

*alert!***Bert Hellinger's controversial therapy
by Herman Nimis, September 2005**

[The following is a summary of 2 articles which originally appeared in the Dutch antifascist magazine *Alert!*, issues [1-2005](#) & [2-2005](#), see <http://www.xs4all.nl/~afa/alert/>. The English translation of German booktitles- in brackets and italics- is unofficial since hitherto, all books mentioned in this article have appeared in German only.]

Bert Hellinger's so-called systemic constellations, which he commends as a therapy for problems within families and organizations, are now being offered in more than 25 countries all over the world; they are especially popular within esoteric and new age circles. Over half a million of his books and videos based on this sort of therapy, which is supposed to constitute a revolution in the field of psycho-therapeutics, have as yet been sold in these countries. Since a couple of years, Hellinger's own reactionary ideas have been under severe attack in his native country Germany, whereas hardly any criticism exists in other countries. German critics point out that Hellinger is not only attempting to set the clock back for decades or even centuries on achievements in contemporary society, but habitually also adopts a most humiliating attitude towards those who come to him for help. Worse still, he displays sympathy and compassion towards dictatorships such as Adolf Hitler's regime and his national-socialist movement. Most of Hellinger's co-written books and teachings dealing on these issues are available in German only. This critical article on H. - probably the first to have ever appeared in English - offers a brief review of his mode of therapy as well as a survey of critical reactions to his therapeutic methods.

A guild of would-be practitioners

Bavaria-resident Bert [= short for Suitbert] Hellinger is already 79 years old, yet still shows a remarkable activity for his age. Furthermore, he does not deny his religious past. As a Roman-Catholic friar, he went to South Africa in 1953 and taught at missionary schools in the province of Natal. He also studied Zulu-rituals and group-dynamics. It has been said that he copied material from the late U.S. family-therapist Virginia Satyr, who displayed a more serious approach in her work. In the early 1970's, Hellinger left the order and resettled in Austria and Germany, where he set up a practice as a psychotherapist without the appropriate qualifications. In many European countries, psychotherapy is not officially recognized, causing a situation that furthers uncontrolled growth of indistinct legal status of the profession. H's followers-cum-practitioners present themselves as qualified, but might actually be would-be as they might have read only one of his books or seen only one of his videotapes and besides, Hellinger's readings do not match with regular concepts of psychotherapy at all.

Hellinger's methods formula to the solution of your problem may read as follows. Suppose you are suffering from a serious ailment or struggling with severe mental problems within your family or a relationship. Regular [psycho]therapeutic treatment has proved ineffective, and then you happen to hear about Bert Hellinger and his family constellations which, within a mere half hour or even shorter, will allegedly solve your problem for approx. 300,- Euros. During these sessions, a practitioner, not necessarily appointed by the official International Bert Hellinger Institut [\(1\)](#) [in Germany, the number of practitioners is estimated to exceed 2000, in Holland around 150], picks out -in agreement with the patient- a representative for each of his family members from an eager audience, occasionally amounting to more than 500 people. Following his instructions, these representatives perform a short role-play on stage, treating the problematical issue in form of a family constellation, whereupon something miraculous seems to happen: within a very short period, a

'solution' emerges which supposedly does away with all mutual intrigues and emotional disturbances. Hellinger bases this phenomenon on a so-called 'conscious field', an apparently imperceptible collective conscience of the entire family pattern. Hellinger's sympathizers claim an obvious link with the morphogenic fields of British biologist Rupert Sheldrake, whose theories however have met with considerable scepticism from other scientists. In order to add scientific flavour to Hellinger's doctrine, Sheldrake's questionable views have been adopted by the Hellinger-scene.

Patriarchism all over

Over the last 4 years, Hellinger's controversial ideas have confronted him with lots of criticism in German-speaking countries, and this is gradually spreading to the Netherlands. Critics report that the Hellinger-like practitioners -in contrast to regular psychotherapists- generally lack solid training and consequently their therapies show a very amateuristic set-up. Intake interviews merely consist of a few sentences, and there is hardly any aftercare. Besides this, Hellinger displays in his therapies an authoritative approach and reverts to extremely old-fashioned moral standards, leaving hardly any freedom to his clients. One of the keystones in H.'s doctrine consists of the hierarchical structure within a family: a father is considered the irrefutable head, and his wife and children are at all times answerable to him and must under all circumstances obediently submit to his will, while the first-born child takes precedence over the younger ones. This hierarchy also applies to inhabitants of a country towards the head of state, and the summit of Hellinger's hierarchical ranks is fate: human beings should be aware that fate actually controls their lives and they have to submit to it.

From Hellinger's highly patriarchal viewpoint, family constellations dealing with matrimonial problems usually tend to conclude that the spouse has been disobedient to her husband, and that she was actually the one who had caused the problem. Obviously, feminist circles, after having achieved a liberal, self-determinative standard for women over the past decades, are far from happy with Hellinger's doctrine. Regarding homosexuality, Hellinger points out that within a family, a homosexual is generally regarded as an outcast and suffers from a very heavy fate. Proudly, Hellinger claimed that he had cured at least one person from this 'disease', who - after having participated in a family constellation - married a few months later and is now the happy father of a child.

A highly unprofessional scene

H.'s therapies occasionally prove to have critical consequences. In 1997, a woman committed suicide after taking part in a family constellation in Leipzig. She was suffering from serious depressions and relational problems and hoped to find a solution through Hellinger's therapy. Hellinger's evasive comment on the matter ran as follows: "It didn't occur to me that she might have been suicidal. I only saw her for three minutes." A psychiatric clinic in Bad Schussenried, a town in southern Germany, had to treat various patients who turned psychotic after participating in Hellinger's family constellations. This clinic confirmed that H.'s practitioners used highly unprofessional methods and were obviously incapable of solving the problems they are faced with. One of Germany's prominent critical agencies, the *Forum Kritische Psychologie [FKP]* (2) stated that four patients had to undergo treatment for obsessions incurred during their Hellinger sessions in 2004. According to the FKP, the factual number of mentally disordered patients among Hellinger's ex-clients may well be much higher, since they generally find it too embarrassing to relate their unsavoury experiences in public. Dutch psychiatrist Nelleke Nicolaï reported of four additional cases of patients who suffered from mental disorders after they had taken part in H.'s workshops. Nolens volens, these cases end up in regular psychotherapeutic wards and in the end, the National Health Service is burdened with the financial consequence of H.'s failures.

Incest isn't bad at all

Hellinger's controversial methods include an incest-therapy of his own making. In his view, a father who has sexually abused his daughter in childhood cannot be held responsible for the deed. The actual offender is the mother, whose repeated rejection of her husband's sexual advances causes him to use the daughter instead. Hellinger turns a blind eye to the problems that emerge from incest, claiming that nothing is wrong with sex and even postulates that a young girl might well experience her father's advances as an exciting, pleasurable adventure. Years of

terrible trauma and victimization are completely denied, and during family constellations these problems are "solved" by means of the following ritual: the practitioner orders the representative daughter to kneel down in front of her representative father [frequently in public!] and is then told to say: "Thank you Dad, I am very grateful to have been able to do this for you". Hellinger believes that the distorted family balance will be restored in this manner, but critics point out that this 'therapy' is extremely humiliating to the victim and will in no way contribute to a solution of such a serious problem. German writer Elisabeth Reutter, sexually abused by her father during her youth, writes in her autobiographical book *Gehirnwäsche [Brainwash]* (3), that Hellinger's incest-therapy almost expelled the last remainders of her human dignity.

An obscure form of mysticism

By the same token, Hellinger explicitly and invariably sides with the role of offenders during therapeutic sessions which centre around the latter and their victims. He goes even further on this issue, claiming that those who commit crimes - including war-criminals - are unable to act in any other manner since they are under orders of an authority 'from-on-high' that lies entirely beyond their influence. Basing himself on indeterminate cosmic laws and obscure mysticism, Hellinger proclaims that this authority makes use of human beings whose actions are inescapably determined by their destiny. Consequently, war criminals were unable to defy their duties as this authority was in complete control of them. Sixty years after the end of W.W.2, Germany is still suffering from feelings of guilt, which prompts Hellinger to induce the victims of the first and subsequent post-war generations to be grateful to their offenders instead of dealing with post-traumatic problems for years on end. In keeping with his habitual family constellations and incest-therapies, victims are told to perform a ritual of a similar kind: they must kneel down before those representing their malefactors and express their gratitude. Obviously, Hellinger met with strong criticism from German authorities, all the more so since the idea to end all discussions on war culpability is one of the main issues within the *N.P.D.*, a German political party with outspoken leanings towards the extreme right, which over the last years has gained increasing public interest.

Winning the hearts and minds of managers

Meanwhile, pretentious expressions such as 'systemic constellations for organizations' serve to introduce H.'s therapies on a large scale into - mostly German - enterprises and institutions. Managers and business people in general are considered prone to therapy in order to weather the present economic uncertainties. Unfortunately, they are frequently oblivious of authentic scientific methods and instead are receptive to pseudo-therapies with alluring claims. Unable to tone this down to its real proportions, they tend to become impressed and overwhelmed by the current terminology on the H.-scene such as systemic ranks, morphogenetic fields, resonance, and chaos-theory.

Allegiance to resistance fighters is uncalled for

According to Hellinger, opposition against those so-called authorities-on-high is entirely futile, and resistance workers during W.W. II ought to have been aware that nothing could be undertaken against the disastrous phenomena within Hitler's Third Reich. In fact, they should have realized their failing beforehand. Only last year, Hellinger told a German audience, whilst guiding one of his family constellations: "In this country, a broad public opinion still exists that these nazi criminals were personally responsible for their acts and took decisions of their own free will and that they are therefore to be blamed for those crimes. But that is wrong, because at the time a stupendous force had enveloped them." Hellinger also proclaims that allegiance to resistance fighters against national-socialism - or any other dictatorial government such as the former Pinochet regime in Chile - is useless, wrong and actually based on ego-inflating self-deceit. One may well wonder why H. does not apply his own logic to these opponents of tyranny, considering that the latter may also be carrying out orders-from-on-high, albeit of a very different quality. [It would seem that in H.'s line of thinking, the powers of evil have supremacy over the powers of good, in so far as he willing to accept the existence of the latter]. According to H., the names of resistance fighters such as young Scholl and his sister who were murdered by the nazis should no longer be remembered and be scrapped from history books, since he supposes them to have also had lethal intentions. To top it all, Hellinger goes so far as to accuse these courageous people of lack of

compassion towards their compatriots! (B) ! H. himself served as a soldier on the eastern front during W.W.II and admires the acts of his fellow-soldiers, considering them to be heroes as they also acted within the scope of a high and mighty authority. Following his line of reasoning, Hellinger shows deep admiration for the type of man who acts like a warrior and is prepared to serve as an implement of war. In his view, a martial attitude is a quality of true manhood, and 'soft sentiments' are entirely out of place in a male.

Hitler's mystic spot

Not surprisingly, Hellinger displays considerable admiration for W.W.II-dictator Adolf Hitler in his books and teachings. He points out that von Stauffenberg's assault on Hitler failed, whereas the latter enjoyed twelve years of uninterrupted victory. H. continues that an overwhelming power took hold of Hitler too, forcing him to ride with the tide until the time came for his defeat, since no-one can sustain until the end. Last year, H.'s admiration for Hitler culminated when he and his much younger spouse, a healing psychic by the name of Maria Sophie Erdödy, moved into the *Kleine Reichskanzlei*, a villa which the *Führer* once owned in Berchtesgaden, near the Austrian border. Hellinger asserted that during his search for living accommodation in that region, this villa had purely by chance been offered to him by an estate agent. Hitler had chosen this spot because of a saltmine in the near surroundings, namely at the Obersalzberg, said to be one of Europe's principal regions possessing mystical energies. This enabled Hitler to confer a mystical quality on his Third Reich doctrine. Critics assume that Hellinger also believes in these powers. However, many disconcerted reactions by local inhabitants and the press caused him, half a year later, to move to the neighbouring *Villa Askania*, where he assumingly intends to found a large therapeutic centre. Hellinger's latest book entitled *Gottesgedanken (Divine reflections)* (B), which appeared around the same time, contains the following almost lyrical ode to the *Führer*:

Hitler,

Some people consider you to be inhuman, as if anyone ever deserved that qualification. I look upon you as I look upon myself: namely as a human being with a father and a mother, and with an extraordinary fate. Does that make you any greater? Or smaller? Are you better or worse? Because if you are greater, then so am I. And if you are smaller, then so am I. If you are better or worse, then so am I. For I am a human being like you. If I respect you, then I respect myself. And if I loathe you, then I loathe myself. Am I then permitted to love you? Am I perhaps even supposed to love you, since otherwise I could not love myself? When I admit that you were a human being, just as I am, then I am prompted to do so by something that governs both of us likewise, something that caused your beginning as well as mine - and also our end. How could I ever exclude myself from this Cause by excluding you? How could I ever cast blame upon this Cause and set myself far above it by casting blame upon you? Yet I cannot pity you, because your rise and fall has its origin in the same cause as mine. I worship it in you as in myself, and submit to all it brought about in you and to everything it brings about in me as well as in every other human being.

Lost court cases (4)

Public criticism of Hellinger's doctrine also culminated when, at prime time on April 19th 2004, Germany's renowned national tv-channel *Das Erste* presented a lengthy and most devastating report on H. called "*Das Geschäft mit der Seele [Merchandising the soul]*" (5). Claiming that Hellinger had been portrayed as a fascist, his most prominent followers immediately called upon the producers to rectify some of the issues, but in the end they abandoned their efforts. In this documentary, an ex-Hellinger patient reported she had suffered severely from therapeutic treatment by H.-psychiatrist Robert Langlotz from Munich, against whom she subsequently filed a lawsuit. The case ended six months later in court, where the parties agreed upon a compromise. In 2004, additional prominent followers of Hellinger were involved in court cases. Therapist Franz Ruppert, one of the foremost followers on the scene, brought charges against Klaus Weber, one of the members of the aforementioned FKP [zestfully headed by psychologist Colin Goldner, co-

author of two books criticizing the H.scene]. Elaborating on H.'s ideas, Ruppert had given vent to a forgiving attitude towards Adolf Hitler in his own book *Verwirrte Seelen [Confused souls, 2002]*, in which he proposed that all war criminals be granted amnesty. In a second book on the H.-scene, *Niemand kann seinem Schicksal entgehen [No-one can escape his fate] (A)*, Weber had highly criticized some of Ruppert's readings, which resulted in the latter filing a lawsuit against him. Meanwhile, before judgement was spoken, the editor of *Niemand...* had published a revised edition, omitting Weber's most tarting criticism. This proved superfluous since the court ruled that freedom of writing and speech must prevail.

Another celebrity on the Hellinger scene, therapist Matthias Varga von Kibéd, filed a complaint against Colin Goldner of the FKP. Von Kibéd stated that Goldner had accused him of holding similar views on incest as Hellinger, and he demanded that Goldner withdraw his words. The case ended last October with a hearing of both sides by the court, which then decreed that Goldner need not withdraw any of his prior words. By now, it appears highly questionable whether H.-celebrities will continue to take their critics to court.

How one of Hellinger's closest friends quitted

Although Hellinger hardly made any personal efforts to defend himself against increasing criticism, the H.-scene began to feel uneasy. Reinhard Bauss, until then an unimportant member of the guild of practitioners, made a courageous attempt to plunge right into the heart of the scene by stating in the Hellinger periodical *Praxis der Systemaufstellungen (6)*, that some of H.'s standard family constellations were outrageous and in no way corresponded with regular psycho-therapy. Their sacrosanct repute should therefore be got rid of. He was reprobated by the H.-elite, but then a prominent member and close personal friend of Hellinger, Arist von Schlippe - also chairman of the German umbrella organization of family-therapeutical centres - completely broke with H.'s ideas. In May 2004, von Schlippe wrote an open, emotional farewell letter stating that he could no longer agree to Hellinger's views on psychotherapy. Two months later, the *Potsdamer Erklärung (Declaration of Potsdam) (7)* was drawn up, which von Schlippe also initiated. In this declaration, more than 150 H.-therapists officially announced their rejection of all H.-readings and teachings. The list included the names of Vargas von Kibéd and his spouse Insa Sparrer, also former H.-therapists. Nevertheless, both names ranked on announcements of therapeutic Hellinger-like seminars which were to take place in Holland during the summer of 2005. The FKP believes that both therapists have now put themselves in an extremely tight spot, as they can only present their highly complex yet insignificant variations on Hellinger's formula within H.-circles, where they once made their debut.

A dubious therapy

In the Netherlands, many of the new age and psychotherapeutic circles that apply Hellinger's formula prefer to ignore serious criticism from colleagues as well as vigilant authorities in Germany, whom they believe to have constituted a counter-movement as a reaction to the initial success of H.'s family constellations. Some even deny the facts, claiming that the H.-therapy deserves credit for its positive effects. Moreover, Hellinger's ideas seem to be catching on within regular psychotherapy. The following example illustrates this. In the Netherlands, incorrect public behaviour during the German occupation in W.W.II is still a current issue. Children and/or grandchildren of people who collaborated with the enemy are known to suffer under this knowledge. Consequently, a therapeutic institution was founded in an attempt to alleviate these people's problems. Yet it will come as a surprise that this institution also makes use of Hellinger's formula. Claiming that Hellinger's therapy grants his clients lots of freedom - which is contradicted by evidence - this institution named *Herkennen [lit.: Recognition]*, relentlessly brushes aside all forms of criticism.

Whitewashing the incongruities

Yet another example shows how the Hellinger-elite tends to soft-pedal its own fallacies. In different interviews and during family constellations, Hellinger has made various anti-Semitic remarks. On one occasion, he ordered a woman of Jewish descent to confess to her husband, with whom she had matrimonial problems: "I am very glad that you married me in spite of me being Jewish." In his book *Mit der Seele gehen [Conversing with the soul] (B)* Hellinger quotes a Jewish teacher who

deserted his faith: "Not until each and every Jew has remembered Adolf Hitler in his prayers, will the Jewish people come to terms with themselves." Another H.-quote is: "Europe would not have reached its present level if national-socialism had not occurred." In order to tone down some of H.'s anti-Semitic utterances, the H.-elite brought professor Haim Dasberg, chairman of the *Israeli Center for Psychosocial Support of Holocaust Survivors and Second Generation*, around to write a praising introduction to H.'s book *Rachel weint um ihre Kinder [Rachel weeps for her children]*, published in 2004. To top it all, Dasberg was invited to speak as an eminent guest before the *5th International [Hellinger] Congress for System Constellations*, named *Pantha Rei [Everything flows]*, held at Cologne in May 2005 (8). Its programme revealed that Dasberg's lectures focussed on the German-Jewish past. Last year already, the FKP published an open letter (9), advising Dasberg to withdraw his participation in this congress. In spite of their warning, Dasberg went, thereby displaying unreliability and compromising the centre he is allied with.

Junkyard

Hellinger doubtlessly shows similarities with the new pope Joseph Ratzinger/Benedictus XVI: his age, his faith, his region of descent [Bavaria] and some of his conservative attitudes, although the pope demonstrated during his visit to Cologne in August 2005 that he vehemently condemned anti-Semitism. This year, Hellinger will turn 80, but this does not mean that his lifework will not be continued after his death. Among his elite are followers who profile themselves as extremely hard-core. It is to be hoped that the accumulating criticism will set these die-hards thinking, and that the latter will eventually face the facts and bear the consequences. According to the FKP, the H.-elite is wavering and is making fruitless attempts to press their issue through court proceedings. The present state of affairs undeniably shows that in the end, Hellinger's forms of therapy will land where they belong, namely on the junkyard of psychotherapy.

A) Titles of 3 recommendable books that critically examine the Hellinger doctrine (available in German only):

Der Wille zum Schicksal (= Self-fulfilling fate), by Colin Goldner and co-authors, ISBN 3-8000-3920-6, 2003 Verlag Carl Ueberreuter, Vienna, Austria;

"Niemand kann seinem Schicksal entgehen" (= "No-one can escape his fate"), by Colin Goldner, Klaus Weber and co-authors, ISBN 3-86569-007-6, 2005 Alibri Verlag, Aschaffenburg, Germany

Familienstellen - Therapie oder Okkultismus? (= Family constellations - therapy or occultism?) by Werner Haas, ISBN 3-89334-420-6, Asanger Verlag GmbH Kröning, Germany

(B) Titles of Hellinger's most controversial books (available in German only): *Der Abschied (The farewell)*, *Mit der Seele gehen (Conversing with the soul)*, *Gottesgedanken (Divine reflections)*; see for details: www.hellinger.com.

Notes:

1) Official website: www.hellinger.com (English pages available)

2) Forum Kritische Psychologie: <http://www.fkpsych.de/>

3) *Gehirnwäsche (Brainwashing)* by Elisabeth Reutter, ISBN 3-925931-40-6, Antipsychiatrieverlag 2005, Berlin, Germany

4) see for details: <http://www.fkpsych.de/>, section 'Gerichtsverfahren'

5) *Das Geschäft mit der Seele (Merchandising the soul)* by Andrea Mocellin, 19.4.2004, Report - ARD/Bayerischer Runkfunk

6) In *Praxis der Systemaufstellungen*, February 2003

7) see for details: www.syst-strukturaufstellungen.de/index.php?aid=20.

Potsdam Declaration on Systemic Constellation Work (revised)

The work with role-playing and constellations has a long tradition in family and systemic therapy. Such work is rooted primarily in therapeutic techniques as they were developed in Family Sculpture work or in Psychodrama. In the form practiced by Bert Hellinger, it has achieved a wider public recognition that it never had before.

Regrettably, Hellinger has increasingly distanced himself from his original systemic work. But he is still to be given credit for his contributions in strengthening constellation work.

Above all, he has developed new and innovative procedures that promise to resolve the dynamics of entanglements.

However, today we have reached the point where, not only essential parts of the practice of Bert Hellinger --- and many of his followers ---, but also many of his statements and procedures are to be regarded explicitly as incompatible with the

fundamental premises of systemic therapy, namely:

- * **Neglecting to clarify statements and their related directives**
- * **The application of mystifying and "self-immunizing" descriptions ("something greater", "taken into service of . . ." etc.)**
- * **The unqualified use of generalized formulations and dogmatic interpretations ("always when", "bad effect", "punished with death", "the only way", "forfeit the right," etc.).**
- * **Employing potentially humiliating interventions and submission rituals ?**
- * **The allegedly compelling linkage of these interventions with specific models of human types and their associated world views (e.g., regarding gender issues, parenthood, dual nationalities, etc.) ?**
- * **The idea that one person can reach a truth that is denied to the other person. This leads to the use of absolutist terminology and implies that, in a partnership, it is pointless to strive for cooperation in the relationship.**

By contrast, we validate many examples and permutations of constellation work, all being done in the context of a systemic- constructivist understanding of therapy, and within the framework of a competent and responsible therapeutic relationship.

We understand these points as constructive attempts to develop further this already proven therapeutic technique and also to submit it to more and more scientific testing.

To that extent we also resist any vague or imprecise criticism of this kind of practice.

Constellation work "beyond Hellinger" should be developed further as a therapeutic instrument, but the close connection with his name is not to be maintained any longer today.

July 2004

This Declaration is supported by: (name, address, signature).

English translation: courtesy by Thomas Mellett.

8) see for programme details if still available: www.iag-kongress.com (English pages available)

9) see for details: <http://www.fkpsych.de>, section 'Offener Brief'

