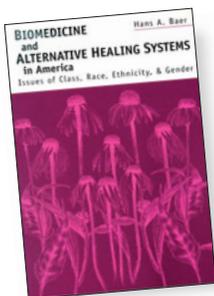


▶ Biomedicine and Alternative Healing Systems in America: Issues of Class, Race, Ethnicity, & Gender

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For most Americans, a routine trip to the doctor means a visit to a general practitioner, an M.D. with a specialty in family or internal medicine. But this interesting book by the anthropologist Hans Baer critiques

the conventional associations such a phrase evokes. Baer claims that the dominant medical and legal institutions in the United States have made biomedicine (or “scientific medicine”, the province of M.D.s) standard while pushing so-called alternative health practices to the social and economic margins.

He asserts that our current health care system is hierarchical, with biomedicine enjoying preeminence over alternative therapies predominantly because it has gained the support of political and economic “elites”. He goes on to demonstrate that there was a time in the United States when biomedicine was just one contender among many for the allegiance of patients and the patronage of politicians. Medicine in 19th-century America was more pluralistic than it is today, as Americans of multiple social classes patronized homeopathic and hydropathic physicians when “regular” medicine could not heal their ills. Other Americans turned to botanic therapies or to religious healers (such as spiritualists or Christian Scientists) for remedies. Biomedicine may have been “first among equals”, but it did not go unchallenged.

Biomedical physicians, Baer claims, worked hard to establish dominance, organizing societies like the American Medical

Association to promote their work and to denigrate the healing activities of the “unscientific” therapies. A critical step in the move to biomedical dominance was the establishment of state licensing boards. Biomedical physicians and their corporate supporters dominated these boards, according to Baer, and used them as a way to deny legitimacy to other traditions, such as the osteopathic and chiropractic disciplines.

One particularly insightful critique Baer offers is his assertion that the biomedical model of illness and healing often overlooks the social factors that contribute to disease. He illustrates convincingly that biomedicine has tended to ignore the influence of poverty, lack of education, and racial discrimination on the health of certain populations. According to Baer, alternative therapies became popular in some of these communities because they emphasized the connection between individual health and holistic social change.

While Baer demonstrates that alternative medicine was (and is) not simply the domain of antiscientific crackpots, his critique of biomedicine sometimes seems quixotic. He grudgingly acknowledges that the germ theory of disease was not a conspiracy theory designed by “regular” physicians to gain social and economic hegemony, but a revolutionary discovery that led to significant improvements in individual and public health. Perhaps biomedical practitioners were a bit too intolerant of alternative therapies and wanted to eradicate their competition, but biomedicine also succeeded because it healed successfully in ways that other therapies (like spiritualism and homeopathy) did not.

There has been, in recent years, a resurgence of alternative healing systems in the United States. The U.S. government has sanctioned research into alternative methods, and in 1992 it created the Office of Alternative Medicine as a division of the National Institutes of Health. Although Baer endorses a more egalitarian relationship between biomedicine and alternative systems, he is suspicious of the current government and corporate approval

of many alternative practices. As biomedical therapies have become more expensive and less accessible to working-class Americans, government and business have supported alternative healing systems as a way to cut costs. Thus, the contemporary move toward medical pluralism (which Baer values in theory) is inauthentic, as it does not have the long-term interests of American public health at heart.

While not without flaws, *Biomedicine and Alternative Healing Systems in America* is a useful and well-intentioned book. Its author reminds the reader that the dominance of the modern biomedical system did not come without intense struggle, and that in such social and institutional conflict something of value may have been lost. The practitioners and supporters of biomedical research can ill afford to ignore the social factors that contribute to disease, nor can they turn a blind eye to cost-cutting measures that may, in the long run, do more harm than good to American public health.

—REVIEWED BY RICHARD A. PIZZI

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Oxford University Press, 2002

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Prima Publishing, 1998