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Sección: Book reviews and interviews

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## Philip Zimbardo, a Heroic Life Dedicated to Psychology

Philip Zimbardo (New York, 1933), Emeritus Professor at Stanford University, one of the best-known psychologists in the world. There is no Psychology University where his valuable contributions on subjects such as social influence, roles, leadership, antisocial behavior, time perception, and heroism, are not mentioned.

He completed his M.S. and Ph.D. from Yale University. In 1971, he conducted the Stanford Prison Experiment. In 1990 he presented the PBS Discovering Psychology series. In 2002 he became the American Psychological Association (APA) President. He is currently Founder and President of the Heroic Imagination Project.

Among his most important books, there are: *The Lucifer Effect*, *The Time Paradox*, and *Living and Loving Better*. He has received numerous awards and recognitions for his work as a researcher, educator, writer, and popularizer of psychology, among them, Carl Sagan Award for Public Understanding of Science.

On the occasion of his 90th birthday, as well as the publication of his book *Zimbardo: My Life Revealed* (Giunti, 2021), Professor Zimbardo kindly accepted this interview from his home in San Francisco, California, which was conducted via Zoom on December 2nd, 2022.

**Professor, in 2023 we celebrate 90 years of your life, a “superhero’s” life, just as Mauro Cozzolino said. How do you feel about this celebration?**

I’m really excited. My birthday is March 23rd, 1933, so I’ll be 90 years old next March, but we are going to have a big celebration in San Francisco, that is call *Zim Extravaganza*.

We are going to have people coming to give lectures about Heroes, we will have on stage some people who are heroes, firefighters, police, and others, and we will have a big dinner, a big celebration for one whole week, celebrating heroes in San Francisco. And probably we can put it on Zoom so you could follow it. There is a man named Matt Langdon, he is the President of HIP (Heroic Imagination Project), he lives in Australia, so he is coming to San Francisco to do this ceremony, but he certainly could have a Zoom group.

**It would be wonderful; we will also join this celebration through this interview.**

Thank you!

**Undoubtedly, the autobiography *Zimbardo. My Life Revealed* (2021) is a text of great value, and one of the main things that caught my attention, after reading it, was that there were no mentions of Mexico or Latin America, even though we are neighbors. Have you ever had any contact with psychology in this part of the world?**

Oh yes, very much so. I lectured, I was a one-week guest in Guanajuato, and I had a great time lecturing with students about psychology, also teachers, and then every night having some whisky and beer, so that was a one good experience. I also gave lectures in Mexico City of course.

**Talking about your life, and those who helped in your academic education within psychology, who do you recognize as a great teacher that shaped you? I am not asking only for the teacher who had an impact on you intellectually, but the person who also became a true teacher of life, those kind of persons from whom we learn beyond classrooms.**

Oh! That is really difficult, my memory is not so good today (I must say, I recently had Covid). The one that helped me, talking about research, was a man named Leon Festinger, and he was the one who did research on psychology dissonance. And then, when I was at Yale University, there was a psychologist named Irving Janis, who really was like my mentor and taught me not only how to do research, but how to be a good speaker to present ideas.

**One of the main topics you have studied is time, by the way, if you had a time machine to travel to a past time in the history of psychology, or to meet a celebrity in the history of psychology, which time or celebrity would it be and why?**

Oh! That is a really great idea. I would go way back in time to see Marco Polo, to see the Revolution in Cuba, Che Guevara, but also a psychologist named Eric Fromm.

## **Why Fromm?**

Well, because he had wonderful ideas about how to help people think better, work better, function better.

## **And now the opposite, if the same time machine would allow us to travel 100 years ahead, in the future, what would you like to be written about you on psychology books?**

Oh! That Philip Zimbardo loved his students, loved teaching psychology, loved writing about psychology, lecturing psychology, and always wanted to use psychology to help people live a better life.

## **You were talking about Covid, in some way the coronavirus pandemic was also a big social experiment. As a social psychologist, how did you see it and live it? Which relevant matters did the pandemic showed, in terms of individual and community behavior?**

The pandemic has been a big problem for people who are social, people who like to be with family, people who always want to share good times with neighbors, with friends, especially in holidays. So, the pandemic isolated us, one from another, and it was especially terrible for all the people who already were living alone. We also used to visit family and friends before the pandemic. But, so many people, I think died during the pandemic not so much from the disease, but from the feeling of loneliness, from feeling isolated, so that was a side effect of the pandemic, besides the disease it was a social disease of feeling isolated and lonely.

## **On the other hand, one of the topics that you have studied a lot is shyness, and the pandemic even helped a lot of shy people.**

Oh no!, made it worse, I mean, I studied shyness. I am not a shy person, I am an extrovert, I am a Sicilian, I am a family man, I have much family in a small village in Sicily, that I used to visit every single year. I also set up a program, I gave money to send high school students to college, which before that, Sicilian citizens never went to college, I have been doing that for almost 20 years now.

## **You are the founder of the Heroic Imagination Project (HIP).**

Anyone can be a hero. You know, a hero is somebody who helps others in need, a hero takes action, so, it's not just to be compassionate, like... you see a child in school that other kids are bullying, hitting, but what you do is you stop it, you take action to say stop doing that, it is wrong.

Heroes stand up for poor people, for little people, so this is what I have been promoting through my Hero Program and we are now in many countries around the world, more than 20 or 30 countries, even in Senegal, even in Africa, in Palermo.

### **What has been the most important thing you have found about heroism psychology?**

The most interesting thing is that children can be heroes. So, for example, another way to think of heroes is one of the big terrible things that has been happening in the planet, that I have been saying is coming, it is climate change. Our world is suffering now from climate disasters: floods, tornadoes, extreme snow in different parts of the world. Children were one of the first to say: "Climate change disaster is coming, and we have to stop carbon emission, we have to stop excessive use of oil", so children were heroes because they gave a warning years ago. Climate change could destroy the earth and it is doing it, creating draught in many places where people have no food, the animals have no grass to eat, because it is all dried up, so people are starving in Africa, in India; and at the same time, in other places they have no rain, as you know. In the south of America there's been flooding, storms, and up in Miami, I mean, from Florida coast there's been tornadoes, devastating tornadoes. And this is going to be every year, I mean, it's not like before, it used to happen once every five or ten years, they would give the tornado a name, but it is going to happen many times every year now, which is very sad. It is sad because at this point there is not much... there's nothing we can do anymore, but it was children who said: "Adults must become aware of future climate change and change their behavior."

### **In your memories you say there are some topics you would like to study, which are really important, for example conservation and sustainability, two essential subjects for humanity. Which are the challenges you see regarding environmental performance in which social context is fundamental?**

The problem has been what America and all the other countries do, like fracking. Essentially, it's the curse of oil. It is a paradox, it is the oil that you take out of the earth, and then you put it into automobiles, you put it into other things, which then, pollute the environment, and then, made for climate change that is happening right now, so I have been talking about this for many years, but it is almost too late to do anything about it, I mean too late to reverse it, I think.

### **So, your attitude is pessimistic about it.**

Oh, yeah! I am an optimist, but I am a pessimist about the effects of climate change, I think it is here, it is here to stay, it is too late to do anything about it. And again, it's big countries like Russia, China and America that are doing all the pollution with thousands of automobiles and, the many, many problems they create on the assembly line. So I'm a pessimist now, I think climate change will create disaster in many parts of the world, but what is strange is the effect, the negative effects are different in every place, I am saying, in some places there are floods, in some places there are tornadoes, in some places hurricanes, in some places droughts, so it's very different in different parts of the world, and so it's hard to predict what will happen. And also, as the seas hit up, fish are dying, poison algae is growing. So,

for fishermen in many villages in Mexico, even in Vietnam and other places, fish are dying, so there will be no fish to catch.

**Then for you the challenge wouldn't be on trying to avoid climate change because it is already happening and there is nothing else we can do, but the challenge would be how to adapt to that climate change, isn't it?**

Yeah, I don't have any good idea of what can be done at this point. We see now in the Swiss Alpes that glaciers are melting, these are glaciers that have been there for thousand years, and we see in Alaska the ice caps are melting away. And there are these sad pictures in the Alaska polo, bears sitting on top of a big flooding ice cube, and they would die, because there will be no food for them. So I don't know what can be done, the United Nations have committed to study this problem, but it's the big nations as I said, it's China, Russia, and America who are still doing all the polluting, and makes it worse, I mean, it's bad that they are making it worse rather than doing anything to make it better.

**There is a subject which connects Covid and climate change, it is about people who say that vaccines shouldn't exist, there is also people that say that climate change doesn't exist, what is going on with this people?**

Oh yeah, these are reality deniers, they deny the reality of what is happening ("climate change doesn't exist, fascism is better than democracy"). The reality right now is that I have a disease, I have Covid, and at my age it is very damaging.

**Could you tell us something about your childhood?**

As I said in my memories, I grew up as a poor child from an immigrant family, in poverty, really in poverty, and I made money shining people's shoes, they don't have that anymore, for 10 cents only. You have a little shoe-shining box that I made and you shine people's shoes, on those days men always would like to have shining shoes, they do not do it anymore. So, imagine, I'm kneeling down on the floor like a beggar, instead of begging, which a lot of kids did on those days, this is during the Great Depression in 1930's. I was a worker, I shined people's shoes! But imagine that so lonely position, you are shining, as a child, shoes of a rich person. I survived the poverty. The other thing about poverty is the humiliation, poor people would go to a place that was like a factory to get clothes that they would give away and I can remember trying to see a nice pair of pants. On those days boys used to wear something called nickers, not long pants, not short pants, and I was looking for a nice design, and the man who worked there said, just pull down one, threw it to me and said: "Beggars should not be choosers", meaning: if you are a poor, you are a beggar, and you don't chose, you lose reality, the option of choosing what you want; if you are poor, you get what is given to you, namely, ugly pants, or something, as I still remember that line: "If you are a poor, beggars cannot be choosers", they have to

get what society gives to them. There is still many people begging in the streets in many cities around the world.

**I cannot finish this interview without asking you about the Stanford Prison Experiment. What do you think we still need to understand about that experiment?**

The Stanford Prison Study was done in 1971, that means there's more than 50 years old. The experiment shows how easy it is for people, for good people, to do bad things. The college students who are playing the role of prison guards, they're college students, they never were prison guards, to then use the power that they had in their hands to abuse the prisoners, and then to degrade them, I mean, not only to physically harm them, but at the end of the experiment they would say: "Imagine you are a female camel and you get behind them and you milk camels", then they say: "Now pump them", that is pretending to have anal intercourse. So these are college students who started as nice college students playing the role of prison guards and then, they became cruel and abusive individuals. So this is true not only in the experiment, this is in the real life, that is, we all play roles and sometimes the role overcomes us and we become that, we become the cruel prison guards, we become the cruel owner of a factory, we become someone who does sex trafficking of young women and our boys, so Prison Study says we have to be aware that even if we are playing a role it is easy to become the role and do as if you were an actor, and then when the movie ends, you keep acting, you are on stage, you keep going, you don't stop, so that is one of the messages of the Stanford Prison Study: Be aware that we all play roles in life, and you want to be aware that you do not want to be that role, you are playing a role, but you do not want to become that cruel person when you play the role of a hero and become upstanding and kind and caring for other people.

**Professor, you, interested on psychology of evil, were born the day Hitler became Germany's Dictator, have you ever thought about it?**

No, I didn't know that. Hitler was, even as a child, the enemy, and again here is the case where people in Germany loved him. Even if you were not Jewish, he was horrible, and he did that purposely, picked up a group of Jewish and he said Jewish are like animals ("we have to exterminate them"), and then set out, to kill millions of Jewish, innocent Jewish who did nothing. He believed Germans were the Arian race, the white race, and they had to eliminate Jewish, gypsies, homosexuals. All the people that Hitler said were inferior, had to be eliminated, and they settled them, as you know, in the concentration camps, and then the extermination camps, so he is probably my biggest anti-hero.

**Thank you very much.**