

GESTALT THEORY IN BRAZIL

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A new way of looking at science called Gestalt theory was first established by Max Wertheimer in 1910 after doing an experiment at the Frankfurt-am-Main Commercial Academy. Wertheimer's main participants were two of his colleagues, Koffka and Köhler. After hearing Wertheimer's explanation of his new theoretical scientific standpoint, the two former participants eagerly embraced it. The three started a Gestalt theory group that soon acquired a considerable number of scientists. Between 1922 and 1935, Köhler was Director of the Psychological Institute of Berlin. In 1927 he received a committee of Brazilian physicians under the direction of the Polish psychologist Waclaw Radecki, who were visiting the great European centers of psychology.

It is probable that experimental psychology in Brazil started through *Waclaw Radecki* (1887-1953). Before the First World War, Radecki obtained his doctorate from the University of Geneva in psychology, having done work on psycho-electric occurrences. He came to Brazil in 1923 with his new wife after having worked in Poland for some time. The next year, in Rio de Janeiro, Radecki was invited by the Mental Hygiene League to assume the direction of a laboratory. Although in a psychiatric establishment, Radecki was interested in maintaining a group of assistants that had experimental psychology as their main aim.

A contemporary neurology and psychiatry physician, *Nilton Campos* (1898-1963), was one of major assistants of Radecki. Radecki and other members, including Campos, performed experiments in psychology and published the results in papers in the *Works in Psychology* from the *Laboratory of Psychology of the Colony of Psychopaths* from 1928 to 1929. In 1927, the group under the leadership of Radecki traveled to many important psychological centers in European universities. Among them was the Psychological Institute of the University of Berlin, at the time under the heading of Köhler. Campos was astounded with the experiments going on in Berlin. In a letter to Annita Cabral from 1949, Campos wrote "in 1927, during my visit in Europe, I approached Professor Köhler trying to confirm my knowledge about Gestalt psychology but without doctrinal compromise about my care to distinguish the facts and their possible explanations."¹ Later in August 1930, Campos hosted Köhler during his visit to Radecki's Laboratory in Rio de Janeiro. Campos went together with Köhler to São Paulo where Köhler was attending a conference (Centofanti 1982; Cabral 1964; Penna 1992).

In 1931, after his misunderstanding with Radecki, Campos moved to São Paulo. Campos returned to Rio de Janeiro. In 1932 Radecki moved to Uruguay. The Institute of Psychology (the current name of the Psychopaths' Colony) was incorporated in the new University of Brazil in 1937. After the French Ombredane left Brazil in 1944, Campos substituted him in General Psychology at the Philosophy Faculty of the University of Brazil. At the time, Campos wrote "The phenomenological method in psychology"² where he discussed Husserl's phenomenology, but also the theory

¹ Letter from August 12, 1949, sent from Campos to Cabral and translated by Engelmann from Portuguese to English (Cabral 1964, 4).

and experiments of Gestalt theory. This book enabled Campos to become the chair of Psychology in 1948. Campos also wrote many shorter papers that discuss problems of Gestalt psychology. However, after Radecki's experimental period, he remained only a theoretical investigator. Campos died in 1963 (Campos 1945; Penna 1992).

In 1941, after completing a philosophy degree at the University of São Paulo, *Annita de Castilho e Marcondes Cabral* (1911-1991) obtained a scholarship to study with Koffka in the American *Smith College* in Northampton, Massachusetts. Unfortunately, Koffka died the same year. So, in February of 1942, Cabral moved to the *New School for Social Research* in New York where she became disciple of Max Wertheimer. Cabral was in contact with a living master, who brought scientific studies in a different and more real perspective: "from above" said Wertheimer. Also, Wertheimer chose a particular theme for her in psychology, "Memory of forms," and gave her supervision. Annita Cabral finished her research, wrote the paper, and received her Master's degree in 1943.

In 1945 she earned her PhD, in Brazil (Cabral 1946; Ramozzi-Chiarottino 2001). Having returned to São Paulo, Annita Cabral realized that, in Brazil, psychology was only taught as part of a philosophy course or as part of an education course. Therefore everything had to be newly organized: a course separated from the other sciences, the establishment of a society for psychologists, the founding of journals, etc. Although her lessons were strongly directed towards Gestalt psychology and her thesis supervising was also along this line, her main professional work was the establishment of psychology in general, not of a specific "school" (Ramozi-Chiarottino 2001).

Of all the published papers of Annita Cabral, I will cite only the most important. The first is a paper issued when Wertheimer passed away: "*Max Wertheimer and social sciences.*" In this paper Cabral brought Wertheimer's unique theory of Gestalt in the sciences and in the arts, and reviewed the importance of Wertheimer's consideration of Hume's contribution as well (Cabral 1944). In "*Experimental conflict of results about the memory of forms,*" Cabral wrote about the problems of memory in a Gestalt outlook and revised the experiments starting with the work of Wulf (Cabral, 1946). In 1946, Kisker from Cincinnati planned a modern *World Psychology* having contributions from psychologists in different countries. For Brazil he contacted Cabral. Cabral wrote a very interesting paper starting from Portugal's dominion in Brazil. However, Kisker did not publish it. Translated from English to Portuguese, Cabral published it in a Bulletin (Cabral 1950a). That same year a collective paper was published in which Cabral wrote the "*Schools and systems in psychology,*" giving praise to Gestalt psychology (Cabral 1950b). With the death of Nilton, Campos she wrote a paper about him (Cabral 1964). Finally, in 1966 Cabral published a paper showing the similarities between psychoanalysis and Gestalt psychology (Cabral 1966). Carolina Martuscelli Bori, Dante Moreira Leite, Irineu de Moura, Walter Hugo de Andrade Cunha, Ecléa Bosi, Sueli Damergian and I all received from her our introduction to Gestalt theory and have retained some of the positions inherent in our initial exposure.

² The great majority of references are in Portuguese, although the title of them has been translated into English. In the References at the end of the text the title is in the language that was used, with the English translation between parentheses when necessary.

In Rio de Janeiro, the death of Campos brought his assistant at the Faculty of Philosophy of the now Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, *Antonio Gomes Penna* (1917-), to substitute for him and to continue his work on Gestalt psychology. Even after the adoption of American behaviorism by many Brazilian psychologists, Penna remained a follower of Gestalt theory and is still today in this position. In 1963, by Brazilian federal law, universities were required to include a course in psychology that involves experimental work. Although a very important psychologist, Penna never undertook any experimental Gestalt work. However, he did publish a great number of psychological and philosophical books that convey his Gestalt position. The more Gestalt inspired books are “*Perception and learning*” (Penna 1966), “*Perception and reality*” (Penna, 1968), and “*Introduction to Gestalt Theory*” (Penna, 1999). In 1989, Penna had to retire due to his age. However, he still continues to advise students and is writing a series of books (Figueiredo 2002; Krüger 2001; Penna 1992).

The psychological career of *Carolina Martuscelli Bori* (1924-2004) could be categorized into two main periods: the first one during which she followed Gestalt theory and adopted a particularly Lewinian psychological outlook; the second one when she embraced operational behaviorism in 1961 after the arrival of Fred S. Keller in Brazil — Keller was closely affiliated with Skinner. As a follower of Cabral, Carolina Martuscelli — her only name at that time — obtained her Master’s degree in 1952 at the *New School of Social Research* under Tamara Dembo’s direction. Her thesis concerned a series of experiments initiated by Bluma Zeigarnik, another student of Kurt Lewin. Back in São Paulo, in 1953 Martuscelli obtained under Cabral’s orientation the doctorate with a thesis on “*The task interruption experiments and Kurt Lewin motivation theory*” (Martuscelli 1959). Martuscelli discussed first Zeigarnik’s experiments and then all the later experiments replicating the Zeigarnik ones. The results of these later experiments often did not successfully replicate the results of the original one. In a last note near the end of Martuscelli’s Bulletin, she wrote that Lewinian’s theory worked only with systematic causation in experiments that do not reveal the equally important problem of historical causation. In the Gestalt look, Martuscelli took a perspective similar to that in the pre-Wertheimer Gestalt-quality of von Ehrenfels’ and Meinong’s psychology (Cunha, 1998; Martuscelli 1959).

Another student of Cabral, *Dante Moreira Leite* (1927-1976), completed the course in Philosophy in 1950. Beginning in 1951, Leite worked as Cabral’s assistant in São Paulo while simultaneously completing his doctorate’s thesis, which he defended in 1954: “*The Brazilian National Character*.” In this text, following a long analysis about the main theories each presenting some national characteristics, Leite found reasons to attack each of them. Leite ended his thesis declaring that the Brazilian psychological literature is only one of many similar other international literatures, ending with a declaration that everywhere human beings are more or less the same (Leite 1954). Later, Leite spent a year at the University of Kansas from 1955 to 1956. It proved important for him to remain in an American Gestalt center where he was acquiring “naive” psychology directly from its founder Fritz Heider. The “naive” psychology became a center of Leite’s further thought. For getting the free-docent title in 1961, Leite wrote a long thesis called “*Psychology and literature*”. In this thesis, an introductory text about the psychological perspective from which to study literature is followed by three chapters concerning the creative process, psychological analyses

of the text, and about the reader (Leite 1965). The “*Brazilian national character*” and “*Psychology and literature*” had new printings. In “*Differential psychology*,” a short book, Leite attacks the idea of main differences that according to known differential psychologists would occur between human beings (Bosi 2000; Leite 1966; Paiva 2000; Schmidt & Neves 2000).

Like the others, *Irineu de Moura* (1928-1992) came into contact with Gestalt theory in Annita Cabral’s Psychology course. His particular interest in art led him to study mainly the works of Rudolf Arnheim. Moura introduced the Brazilian reader to Arnheim’s approach to art perception in a paper titled “*Perceptual properties in contemporaneous pictures: balance*” (Moura, 1970). Among his writings on numerous Brazilian painters whose work Moura has analyzed using the approach of Arnheim, three are the most interesting: “*Perceptual analysis about a painting of J. A. da Silva*” (Moura, 1966), “*Picture of letters by Déa Sylvia*” (Moura 1985), and “*Monstrous forms in Brazilian art*” (Moura 1990).

Walter Hugo de Andrade Cunha (1929-) was influenced early during a discussion with one of his brothers, long before he decided to pursue philosophy. Cunha and his brother were inside a room. There was a trail of ants on the wall, as happens in many places in Brazil. Cunha’s brother smashed some ants from their normal trail. The ants trail conduct was disrupted: some ants arriving at the point of the smashing immediately turned back, other ants fell down from the wall. The regular trail was not the same anymore. Cunha thinks that in this incident he saw for the first time the effect of smashing in the normal trail. And he saw the effect not just for some individuals but the effect for the conduct of the whole group (Cunha 1995).

In 1956 Cunha finished his Philosophy degree and was invited by Cabral to be his assistant. Between 1960 and 1961, Cunha went to the Gestalt group at the University of Kansas. There Cunha was student of Wright, of Epstein, and of Scheerer. Cunha’s interest in ants’ conduct was only one among others in psychology. Scheerer invited Cunha to do his doctor’s degree with him (studying the behavior of ants). However, Scheerer died suddenly a few days later.

Returning to São Paulo, Cunha published a Bulletin about psychology – “*The facts of psychology*,” – containing two kinds of experience: perception and cognition. Perception is “to perceive,” while cognition is “to perceive something” (Cunha 1963). Besides teaching other kinds of psychology, Cunha was also to teach Comparative Psychology. The conduct of ants was one point where comparison was possible. In 1966, Cunha defended a doctoral thesis titled “*Explorations in the psychological world of ants*” with the dynamic use of hypotheses (Cunha 1980). Later, under the strong influence of radical behaviorism, Cunha changed his ideas and rewrote the whole paper. But in seeing in the organism nothing more than a robot, Cunha came back to his initial Gestaltist outlook.

Cunha published long papers that communicate his ideas. Three of them should be mentioned here. The first is “*The mind-body problem: considerations about his place in psychology, and trial of its re-interpretation*” (Cunha 1985a). The second one is the “*Trial of new principles of natural science, applicable to animal behavior and to human behavior and experience*,” where Cunha explains a series of his principles (Cunha 1985b). The third one is “*Ant’s trail, the path of a psychologist and an ethologist [my*

ways in conducting this study]” (Cunha 1995). There is an evolution of thought that started before his going to the United States. However, the most relevant are always going through the Gestalt theory concepts.

Cunha is really the founder of non-human psychology in Brazil. Hannelore Fuchs wrote an article that contains the teachings of Cunha and the numerous theses that he supervised in the paper “*Animal psychology in Brazil: its founder and its foundation*” (Fuchs 1995).

The “*Social psychology*” of Solomon Asch in 1952 and “*The psychology of interpersonal relations*” of Fritz Heider in 1958 maintain their influence over a group of professors of social psychology in the University of São Paulo. *Ecléa Bosi* (1936-) studies the memories of older people. Each memory is studied as a whole till the final acquisition of the data. Pure remembrance brings to the consciousness a unique moment. This is a theoretical tendency of Bosi’s work. Besides the non-static meaning of Gestalt fields there is an enormous influence of Bergson. Among her books there are three that form a basis of her psychological thinking: “*The masses culture and people’s culture – readings of feminine workers*” (Bosi 1972); “*Memory and society – remembrances of old people*” (Bosi 1979); “*The living time of memory – social psychology essays*” (Bosi 2003).

Before moving to psychology, *Geraldo José de Paiva* (1936-) studied in a Missionary School and passed three years in studying catholic theology in Rome, from 1957 till 1960. In Brazil, Paiva taught first theology, then philosophy, and finally psychology. In 1979 Paiva got his doctor’s degree with “*Aspects of Heider’s balanced state in two ethnic subcultures,*” the Brazilian and the Japanese (Paiva 2004). In 1988, Paiva communicated about his ideas that relate theology and the balanced states in “*Heiderian balance and religious affiliation*” (Paiva 1988).

Sueli Damergian (1945-), a later student of Cabral, conducted a long study of social psychology titled “*The unconsciousness in human interaction*” (Damergian 1991). Starting like Annita Cabral’s important paper on the influence of Gestalt in psychoanalysis, Damergian explores the possibilities of integrating social aspects of psychoanalysis with Gestalt theory’s and Kurt Lewin’s concepts.

Esdraes Guerreiro Vasconcellos (1946-) came back from Germany where he completed in 1985 his doctorate thesis under Brengelmann called “*Stress, coping, and social competence in cardiovascular illness*”. In São Paulo, Vasconcellos continued in clinical studies mainly with AIDS people.

José Moura Gonçalves Filho (1960-) is a social psychologist who has a strong Gestalt outlook.

The famous Brazilian art critic *Mário Pedrosa* (1900-1981) studied philosophy at the University of Berlin from 1927 to 1929. There Pedrosa acquired knowledge about Gestalt theory. Pedrosa became a defender of Gestalt theory during his whole life. Pedrosa influenced many painters, between them *Abraham Palatnik* (1928-). Also, there is in architecture a small group of professors that are faithful to Gestalt theory. The sculptor *Caetano Fraccaroli* (1911-1987) published a short introduction in Gestalt theory for students of architecture (Fraccaroli 1983). In 1985, Vera Maria Pallamin wrote in Portuguese “*The Gestalt principles in form organization*” as a thesis.

I, *Arno Engelmann* (1931-), finished the course of Philosophy in 1960. I was invited to be instructor in philosophy and also in psychology I preferred the latter. If I had

to publish small experiments, however it would be an increase of knowledge. From 1961 to 1962, I spent a year at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign where I learned with O'Kelly, Frankmann, Dulany, J. McV. Hunt, and Osgood. In 1976, I returned for a short period to the same university for a new contact with Osgood. I know that Osgood was a methodological behaviorist. But his linguistic theory can be transformed into Gestalt theory.

I did my early research on the kind of conscious percepts that are said to be "emotional" but also include some non-"emotional" percepts. These are always included inside the body, but this is their only location. Nevertheless, they have their specific names. I tried to classify them starting with these common names known around the city in which I lived: São Paulo. In 1972, I did a doctoral thesis called "*The subjective states: A trial of classification of their verbal reports*" (Engelmann 1978a). In 1978, I published a book with texts from Wolfgang Köhler (1978b). Invited to edit a book about a psychologist, I preferred Köhler to Wertheimer or to Koffka only because he did more research and wrote more papers than his two partners during his 25 working years. I put the subjective state as one between the four or five percept echelons, beginning with the largest and weakest Gestalt and ending with the smallest and strongest Gestalten in "*The percept echelons consciousness proposal*" (Engelmann 2006). Although I am a Gestalt theory disciple, I have also a probabilistic skeptical outlook. The only reality is the individual's experience of "now." By using hypotheses, I can reconstruct the Universe and the Wertheimer's interpreting "from above." The paper is "*From the terrible loneliness to the wonderful agreement of human beings*" (Engelmann, in print a). The verbal report is the main consciousness indicator. However, there are other types of reports and other non report consciousness indicators, as has been exhibited in "*A central question of psychophysics: What kinds of consciousness indicator responses to be used?*" (Engelmann, in print b).

The Brazilian Gestalt theory ideas were brought to Rio de Janeiro by Nilton Campos in 1927 and in São Paulo by Annita Cabral in 1943. However, their influence has diminished with time. Do they represent only a Boring's *Zeitgeist* of psychology? I answer with a loud "no!" In proposing Gestalt theory, Wertheimer did not just represent a new psychology but a new way of representing the world scientifically. Rather than the numerous false mourning, the now International Gestalt Theory Society President Gerhard Stemberger believes not in Gestalt theory's end but, on the contrary, in his natural growth.

Zusammenfassung

Es gab in Brasilien zwei voneinander unabhängige Strömungen der Rezeption und Anwendung der Gestalttheorie, getragen von Nilton Campos in Rio de Janeiro und Annita Cabral in São Paulo. Ihr Werk wird auch heute noch fortgeführt, von Antônio Gomes Penna in Rio de Janeiro und einigen Psychologen in São Paulo, zusammen mit anderen Psychologen, Architekten, Malern und einem bekannten Kunstkritiker.

Summary

In Brazil there were two independent currents in the reception and application of Gestalt theory, represented by Nilton Campos in Rio de Janeiro and Annita Cabral in São Paulo. Both have successors, Antônio Gomes Penna in Rio de Janeiro and a number of psychologists in São Paulo, together with other psychologists, architects, painters, and a well-known art critic.

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