

Biomedicine and Alternative Healing Systems in America
Issues of Class, Race, Ethnicity, & Gender
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“The study of health, illness, and medicine provides us with one of the most revealing mirrors for understanding the relationship between individuals, society, and culture; it is an exciting task which has only just begun.”

--Margaret Lock
(*Biomedicine Examined*, edited by
Margaret Lock, Kluwer, 1988)

“Medicine is a social science and politics is nothing but medicine on a large scale.”
--Rudolph Virchow (Critical Medical
Anthropology, edited by Merrill Singer and Hans Baer, Baywood, 1995)

The directions that medical care, medical education, and medical research have taken in the United States have been largely shaped by corporate sponsored philanthropies --particularly the Rockefeller foundation-- during the early 20th century. This is not controversial. The intent and results of this corporate sponsorship, however, are issues of great dispute among historians, sociologists and anthropologists of disparate political persuasions.

Critical medical anthropologists such as Hans Baer take the position that most illness and disease are the result of poverty and inequality, along with occupational and environmental factors. These conditions, in turn, are themselves consequences of a society's social and political organization. Accordingly, the best and most logical way to improve the health of any population is to reorganize society, change the status quo. Needless to say, men of privilege, directing large foundations at the turn of the 20th century did not favor such a radical approach. Consequently, at a time when there was increasing labor unrest in the cities, and populist sentiments were widespread among farmers and small-town people, foundations favored the type of medicine least concerned with the social origins of illness and disease.

Biomedicine and Alternative Healing Systems in America begins with a review of the pluralistic nature of American medicine in the nineteenth century. Although regular medicine was the most widespread health-care subsystem in the United States during that period, it did not completely dominate medical practice; rather, it shared the stage with homeopathy, botanic medicine, eclecticism, hydropathy, Christian

Science, osteopathy, and chiropractic. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, however, an emerging alliance of corporate leaders, the state, and elite medical doctors and researchers directed the transformation of regular medicine into biomedicine, which ultimately permitted biomedicine to establish political and ideological dominance over rival medical systems. In the process of this rise to dominance, medical science neglected all that had been previously learned about the social and environmental factors of disease causation. Instead, there was an overemphasis on the importance of the germ theory-- a diversion that served the interests of the status quo.

In the midst of biomedicine's rise to dominance, homeopathy, osteopathy and the other medical subsystems continued to persist. However, they all had to adapt themselves to the dominant model. Much of *Biomedicine and Alternative Healing Systems in America* provides a useful and wide-ranging synthesis of the history of these alternatives, and important insights into the accommodation process.

After skillfully dissecting the way in which the economics of industrialism has come to shape current medical practice in both its dominant and alternative forms, Baer argues for a more holistic understanding of the causes of sickness, and a return to a pluralistic medical system. However, he carefully qualifies the type of holistic health movement he wants to see. Currently we are witnessing a limited holism, in which holistic health practitioners of various modalities emphasize the mind-body connection but fail to make the necessary mind-body-society connections, and thus we (note: "we" should read "they"--MC) become passive supporters of the status quo. A truly holistic approach recognizes the need for a significant social restructuring in order to achieve a fundamental reduction in the level of human suffering. Hence, Baer's vision is of a global system of democratic eco-socialism in order to directly challenge the underlying political structures and relations responsible for much ill health and poor treatment.

A treasury of information and a devastating critique, *Biomedicine and Alternative Healing Systems in America* is a wonderful single-volume education in the politics of health, and a potent antidote to orthodox thinking.

REVIEWER: **Mike Chappelle** is a political writer and playwright living in New Jersey.