

IMAGINING IGNACIO MARTIN-BARO AND STEVE BANTU BIKO IN CONVERSATION ABOUT IMAGINATION

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Today November 16, 2014 twenty five years since the murder of Ignacio Martín-Baró, I am reminded of the killing of Steven Bantu Biko; Biko was tortured and killed by the South African apartheid security police on September 12, 1977. As I try to recollect features of Biko's intellectual legacy that shaped my generation's political consciousness, I also imagine Martín-Baró and Biko in conversation about the post-colonial world's troubles and struggles for intellectual, social, economic and political independence.

Even though these two men were separated by culture, language and geographical distance they were united through their respective insistence on locating psychological liberation within the political realm (see Hook, D. (2005; A critical psychology of the postcolonial. *Theory and Psychology*, 15(4), 475-503).).

Their respective legacies continue to move rich articulations of liberation psychology in different parts of the globe. Steven Bantu Biko's seminal thoughts, like those of Martín-Baró, embody a fundamental challenge to institutionalized oppression in all its many manifestations. Steve Biko was not a trained psychologist.

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Yet his seminal writings, contained in publications such as *I Write What I like* and *Frank Talk*, located psychological liberation at the center of the liberation process. Steve Biko, like Martín-Baró, contested the easy binaries between the psychological and the social and between the political and the personal. For Martín-Baró and Biko social transformation and liberation were about confronting exclusionary social structures and dehumanizing policies as well as internalized oppressive scripts, structured by dominant ideologies and discourses of superiority.

For Biko the subtle and overt acts and utterances of self-denigration, self-hatred and self-destructiveness that linger in our collective psyches are marks of internalized oppression. In Biko's critical Intellectualism, a term used by Nurina Ally and Shireen Ally (see *Mngnitama, Alexander & Gibson, 2008. Biko Lives. Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko: New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press*), in their writings on Black Consciousness, liberation is an enactment of generative agency, a break from the over-reliance on imaginary saviours, suspicion of the supposed benevolence of dominant structures, and introspection about the internalized oppressor, as well as resistance to the influences of dominant values in marginalized people's affairs. Liberation is both a vision and the practice of freedom, a call to reflexive action, and an insistence on intellectual independence and self-affirmation.

Both Martín-Baró and Steve Biko refused to accept the dominant and exclusionary social structures, ideals and norms. They were committed to liberatory intellectual thought, supporting the journey for self-empowerment, humanizing identities and compassionate critical citizenship.

I imagine Biko and Martín-Baró in conversation for many reasons. In the twenty years of democracy South Africa has so much to be proud about and celebrate: Our constitution is the envy of so many who are denied basic rights and the freedom of movement, association, and choice. Our vibrant civil society structures can openly call attention to corruption and negligence in the private and public sectors. Yet like in many parts of the post-colonial world there is anger everywhere manifest in the public protests that mark South Africa's political landscape; there is anger on the roads that systemically neglect pedestrians as the majority road users; there is anger present in visits to public hospitals, police stations and other service centres where public servants as the present class of bureaucrats take joy from petty exercise of officialdom, dismissiveness and disregard for members of the public seeking service. The public, mainly African and poor, remain troubled by the smirks and insolent glances on each visit to a service facility (that is if the public official bothers to make eye contact in the first place). Millions of South Africans, like their counterparts elsewhere in the post-colonial world, dread that moment of walking into a public facility; each visit to a public

service facility requires tremendous emotional labour: the marginal must feign calmness, consent and docility if they are to obtain mediocre services when faced with the smirks and rudeness of public officials.

The anger and disillusionment are so palpable. The weak turning on others who are either equally marginalized, or simply less influential over how post-colonial societies like South Africa are to be governed and managed. This is the anger turned on to loved ones; the anger present in the burning of public property, while those entrusted with governing and managing national resources grow more and more distant from the fires; the daily agony of long public commutes, the hurt of unemployment, the pains of inequality continue to be dismissed by official arrogance and political betrayals. While the fires rage in South Africa so many among those we entrust with our country, subject us to a crass morality and excessive lifestyles, claiming that “it is our turn” to live large. Excess and vulgar consumption are marks of success, accomplishment and empowerment.

I return to imagining Biko and Martín-Baró in deep conversation to help us make sense of the raging anger, the burnings and the crass markers of success entrenched and perpetuated by the ruling and economic elites in post-colonial societies. They ponder: what are our people really burning? What is the psychology of the post-colonial elite that reproduces dominance with the support of the ruling and avaricious classes in

Washington, London, Paris, Moscow and Beijing? What should people struggling for freedom in all its forms really burn and what is worth igniting, preserving and growing?

I imagine myself attentive, captivated by this imagined conversation; I stir silently containing my own disappointment and sadness at the scale of betrayal by our public and corporate officials. Then as if wrestled away from the brink of pessimism and hopelessness I hear or least I imagine I hear Steve Biko and Martín-Baró move the conversation deeper to reflect on the place of imagination in liberation psychology. They ask: how may political psychology support marginalized people to enact compassionate, critical citizenship shaped and inspired by imaginations about a better world? How may liberatory psychology enable insurgent participation in civic, national and global affairs, as well as capacities to reflect on the consequences of individual and social choices?

Ignacio Martín-Baró and Steve Bantu Biko, united through their deaths sanctioned by state violence and their respective humanizing philosophies ask: how may liberatory psychology be enacted as a form of compassionate, critical citizenship? How may liberatory psychology support solidarity and human rights initiatives seeking to develop inter-connected and caring worlds? How may liberatory psychology support the assertion of humanizing capacities everywhere in moments of defeat and

victory, in moments of failure and achievement, and in moments of struggle and celebration?



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