

Liberation psychology: why an idea from the Salvadorean struggle is relevant today

Friday 18 May 2018, by [MALHERBE Nick](#) (Date first published: 4 May 2018).

Psychology is increasingly abused and misused by reactionaries, conservative and neoliberal. Time to renew the tradition of liberation psychology. One good starting point is the work of social psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró. A Jesuit priest killed by the regime during the Salvadoran civil war, his aim was to develop a critical approach to psychology that uses the discipline to help people challenge as well as change systems of oppression.

The Atlacatl Battalion was a notoriously violent US-trained “counter-insurgency unit” of the Salvadoran Army. On 16 November 1989 its soldiers entered the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (or, UCA, to use its English acronym) in El Salvador in central America at around 1:00 AM.

In what became known as the UCA Massacre, the soldiers shot and killed a rectory housekeeper and her teenage daughter. They also killed six Jesuit priests who had vocally advocated for a peaceful negotiated settlement between the military-led government of El Salvador and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, which had been at war with the government for a decade. The Salvadorian government was resourced financially and militarily by the US.

The UCA Massacre was indicative of the brutal violence that characterised much of the Salvadoran Civil War. Clashes between popular movements and paramilitary forces during this time saw thousands of political assassinations.

Social psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró was one of the Jesuits killed in the UCA Massacre. Today, he is best known for his pioneering work on liberation psychology. His aim was to develop a critical approach to psychology that uses the discipline to help people challenge as well as change systems of oppression.

Almost 30 years after his death, Martín-Baró remains under-studied outside of South America. This is largely because he wrote in Spanish and his work was always rooted in Latin American experiences.

Oppressive ends

For a number of reasons the job of revitalising a psychology of liberation seems particularly pressing at the moment. For example, the “relevance” of psychology is being called into question. Furthermore, mainstream psychologies are frequently used towards oppressive ends.

Take the popularity of Jordan Peterson, a right-wing psychology professor at the University of Toronto. His case raises troubling questions around how psychology can and should be used.

Among other things, Peterson’s unfounded, toxic and vitriolic rhetoric has claimed that feminists present “an unconscious wish for brutal male domination”. Nations in the Global South are “pits of

catastrophe", he says, and gender neutral bathrooms are entirely unnecessary.

But there are alternatives. In developing a liberation psychology in, of, and for Africa, we may benefit from returning to and, importantly, adapting Martín-Baró's work. This work would need to be located in specific contexts. It would also need to align with broader liberation struggles, such as global feminist movements as well as anti-racism, anti-capitalism and decolonisation projects.

In an attempt to do this, the critical community psychologist Mohamed Seedat places liberation psychology in South Africa by imagining a conversation between black consciousness thinker and activist, Steve Biko, and Martín-Baró in 2014. Seedat imagines that both would reflect on the place of solidarities, emotion, compassion and imagination in struggles for liberation. This is especially important when considering the stark inequalities that mark contemporary South Africa's liberal democracy.

Developing a psychology of liberation

Liberation psychology sets out to reposition psychology as a discipline that is able to speak to the psycho-social traumas of majority populations. Its starting position is to stand in solidarity with oppressed peoples. Liberation psychology aligns with their concerns, histories and values, while galvanising them towards radical social action.

Although not a distinct field of psychology, liberation psychology is perhaps best understood as a paradigm from which to conduct psychological work. This means that all psychology can (and should) be practised as liberation psychology. As Martín-Baró remarked:

a psychology of liberation requires a prior liberation of psychology.

He argued that dominant psychologies frequently sustained, bolstered and individualised oppressive social systems. Liberation psychology then challenges this globally dominant psychological approach. That's because the latter had little to say about the cultures, politics and ideologies of the Latin American context in which he worked.

Liberation psychology requires psychologists to assume an explicitly political position when it comes to injustice. It therefore counters the kind of "neutrality" typically adopted by mainstream psychologies.

Commitment to social justice

Martín-Baró became increasingly well-known in the mid-1980s. He accepted a number of visiting professorships and served on various scientific committees. He always took time to speak out against the Salvadoran government and US imperialism.

His political allegiances and unwavering commitment to social justice were clear both in his life and his work. From 1987, under the tremendous violence that marked the presidency of José Napoleón Duarte, he went into periods of hiding. Despite being born in Spain, Martín-Baró refused to leave El Salvador even after six attempts on his life and many prestigious job offers from around the world.

He wrote prolifically. Strands of politics and psychology are present in his 12 books and over 100 published articles. But he also wrote on war, education, gender, theology and population density.

Martín-Baró's choice to write in Spanish, despite speaking English fluently, meant that, during his lifetime, his writing was largely ignored in Europe and America. But his reliance on Spanish ensured the relevance of his work within the contexts in which he worked.

Shortly after his 47th birthday, and 10 years to the day after receiving his doctoral degree, Martín-Baró was working on a manuscript. The Atlacatl Battalion entered the UCA campus, murdering him and his colleagues. It has been reported that his last words to the soldiers were:

this is an injustice; you are scum.

Liberation psychology today

Social, educational and - especially - community psychology have taken most readily to the liberation psychology paradigm. But Martín-Baró's work reminds us of the urgency to bring all psychology into the orbit of liberation. Doing so allows for a necessarily ambitious and contextually-sensitive conception of liberation. Such a conception is both local and global in scope. It also disregards any false distinctions between psychology, politics and freedom.

Nick Malherbe

[*Click here*](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Conversation

<https://theconversation.com/liberation-psychology-why-an-idea-from-the-salvadorean-struggle-is-relevant-today-94432>