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CLINIC, POLITICS AND COMMITMENT: HÉLIO PELLEGRINO AND THE SUBVERSION OF SILENCE

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Abstract

This paper explores the trajectory of Hélio Pellegrino, highlighting his active engagement in the fight against authoritarianism and the military dictatorship in Brazil, as well as his courage in challenging rigid institutions. Hélio Pellegrino embodied the synthesis of the intellectual committed to social transformation, integrating psychoanalysis with public and political engagement in times of coups, silencing, censorship, and the torture of political prisoners. His combative stance extended not only to the institutional practices of traditional psychoanalysis but also to the public confrontation of ethical issues, as in the case of the self-proclaimed "psychoanalyst" Amílcar Lobo, a collaborator in acts of torture. In this emblematic case, Pellegrino exposed the contradiction between the clinical commitment to human care and involvement in acts of torture. This denunciation transcends the Brazilian context and reveals the ongoing tension between psychoanalysis and authoritarianism in Europe and globally, standing out as a particular episode within a broader historical framework of international psychoanalytic institutions. His intense participation in spaces of resistance, such as the Symposium "Psychoanalysis and Politics" at PUC-Rio, is recalled as a moment when he confronted the dilemmas of analytical neutrality in dark times. Beyond being a psychoanalyst, Hélio was also a poet, journalist, physician, and psychiatrist—a defender of a living clinic open to the people, opposing the confinement of knowledge. He believed in psychoanalysis as a subversive and transformative practice, open to human encounters and historical processes. The first social psychoanalysis clinic in Brazil was born from his restlessness. Together with Kattrin Kemper, whose experience at the Berlin Polyclinic inspired a commitment to democratizing psychoanalysis, he proposed a model aimed at the working classes, breaking with the elitism of traditional consulting rooms. There, in Morro dos Cabritos and the streets of Copacabana, psychoanalysis assumed another face, one close to the suffering of the people. His trajectory reconstructs the struggle for ethics in psychoanalysis, transforming the consulting room into a space of human encounter that transcends the mere application of psychoanalytic technique—a gesture of presence in the face of the other's suffering, capable of opening unexpected paths to freedom. This study revisits this restless and luminous figure, reaffirming the relevance of his courageous trajectory, his intellectual contributions, and his clinical and political psychoanalytic praxis.

Keywords: *Hélio Pellegrino, international Freudianism, international authoritarianism and dictatorships, social clinic, ethical commitment.*

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1. Hélio Pellegrino

On the banks of the Danube, in this beautiful and magical city, the solemn proclamation of Freud was heard in 1918 at the *V International Congress of Psychoanalysis*, a courageous manifesto in defense of the dispossessed, as stated in the text *Lines of Progress in Psychoanalytic Therapy*. A remarkable son of this land, Sándor Ferenczi, president of the event and dean of the faculty of medicine, sought to integrate psychoanalysis into the medical curriculum, dreaming of multiplying practitioners so that psychoanalysis could reach the people, contributing to the reduction of neuroses, an "endemic" as harmful as tuberculosis at the time.

Werner Kemper brought the Budapest speech to Brazil, in 1948, in its original German version. He had it translated into Portuguese and gave a copy to Hélio Pellegrino, who carried it in his pocket. Certain aspects of the "1918 manifesto" deeply impressed the Brazilian psychoanalyst, guiding his approach to psychoanalytic practice, such as the question of abstinence: "By abstinence (...) one should not understand acting without any satisfaction—which would certainly be impracticable; nor do we mean what the term popularly connotes, that is, abstaining from sexual relations; it means something different, which is much more connected with the dynamics of illness and recovery" (Freud, 1987, p. 205). Likewise, he examined the dynamics of this new science: "The progress of the new therapy will undoubtedly continue

along other lines; above all, along the one that Ferenczi, in his article *Technical Difficulties in an Analysis of Hysteria*, recently termed 'activity' on the part of the analyst" (Freud, 1987, p. 204).

In Brazil, during the 1970s, the brutal military dictatorship, driven by a culture of death, inflicted suffering and pain upon the Brazilian people. Psychoanalysis plunged into the cowardly silence of those who omitted themselves, shielded by the pretense of apolitical neutrality—a disgraceful excuse for such a shameful omission.

Hélio Pellegrino was born a poet and became a militant in politics and journalism, raising questions that spanned literature to theology, philosophy to the arts. He was an indignant voice, calling to reflection those who longed for justice and equity. And he did so in the most significant sectors of Brazilian society.

In the field of psychoanalysis, his fervent passion, he fought for the return to its original spirit, the psychoanalysis of social democracy, as proclaimed by its creator, Sigmund Freud. The latter's 1918 speech, known as *Lines of Progress in Psychoanalytic Therapy* (Freud, 1987), was deliberately excluded from curricula, as was *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1927), written in defense of Theodor Reik, who was prosecuted for practicing psychoanalysis without being a physician (Freud, 1976). The training curriculum for psychoanalytic candidates was intentionally designed to sabotage such studies. The question that was never answered—whether psychoanalysis was a prerogative of physicians—became an increasingly troubling issue for the official members of psychoanalytic societies and institutions. The Brazilian press took an interest in this unsettling proposition and published articles on the subject, the most controversial of which appeared in *Jornal do Brasil*, written by journalist Roberto Mello, titled *The Barons of Psychoanalysis.*

Hélio Pellegrino was neither superficial nor a mere pamphleteer. His arguments were irrefutable, leaving his colleagues—concerned about their own financial interests—speechless. Yet, his emphatic inquiries never lacked delicacy and elegance; they were never offensive. This, in turn, unsettled his detractors even more, prompting them to fabricate false accusations in their defense. In fact, the response to his critiques relied on weak arguments, laced with insults, even as his adversaries grudgingly acknowledged his brilliance in journalism, philosophy, literature, and poetry. However, they sought to deny him recognition as a psychoanalyst. Their main criticism was his refusal to practice abstinence, exposing in public his ideology and militancy for the right to freedom of thought and expression—brutally suppressed by the ill-fated military persecution, which killed, kidnapped, and imprisoned regime opponents, eliminating countless Brazilians who remain missing to this day.

Governed by modesty and simplicity, he never boasted about his achievements, a stark contrast to the frequent self-promotion of his colleagues. His scientific output is vast, though not yet compiled into books. The rigor of abstinence was observed in the analytic setting, where he was impeccable in professional conduct. His clinic was the most sought-after in Rio de Janeiro, welcoming clients from all ideological backgrounds, including right-wing individuals who respected his honorable and dignified socialist stance in politics. A comprehensive view of his extensive theoretical work can be found in the recent doctoral research by Larissa Leão de Castro, *Hélio Pellegrino: For a Political Psychoanalysis* (2024). This groundbreaking study revealed the immense legacy of the psychoanalyst, triggering the initiative to publish, in 2025, *The Complete Works* of this genius, whose crystal-clear thought offers an enduring source of inspiration—a relentless struggle for a democratic and socially engaged psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, his persecutors sought to discredit him as a psychoanalyst, attempting to undermine his authority as a master and interpreter of Freud's work. He never cared to defend himself. The "authentic" psychoanalyst, according to his detractors, was one affiliated with the IPA, practicing abstinence both inside and outside the consulting room. He, however, preferred to be a bastard!

Regarding the expansion of psychoanalysis to new understandings of neuroses, one could say that Pellegrino gleaned from his contemporaries whatever could serve as an effective tool for understanding patients' symptoms, without straying from the psychoanalytic axis: the unconscious. He was a relentless scholar, distinguished by his unique ability to assimilate doctrines, digest them, and apply them with his own distinctive touch, without resorting to authorized discourse, jargon, or even citations from renowned authors.

The expression *Barons of Psychoanalysis* was coined to challenge the imposition, within the Psychoanalytic Society, of the figure of the training analyst, where candidates' analyses were only validated if conducted by officially accredited members—mandatorily four times a week, at exorbitant fees—with the novice having no right to a voice, space, or vote. Pellegrino considered them eunuchs, silenced until they could prove their unconditional adherence to the Institution through blind obedience. Similarly, supervisions could only be conducted by accredited analysts and were extensive, requiring more than one supervision per case, following the patient from start to finish.

When it was publicly revealed that a torturer—a military physician—was undergoing psychoanalytic training at SPRJ, to which Hélio Pellegrino belonged, he was seized by a prophetic spirit and raised his voice in protest, demanding the exclusion of this aberrant candidate. The case reached the

press and intellectual and artistic circles. The IPA was called upon, but its response was one of unjustified omission and leniency. Ultimately, it was Hélio Pellegrino who was expelled from the Psychoanalytic Society—not the accused. Pellegrino, fearless, took the matter to civil court, where a judicial ruling reinstated him to the Society, the place where he believed he belonged—to continue his contestations, always articulated with nobility and tenderness, grace and poetry, never with insults or aggression of any kind. He wanted dialogue. He wanted to ask questions and receive answers or explanations. He made enemies, not by choice, but because of his obsession with otherness—the other was the focus of his appreciation and love, which he demonstrated with deep devotion and respect for difference. If obsession knocked at his door, it was only to repeat the mantra that echoed inside and outside his consulting room—on the asphalt and in the slums, in the affluent homes and those lacking everything. He carried in mind Freud's words: "I have been able to help people with whom I had nothing in common—neither race, nor education, nor social position, nor general life perspective—without affecting their individuality." (Freud, 1987, p. 204). If, as Jacques Lacan aptly states in *Seminar VI*, it is the patient who legitimizes the psychoanalyst—not the Society where they trained, *Lesson 26*, then the unanimous recognition and gratitude of Pellegrino's patients render him, without a doubt, a legitimate and authentic psychoanalyst.

In *The Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* by Elisabeth Roudinesco (1998), Hélio Pellegrino is the only Brazilian psychoanalyst honored with a distinguished entry, highlighting the vigor of his practice in psychoanalysis in Brazil. In 2022, it was the Freud Museum in London that included in its annals the remarkable work of Hélio Pellegrino, titled *The Oedipal Pact and the Social Pact* (Pellegrino, 2020). The first presentation of this work took place in Santiago, Chile, in 1983. In 1986, he opened the Latin American Colloquium in Paris, titled *The Psychoanalyst under Terror*. In three states of the Brazilian Federation, clinics, streets, avenues, and public spaces immortalize his name, Hélio Pellegrino, resonating in the silence imposed by the Societies that sought to suppress the voice that protested against distortions and deviations in the role of psychoanalysis as a listening space for human suffering—a role meant for all, not just a privileged few. There is no record of another psychoanalyst being celebrated in the same manner as the *mineiro* who settled in Rio de Janeiro in 1952. Does all this mean something, or is it just dust dissipating in the perverse winds of oblivion? Should it not have become standard practice in Brazil? It did not yield financial dividends for professionals. Hélio Pellegrino was cursed by his peers. Despite the relentless siege against his psychoanalytic practice and the reprehensible censorship of freedom of expression, Hélio Pellegrino, alone, convened a symposium, *Psychoanalysis and Politics*, at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. The auditorium was overcrowded, while outside, bayonets and tanks stood ready to sweep away those who dared to rise against the insane regime. It was during the keynote speech that a participant, a victim of torture, interrupted the discourse, stood up, and made an emphatic denunciation: *Doctor, your Psychoanalytic Society harbors a torturer. What do you intend to do about it?* The response came like lightning: *I will do the impossible to denounce this villainy and pursue it to its ultimate consequences.*

After a painful and grueling struggle, the torturer was expelled from the ranks of the SPRJ, without explanation or any form of reparation.

On November 26, 1985, Hélio Pellegrino received an official invitation from the Government of Cuba to visit the island. Brazil, under the arbitrary imposition of American imperialism, had no diplomatic relations with that beautiful Caribbean country. The journey took place via Lima, Peru. Criticism rained down: *Such conduct is an affront to his clients.* Yet, the Brazilian psychoanalyst traveled to meet with Cuban authorities, who were eager to understand what the *Psychodynamic Encounters* held in Rio de Janeiro had entailed. Hélio's commitment to the *Psychiatric Reform Movement* earned him the flattering invitation to speak at the Havana Psychiatric Hospital, extended by its distinguished and renowned director, Dr. Ricardo González Menéndez, alongside the institution's entire staff. Indeed, Pellegrino's defining characteristic was his pursuit of humanization in the care of those labeled as mentally disturbed. Two of his actions stand out as worthy of the anthologies. The first took place during a psychiatry lecture when a professor brought a psychotic patient before the students as a "live model," asking questions that elicited incoherent responses, which in turn provoked bursts of laughter. The patient had been a sailor. He had encountered the ghosts of the deep, the "sea wolf," fearless in the face of the towering waves of stormy days and nights. Yet there, in the amphitheater, before the unrelenting sea of inquisitive gazes, that ocean of frozen humanity terrified him, and he urinated on himself. Hélio Pellegrino, in tears, descended the steps where the students sat and embraced the patient. *Not like this*, he vowed, committing himself to a human methodology for humans, regardless of their psychological condition. The second gesture remains a cherished memory in Belo Horizonte, the city where the physician and psychoanalyst was born. At the Raul Suarez Institute, he was on duty on Christmas Eve. When he noticed that the prescriptions had been doubled to allow the professionals to leave early for their celebrations, he refused to administer them. Instead, he called everyone outside to see Santa Claus arriving in the sky. If medicine seemed harsh to him, striving to become an exact science, psychiatry appeared to be reifying the "disturbed" patient, obsessing over medicalization. Hélio Pellegrino sought the path of the word, believing that when one speaks, light emerges.

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The limited time of this presentation prevents even a minimal description of the immense presence of this thinker of Brazilian psychoanalysis, so deeply committed to society. However, it is worth mentioning one of the most significant events of 1973: the creation of the *Anna Kattrin Kemper Social Psychoanalysis Clinic*.

Anna Kattrin Kemper, wife of Werner Kemper, had come from Germany with her husband, sent by Ernest Jones with the mission of organizing the Brazilian Society of Psychoanalysis. In Europe, Kattrin had been a prominent figure at the Berlin Polyclinic, tirelessly working with children orphaned by the war. She brought her dream to Brazil, where she joined another dreamer, Hélio Pellegrino, and together they envisioned a clinic modeled after the Berlin Polyclinic. Pellegrino, with his visionary genius, set to work and created a one-year course on *The Thought of Freud and His Followers*. He also established, at Cândido Mendes University, the *Psychodynamic Encounters*, including themes such as *The Child, Parents, and Their Problems* and *Grandparents Are Very Welcome*, which lasted two semesters. This event inaugurated the 1973 International Congress of the FSPI (*Federation of Independent Psychoanalytic Societies*) in Innsbruck, Austria.

The funds raised through courses and meetings enabled the rental of a house, the establishment of a clinic, and the introduction of Hélio Pellegrino's creative idea of founding a Time Bank. Each professional trained in group therapy, voluntarily affiliated with the Clinic, would allocate a minimum of two weekly hours of their work to support care for the destitute and dispossessed population. Thus, with payments made according to each individual's financial capacity—some merely symbolic—candidates steadily arrived, reaching seven hundred registrations by the end of the Clinic's first three months of operation. In its inaugural year, this pioneering treatment center opened its doors to adults, adolescents, and children, the latter forming the so-called Play Groups. Aggressiveness, disputes, and rivalries, the primary expressions of internal conflicts, were interpreted exclusively through allusive questioning. Individual treatments, in specific cases, were considered, as was psychiatric follow-up in a special department of the Clinic when necessary. The proximity of the Social Psychoanalysis Clinic to a favela in the Copacabana neighborhood led psychoanalysts to venture into the hills to listen to this segment of the population that would never enter a consulting room to speak of their fears and ghosts. This experience was presented at the Paris Colloquium, showcased at the aforementioned Latin American meeting, *The Psychoanalyst Under Terror*. Inês Etienne Romeu, detained in a maximum-security prison for her involvement in the 1969 kidnapping of U.S. Ambassador Charles Burke Elbrick and sentenced to life imprisonment, received therapy in prison at Hélio Pellegrino's request.

During his visit to Rio, Michel Foucault sought to personally visit the Social Clinic, meet with Hélio Pellegrino and Anna Kattrin Kemper, and later wrote to praise the initiative as fundamental. In fact, the CSAKP was the first of its kind in Brazil, the only one to implement a Time Bank, open to all Psychoanalytic Institutions, operating entirely non-profit and without any intention of becoming a training facility for professionals in the PSI field.

Hélio Pellegrino was passionate about the Other: *I wish to love him in his radical uselessness, that is, to love him for love's sake, not for any utility he may provide me.* He was exemplary in the way he welcomed patients. He neither acted on their behalf nor with them. His approach echoed the Socratic method, rooted in the belief that the subject, in due time, would find their own path. He followed the teachings of the Master: *"Cruel as it may seem, we must ensure that the patient's suffering, in some effective measure or form, does not come to a premature end. If, due to the removal of symptoms and their consequent loss of meaning, their suffering is alleviated, we must restore it elsewhere, under some appreciable form of deprivation; otherwise, we risk achieving nothing more than insignificant and transient improvements."* (Freud, 1987, p. 205).

A great outcry arose among psychoanalysts, who deemed the space injurious to psychoanalysis, historically elitist and exclusivist in Brazil. The very IPA requested the removal of the term *Social* from the Clinic's name, arguing that it should not be attached to Psychoanalysis. The response was a solemn disregard for this "nonsense" request, dismissing its absurd demand outright. The low fees charged for sessions threatened the longstanding tradition of high prices in private practices, a discretionary filter on the demand for treatment of psychic suffering. Attacks reached the press, where offensive remarks abounded, portraying the initiative as a trivialization of psychoanalysis or, worse, in a prejudiced accusation offensive to both Freud's science and the impoverished population, dismissing it as "luxury in the trash."

Pellegrino was envied and, consequently, criticized by colleagues who remained impermeable to revolutionary proposals aimed at purging psychoanalysis of the weeds that had taken root within it. He was expelled from the Psychoanalytic Society he so esteemed, one that conferred upon him both notoriety and respect by virtue of his membership. He was imprisoned for denouncing torture and advocating for freedom, stolen by military usurpers of the legitimately constituted power. The charge against him was that his actions endangered National Security. His weapon was the word—clear, precise, and always in service of the excluded.

The awareness that the patient presents with a shattered mind, attempting to compensate for their void through vicarious satisfactions, served as a warning for Pellegrino not to compensate, within the transference process, for the dissatisfaction continuously expressed. He mastered the art of restraint to the precise degree, offering a secure reception and attentive listening, within deprivation, providing nothing beyond, convinced that the patient would achieve fruitful appeasement through their own means. Moreover, his clinic was open to all, particularly sensitive to the less privileged, where he maintained a strict and unbiased psychoanalytic treatment. He remained faithful to the doctrinal axis that establishes psychoanalysis as a generous and aseptic form of listening, certain that, "when someone speaks, things become clearer" (Freud, 1905/1996, p. 212), as one may read in a footnote in the book Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.

Aligned with the thought and action of Hélio Pellegrino, it is worth recalling Elizabeth Ann Danto's monumental work, Freud's Free Clinics, an appeal to the fourth generation of Freudianism for a profound reassessment of psychoanalytic practice in the third millennium. This view is relevant, since psychoanalysis has long been confined to the bourgeois elite with financial means for extended treatment. Although not Freud's intent, psychoanalysis became reserved for the privileged, even though, since his 1918 speech, it had been clear that psychoanalysis was meant for everyone, with the Viennese Master characterizing it as a product of social democracy.

Indeed, during the 1920s, several Public Clinics emerged, with Freud and the first generation of psychoanalysts establishing them across various countries in Central Europe, including Austria, France, England, and Germany. In Vienna, the clinic known as the Ambulatorium was inaugurated in 1922 under the direction of Wilhelm Reich, who later founded Sex-Pol, a polyclinic dedicated to issues of sexuality and reproductive rights. The expansion of psychoanalytic clinics transcended oceans, reaching Egypt, Cuba, and the United States. In Brazil, the movement gained traction with the arrival of the Kemper couple, sent by Ernest Jones, who contributed to the consolidation of psychoanalysis in Rio de Janeiro.

Elisabeth Danto eloquently reminds us that, from its very origins, psychoanalysis has been intimately linked to a collective and social vision of psychic suffering. The first and second generations of psychoanalysts upheld this perspective with Freud's own endorsement, particularly in Vienna, known as "Red Vienna," where innovative housing policies aimed to ensure dignified living conditions for workers. Psychoanalysts such as Wilhelm Reich, Otto Fenichel, Alfred Adler, and Theodor Reik advocated for a practice engaged with social issues. In London, Melanie Klein, Anna Freud, and Ernest Jones followed this path, as did Karl Abraham and Otto Rank in Berlin, and Sándor Ferenczi in Budapest, who was influenced by the thought of Georg Lukács. In Paris, Marie Bonaparte established the Centre Jean Favreau with a similar intent.

The breadth of this movement becomes even more striking when one realizes that Public Clinics were not confined to Western Europe but spread across different regions of the world. Their purpose was to bring the analytical word to spaces where it could illuminate and transform, even in the face of the harshest criticisms. These initiatives faced resistance from critics. However, the founders of this approach were undeterred, maintaining that psychoanalytic listening must extend beyond the confines of the traditional consulting room and engage directly with urgent social demands. Over time, psychoanalysis distanced itself from the popular classes it once embraced. These initiatives sought to offer psychoanalysis to the poor and extremely deprived. Why was this practice lost?

Hélio died in 1988, aged 64. A long silence followed. In 2024, his centenary revived Freud's 1918 dream: psychoanalysis as listening to suffering, without class distinction.

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