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11. IGNACIO ELLACURÍA

Historical Reality, Liberation, and the Role of the University

There he lay. Face down on the lawn with a bullet in his head. Along with the seminarians' cook, her daughter, and five of his fellow Jesuit priests, Ignacio Ellacuría was assassinated by members of the Salvadoran military's elite Atlacatl unit on November 16, 1989. In many ways, the killings that took place on the campus of the Jesuit-run Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) were just another massacre in a decade-long civil war that had seen atrocities like these all too frequently. Ellacuría and the others died like so many other Salvadorans. Yet, these deaths were different in some way. This murder of Ellacuría, the university president, which took place on the university grounds, was precisely about the university and the role it had come to play in the nation, in the church, and in the larger geopolitical stage in which the Salvadoran civil war had taken a surprisingly central role.

Why was Ellacuría the primary target of an assassination? What was it about his philosophy and the UCA's work that would generate such furious hostility? How did a university become a target of military opposition so that the assassins would not only vandalize computers and books, but elect the symbolism of killing Ellacuría by splattering his brain on the blood-soaked ground? A brief sketch of Ellacuría's central ideas and summary of the UCA's activities during the war will both provide the preliminary answers to these complex questions and serve to introduce one of the most remarkable visionaries for the responsibilities and possibilities of the contemporary university.

PHILOSOPHER OF HISTORICAL REALITY

Though born in the Basque country of Spain, Ignacio Ellacuría was a naturalized Salvadoran citizen who first came to the small Central American country in 1949 as an eighteen year-old Jesuit seminary student. His training in philosophy and theology took him to Ecuador, Austria, and Spain, but Ellacuría always returned to El Salvador. In some sense, his thought never left El Salvador because he developed both his philosophy of historical reality and his liberation theology in response to the struggles of the poor majority of the country. This philosophy and theology would ground his ideas about the role of the university and guide its actions through the tumultuous civil war.

Ellacuría's philosophy, deeply influenced by that of his mentor, Xavier Zubiri, stems from the diagnosis of a basic flaw in much Western thought: philosophy misapprehends the basic act of human knowing by dividing sense and intellect, and this division has two disastrous consequences: 1) the intellect is divorced from reality and can only arrive at it through concepts; and, 2) reality itself is reduced to a thing or entity that loses its openness and dynamism. Rather than perpetuate a division between ideas (beyond reality) and sense-data (that we perceive), Ellacuría treats human intellection as a "sentient intelligence" that assumes that humans are installed in reality in a basic way and must confront the ethical demands of reality (Ellacuría, 1990). He emphasizes the interrelated character of all things, from their biological roots to the most complex structures that represent the historical actions of human beings. His philosophy of historical reality thus prioritizes placing oneself in the location that most fully reveals the truth about history in all its complexity: the world of the poor (Burke & Lassalle-Klein, 2006).

With roots in his philosophical vision prioritizing the marginalized and oppressed, and as part of the wave of thinking known as "liberation theology," Ellacuría articulates an understanding of Christian salvation as present in history in some way, revealed specifically as good news to the poor (Lee, 2013). Instead of dangerous separations such as theory-practice, body-soul, or heaven-earth, Ellacuría's theology possesses an incarnational imagination in which God's transcendence is "in" and not "away from" history (Lee, 2009). Christian faith must respond not simply by seeking an afterlife, but transforming the world so that it more clearly reveals the transcendent presence of God. It is with this vision of human intelligence and its ethical demands that Ellacuría grounds the vision for the university carried out at the UCA.

A UNIVERSITY WITH A CENTER OUTSIDE ITSELF

Originally founded in 1965, the UCA was viewed by the Salvadoran elite as a conservative haven from so-called secular and Marxist-inspired academics of the national university. Yet, under the leadership of Ellacuría, the UCA transformed in the 1970s and 80s into one of the most outspoken critics of the brutal military regimes that governed El Salvador and of the social, political, and economic structures that undergirded the massive inequality that characterized Salvadoran society. This transformation sprang from the UCA's commitment to serve the national reality, but to do so *universitariamente*, in the distinct manner of a university.

If the university is the cultivator of truth and knowledge, Ellacuría reasoned, it does so not in an abstract fashion but in a real, historical way. The existence of extensive poverty and oppression represent a historical negation of truth and reason that demands analysis and resistance. In an unjust society, the university must function to study reality and uncover the truth so that it can participate in interpreting and transforming the ideological frameworks that sustain the unjust status quo. In other words, Ellacuría believed that a university cannot simply dedicate itself to the

production of professionals or technicians who replicate the social structures already in place, nor commit itself to an abstract and a-historical quest for knowledge, which divorced from the reality of immense inequality serves only to reinforce its ideological bases. Rather, in a favorite phrase of Ellacuría's, the university should serve as the "critical and creative conscience of society." He splits the Spanish word for conscience *con-cienca* (lit., 'with-learning') to indicate the manner that the university analyzes causes, discovers remedies, and communicates a consciousness (Beirne, 1996).

In this vision of the university, teaching and research are linked by a third unifying element: what Ellacuría calls *proyección social* ("social projection"). Social projection makes concrete the orientation of the university to the wider society and indicates how the university must have a center "outside itself," where that which is most conducive to satisfying the needs of the poor majority serves as the criterion and principle for determining research priorities and other university functions. Practically, social projection indicates the various ways that the university "projects" its knowledge to the wider society, but also allows the society, and particularly its poorest, to orient its activities (Brackley, 2008).

THE UNIVERSITY AMIDST A NATIONAL CRISIS

During the last decade of Ellacuría's life, a period that coincides with his presidency of the UCA, the 'social projection' of the university faced its greatest challenge: the descent of the country into civil war.

The first half of that decade demanded confrontation with the propaganda and ideological interests of powerful forces, primarily a Reagan State Department that clamored for military support for the Salvadoran government because it viewed Central America as the pivotal battleground in the fight against Soviet global expansion. As civilian casualties mounted, Ellacuría was convinced that a real solution to the war could not be achieved through a military victory by either side. In publications and speaking engagements, Ellacuría and the UCA criticized U.S. intervention by denouncing inflated election numbers used to sway foreign policy and exposing the savagery of the Low Intensity Conflict military strategy (Whitfield, 1995). At the same time, the UCA did not hesitate from denouncing the guerrilla Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front's strategic shift to a war of attrition, characterized by damage to infrastructure, political kidnappings, and assassinations.

By the middle of the 1980's, the UCA emerged as the leading independent source of information about El Salvador's political, economic, and social reality. For foreign journalists and other newcomers, it was often a shock to see a Catholic priest function as an expert on the socio-political circumstances of the nation. As part of its social projection, the UCA developed key institutes, such as the Human Rights Institute (IDHUCA), which documented kidnappings, torture, massacres, and other abuses, the Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP), which conducted urban and rural surveys on various topics, and Ellacuría's own brainchild, the UCA's, Seminar on

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National Reality, which was the only forum where leading figures in the conflict could debate the issues openly (Hasset & Lacey, 1991).

These institutes gave flesh to social projection and moved beyond the propaganda of the warring parties to document the great suffering of the nation and bring its reality to the awareness of the world. Tragically, the UCA paid the price for its social projection. Threats, periods of exile, and bombings of the campus culminated on that fateful November night when Ellacuría and the others, known collectively as the “UCA martyrs,” offered their last testimony to what the university can and should be.

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