between oppression and liberation.

What has been said so far will be enough to explain why this book has been written. Consequently, it is not a commercial book, another of those social psychology textbooks that every year are launched on the market. It is a social psychology from Central America, that sets out to unravel the entangled social interests behind the actions and aims of

2 "Consciencia" translates as both consciousness and conscience - while consciencia is the translation used above, it is possible that both senses are implied by Martín-Baró.

persons and groups in these conflict ridden societies, orientated to making manifest the ideology that materialises in every day action. It intentionally assumes a critical stance, but without throwing out the available accumulated knowledge. There is in this book an effort to construct a social psychology that, taking from the best in the tradition, tries to provide a response to the pressing questions that are posed by the daily life experiences of the Central American peoples. It is possible that we won't always succeed in establishing this perspective adequately, and that at more than one point the internal logics of the dominant social psychology should be stronger than our original intention. However, it is a first attempt, no less necessary for its deficits.

We offer this first volume that is about how persons are configured socially, and some basic forms of interpersonal behaviour. In a second volume³ we intend to examine some of the processes more related to the life of groups and with social changes, always within the framework of a critical social psychology and from the perspective of the Central American peoples.

Many of the pages presented here are not “polished” enough: they are written under the pressure of teaching, amidst other administrative and academic tasks. In circumstances such as those of the Salvadorean university, to think that one day one could have either the time or the academic resources – grants, library resources, critical assistance – to polish this work, would be utopian or disingenuous. Therefore we prefer to run the risk of offering an unfinished work, rather than waiting for a desirable but hypothetical tomorrow.

It is also possible that some of the following pages lack, not so much a presumed purity⁴, that to us seems like an ideological deception, but rather that cold objectivity that that is usually advised in the academic world. We can only offer the explanation that many of them have been written in the heat of the moment, straight after a police raid on our own home, after the murder of a colleague or under the physical and moral

3 Subsequently published as Martín-Baró, I. (1989). *Sistema, Grupo y Poder: Psicología social desde Centroamérica II*. San Salvador: UCA Editores.

4 “asepsia”, literally sterility or free of infection.

impact of a bomb that destroyed the office where I worked. But what we also think, perhaps mistakenly, that it these experiences that allow us to get a little more inside the experiences, to feel a little more closely, the experience of those who bear on their working backs,⁵ centuries of oppression, are now trying to embark on a new history. There are truths that can only be described by starting from the suffering or from the critical standpoint⁶ of those limit situations.

Our ultimate objective consists is to articulate, through the work of social psychology as science and as praxis, the perspective of the wretched⁷ of these Central American lands. That is why the definitive criterion of the value of this work can not be found in its conventional rigour or in its coherence or degree of abstraction, but rather in its effective contribution, however little that may be, to the process of liberation of the peoples of Central America.

San Salvador, 2nd April, 1983.

5 "...de quienes cargan sobre sus espaldas de clase siglos de opresión y hoy intentan emerger a una historia nueva" Literally: "...of those who carry on their backs of class centuries of oppression and today are trying to emerge in a new history"

6 "desde la atalaya crítica". Literally "from the critical watchtower".

7 "los condenados de esta tierra centroamericana" - the allusion is to Fanon's work "Les Damnés de la terre" translated as "The Wretched of the Earth" and in Spanish as "Los Condenados de la Tierra."