

## Paths for the Future: From a Culture of Indifference Toward a Gestalt of Hope

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This paper, presented as one of the keynote speeches in the opening panel “Voices From 3 Continents” at the AAGT Third Conference, elaborates on present and future perspectives for Gestalt therapy through a review of its major tendencies over the last decades. The article begins by giving an overall view of Brazil’s socioeconomic context<sup>1</sup> and goes on by putting into context past and present tendencies of Gestalt therapy within the cultural, political, and economic world scenario in which Brazil is inserted. The author then elaborates on the current crises of psychotherapeutic practice and on the “culture of growing indifference” that colors this decade. Questioning the validity of such concepts as “organismic self-regulation” and “intrinsic evaluation” as parameters for ethics, philosophy of life, and healthy functioning for Gestalt therapy in the decades to come, the author proposes a perspective for Gestalt therapy that she metaphorically calls “Gestalt of Hope”: an ethos of solidarity and collective responsibility where the interrelation between personal and social factors, and individual and cultural aspects, will be truly considered in our work within a field perspective.

### Introduction: Tracing the Context

SINCE THE TITLE OF THIS PANEL is “Voices From 3 Continents”, I would first like to say that my presence was mainly as a voice from Brazil, because despite many similarities, the history of development of Brazil, a Portuguese-speaking country, and of the Gestalt movement in Brazil differ in many ways from that of our neighboring Spanish-speaking countries.

Because of this, as my perspective for Gestalt therapy in the future—about which I shall elaborate on later—departs from the context where

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<sup>1</sup> Since this paper was written in the first semester of 1998, it does not reflect Brazil’s recent economic difficulties, disseminated in the media.

I live, I want to start off by giving you an overall idea of our country. Brazil has a surface area that occupies half of South America's territory, is almost as large as the United States, and has approximately 180 million inhabitants. Apart from the native Brazilians, who (as in the United States) were exploited and massacred, Brazil's population basically stems from the country's Portuguese colonization. When colonized, Brazil was not seen as a place to settle down but, rather, as a source of natural wealth such as sugar, noble wood, gold, and precious stones, which were exploited for the sole purpose of sending these riches back to Portugal. Furthermore, we also had a large percentage of people of African origin; in Brazil, slavery lasted longer and was more widespread than in any other country of the Western hemisphere. In fact, several sociologists believe that these origins somehow provided an ethos of economic exploitation and inequality that, until today, influences the way institutions, groups, and classes developed in our country.

Brazil today still harbors acute and baffling disparities in terms of socioeconomic development, basic living conditions and the educational level of the population. According to UNICEF (1998), we still have 17 percent illiteracy among the adult population, which amounts to over 19 million people.

In terms of class differences and income distribution, the gap between the rich and poor is the *widest* worldwide. The wealthiest 1 percent of the population earn more than the 40 percent that makes up the poorest. Among those, the income of 29 percent of the population is less than one dollar per day (Rocha 1997, UNICEF 1997).

There are rural areas in the Northeast of Brazil, where the development of modern industrialized cities has not yet arrived, and the political system is still almost feudal. There are a few rich landowners, while the rest of the people live in a state of absolute misery. As in other places in Brazil, there is a high percentage of infant mortality caused by malnutrition and lack of the most basic sanitary conditions.

On the other hand, Brazil has extremely modern and developed metropolitan areas, with overcrowded skylines marked by skyscrapers. These cities have sophisticated universities, hospitals, and cultural and economic centers that are well in line with those of developed countries—although in these metropolitan areas there are large pockets of poverty where the minimum living conditions for human dignity are completely absent. Furthermore, like other metropolitan areas worldwide, Brazilian cities face problems such as the increasing number of homeless, a scaring rise in urban violence, and drug traffic and use.

Politically, as in most South American countries, from 1964 we lived under a military dictatorship that lasted for 21 years and ended in 1985 with the election of a civilian president. Today we live in a democracy,

but this process of democratization has not yet eliminated the huge class and economic differences that exist in our country.

Within this background of disparity, Gestalt therapy was introduced in Brazil and basically developed in the large cities, among the upper middle class and middle class levels of the population. During the last 30 years, it has basically developed in the same ways as in Europe and in the United States, and I would like next to mention several aspects that I consider important in these developments.

### Gestalt in the 1960s and 1970s in Brazil and the World

Last month we read in the newspapers of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the events that burst forth in May 1968 in Paris. In the words of a Brazilian journalist:

The 60's were bloody and convulsive years. All socially oppressed groups—protested and fought for their rights, to change the world. Those were years of demolition and transformation of all parameters that oriented people's lives . . . years of big dreams and at lot of ingenuity [Toledo, 1991, p. 7].

We were indeed a generation that contested, that put ourselves against the mainstream establishment trying to be revolutionary in all spheres of our lives. We wanted to change the world, the institutions, families, and people, and we saw ourselves as agents of transformation for a new era. Gestalt therapy was *totally* inserted into this context. Perls (1969), in the introduction to *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, explicitly stated that there was a struggle between fascism and humanism going on and that he believed that there was only one way to build the path to deep social changes: to free people from their inner tyrannies and become more real (pp. 1–4).

Vinacour (1995), an Argentine Gestalt therapist, asserts that, if the counterculture movements pointed to the crisis of modernity, the crisis of reason, Gestalt was the therapy that most extended psychological support to this movement. He wrote: "Never before had a psychotherapeutic school been so identified with a proposal for social transformation, and never before had a psychotherapy been so closely identified with a movement by the public at large" (p. 4).

However, from the early 1970s onward, counterculture movements gradually ebbed from the global social scenario. The energy of transformation turned to a different polarity, more inward, directed toward the freeing of each one's energetic blocks and conflicts, toward each individual's inner searches. Therapy was concentrated in clinics and

centers devoted to human growth, where a diversity of workshops was held. It was the period coined by Lash as being the “culture of narcissism.”

But in Brazil, as in other parts of Latin America, the mid-1960s and the 1970s had an additional configuration: they were also known as the lead years, an obscure and violent period marked with military dictatorships, torture, imprisonment, abuse of civil rights, and repression of freedom and of any critical thinking or political opposition. Slemenson (1998) points out that in Latin America therapies were havens of liberty, where people found refuge and consolation against the fear, brutality, and insensitivity that reigned at the time. On the other hand, the “lead years” were also “golden years,” years of euphoria and economic expansion, and as a consequence, therapy also expanded because the upper middle classes had the funds to pay for it.

### Tendencies of the Gestalt Movement in the 1980s

In the mid-1980s “the dream seemed to have ended,” and a period began in which the values of the 1960s were questioned: socialism and class equality as a utopia, the right to pleasure and to be different, the libertarian romanticism, and the epistemology of irrationalities that accompanied the crisis of reason. Concurrently, a movement of questioning and reformulations in Gestalt therapy began in the world and also in Brazil, which has continued to date and which I think can be organized into three basic tendencies:

1. As Gestalt therapy work began to develop by means of therapeutic processes that were longer than the short and intense workshops that had characterized the greater part of Gestalt work in the 1960s and 1970s, a need arose for a more careful understanding that would be more attentive to the complexity of our inner dynamics, to the inner landscapes of our psychological intimacies, and to our individual developmental history. A search for a deeper and more subtle existential understanding regarding the forms that the Gestalts are being experienced, those that have already been experienced, and those that we desire to experience, interact, and dynamically configure themselves in our lives, frequently with more enduring traces and hidden aspects more difficult to access (Ciornai, 1991b, 1995, 1998). This movement was manifested both in the search for theoretical references that were outside Gestalt therapy, as well as in the further development of Gestalt therapy’s own theoretical approach.
2. The second tendency was that of attributing more attention to the human relationship, which was manifested in making figural to our

attention the quality of the therapeutic relationship in itself. The dialogic relationship (Yontef, 1993) by embodying the phenomenological and noninterpretive posture of Gestalt therapy, coupled with an attitude of really being there for the other, with kindness, warmth, empathy, and inclusion, became a part of all training courses and study groups in Brazil. On the other hand, Gestalt therapists started to study and search for ways to work with Gestalt therapy with more enduring intimate relations, or *intimate systems*, as the staff of the Center of Studies of Intimate Systems of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (Zinker, 1994) call it, that is, couples, families, partners, and inter-group relations.

3. The third tendency that I see is that of a magnifying lens directed toward the relation with the environment, to the cultural, social and family influences in our interiority, with a shift to a more accentuated field perspective and paradigm in Gestalt therapy thinking and practice. This shift was also accompanied by the use of Gestalt therapy in organizational contexts, a new trend that started to grow considerably during this decade.

### The Situation in the 1990s

These tendencies have been present in Brazil during the last 10 years. However, in the 1990s important changes have taken place in our country. Brazil has opened to the world, and, within the possibilities of a third-world country, has accompanied the globalization movement that has become part of the world scenario. With this globalization of markets and financial systems, like other countries, we have felt the repercussions in the tightened funds for government programs targeted to the population—the “Welfare State.”

In Brazil, this movement has been accompanied by extremely high interest rates in order to attract foreign investment, privatization of state-owned companies and the opening up of the country for imports—which caused the bankruptcy and closing of many Brazilian industries. This is not to mention the enormous foreign debt contracted during the 1960s, without prefixed interest rates, which snowballed into a sum that is impossible to pay. This debt has caused the country to allocate a large portion of its Gross Domestic Product to pay the interest on the World Bank loans, subordinating it to interests that do not represent the majority of the population.

This situation has caused an increasing wave of unemployment and urban violence, which has placed the country on the brink of despair. Newspapers have printed horrific images of the misery that the victims

of the Northeast drought have been suffering, coupled with images of the ransacking of food warehouses and supermarkets.

### The Crisis in Psychotherapeutic Practice

In what concerns clinical psychology, this crisis has caused an enormous slump in private clinical practice. The middle class, which used to pay psychotherapy for personal growth, is being flattened more and more, and funds are short. Therapists are "in crisis." In all the Brazilian cities, Gestalt therapists, as well as others, have felt the impact of a sharp decrease in their clientele and in their purchasing power to pay for treatment. In addressing the similar issue of increased scarcity in private psychotherapeutic practice in the United States, Miller (1997) ironically stated that within a few years "private practice will serve only a few wealthy people who are willing and able to pay for therapy as though they are purchasing a beautiful hand-crafted cabinet made of fine wood. The rest will shop for mass produced packages comprising ten sessions of cognitive therapy or behavior mod and a year's supply of Prozac" (p. 61).

In Brazil, this has caused various professionals to attend patients at longer intervals, supplementing treatment with telephone calls or, for clients living in other cities, via the Internet. Some professionals are specializing in shorter-term treatments as crisis therapy.

Others have begun to work with companies or with groups with specific problems: professional guidance for adolescents, the elderly, patients with AIDS, cancer, anorexia, psychomotor difficulties, and so on. Many have turned to university teaching jobs, and it is quite interesting to note that a byproduct of this crisis is the considerable increase in the number of professors with a Gestalt approach in universities, both in theoretical courses and in clinical supervision. Others are resorting to work at hospitals and other mental health institutions or are working with insurance plans that pay very little. Training centers in Gestalt therapy are offering groups and workshops directed to the public at large on existential themes that permeate daily life, such as relationships with children, sexuality, drugs, and other topics. Training is also being given to professionals that work with people on a wider scale, such as social workers and multiprofessional teams.

On the other hand, it is impossible to remain insensitive to the drama of the unemployed, homeless, and the destitute people who live in our country and to continue with psychotherapeutic practices that are alienated from the reality surrounding us. In line with this, several centers of Gestalt therapy training have developed community-related

programs for the low-income population, in which students work under our supervision. In other programs our students have been working directly in community centers for the needy and have brought their experience as material for course supervision.

As a result, we have felt the need to prepare ourselves and our students to work in other types of activity: to work in a more flexible manner, within community contexts, with more severe cases, and with the needy population. In the last Brazilian Congress on Gestalt Therapy, the main theme for presentations and panels was the social practice of Gestalt therapy in community contexts.

### **The Culture of Growing Indifference**

The impact of economic, sociocultural, and political factors in people's inner lives has also been impossible to disregard for another reason: violence is so present in our lives today that not a single family in São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro has escaped at least one of its members being mugged three or four times. Some people even walk around with two wallets, one for themselves and one for the thief; air conditioned cars have become a need because it has become too rash to drive with open windows; the places in which we live are becoming bunkers, with ever more sophisticated alarm and security systems.

On the other hand, the world is living through a period devoid of utopias and ideals, in which there is a crisis of ethics and values amidst a frightful increase of fanatical religious and messianic movements. We are living through a dehumanized period. In Brazil, the country was completely stunned by the news that a group of adolescents from rich families had set fire and burned to death an Indian who was sleeping on a bus stop after having participated in a demonstration in favor of Indian's rights. Even more shocking was the boys' explanation that they had thought the Indian to be a "beggar," since it has become known that other beggars had already been burnt to death by upper class adolescents in Brasilia. On the same note, the world has been astonished with the news of the adolescent killings in the United States, which have hit the headlines in the past months.

When commenting on these events in the article entitled "Faces of Immorality," Costa (1998), a Brazilian anthropologist, stated that the crime committed by the Brazilian boys goes way beyond a hideous assassination that is representative of our culture at the end of this century, because it is a crime of indifference. Costa pointed out that an enormous social inequality is the cradle of millions of youths who are accustomed to viewing others as nonpersons and who hold in contempt those who are not part of their shopping-center culture. Looking out of

the windows of their imported cars, these youths view the spectacle of their neighboring world with complete indifference: the hungry, the street children begging for the things that come so easily to them.

On the other hand, the streets are filled with children and muggers who will kill for a pair of sneakers and to whom a pull of the trigger probably gives them the same sensation of power that is felt by the rich man's son, who, with the same gesture, pulls out his credit card to pay a bill.

Considering that Gestalt therapy was born in the vanguard of movements of ruptures and transformations, in view of this world of growing indifference and dehumanization, it seems quite pertinent to review the question of ethics in Gestalt therapy. In 1951, Perls Hefferline, and Goodman wrote:

By desensitizing themselves . . . most persons seem to conceive a "reality" that is tolerable, to which they can adjust with a measure of happiness. . . . By and large, we exist in a chronic emergency and most of our forces of love and wit, anger and indignation, are repressed or dulled. . . . [But] it is impossible for anyone to be extremely happy until we are more happy more generally [pp. 250–251].

Perls et al. (1951 p. iv) wrote about organismic self-regulation and about one's intrinsic evaluation as a philosophy and as an ethical basis for a new life, as opposed to comparative or neurotic ones. In this regard, when writing about the relationship of Gestalt therapy and the counterculture movement of the 1960s, Vinacour (1995) considers that one of the original core proposals of Gestalt—the search to unblock the energetic flow in each person's movement of figure–background formation, aiming toward organismic self-regulation—is basically a proposal to return to the "Savage-self," to a idealized naturalism, a return to the style of primitive communities romantically idealized by those who live in an industrialized society (p. 8). In affirming that in general the critical viewpoint of Gestalt therapy in the 1960s with regard to society still stands, he questions whether in the mid-1990s this course still seems valid to us.

### Toward a Gestalt of Hope

I do not have an answer for these questions; I am sharing with you my consternation. But I have some considerations that may contribute to our reflections.

Last year, I spoke of my longings for what I metaphorically named the “Gestalt of Hope” (Ciornai, 1998). Gestalt therapy, from the 1960s to the early 1980s, was impregnated with the liberating energy of the counterculture movements, with its emphasis on experimenting with alternative lifestyles, with its emphasis on people freeing themselves from inner ties and limiting patterns of relating to themselves and to others. I said that, in my point of view, this liberating energy impregnated with hope and vitality most therapeutic experiences of the time and that this is an aspect that, in my perception, needs to be recovered.

Today I see that the term *Gestalt of Hope* can be expanded beyond this connotation.<sup>1</sup> Shifting away from an atomistic view of human beings, Gestalt therapy has long conceptualized that the individual can only be understood as a relational being, as a living system in a constant interdependent relation with the environment. Wheeler (1996) points out that this represented a radical shift to a field paradigm in psychotherapy. This view is close to that of modern physics and of most oriental and spiritual philosophies that point to the unity of all things, to the importance of recognizing ourselves as manifestations of universal energy and, consequently, rediscovering our connection with the wind, the stars, the tides, nature, and other people (Ciornai, 1991a).

However, although this view is imbedded in our most basic theoretical foundations, in our practice it has often been reduced to a very narrow focus. I believe that in Gestalt therapy we should find paths that could lead us to really consider the interrelation between personal and social factors, between cultural and individual aspects in our work. I think that we need to enlarge the concepts of organismic self-regulation and intrinsic evaluation to a field perspective, helping people to become more aware of both their connection and interrelation with broader systems, as well as their power to help transform them. Gestalt therapy needs to redeem its faith in humans’ capacity to be artists of their own existence, in their possibilities of transcending limits and conditionings even in the most inhospitable conditions.

I think that as therapists, when we help people individually or collectively to be aware and perceive themselves in relationships, to figure out and reconfigure relations with oneself, with others and the world, when we teach them to take human experience away from the

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<sup>1</sup> Considering these ideas, in a recent letter to me Rubinfeld wrote: “When you think of a Gestalt of Hope, I wonder, in what dimensions are you thinking? The intrapersonal? The interpersonal? The socio-political? The eco-spiritual or transpersonal? What possible combination?” He sent me in addition the short text *The Expanding Universe* (1997), which for him “contains the basis for hope.” His input was inspiring and triggered in me a recovery of thoughts expressed in a text I first presented in 1989 (Ciornai 1991a) that I cite below.

stream of the routine of daily life, putting it under new lights, mixing the old with the new, the known with the dreamed, and the feared with the glimpsed, we are confirming the libertarian tradition of Gestalt Therapy<sup>2</sup> (Cio, rnaí 1991a)

I believe that we can thus help create a true “Gestalt of Hope,” an ethos of solidarity and respect for all forms of existence, in which we can extend our awareness beyond our personal limits, broadening our sense of responsibility and our boundaries to where “I am I, but I am also you, and you are you but you are also me.”

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- Elaine C. Ramazzini, São Paulo
- Enila Chagas–Centro de Estudos de Gestalt Terapia de Brasília
- Jorge J. J. Boris, Universidade do Ceará, Fortaleza
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<sup>2</sup> A few days after I finished writing this paper, I attended a lecture by Michael Vincent Miller in São Paulo, Brazil, entitled “Gestalt therapy at the end of the century: From disappointment to liberation”, that had an important resonance to the ideas I organized in this paper. He stated that, in his view, therapy at its best is always revolutionary, as it teaches people that they do not need to conform, that the reality they live need not be the only possible reality.

- Virginia E. S. M. Costa, Inst. de Treinamento e Pesquisa em Gestalt Terapia de Goiânia
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