

## **“The Natural Ancestors. An Ethnography of Family Constellation Therapy”**

Silvia Vignato  
*Università di Milano-Bicocca (Italy)*

In this paper I aim to cast an anthropological look on one particular systemic-psychotherapy which draws its inspiration both from ethnographic experience and from the Christian Catholic religion. This therapy is called Family Constellation and is a good therapy in the sense that it heals, as it is maintained by both therapists and clients. It relies on the idea of a “natural” or “true” family and it is practiced by psychologists as well as by ‘alternative’ therapists, intensively in Europe and parts of Asia but all the more so in other corners of ‘the West’.<sup>1</sup> Its main feature is that it works through ritual and through what, in anthropology, would be called possession by a spirit, most likely an ancestor.

I will show that on the one side, Family Constellation Therapy (FCT) deals with a specific idea of ancestrality seen as both ‘natural’ and ‘good’, and this defines the individual-cum-ancestors’ primacy over any wider social structure. Sociality, citizenship and state are mainly constructed as dangerous though historically unavoidable disturbances to nature and, ultimately, to health and morality. On the other side, I will also underline that precisely because it includes history as a specific set of ancestral relationships, in its practice FCT rescues *any* ancestorship as moral. Thanks to FCT ethnography I argue that, as Strathern says, in the age of individualism and contrarily to expectations, the individual appears as a relative (2005: 8), and that this, for the middle-class patients of the FCT, seems a good way to retrieve some power over themselves. This questions why and how they have lost it.

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware of the thinness of ‘West’ as a meaningful social subject. A more precise locality, Northern Italy, will ground my argument.

## **Methodological remarks**

Because it is so much entangled in local histories, FCT appears as an interesting observation site of some specific transnational trends. I have selected my observations from a personal network of therapists and organizers rather than from any pre-existing scientific hypothesis<sup>2</sup>. Here, I draw my descriptions from the many sessions of FCT I have participated in at the Osho Meditation Resort in Pune (India) and in Europe, especially in Italy. In Pune, both the clients and the therapists were of various nationalities. I have seen German, American, Italian, Japanese, British and Spanish therapists deal with clients from many parts of the world. In Europe, I participated in about 20 mostly Italian-composed groups in northern Italy and in mostly Spanish-composed ones in Spain. In spite of such multi-sitedness, the constellation itself has created a social locality which, as we will see, is by no means disembodied.

I have also watched many videos of sessions led by the initiator of the therapy, Bert Hellinger, often within the residential seminars I was attending. These videos are a common reference for all the different therapists and clients.

My position within the seminars has never been detached. Beside being (of course) a patient in the beginning, I was a translator (by far the most frequent role), a trainee, a ‘helper’ and an organiser. My relationship with a few of the therapists and many of the clients spans many years, especially with one therapist whom I refer to as S. I was a ‘neutral’ observer only during one training session, where I was basically taking notes. All the words I report here were actually spoken and transcribed in fieldnotes, but I have no personal digital recording of any session.

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<sup>2</sup> I am much indebted to Svagito Liebermeister for a huge part of the understanding I have reached on the therapy. For this, and for the long friendship it has originated, I wish to thank him. I am, of course, the sole responsible for what is written in this article.

## **FCT sessions: seeing ‘facts’, not ‘interpretations’**

There are many ways of practicing FCT, but here I will only describe the most common: the session takes place within a group and during a seminar where every attendant is awaiting his turn to be a client. It is an individual work done within a group with a leading therapist, or facilitator. Clients or patients undergo constellation a couple of times in a year or less frequently, sometimes only once in all.

### **1<sup>st</sup> step: identifying the problem**

Client: ‘I never had a father’.

S. ‘This is not true. Of course you had and still have a father’.

Client: ‘Well, I hardly ever saw him and now he is dead’.

S. ‘Why? What happened? Did he leave your mother?’

Client: ‘He was an absent father’.

S.: ‘I am not interested in that. This is all interpretations. If your interpretation were good and true, you would not be here. What happened in your family? Just facts’.

[Sommacampagna, VR, 2004]

The therapist asks the client to say what brings him or her to the consult. It can be directly a family relationship issue or, indirectly, some specific difficulty in life, what is classified as a psychological or psychiatric problem in a rather common sense terminology (depression, panic, hallucinations, phobias and the like) or a physical sickness of some light or serious kind.

The therapist then inquires about important ‘facts’ that occurred in the client’s family. Such are considered ‘bad deaths’ (*malmorts*) in a classical anthropological

definition: dead children, untimely and violent deaths, especially suicides and deaths in childbirth. If one or more members of the family are involved in general catastrophes such as wars, natural disasters, crimes, serious illnesses; or when one legitimate member has been excluded from the system, for instance because he has emigrated or is believed by the rest of the family to have done something bad, this is also considered to be a general 'fact'.

It must be noted that in the FCT approach, a difference is established between 'facts' and 'interpretations'. I have often heard therapists tell the clients that 'facts' pertain to truth whereas 'interpretations' are cultural stuff which keeps you from acknowledging facts. FCT is supposed to deal only with facts, 'that is', with truth. S., the therapist I most often worked with, likes to say that 'truth heals'.

**2<sup>nd</sup> step: staging the family.** According to some established principles which enable him or her to imagine where the systemic problem or problems might be located, the therapist asks the client to choose a few people in the group to represent some specific living or dead members of his or her family (most often one of the parents or both, and probably those involved in a 'fact'), and someone to represent the patient himself/herself. The therapist then asks the client to place all the selected persons in the room in relation to each other according to what he or she 'feels to be right'. This is what you call 'to put up' a constellation. The client is finally required to sit and watch.

Once the picture is settled, the positions given by the client to each member are thought to show what in the system is not following the 'natural order' of the family. According to 'natural laws', no person entitled to belong to a family must be excluded from the picture. What must also be respected in the representation of the family is

chronology, which defines status. The older the person, the more prestigious his/her position.

**3<sup>rd</sup> step: progression towards a ‘natural order’.** It is the chore of the session. The therapist aims to reconstruct the ‘natural order’ among the client’s family members staged in the constellation. This operation has to take into account the patient’s actual ‘readiness to heal’. In other words, the system can only be modified slightly; it has its own resistance to change and a good therapist – so says S. – must respect it, or the session will ‘have no power’.

Because the blood bond between victims and perpetrators of crimes is equated to a family bond, this often brings historical facts of major relevance into the constellation. Depending on the generation and the place, the patient’s constellation can stage the victims of the holocaust, the Basque terrorists, Turkish migrants in Greece, the Italian partisans, Palestinians and so on as important elements in his/her family system.

Unlike in Moreno’s psychodrama<sup>3</sup>, in FCT the representatives are not expected to act out, and do not know much of, the patient’s life story. While they stand in their position, they are asked by the therapist how they feel right then and this, in a very down to earth and somehow coded language<sup>4</sup>. The questions are asked as if addressing the represented one, and answered consequently. For example:

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<sup>3</sup> Jacob Levy Moreno (born in Romania in 1892, died in USA in 1974) is considered to be the originator of most group therapies both in psychiatry and in psychology. His basic assumption is that the various “actors” of a “psychodrama” are parts of “the psyche” that must be given the opportunity to come out. In his theory, the actors are requested to act out whatever feeling they never usually express (see Blatner 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Many groups use foreign English-speaking therapists who need to be translated into sometimes quite different languages such as Chinese or Japanese and viceversa. Very little attention is paid to rhetoric and poetry, and the translation of the description of feeling is often reduced to a few standard options which the translators can handle with ease.

*Therapist:* ‘Mother, how do you feel?’

*Person representing the client’s mother:* ‘I feel tense’ or ‘I feel angry’ or ‘I feel a strong pain in my leg’ or similar.

Sometimes, the representatives are invited to ‘follow their movements’, that is, to move in the direction they feel drawn to. They can then step in one direction or fall to the ground, start weeping or express various emotions. In the light of what he or she sees as ‘autonomously’<sup>5</sup> enacted by the system, the therapist can then reposition some of the representatives in a place which, in the FCT understanding, is more appropriate to their ‘natural’ family role; they might not tolerate the new position.

While proceeding with the session, additional representatives can be added to the picture. Sometimes, as the constellators say, ‘the system shows’ a ‘fact’ that the client has not reveal (he didn’t remember or didn’t think of or had some reasons not to tell, or even knew nothing about). Some therapists tend to stage many such elements, while others (like S.) prefer to stick to what is actually known to the client from sure source.

**4<sup>th</sup> step: healing rituals.** In the end, the client’s representative quits his/her role and the client is made to take his/her own place within the newly shaped constellation. This is considered to be a very important step in the healing process. Now the therapist asks the client to perform some coded sequences of actions, that is to say sentences and make gestures which translate and consolidate the new, more – as they say – ‘natural’ order which has been found.

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<sup>5</sup> Here I am stressing ancestorship, but an important part of the session might also concern peers or descendents.

Most often, this means that the client has to bow down to the ancestors (their representatives) or hug and be hugged by them or both. She or he is asked to honour and thank them for the life they handed down to him/her and tell them sentences like ‘Without you I would not be here’ (to a parent) or ‘Thank you for staying alive and looking after my mother’ (to a grand parent), according to the situation. Before the patient does this, and in order to make it possible, other ‘ancestors’ might have to perform similar tasks.

Sometimes, quite often indeed, the client is not able to perform such final rituals. He/she violently opposes them or accomplishes them in a very absent-hearted way, which is perceived by the therapist as superficial zeal. This zeal is said to be coming from ‘the mind’, a dominating intellectual structure which (as S. often says) tends to ‘get rid of the initial problem’ and keep on with the same life as before. In this case, the client is asked to say sentences which acknowledge what in his/her family is *not* following the ‘natural’ laws of the family, so as to make the unhealthy relationship clear to his/her own eyes. This is viewed as a first step into awareness and healing rather than a failure. For example:

*The client [a man] to his father’s representative:* ‘Dear father, I would make a better partner for my mother than you’ .  
[Povegliano, VR, 2005]

This is very ‘unnatural’ according to the law of chronology: the mother comes first, and ‘parents are parents, and children are children’.

*The client [a woman whose now dead mother used to be depressed] to her mother’s representative:* ‘I do not need you’ .  
[Sommacampagna, VR, 2003]

This is very ‘unnatural’ according to the ‘natural flow’ of ‘love/life’: a child is always seen as loving his parents. After this session, the therapist commented that the client was too proud and arrogant to treasure whatever little care she actually did receive from her mother, and this was precisely what would not allow her to relax and stop missing her mother’s love. A few months later, the second client came to another seminar and expressed her gratitude for what had happened during that first FCT session, where ‘she saw the truth for the first time’.

### **The founder: Bert Hellinger, from the Zulu to the ‘sciencia’**

In its German inventor Bert Hellinger’s words, FCT is openly inspired in Zulu rituals and is inhabited by a religious ghost. Hellinger, once a reluctant conscript in the Nazi Army, had indeed trained as a Catholic priest and worked as a missionary in South-Africa, among the Zulu. Only when he came back to Europe did he quit the priesthood and train as a psychologist, and make FCT his main activity. He now tours the world holding FCT seminars (<http://www.hellinger.com>).

While with the Zulu, as stated in the official website, Hellinger began to think that human societies work as systems where rituals largely shaped by cultures, but universally structured, help the individual tune in with nature.

The process of leaving one culture to live in another sharpened his awareness of the relativity of many cultural values’(....)’and his interest in the human commonalty underlying cultural diversity made itself apparent during those years—he saw that many of Zulu rituals and customs had a structure and function similar to elements of the Mass, pointing to common human experiences, and he experimented with integrating Zulu music and ritual form into the Mass.  
([http://www.hellinger.com/international/english/about\\_bert\\_hellinger.shtml](http://www.hellinger.com/international/english/about_bert_hellinger.shtml))

Of course, such missionary creativity is not Hellinger’s exclusive idea. There has been a tradition for priests working amongst the Zulu to unify a multiplicity of



intertwined spirits, 'oNkulunkulu' ('ancestors'), whom the Zulu paid rituals to, into one single divine reference called Unkulunkulu, and translated as 'God' (Weir 2005). In this sense, Hellinger was no different from other missionaries who tried to hierarchize local spirits under a higher divinity, thus more or less unintentionally reproducing in their cult the colonial submission.

It must be remarked that Hellinger's official biography puts as much stress on the Zulu experience and on Catholicism as on Hellinger's scientific training in psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy, systemic therapy, NLP and others. So, FCT does not claim any religious belonging – on the contrary: it ends up posing itself as a sort of device for truth-discovery rooted in a scientific pattern. Actually, nowadays Hellinger, in the words of his second wife and therapy partner Maria Sophie, claims to have gained access to further dimensions (...) where rituals, ceremonies or symbols are no longer needed. Only the appropriate opening is needed, and such further dimensions open up for everybody within a few minutes.

<http://www.hellinger.it/index.php?id=9>

Not surprisingly, Hellinger calls his new position *sciencia*, 'science', as if the truth of nature finally found its explicative pattern in modern scientific method. In this last formulation, for which I have no ethnography, what is natural, what is scientific and what is sacred seem to be regarded as completely overlapping.

Hellinger has trained a large number of therapists in Europe. The first channel of diffusion in Italy was an 'alternative' therapist (a rebirther) from a city in the Northeast, but the therapy rapidly left this relatively unfluent niche and established schools and specific trainings. Hellinger's pattern was a sort of transnational frame for therapy. While in the beginning he would hold his seminars in German with a translator, later he himself shifted to English and, most of the time, an interpreter would translate for patients and participants in their own language.

### **The laws of inclusion and chronologic hierarchy**

I would like to go back to some of the principles which the ethnography of a session calls into play. Technically, Family Constellation Therapy is based on a

systemic approach to psychotherapy.<sup>6</sup> In this case, the system taken into account is formed by the patient and his/her living and dead family members. One sub-system is the 'actual family', composed of ego, his/her actual partner, the former ones, and the children born out of the actual or of the former partnerships. At the same time, ego is a member of the 'original family': ego, his parents, his brothers and sisters from both parents or from only one of them, the parents' brothers and sisters (ego's aunts and uncles) and the parent's parents and their brothers and sisters (ego's grand-parents and great aunts and uncles). Any adoptive link is not considered as truly inclusive. Cousins are also not considered as part of the system.

So, in FCT, semen exchange decides the inclusion of spouses, and sexual partners at large<sup>7</sup>, into the system; 'blood' determinates the inclusion of descendants. Blood can also be the means of inclusion in the sense that the perpetrator of a crime includes his/her victims into his/her family system and viceversa, the victim of a crime brings the perpetrator into his/her family system. A crime about money (for example: someone caused the client's bankruptcy) is considered as an act of violence, and equated to blood crimes. One basic idea in the therapy is that whoever is entitled to belong in the system should never be excluded from the subject's inner representation of the system itself. The constellators call this 'the law of inclusion' and consider it as one of the general principles to be taken into account when considering someone's family. Exclusion is seen as generating suffering.

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<sup>6</sup> A systemic approach to psychotherapy maintains that the family is a system and you cannot act on one element without considering its relationship to the others. One of the founders of this approach is former anthropologist Gregory Bateson. See his bestseller *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. University Of Chicago Press, 1972.

<sup>7</sup> As far as I could see, female homosexuality is handled as a sort of lesser form of a relationship, and thus I tend to say that it is sperm exchange rather than love making which is supposed to create the family bond. Furthermore, I never attended a session where conception through a semen bank had been performed.

What must also be respected in the subject's inner representation of his/her family is the other 'law' which was mentioned in the ethnography, that is, chronology: as S. often puts it, 'whoever comes first, comes first'. This means, for the constellators, that chronology determinates status, and status entitles a person 'to give' or 'to receive love'. 'Love' or 'life' is thought to be always 'flowing' from the older to the younger. Making a relative more or less important than he/she is – trying 'to give' to someone older than you, for instance – is also seen as generating suffering.

Now, the 'inner representation of the system' is precisely what the client stages in a session. No client who is actually, as the therapists say, 'in touch' or 'connected' to his interiority – who is not acting out some rational ideal – ever puts out a representation where the laws of inclusion and chronology are fully respected. In this case, the natural family system would be represented in the space as an open circle beginning with the father followed by, in a clockwise direction, the mother and the children from the first to the last; an arborescence is also a favoured spatial representation. This is never what you see in a session, and any exclusion or distortion points to a knot of suffering. The constellators call such knots "entanglements".

### **Childish instinct and wise nature**

In the FCT's view, the main reason why everybody somehow ends up not respecting the laws of the natural family is that all children feel a 'blind love' towards their parents, a sort of inner resonance of the 'natural' survival hint of the baby. Because of this blind love, say the constellators, children are ready to do anything, even die, for their parents: they want to help them, they are willing to take their responsibilities or pains upon themselves – that is precisely how one particular attitude descends along one

genealogy. Similarly, children can be angry at their parents, and this is supposedly another form of love which is handed from one generation to the next. Here is an example of the way such passage is staged and explained.

The client's representative says she feels angry. The constellation stages the client herself (a middle-aged clerk), her mother, and her mother's mother and father. MF died from wounds inflicted in the First World War, leaving MM alone with three small children and one on the way. In the constellation, the client's mother's representative is turned towards her own mother (MM) and does not look at her own child (the client), and she also says she feels angry.

The client's mother (M) is said to be trying to help her own mother (MM) by carrying her pain and anger at being left alone in her place; so is supposed to be doing the client, who wants to help her mother too. Through this loyalty the anger of abandonment in a difficult situation is seen as descending along the maternal line.

As we see, in the FCT view, an individual, in his solitude, cannot do much about his entanglements in ancestral problems. A general imbalance in the transgenerational system has to be corrected. Only when the client's ancestors change their attitude, make peace and take on their own responsibilities towards their descendants can the client also be peaceful and, in his/her turn, become responsible for his/her own descendants. That is why, in order to enhance the healing, the client is supposed to need FCT's refined device.

### **Efficacy – the emic explanation**

For the clients there is much agreement about the therapeutical effect of FCT, even though different people see such efficacy in different ways: some expect they will heal from a cancer<sup>8</sup>, others that they will feel generally better or that their relatives will. I will turn now to my specific experience with FCT in Italy as far as ethnographic

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this was one of the first very successful seminars Bert Hellinger led in Italy, in the early Nineties (ALCI 2000).

evidence is concerned. Many people keep coming back to the seminars year after year, and this has given me the opportunity to keep track of some of their stories.

‘FCT has changed my life. Now I really understand I have to seek strength from my mother. I feel really grateful towards S. [the therapist] even though sometimes... he came down so hard... but that was good! It’s a very helpful way to see life.’

N., 49, high school teacher in Vicenza.

‘It’s incredible! So many years I spent in psychoanalysis. Now I see things differently.’

D., 48, engineer, Vicenza.

‘FCT has made a difference. I mean, even with my patients, I always use it. Not that I do constellations, but it’s a reference, a way to understand things. (...) I think it’s good for my child, too’.

A., 54, psychotherapist, Padova.

‘I don’t know. S. said no man would want me as long as I didn’t take my mother in. I hope it’s not true. I feel FCT has really meant something in my life, but now the time to do it is finished’.

U., 43, physiotherapist, Verona.

‘What a relief! I feel a great burden has been taken off my shoulders!’

X., 42, suffering from a very serious degenerative disease, Udine. [This is a very common commentary even during the sessions]

Whatever the personal results achieved, most people I talked to repeatedly over the years stressed the importance of FCT as a general symbolic horizon rather than as a specific device for healing.

This becomes evident if we consider the first emic explanation of the efficacy in FCT, that is, its ‘revelatory’ quality: staging the constellation is supposed to bring the *true* past (and thus future) into the present. Once it is known, it becomes available as a resource for personal healing, or empowerment<sup>9</sup>. Even though the logic of the therapy is quite sophisticated, the therapy does not act directly on behaviours and their rationale,

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<sup>9</sup> Anthropologists are familiar with such proceedings. See Strathern’s example of *malanggan*, a ritual statue representing an ancestor (Strathern 2005: 97).

even though there might be some behavioural indications given to patients. Sometimes, after a constellation, a client may be openly asked to perform small gestures like sticking up a picture of a grandfather or another ancestor and repeat the soothing words learned in the ritual healing. In some rare cases the client can also be advised to make some critical decisions as an answer to his original questions, such as (real examples) stop giving money to a grown-up child or split from a partner. He or she can also be advised to reinforce the outcome of the constellation by consciously reliving the experiences undergone in the constellation, like the insight that (as S. put it in one specific case) ‘struggling against cancer is struggling against your mother, therefore it makes life impossible’.<sup>10</sup>

But more than advice, it is the logic of the revelation that is supposed to bring improvement to the patient’s life. Mainly, the constellation is said to work on a level which is called ‘deeper’, that is, the ‘soul level’, which one can reach during the session thanks to the setting, i.e., the representation. What the soul is, is left implicit. The ‘movements of the soul’, that is, the ‘spontaneous’ movements of the representatives which started during the constellation are supposed to continue, on an unconscious level, even after the session itself is closed. This is because the souls of the dead are said to be seeking peace and thus to have a tendency to support the healing processes. In his latest formulations, Hellinger overtly talks of such ‘spirit of the family’ which follows some ‘natural and universal laws’, and which you can come in touch with during a session. Actually, this supposed experience of truth is considered to be the most important factor of healing.

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<sup>10</sup> Embodiment of sickness often happens during the constellations. One of the workshops which made Hellinger famous and drew clients to the FCT concerned terminal diseases (Verona 1997).

It will be noted that, in the constellators' view, it is an experience which needs to be rooted in the body, and that is also why the FCT session is seen as necessary. Even though a few therapists I know maintain that you can do a constellation 'for' somebody who is not present, participation and physical participation of the client is most often thought to be necessary as the body must be transformed at the same time as the soul.

At the end of the session, a male client who has come to the seminar because of a nearly unbearable back ache is asked to bow down to his father. He does it with certain stiffness. S. touches him on his back to help him bend further down.

S.: 'Of course you have a back pain. You resist so much!'

The client finally bows down and lies on the floor at 'his father's feet, and bursts into tears, his face buried in his arms. The therapist stops him.

S.: 'No no, no sound, no drama. That's Italian drama. Stand up and tell your father, Dear father, you are right and I am wrong. Then bow down again'.

The client stands up, looks at his father and does as he is told in a more relaxed way than the first time. He is then asked to turn towards his own child's representative, having his own father's one standing right behind him.

S.: 'How is it now?'

Client: 'I feel stronger. I can see my children now.'

S.: 'A man needs his father's strength'. S. calls some men in the group and places them at the back of the 'father'.

S.: 'This is you father's father, and his father, and his father's father. Feel the strength of the men of the past generations behind you'.

In this case, the wrong attitude towards an ancestor corresponded exactly to a physical ailment. Besides, some clients relate that because they were sitting outside the constellation, it was a shock for them to see their whole family all there (that was my own impression too), and most of them agree that 'it is really like that'; they also emphasize the relief of an experience of reconciliation. The effects of a constellation session are believed to be there whether you keep it in mind or not, because your soul and your body are said to tend to remember whether you know it or not. Many clients say they do not remember much of what happened during their own constellation.

## **Family versus society: nature and its morality**

Besides the ‘natural’ blind love of the child, the other main reason why, in the FCT understanding, a person ends up contradicting the natural laws of family is ‘society’, or ‘culture’, which is in FCT language, a wider system than the family: any officially or unofficially identifiable social group that all the members of the family or even only one of them belongs to. It is considered that the ethical views, which are called ‘moralistic’, of a group one belongs to often demand a behaviour which goes against the natural principles of the family and the deep laws of the soul, that is, against what is ‘truly’ moral. The typical and most simple example of this is devotion to some political cause.

A Turkish Kurdish fighter (that is: his representative in the constellation) is made to tell his  
Greek grandson (the client):  
‘I am sorry I left you all in misery. I was too busy with my ideas’.

According to FCT, it is natural and moral that a father protects his children; but to this Kurdish fighter, because of the laws of his own group (the persecuted Kurds) it seemed immoral not to stand up for his people. Entangled in the negotiations between two conflicting laws, in the FCT view the fighter’s children and their children inevitably have problems.

The relevance of the conflict between different orders of loyalties within FCT formulations is well summarized by the importance Hellinger explicitly gives to one of his first experiences in a seminar about group dynamics, led by an Anglican clergyman. As can be read in his official website:

He [Hellinger] tells how one of the trainers once asked the group, ‘What’s more important to you, your ideals or people? Which do you sacrifice for the other?’ A sleepless night followed, for the implications of the question are profound. Hellinger says, ‘I’m very grateful to that minister for asking that. In a sense, the question



changed my life. That fundamental orientation toward people has shaped all my work since’.

([http://www.hellinger.com/international/english/about\\_bert\\_hellinger.shtml](http://www.hellinger.com/international/english/about_bert_hellinger.shtml))

In such cases, the reference to a ‘higher level’ or a ‘higher sense’ is often brought in so as to show the primacy of the family over any kind of political structure. As S. often says, ‘you can call it Nature, or Life, or even God’. More specifically, the ‘higher level’ is addressed in order to enable the client and the representatives of his family to watch a political conflict from outside and gain a historical perspective on it, which is held as necessary for the ancestors to change their attitude.

An example from ethnography will make this clear.

During Franco’s dictatorship, in Spain, the client’s mother chooses to get imprisoned rather than give away her fellow-freedom fighters, and she ends up neglecting her own children for the sake of the cause. In the constellation, ‘the mother’ cannot acknowledge her choice and blames Franco instead. While sitting and watching, the client, a woman in her late thirties suffering from depression, strongly sides with her mother (‘It would have been horrible!’ she cries, with some anger). In fact, the whole group is of two minds, as resisting Franco and not giving away friends are undoubtedly good and moral actions. ‘Franco’ is brought into the constellation and it appears he is not at all interested in having ‘the mother’ in jail, but this only tightens ‘the mother’s’ obstinacy to feel proud of her choice. In the end, a ‘higher instance’ called ‘Life’ is put up in the constellation (somebody represents it). ‘Franco’ abides to it and lies down beside his victims. Then the client’s ancestors (mainly her mother) see they are ‘all part of the same flow of life’ (in the Spanish therapist’s words). She and Franco are alike, and they can find peace.

[Bilbao, 2005]

As it appears, the discourse on what is moral comes out explicitly. Guilt and responsibility are often addressed in the sessions and in the books various therapists have written on their experience (Liebermeister 2007). In our conversations, S. has often talked about FCT as a tool to separate ‘true morality’ from ‘moralism’, and to pinpoint the intersection of group laws and family laws.

In order to successfully deal with such matters, the therapist is not actually required to have a specific knowledge of historical events (such as the Kurds' relationships with the Turkish Government, or the organizations which were accused of fuelling the Brigade Rosse in Italy or the misdeeds of Franco's dictatorship). Most of those I have worked with relied on the group itself to have some knowledge of local issues. From what I have seen (but this is never explicitly written), being caught in a war – a national conflict – is generally considered to be inevitable hence morally less risky, whereas siding with local and civil contrasts is more often seen as morally dubious, as a source of illness or a consequence of a former 'fact', rather than a demonstration of positive moral concern. Even though this is by no means a rule, on the whole you do get a picture that the only true cause worth siding with is the family itself.

What also comes out quite clearly is the intricacy of knitting between ancestorship and history precisely as far as moral behaviour is concerned. In the Spanish case, 'Franco' was actually playing a rather positive role, even though nobody was honestly doubting the concrete evil his dictatorship brought about. 'Franco', according to the interpretation given by the therapist, was enabling the group to realize that the mother's mother could have chosen to actually stand by her children, and no great harm to the cause would come out of it.

### **Being possessed by a soul**

The truth that is said to be unveiled in a session of FCT through the representatives' bodies is not seen as a metaphor or a projection, even though nobody – especially no therapist – would mistake what is represented for a literal present: a murderer's or rapist's representative never actually kills or rapes his victim's. But the

ancestors are accepted as actually being there. In many aspects, a FCT session resembles closely what in different contexts anthropologists, including myself, have described as divination through trance and possession.

In FCT, as in the Zulu rituals it drew its initial inspiration from, the point of the session is to evoke the wronged ancestor in order to repair the fault and/or reduce the damage. In FCT, those who are angry or sorry or depressed are entitled to feel so by the laws of the family, which are seen as natural and universal and at work whatever the cultural origin of the subject. The appropriate ritual actions succeed in eliminating or diminish their anger, sorrow or depression. As I said, the constellation is thought to reveal what is otherwise concealed thanks to the fact that it lets the dead speak, the victim accuses, and the perpetrators repent and so on. So, once it is dealt with in the ritual, possession fosters a positive contact with truth.

Also, in FCT you are dealing with possessions which cause illness. We saw that someone who feels depressed and wants to die, for example, might be seen as ‘carrying’ – as they say – an ancestor’s feeling. This becomes more precise when the illness itself is staged.

An Italian patient with cancer found no particular ‘fact’ in her family history. She was then asked to pick someone from the group to represent herself, and someone for the cancer. A short time after she had placed her two representatives, one, which she chose male, for the cancer and one for herself, she was asked by the therapist who this man was. It was clear, she said, that it was her grandfather. By being sick, she was then supposed to be embodying her grandfather.

[Sommacampagna, VR, 2004]

I underline that in FCT as well as in many divinatory contexts, a coded ritual is essential for the possession to be of any healing value. In a certain way, you learn to be a good medium. As in non-western contexts, in FCT too you have expert and occasional

mediums. Some people are better than others at being representatives: they are seen as more available to possession, more able to let it in without clinging to their personal constitution and at the same time, able to 'tune in' (as it goes) without being 'carried away' by the ghost-ancestor. In the case of the man bursting into tears in front of his father, i.e.: acting out the weakness of the ancestor he was 'identified with', the therapist called him out of this total surrendering so as to enable him to perform the ritual. In other cases, the therapist wants to help the progression of a constellation (an attitude which S. considers as negative, albeit somehow inevitable) by himself choosing the representatives for the patient's key relatives. He picks out known participants whom he thinks will not act out violent emotions creating hindrances to a good end to the session, even while being true to their role.

Knowing that some people are more used to being representatives than others points to an aspect of initiation and of apprenticeship which is present in the whole matter. If newcomers to seminars are often shocked, those who are experienced are more familiar with the code of the therapy and enjoy the experience on the whole. Everybody agrees that beyond doing your own constellation, it is very 'useful' to stand as a representative, as 'you can have experiences you don't have on your own'. This is a particularly common remark when it comes to representing the victims of blood shed or of a very sad situation, and it sometimes helps bring out some of the representative's own emotions.

### **Common ancestry for different cultures**

At the beginning of the 1990s, Hellinger's therapy started to spread within the world of 'alternative therapies'. I first came in touch with it at the Osho Meditation

Resort<sup>11</sup> in Pune (India), a former master-centered ashram now transformed into a sort of Mecca for self improvement using generally non psychoanalytic psychotherapies in a framework of modern meditation<sup>12</sup>. Now, some considerations on the introduction of FCT into the Resort has cast an interesting light on its practice in Europe and on the people who are affected by it. Indeed, the Resort is an interesting place to observe what is sometimes called ‘middle class culture’. Even though the sannyasins<sup>13</sup> – as most clients of the Resort call themselves – range from an Australian cook to a retired Japanese manager, or from an Italian high school teacher to an Israeli undergraduate, just to mention a few, they can still be identified as this peculiar and moving part of the world population who will pay anything from 30 to 100 € for a personal healing session and are willing and able to travel far in order to do it.<sup>14</sup> This is not merely to say they are not poor, as most of them are not rich either. Rather, it points to the importance they give to the individual as founding value.<sup>15</sup> The problem is, of course, that ‘the individual’ as a value is not steady in time.

If you take a look at the recent evolution of the Resort (D’Andrea 2007) a clear feature concerns the change in the attitude towards ancestrality that all the therapies performed there have undergone in the last ten to fifteen years. Until the end of the

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<sup>11</sup> From 1975 to 1981, ‘Rajneesh’ Chandra Mohan Jain, later known as Shree Bhagavan Rajneesh and then Osho, gathered around himself a vast group of followers, then known as the Orange people, who resided in a commune in Pune, India. After a troubled attempt to set up in the United States, in 1986 Osho started a new centre, the Osho Commune International; in 2004, 13 years after its founder death, the centre has become the Osho Meditation Resort. As its new name suggests, this is no longer a place designed for people to live in.

<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive report on this world-famous ashram, see Aveling, 1999; D’Andrea (2007) examines ‘cathartic’ therapies in much the same perspective as I do here towards the family constellation.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Sannyasin’ are all the clients of the resort who undergo initiation. This name was chosen by the Resort founder, Osho, and it echoes the renouncer of the Brahmanic tradition.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, the meaning of travelling itself has rapidly changed in the last 30 years. Just to give an example, while until recently people who ‘left for India’ would fear illness and dreadful food upon arrival, many of those who go to Pune now grab the chance to have their teeth treated by excellent and cheaper dentists.

<sup>15</sup> Besides, many of Osho’s discourses which are diffused by video and audio in the Resort address individualism.

1990s, Osho therapies seemed designed to entitle the patients to an absolute individuality and to free them from any former duty. So-called Primal Therapy, considered as basic for any meditator, aimed at learning to get rid of all the ‘repression’ largely conveyed by parents. Similarly, to put it in a simplified way, long term relationships were considered to be the end of love and child bearing to be of precious energy (Aveling 1997). As Littlewood points out, this was a general trend in clinical psychiatry and psychology (Littlewood, 2002), so it is not surprising that it concerned the Resort too.

The introduction of FCT, a therapy based on the expression of gratitude towards ancestors, has marked a totally reverse attitude at the Meditation Resort: ‘without your father and your mother you would not exist’ is a now often quoted sentence by Osho, the founder of the Resort (once a commune). Family has started to appear as an ultimate resource, the same for everyone, as if the result of let’s say, 25 years of exacerbated individualism had brought about for some people a specific suffering from lack of ancestrality, or rather, of the conceptualization of ancestrality as a relevant paradigm of comprehension. As far as I could fathom, divorces, sickness, and a sort of disappointment in progressive positivism are the leitmotifs in the sessions, and the patients turn to ancestrality in order to make some sense of them.

Client, a young American man: ‘I loose whatever job I get. I never have enough money. I don’t like what I do!’

Japanese therapist: ‘You seem angry’.

Client: ‘I am angry. It’s unfair’.

Japanese therapist: ‘Why? Anger is love upside down. You love being like that’.

Client, an Italian divorcee in her late thirties: ‘I would like to have a baby. I feel old, depressed and unworthy’.

German therapist: ‘Why did you divorce?’

Client: ‘It didn’t work. We no longer loved each other’.

(....)

German therapist: ‘Are you in a relationship right now?’

Client: 'No. It's been four years'.  
German therapist: 'Are you sure you want a baby? You would have a man if you did'.  
[All cases: Pune, 2004]

In both cases, the therapists showed that the clients were protesting against a fake idea of what their future 'should' be or had been (having a lot of money, having a baby). The right attitude suggested was, of course given the context, to delve into family history and see what happened in the ancestral history that caused the present situation; in other words, to look for 'facts'.

In the Resort you can also detect the transnational model of approach to ancestrality which, as I said, the FCT proposes. In the Resort, people coming from very different societies turn to the same practices and therapies in order to achieve some kind of personal healing. In this sense, because of the importance FCT gives to the idea of nature in shaping the healthy families, among the Resort's small clienthood FCT is constructing a homogeneous, reliable nature for Italians as well as for Japanese, Indians, Chinese or Australians. Thanks to its soothing rituals, the therapy contributes to the enactment and thus the consolidation of the same organizing structure for a sort of world-wide middle-class ancestor's revival. As we have seen, ancestors are considered as part of nature. Of course we know (and Hellinger knew very well) that different peoples perceive and practice kinship and ancestrality in different ways. But if the same model works for many, you can either think that there is an original, inventive process which taking place within the resort, or – which I am more inclined to conclude – that the people who go there need a rational context for what has already happened to all of

them, that is, a change in their experience of ancestrality. Studies on kinship have long observed such international trend in modern societies.<sup>16</sup>

### **Efficacy, again - conclusion**

It has often been written that rituals are meaningful for their participants because they both summarize and help create an entire, inevitably contradictory pattern of social relationships and make it emotionally accessible and logically thinkable to one subject – thanks to the *mise en scène*, thanks to the separation or inclusion which the subject experiences and all such well known considerations you can read in Turner (1982), Atkinson (1985), or Valeri (1990) just to recall a few. Of course, you can also remember the common-sense schema which Kleinman (1988) draws of ‘therapies that work’, and see FCT as a culturally-shaped means to attune individuals to a mainly dominant structure. This would account, following Kleinman, for its asserted efficacy in both body and soul diseases. This is not, as it is not in Kleinman’s proposition, an invalidating or reductive remark. Because of its ritual aspects, FCT can be seen as a sort of training in what Augé has been calling the creation of social sense by the making of others, with ancestors as your main ‘others’ (Augé 1994 : 11). But this is the mechanism, which I referred to as a device.

If we focus on ethnographic contents, in FCT, what mainly produces social sense is the process of contextualizing personal suffering in history. Not just in personal life-stories, or narrative (Kleinman 1988b), but in a more world-encompassing History. In fact, the FCT session joins together what is given, self ruled and universal, that is: nature, and what is unpredictable, forever changing and particular, that is: history, and

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<sup>16</sup> Of course Schenider (1980) was the pioneer. Here, I refer instead to Strathern 1992, Carsten 2000 and 2004.



make them available to sensitive experience through embodiment. As we have seen in ethnography, when ancestors appear as a historicized nature and thus retain the self-asserting (in this view) goodness of nature, the client experiences a change from being the victim of an unlucky or malevolent world to being the natural outcome of a natural, good process.

It is an empowering experience. Ancestorship becomes the vehicle for a client to appropriate the power of nature. Actually, power is openly at stake. During the sessions, phrases about ‘the feminine/masculine strength of your female/male ancestors’ are commonly spoken and, as we have seen, such power of descendance – the power of nature (gendered; which is an issue in itself) or of life – is openly staged and enacted. As we saw, in fact, it is compulsory for the natural family to release its power so that such an idea may be enacted.

Finally, I would like to point out the political side of this idea. If family, in Bourdieu’s words, ‘helps make the reality it then describes’ (1996: 21), Family Constellation Therapy gives a hand to shaping such reality for at least some Western or westernized or at least non-third world people. The point is, why do they need such ritual.

Their painful, ‘unnatural’ lack of ancestorship suggests that in the past 60 years – the clients’ life – there has been, in the social surroundings of those who undergo this specific therapy, a waning if not a destruction of ancestorship as a shared, local, culture specific value, as a source of personal power enabling each person to act upon herself in spite of other contingencies.<sup>17</sup> In my opinion, this destruction is related to the possibility of having a satisfying, good, or healthy life outside the ancestral relationship, being

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<sup>17</sup> You can call this power ‘agency’. In this context, I prefer to stick to more ‘natural’ non discipline-specific language.

empowered, then, by some other agency like, for instance, citizenship, or work. This, after all, is what much of European social politics have been about in the last 50 years. More specifically, as far as the Italian groups are concerned, I suggest that inside a family constellation therapy you can watch the progressive dismantling of a recently assessed direct relationship between the individual and his state. This, of course, is a hypothesis which needs further exploration.

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, the practice of a particular kind of systemic psychotherapy called Family Constellation Therapy (FCT) is taken as an anthropological fieldwork. FCT draws its inspiration both from ethnographic experience and from the Christian Catholic religion. It relies on the idea of a "natural" or "true" family and it is practiced by psychologists as well as by 'alternative' therapists. Its main feature is that it works through ritual and through what, in anthropology, would be called possession by a spirit, most likely an ancestor. Ethnography collected in Italy, Spain and India will show that FCT deals with a specific idea of ancestrality seen as both 'natural' and 'good', and thus defines the individual-cum-ancestors' primacy over any wider social structure. Sociality, citizenship and state are mainly constructed as dangerous though historically unavoidable disturbances to nature and, ultimately, to health and morality. Conversely, it will be argued that precisely because it includes history as a specific set of ancestral relationships, in its practice FCT rescues *any* ancestorship as moral. This, for its middle-class patients, seems a good way to retrieve some power over themselves.

## **Resum**

Aquest article utilitza com a treball de camp antropològic la pràctica d'una forma particular de psicoteràpia sistemàtica anomenada Teràpia de la Constel·lació Familiar (TCF). TCF s'inspira tant en l'experiència etnogràfica com en la religió cristiana catòlica. Es basa en la idea de què existeix una família "natural" i "vertadera" i la practiquen igualment psicòlegs i terapeutes "alternatius". La seva característica principal és que funciona mitjançant un ritual i amb allò que en antropologia anomenaríem possessió per un esperit, gairebé sempre un avantpassat. L'etnografia, que es va portar a terme a Itàlia, Espanya i l'Índia, mostra que la TCF fa servir una idea específica d'ancestralitat, considerada a l'ensem "natural" i "bona", i per tant estableix la primacia de la relació d'un individu amb els seus avantpassats per davant de qualsevol altre tipus d'estructura social. La sociabilitat, la ciutadania i l'estat es consideren fonamentalment com a perillosos tot i que històricament siguin destorbs inevitables per a la natura i, eventualment, per a la salut i moralitat. D'altra banda, l'article sosté que degut precisament a què s'inclou la història com a conjunt específic de relacions amb els avantpassats, a la pràctica TCF defineix com a moral *qualsevol* relació amb aquests

avantpassats. Això és considerat com a una forma d'obtenir algun tipus de poder per part dels pacients de classe mitjana.