Faculty Interview: David Gil

Sara A. Wall

Professor Gil studies and teaches societal roots and dynamics of violence and oppression, links between social institutions and human development, the nature and dynamics of social policy, and strategies to transform social orders into development-conducive ways of life. He has taught at the Heller School since 1964. He was honored at this year's Heller 50th Anniversary celebration for his dedication and contribution to the school and the fields of theories of social justice and social work. This interview took place on December 11, 2009.

Sara Wall, for Inquiries in Social Policy: As students of public policy, we are often pragmatic in thinking about small incremental changes to improve the lives of vulnerable populations today, even though we know it is far from what needs to be done. Others argue that working within the existing system reinforces unjust norms and that we should stop nothing short of revolution. For those of us planning for a career in public policy, what is the balance between these two perspectives?

David Gil: Well, the dilemma between doing things immediately to reduce the intensity of deprivation and suffering makes sense as long as one doesn’t confuse it with the real answer. We certainly need a revolution of our way of life, we need a very comprehensive transformation. But that is a matter for the long-term. I don’t think we can have a successful revolution through violent processes. That is what history teaches us, if we look at the Russian revolution or French revolution. If we believe in justice we need a comprehensive answer. The war in Afghanistan has not brought justice. We have to learn through Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King to obtain justice through non-violent strategies. We need a long-term strategy to addresses injustice through a non-violent means.

But in the meantime people need to eat and be housed and have a sense of usefulness. So, we need policies that assure food, assure health, and assure education. All of these things are attainable
within a system of injustice. In other countries, like Scandinavian countries, other European countries, they demonstrate that this is possible. There is no country in Europe that doesn’t have universal health care, but here we have to accept conversations in Congress and media about whether we should establish health care. We need a two-level strategy: a short-range and long-range one and we have to try to integrate them. The problem is that many political people inside and outside of government promote an important minor step, but they act as if that’s a real answer. And they don’t say, ‘we ought to do this right away, but in the long-term we have to overcome the dynamics of injustice.’ That is why I call it a dual strategy. And as far as possible, (we need) to integrate them.

In the present, we have food kitchens and shelters. It is better to have food kitchens than starvation and it is better to have shelters than people homeless, but it is better if we don’t have conditions that lead to the need for these and that is what we have to focus on for the long-term.

We have to be honest about what we do, when we do it, and know if it is an incremental change or not. Right now the big issue is health policy. This is an example of an incremental change, and we should pass it, but we shouldn’t say that is a real answer or the only answer. This is an essential measure, but not an answer.

To me, the yardstick for the policy system is the extent to which it is conducive to meeting peoples’ universal needs: biological-material needs, social-psychological needs, productive creative needs, and the need for security. The need for self-actualization and their spiritual needs. We all have these needs. To me, these are the criteria for evaluating any policy, both short-term and long-term. If we pass the health policy, that’s a short-term positive step because thousands of the un-insured will now have health care. But many people will continue to be deprived of their social-psychological and productive needs and so forth. This dilemma is real and can only be dealt with constructively if both dimensions of the short-term and long-term are considered.

**SW:** *Part of policy making is assessing political feasibility. The idea of “long-term” can be hard to sell to politicians who are reluctant to admit they did not solve a problem.*
DG: All elections, at the present, do not deal with the long-term. Largely because what and who we elect focuses on the top and solutions come from the bottom. Governments don’t provide solutions, they maintain the status quo. They are paid for by people who are interested in the status quo. The administrators, representatives and the president do the bidding for those who pay for the election. If you want real change, it comes from outside the government.

For example, the women’s movement and the Civil Rights movement in this country, they did not come from the top. Look at the Civil Rights movement which was a struggle that came from the black churches. It was not driven from the top. So, the politicians, I am not questioning their decency, they are as decent and you and I, but they operate in a system that is geared at maintaining privilege and deprivation. And the long-term change requires social movements.

You are studying for the Masters in Public Policy, so that you can enter into current political processes and administrative arrangements, but that shouldn’t stop you from linking-up with people who are interested in long-term fundamental change. And you can inject these ideas into your various political or administrative jobs. If you can teach politicians that what they’re working for is not a real answer, that it’s an emergency measure and is necessary, but it is not a real answer, this can start the integration process. And you have to be involved in organizing movements. Look at what they did in the women’s movement. A small group of women got together in what they called ‘consciousness raising groups.’ They talked about their situation. Then in the Civil Rights movement women were exploited by men. They did the cooking and cleaning and the men created the ideas. It promoted critical consciousness; that is the key.

SW: I often have debates with friends about whether mankind is innately good or evil. Is the goal of a just society a utopian goal? Is a just society attainable?

DG: Human nature is far broader than the behavior of any particular culture. If you study anthropology, you learn about human groups who have lived cooperatively. Many of the native peoples of this country practiced cooperation, prior to the invasion
of the Europeans. They had justice for women. Women voiced their opinions and there was a division of labor. Women were not deprived relative to men in these cultures. There were also European cultures that were cooperative. This tells you human nature is not good or evil, it has the capacity for both. What humans actually do depends on their social system, their culture. We are competitive because we are rewarded for being competitive. That doesn’t mean we couldn’t be cooperative. So, this discussion is not an either or, it is both under different conditions.

SW: In thinking about the careers that graduates of the Heller School will pursue, how can we begin to embody our motto of knowledge advancing social justice professionally?

DG: The process of transformation starts with the self. I ask all of us here in the school, where we are more or less privileged, relatively speaking. But most people take their privilege for granted and do not acknowledge that they are privileged in an injustice system. So, the first steps are self-examination of one’s family (and) one’s relations to others. And that’s not easy to do. Because the school, the university, is a reflection of the culture and it is a competitive culture....People don’t examine their own position within this competitive culture.

Once one examines this, once you conclude that you ought to change your own way of life, then you can begin to change your relations to others. And you can look for like minded people and develop support groups, like egalitarian communities in this country. Now, these are people who have learned from history that change doesn’t come overnight. It comes from a process of creating alternatives. If you study the history of capitalism, a system which we live within now, how did it start? It didn’t start as a global system. People created islands in opposition to the lords and the feudal system. And that is what these people are trying to do, to create island of justice within the context of injustice. I used to live in such a community in Palestine a long time ago.

Part of the process towards real change, is to create the new within the old. These efforts don’t eliminate capitalism, they function within it. But they create cooperation between people and demonstrate what is possible. That is how, eventually, we can create a new system.
SW: I want to conclude by asking you about your 45 years here at the Heller School. At Heller’s 50th anniversary, you were recognized for your contribution to the school. I remember Professor Jon Chillengerian said he “always learns when you speak.” Others on campus have called you the “moral compass” of the school. You have served for years as a mentor for both faculty and students. What is it that guides your own work on a day to day basis?

DG: I have to tell you a little bit prior to Heller because what I did here makes only sense in terms of what I did a long time ago. I grew up in Vienna, Austria when it was occupied by Germany. I was 14 years old. My father was arrested and I had to leave my school. Then I was sent to a segregated school for Jewish kids. After a year, I left without my family to Sweden where I worked on a farm. And of course I kept thinking, what is the meaning of all this? And at that time I was fortunate to read the biography of Mohandas Gandhi and that really showed me that you cannot deal with Hitler by being like him or being a better Hitler. Since then, I have been committed to non-violence and to fundamental change through non-violent measures, cooperation, and through critical consciousness. Now that is the philosophy I brought to Heller. I have tried through my decades here is to educate for fundamental change through my classes, and writings and to do it consistently. To believe we can keep going the way we are. That is unreal. We are on a suicidal course if we don’t change direction. We will destroy ourselves.

You ask about my 45 years at Heller School. I came here because this school from the beginning said “we are not training clinical social workers.” All of the faculty were social workers at the beginning, but were frustrated from the futility of clinical practice that helps an individual and is necessary, but leaves the causes of peoples’ problems untouched. The Heller School was established to study the causes and think about fundamental solutions. And is what I still think is attractive about the school.