In *The Anthropology of Alternative Medicine*, Anamaria Iosif Ross undertakes to provide a ‘concentrated anthropological synthesis’ (p. 2) of alternative medicine. She asks ‘... how do persons and communities decide who is healthy and who is sick? What are criteria for inclusion and exclusion? What are the solutions?’ (p. 19). The ambition is admirable: to ‘clarify the value and meaning that medical approaches contribute to the lives of patients, practitioners, and communities, in context’ (p. 9). The other purpose is to reinvigorate the ‘discourses and categories now used to label and analyze the experiences of health, illness, and healing’ (p. 36).

Alternative medicine consists of a wide variety of approaches and practices, often originating in distant cultures and periods. According to the double-blind, placebo-controlled testing that is the hallmark of Western biomedicine, alternative therapies do not work. Adherents of alternative medicine, however, claim it is efficient due to its holistic approach. In Ross’ view, it is also characterised by its ‘elusive social spirit’ and ‘subversive and grassroots qualities’ (p. 150).

The first chapter, *Alternative medicine in the 21st century*, states that ‘mainstream health practitioners and institutions are increasingly eager to co-opt holistic and alternative practices’ (p. 8). It also introduces key concepts in medical anthropology, anthropological approaches to alternative healing, cultural constructions in health care and the difference between biomedicine and traditional medicine. The second chapter is organised around ‘flow’, the ‘quintessential vital principle’ and ‘empirically descriptive key term’ (p. 41), which appears to be a common idea in the topics treated, for example water and equilibrium in religion, homeopathy, energy, life-force, the powers of the sun, food industry, dowsing, herbs and alternative consumption movements. ‘Spirit, consciousness, and trance’ (Chapter 3) discusses altered states, shamanic consciousness, hypnosis, symbolic and faith healing, pilgrimage, mental illness and Ayurveda. The third chapter, *Body, movement, and the senses*, is dedicated questions like the multidimensionality of healing work, tactile experiences, music as life, aromatherapy and polytheistic medicine. In her conclusion (Chapter 5), Ross expresses the hope that alternative medicine will gradually become recognised and integrated into biomedicine.

The book contains some empirical studies of alternative groups in Romania, such as Hesychasm (or rather neo-Hesychasm), Reiki healing and a millenarian natural food movement, which have an empirical basis and among other things illustrate how Orthodox Christianity is integrated into a New Age set of ideas and practices. In addition, each chapter has questions for class discussion and essay writing, as well as recommended literature and film.

An important point is that ‘culturally speaking, practices and beliefs endure because they have social power, they fulfil needs and they yield benefits’ that can be ‘cognitive, emotional, social, material, or physical’ and hard to quantify (p. 9). Ross claims that she will not prove or disprove the ‘scientific validity of particular practices under discussion’ (p. 37), yet recurrently asserts that the health benefits of alternative therapies
are ‘increasingly supported by scientific data’ (p. 3). One of her ‘dominant concerns and assumptions’ is that the role of the senses in healing ‘goes much beyond current Western conceptions and approaches’ (p. 10), and she appears to share the idea that the distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ reflects an ‘ethnocentric and scientific bias’ (p. 30). That is one of the reasons she eventually rejects the term “alternative” altogether, due to its “fractured” and “hegemonic” flavour. Instead, she prefers the term “integrative medicine”, even though, in her view, that too echoes the ‘colonial, imperialistic, and modern-istic ethos of incorporation’ (p. 150).

A major weakness of the book is that it neglects power structures, economic aspects or gender roles within the alternative field itself. The perspectives conveyed are top-down and set in a scientific or pseudo-scientific discourse (healers, course instructors, etc.), which are not necessarily the same as those of the patients/clients. Ross also de-emphasises significant historical, cultural and socio-religious differences, for example between folk healing/medicine in pre-modern societies and modern alternative medicine in the West, although alternative medicine is a product of the modern, disenchanted world and not just a reaction to it.

Two main assumptions permeate the author’s discussion of what alternative medicine is and does. The first assumption is that biomedical treatment has many shortcomings and is closely related to negative modern capitalist structures and interests. While some of this explains particular concerns of alternative medicine in the 21st century, there are some recurrent logical fallacies in the arguments (straw man, biased, sweeping generalisation, false dilemma, perfectionist fallacy and suppressed evidence). The second assumption, or claim, is that alternative medicine is natural, holistic, and efficient, also in scientific terms. The argumentation is weak here too, for example with repeated appeals to unnamed authorities, tradition, nature, probability, common practice, popular belief, etc. None of this would have been problematic had the author not conflated the emic categories and explanations of alternative medicine with anthropological analysis.

The book does give a certain overview of issues relevant to adherents of alternative medicine and is informative about the discourse. On the whole, it is unfocused and lacks a firm analytical grip on what comes across as a series of random and unfounded claims about various unrelated topics. The result is a lot of strange statements like ‘magic has its rightful place to reclaim’ (p. 82) or that the U.S. government banned certain Apache rites of passage ‘because they conflicted with Judeo-Christian views of puberty and menstruation’ (p. 110).

While Ross purports to explore how ‘alternative etiologies and therapeutic methods are constructed, imagined, or contested in time and space’ (p. 9), she does not take into account relevant studies of alternative medicine in the West in the 21st century or the paradigm’s historicity, above all the influence from Theosophy and New Age. The magical and religious ideas that underpin it are not sufficiently analysed, although they are essential to understanding why alternative medicine (and the author) interprets history, science, religion and cultures the way it does.

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