

OEDIPUS COMPLEX, OEDIPAL PACT AND SOCIAL PACT: THE INSURRECTION OF OEDIPUS IN HÉLIO PELLEGRINO

Larissa Leão de Castro
Psychoanalyst (Brazil)

Abstract

This article addresses the thought of Hélio Pellegrino, highlighting his singular contribution to psychoanalysis through the development of a critical and innovative reflection on the *oedipus complex*, the *oedipal pact*, and the *social pact*. Pellegrino — psychoanalyst, poet, and essayist — is among the most prominent figures of twentieth-century Brazilian psychoanalysis and belongs to the fourth generation of the international psychoanalytic movement. His trajectory was marked by a commitment to the democratisation of access to psychoanalysis and the struggle against social injustice. The articulation between psychoanalysis and the Brazilian historical context underpins his critique of authoritarian institutions, revealing the ethical dimension of his clinical practice. The concept of the oedipal pact, as formulated by Pellegrino, reflects the structuring function of the Law, emphasising reciprocity and equality as foundational to the civilising process. Throughout the text, the author analyses how this perspective contributes to the understanding of the structuration of human desire, processes of subjectivation, and the formation of both psychic and social symptoms, positioning itself as a critique of the traditional psychiatric model and the conservatism prevalent within psychoanalytic institutions. Hélio Pellegrino is recognised among the key figures of Brazilian psychoanalysis and is one of the few Brazilian psychoanalysts with a dedicated entry in the *Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse* by Élisabeth Roudinesco and Michel Plon. Moreover, his essay *Complexo de Édipo, Pacto Edípico e Pacto Social* is catalogued in the Sigmund Freud Library in London, translated into English as *Oedipus Complex, Oedipal Pact, and Social Pact*. This fact reaffirms Pellegrino's international relevance, establishing him as a reference not only within the Brazilian context but also on the global psychoanalytic stage. The inclusion of his work in the Freud Library collection symbolises the recognition of his theoretical contributions to psychoanalysis, especially concerning the articulation between psyche, culture, and social institutions.

Keywords: *Hélio Pellegrino, Oedipus Complex, oedipal pact, social pact, Brazilian psychoanalysis.*

1. Oedipus Complex, oedipal pact and social pact: A critical reinterpretation

In Budapest — a city marked by the encounter between psychoanalysis and the aspiration to build a more just future — Freud, in 1918, proclaimed his vision of access to psychoanalytic treatment as a right of all and as a duty of the State (Freud, 1987). Inspired by this original and revolutionary spirit, the present study engages with the thought of Hélio Pellegrino, whose work likewise advocates for a psychoanalysis committed to the emancipation of subjects and to the critique of repressive social structures. Just as Freud envisioned a future in which psychoanalysis would be accessible to all social classes, Pellegrino expanded this proposal by linking psychoanalysis not only to individual clinical practice but also to the analysis of institutions and to political debate. Within this context, we revisit the concept of the oedipal pact as formulated by Pellegrino and his contribution to a critical reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex in psychoanalysis, articulating it with the formation of the social bond. This study is justified by the relevance of Pellegrino's work, whose contributions have yet to be fully systematised, and by its potential to illuminate contemporary questions regarding subjectivity, culture, and power. Here, findings from research based on a documental survey conducted in the archives of the Museu de Literatura Brasileira in Rio de Janeiro are retrieved. The archive houses over 130 psychoanalytic texts — both handwritten and typewritten — by Pellegrino, analysed through an interpretative approach aimed at identifying some of his key theoretical inflections concerning the Oedipus complex and its relation to the social pact. The study is linked to a doctoral thesis, which resulted in the publication of a book (Castro, 2024), constituting a first cartography of Hélio Pellegrino's psychoanalytic work.

The contemporary relevance of the debate on Pellegrino is reinforced by the forthcoming publication of his complete works, which will expand opportunities for revisiting and deepening the

understanding of his intellectual production. This release will not only facilitate access to his thought but also rekindle fascination with his singular figure, whose life journey is masterfully narrated in the book *Hélio Pellegrino: inconfidências*, by João Batista Ferreira Lembi (2024). With a poetic-psychoanalytic style, the author intertwines the life and work of the psychoanalyst-poet, capturing the aesthetic, historical, and affective dimensions of a thinker who transcended the limits of psychoanalysis. The writer guides us through this journey with the delicacy required to reveal not only the intellectual, the psychoanalyst, and the anti-asylum psychiatrist, but also the poet and the man, highlighting the sensitive beauty that permeated his writing and his gaze upon the world, bringing to light previously unpublished aspects of his trajectory and enriching the historiography of psychoanalysis.

His psychoanalytic proposal distances itself from an adaptive approach, aiming instead to emphasise and reclaim the critical and emancipatory dimension embedded in the origins and foundations of psychoanalysis. By problematising the historical use of the Oedipus complex to reinforce power structures, Pellegrino introduces the concept of the *oedipal pact* as a central element in the constitution of subjectivities, unveiling its imbrication with social and political configurations. This concept emerges from his reading of psychoanalysis through the lens of historical materialism and the critique of authoritarian institutions, revealing the singularity of a thought inscribed within the freudo-marxist tradition. In this respect, his reflection resonates with the formulations of authors who sought to articulate psychoanalysis with social critique, such as Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, who insist on the transformative essence of psychoanalysis.

Thus, the relevance of his work transcends the psychoanalytic field, extending to broader debates on the reproduction of inequality and the mechanisms of social exclusion. Pellegrino's approach to the Oedipus complex enables a conceptual displacement that expands its theoretical and clinical implications. In formulating the oedipal pact, Pellegrino not only revisits the elaborations of Freud and Lacan, but also questions the ways in which psychoanalysis may contribute to the reinforcement of repressive normativities. In his critique of institutional psychoanalysis, the author denounces its tendency toward complacency with mechanisms of domination and its detachment from the marginalised sectors of society. Within this context, the central question that may be posed is: how does Hélio Pellegrino's formulation of the oedipal pact allow for a critical rereading of the Oedipus complex, and what are its implications for the relationship between psychoanalysis, the social bond, and politics?

The answer to this question lies in examining the oedipal pact as a process of subjectivation that extends beyond the family dynamic, embedding itself in a network of social relations marked by power asymmetries. This shift is essential to rethinking psychoanalytic practice in its articulation with politics and with the historical conditions that shape subjectivity. In investigating these issues, Pellegrino contributes to the expansion of the theoretical horizon of psychoanalysis, reaffirming its critical potential and its ethical commitment to the Other. As Freud foresaw in his lecture in Budapest, psychoanalysis can and must become a democratised instrument for transforming psychic and social suffering.

2. A subversive psychiatry: Hélio Pellegrino and the struggle against the asylum paradigm

Hélio Pellegrino positioned himself as a critic of traditional psychiatry and of the institutionalisation of madness, denouncing asylums as spaces of exclusion and subjective annulment. For him, psychiatry — when aligned with the logic of confinement — functioned as a technology of power that subjected individuals to repression and silencing, rather than promoting care and autonomy. He emphasised that asylum-based internment not only removed individuals from social life, but also stripped them of citizenship and of their condition as desiring subjects. The erasure of alterity promoted by the asylum model was sustained by practices that reinforced institutional violence and isolation, exposing a societal project that naturalised the exclusion of those deemed undesirable to the capitalist order. His critique anticipates and inspires the movement that would culminate in the Brazilian Psychiatric Reform, which, through Law 10.216/2001, established the progressive replacement of asylums with a model of care in freedom, centred on social reintegration and the strengthening of community-based support networks. Pellegrino's struggle echoed in the transformation of public mental health policy, reaffirming that madness must not be confined, but welcomed in its singularity and in the right to a full and dignified existence (Castro, 2025).

His political militancy was decisive in the construction of this emancipatory psychiatry, as he understood that the question of madness was directly linked to power relations and to the social structures of domination. In a country marked by historical inequalities and the systematic exclusion of the poor and Black population, Pellegrino denounced the duality of psychiatric care: while the wealthy had access to humanised treatment, the poor were cast into institutions that more closely resembled warehouses of bodies. His actions inspired the anti-asylum movement, driven by the Sanitary Reform and the struggle for Brazil's redemocratisation, and he remains a reference for critical thought on psychiatry in the country. Pellegrino did not conceive of madness as an exclusively medical problem, but as a social and political phenomenon,

one whose approach required a radical transformation of institutions and of society's very gaze upon psychic suffering. The State's omission, the dismantling of the National Mental Health Policy, and the disproportionate funding of Therapeutic Communities in recent years demonstrate that the struggle for an emancipatory psychiatry remains an ongoing challenge (Desinstitute, 2021). As recent studies indicate, scientific evidence supports the effectiveness of the care-in-freedom model; however, the persistence of political and economic interests in profiting from the suffering of madness under capitalism continues to sustain repressive institutions — even those publicly funded.

3. Hélio Pellegrino and the insurrection of Oedipus

Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex revolutionised the understanding of subjectivity by showing that sexuality is not merely a biological phenomenon, but rather plays a structural role in the constitution of the subject and in the formation of the social bond (Freud, 1905). Freud highlighted the centrality of Oedipus by identifying it as an essential threshold in the individual's transition to culture, ensuring inscription into the symbolic order through the renunciation of incestuous desire and the acceptance of the Law. Hélio Pellegrino (2020) retains this fundamental premise and expands it by emphasising that the internalisation of the Law cannot be reduced to a mechanism based solely on fear or the threat of castration. For him, the Law plays a structuring role in human desire and must operate as a pact that articulates interdictions and permissions in a reciprocal manner, ensuring both limits and the possibility of desire's circulation within the social bond. Thus, he rethinks interdiction not as prohibition, but as a reciprocal process ensuring recognition and dignity (Pellegrino, 1987b).

The formulation of the oedipal pact, as proposed by Pellegrino, does not replace Freud's conception of the Oedipus Complex but expands it by highlighting its role as a fundamental structure not only in the constitution of subjectivity but also in that of the social bond itself. If Freud identified Oedipus as the central model of socialisation and of the internalisation of culture, Pellegrino (1987a) underscores that this process is not limited to childhood but recurs throughout life — in education, in work, and within institutional relations. The oedipal pact thus functions as a regulator of the interdictions and permissions that structure subjectivity and collective coexistence. What distinguishes his reading from traditional psychoanalytic interpretations is the emphasis on reciprocity in the internalisation of the Law; that is, the necessity that interdiction be accompanied by a set of social guarantees that enable the subject's development under conditions of equality. In this way, Pellegrino shifts the understanding of the Oedipus Complex to a broader dimension, in which the Law is not merely a normative prohibition, but a symbolic agreement structuring the relationship between subject and society. Cultural inscription, therefore, should not be experienced as an annulment of desire, but rather as a process that enables the subject's emergence as an active participant in the social pact.

The distinction between the Oedipus Complex, the oedipal pact, and the social pact allows one to grasp how the psychoanalyst inserts psychoanalysis into the debate on civilisation and politics. While for Freud the internalisation of the Law constitutes the foundation of the psyche and of culture, Pellegrino (2020) expands this analysis by showing how this process may unfold in different ways, depending on the social structure and the historical conditions that shape concrete social pacts. The internalisation of the Law may give rise to emancipatory processes, or conversely, to modalities of submission and exclusion — depending on how that culture is organised. Accordingly, Pellegrino distinguishes between a just social pact, which ensures reciprocal rights and duties, and a perverse social pact, which naturalises inequalities and arbitrary privileges. For him, the capitalist model of society, grounded in exploitation and the reproduction of inequality, reflects a distorted oedipal pact in which the Law functions as unilateral repression, thereby discrediting its structuring function and becoming merely a mechanism of oppression (Pellegrino, 1984). It is within this context that the notion of the *insurrection of Oedipus* emerges, signalling a symbolic rupture with the reproduction of exclusionary and perverse pacts. This reading expands the Freudian conception by demonstrating that Oedipus, beyond being a psychic phenomenon of the individual, is also a historical and political dispositif that structures the social order and modes of subjectivation.

With this reformulation, the author proposes a psychoanalysis committed to social transformation, capable of addressing the dynamics of power and exclusion in the constitution of the subject. For Pellegrino, it is not enough to understand the Oedipus Complex as an internal psychic process; it is essential to analyse it in relation to the structures of power that determine who may or may not access rights and recognition (Pellegrino, 1984). Psychoanalysis, in failing to confront these questions intrinsic to its own field, runs the risk of becoming complicit with forms of domination and adaptation to the status quo (Pellegrino, 1979). His thought aligns with the Freudo-Marxist tradition in demonstrating that desire and subjectivity cannot be understood in isolation, but must be analysed within the context of social relations and the historical conditions in which subjects are constituted. Psychoanalysis, for Pellegrino (1984), must emancipate rather than normalise.

4. The Law and the mechanisms of domination: The perverse pact and the production of exclusion

The psychoanalyst analyses the structure of modern society as a reflection of a *perverse oedipal pact*, in which the Law no longer functions as a symbolic regulator based on reciprocity, but rather as a mechanism of privilege and oppression. For the author, the internalisation of the Law should guarantee a balance between interdictions and rights, ensuring that the subject's desire may circulate within the social bond without being annulled or instrumentalised by perverse power. In unequal societies, however, this pact is broken and replaced by a perverse model sustained by the systematic exclusion of part of the population. This structure appears across institutions — from prisons to psychoanalytic societies — which often sustain domination under the guise of neutrality. The perpetuation of this *perverse pact* hinders the construction of a truly democratic form of socialisation, for it transforms the Law into an instrument of arbitrary power rather than a foundation of equality and alterity. Thus, Pellegrino reaffirms the necessity of a Law that, instead of operating through unilateral repression, be structured as a legitimate social pact in which the interdiction of incestuous and parricidal desire is bound to the construction of egalitarian conditions for all subjects (Pellegrino, 1984).

5. The Economy of Social Jouissance in Violence: Between paranoia and class hatred

The distorted oedipal pact manifests in symptoms like racism, class hatred, and criminalisation of poverty. Pellegrino analyses the social projection of paranoia as a psychic mechanism through which dominant classes displace their own fears and guilt onto those who challenge their hegemony. The persecution of workers, social movements, and marginalised populations reflects this process, in which violence is justified by the imperative to maintain order and domination (Pellegrino, 1979). Historical episodes such as the Riocentro Operation in 1981 illustrate this logic, whereby agents of the State attempted to instrumentalise collective paranoia in order to criminalise the left and legitimise repression. The denial of equality and the use of violence as a political tool are mechanisms by which society avoids the internalisation of a truly democratic oedipal pact, sustaining privilege through repression and systematic exclusion. Structural racism and anti-communism are symptoms of a society that constructs enemies to justify their symbolic or literal elimination (Pellegrino, 1979). Moved by his indignation at structural violence, Pellegrino shows how the refusal of equality and symbolic castration shapes a subjectivity marked by domination and resistance to alterity.

6. The Insistence on Silence: Psychoanalysis, cowardice and the illusion of neutrality

For Pellegrino, institutionalised psychoanalysis often aligned with power and the dominant order. He denounced the historical complicity of psychoanalytic societies affiliated with the IPA with authoritarian regimes, and the resistance of these institutions to the politicisation of analytic thought. For Pellegrino, the alleged neutrality of psychoanalysis is nothing more than an ideological illusion that upholds hegemonic power and compromises the critical and emancipatory potential of Freudian theory. The emblematic case of Amílcar Lobo — a military doctor linked to the DOI-CODI and accepted by the Psychoanalytic Society of Rio de Janeiro (SPRJ) — illustrates this distortion, revealing the institution's silence and omission in the face of practices of torture. Pellegrino's subsequent expulsion from SPRJ, after denouncing this contradiction, exposed what he termed the *teleology of incest*: the tendency of psychoanalytic institutions to close in on their own privileges, silencing dissident voices and protecting perverse power pacts. The refusal to listen to political prisoners, the persecution of critical psychoanalysts, and the acceptance of figures directly involved in torture demonstrate how psychoanalysis can be co-opted to reinforce structures of domination rather than to dismantle them (Pellegrino, n.d.a).

For Pellegrino, the Brazilian case reflects a broader institutional malaise rooted in the perverse history of institutional psychoanalysis — a trajectory he likens to a Greek tragedy (Pellegrino, n.d.a). In this sense, his critique of the theoretical distortions of the IPA is unequivocal: the organisation, by maintaining a conservative vision of the Oedipus complex — centred on the function of the Law as an instrument of obedience and order — ends up reinforcing the privileges of the dominant class and distorting the radical nature of Freudian theory. The IPA's 1973 refusal to consider the Amílcar Lobo case, along with its historical complicity with institutions aligned to oppressive regimes, illustrates this entanglement.

7. The law and the right to dream: The oedipal pact and social transformation

Freud (1921) saw the Oedipus Complex as the subject's entry into Law and alterity. Pellegrino (1987) maintains this formulation but expands it by demonstrating how the internalisation of the Law may take different forms, depending on the social structure in which it is embedded. When the Law operates as a mechanism of equality and reciprocity, it makes possible the development of a just social pact; however, when appropriated by perverse power, it is transformed into an instrument of privilege and exclusion. For him, authoritarian societies distort the oedipal pact by structuring the Law not as a democratic regulator, but as a means of coercion and domination. In this way, what ought to be a pact grounded in justice is converted into a *perverse pact*, which obstructs the emancipation of subjects and naturalises oppression.

In criticising the conservative tendency of institutional psychoanalysis, Pellegrino shows how the theory can be mobilised either for liberation or for the maintenance of the existing order — when distorted for the ends of right-wing ideology (Pellegrino, n.d.-a). His thought recovers the subversive potential of psychoanalysis by insisting that the Law cannot serve as an instrument of exclusion, but must instead guarantee the right to difference and to freedom. His proposal thus reformulates psychoanalysis as a field not only of interpretation of the unconscious, but of resistance to the structures of power that shape subjectivity and the social bond.

8. Hélio Pellegrino and the democratisation of psychoanalytic knowledge

Hélio Pellegrino was insubordinate. With his sharp voice and unwavering commitment to justice, he refused to accept a psychoanalysis enclosed within elitist circles, protected by symbolic walls that distanced it from those who needed it most. For him, psychoanalysis could not be a science of silence, nor a profession of the consulting room reserved for a privileged few. It was, rather, a practice committed to human emancipation, to the unveiling of power structures, and to the denunciation of forces that reduce the subject to a mere object of history.

His confrontation with the Psychoanalytic Society of Rio de Janeiro (SPRJ) exemplifies this struggle: in demanding a public stance against the crimes of the dictatorship, he not only exposed the institution's complicity with authoritarianism, but also revealed the extent to which psychoanalysis, when detached from a commitment to concrete reality and to that which dehumanises, may be captured by perverse power. In resisting such capture, he reclaimed a popular psychoanalysis — accessible, rooted in Brazilian culture, and above all, engaged in social transformation. He saw psychoanalysis as a tool to break dominant discourse and foster new subjectivities.

His writings — now on the verge of being revisited with the publication of his collected works — present a psychoanalysis that pulses with the rhythm of love for the other, of discontent, of revolt, and of the desire for transformation. In his theory of the oedipal pact, Pellegrino expanded Freud's vision by showing how the structuring of desire occurs not only at the psychic level but is inseparable from the social and political conditions into which the subject is inscribed (Pellegrino, 1987). He did not conceive of the Law merely as an abstract interdiction, but in its concrete expression — as a promise that should guarantee rights and dignity for all, in a reciprocal relation. Pellegrino warned against the ideological misuse of Oedipus as a tool of adaptation, reaffirming the libertarian vocation of psychoanalysis and its role in defending desire and difference. If desire is always traversed by the social, it is in the struggle against oppression that a truly human and libertarian oedipal pact becomes possible.

References

- Castro, L. L. (2024). *Hélio Pellegrino: por uma psicanálise política*. Curitiba: Appris.
- Desinstitute. (2021). *Painel saúde mental: 20 anos da Lei 10.216/01*. Brasília.
- Freud, S. (1987). Linhas de progresso na terapia psicanalítica. In J. Strachey (Org.), *Edição Standard Brasileira das Obras Psicológicas Completas de Sigmund Freud* (Vol. XVII). Rio de Janeiro: Imago.
- Freud, S. (1996). Três ensaios sobre a teoria da sexualidade. In J. Strachey (Org.), *Edição Standard Brasileira das Obras Psicológicas Completas de Sigmund Freud*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Imago. [Trabalho original publicado em 1905].
- Lembi, J. B. F. (2024). *Hélio Pellegrino: inconfiáveis*. Rio de Janeiro: Atos & Divãs.
- Pellegrino, H. (1979). *Democratização da tortura*. Rio de Janeiro: FCRB.
- Pellegrino, H. (1984). Psicanálise da criminalidade brasileira: ricos e pobres. *Folha de São Paulo*.
- Pellegrino, H. (1987a). Édipo e a paixão. In *Os sentidos da paixão*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- Pellegrino, H. (1987b). Pacto edípico e pacto social. In *Grupo sobre grupo*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco.
- Pellegrino, H. (n.d.-a). *Fenômeno portentoso. Nada fica a dever a uma tragédia grega*. Rio de Janeiro: FCRB.