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Understanding Unconventional Medicine. Social Sciences on Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Therapies in Slovakia. By Ivan Souček and Roman Hofreiter.

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Ivan Souček and Roman Hofreiter have co-authored an exciting and inspiring volume that promises to be useful reading "for students and other scholars in the field of sociology and anthropology of medicine and the history of medicine, as well as for policy makers and professional medical experts […] interested in the fascinating world of medical pluralism" (p. 7). This monograph provides a comprehensive overview of the historical context, features, significant trends, causes, utilization patterns, and factors that impact the efficacy of alternative therapies in Slovakia. It is concise yet informative and covers all the necessary information to understand the topic fully.

The authors also point out that social science studies in the field usually look at each therapy from one of three perspectives: the doctors, the alternative healers, or the users. Although the views of both doctors and healers are presented throughout the volume, the focus is on the users of the therapies, who "make the decisions regarding various healthcare options in a highly diverse medical environment" (p. 9).

The authors have combined sociological and anthropological approaches. This is not surprising, considering that Souček, an anthropologist, and Hofreiter, a sociologist, have been accomplished researchers of the subject for many years.[1] This interdisciplinary approach not only broadens the horizons of the analysis but also allows us to gather information on the social characteristics of unconventional medicine users through questionnaires and interview data. The book is structured

1 Souček and Hofreiter, "Komplementárna a alternatívna"; Souček and Hofreiter, "Complementary and Alternative Medicine"; Souček and Hofreiter, "Medical Pluralism."

into three major chapters that examine the historical, political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of alternative healing practices in Slovakia.

In the first part, entitled "Understanding Unconventional Medicine: General Overview," there are four sub-chapters and about forty pages on the concept of unconventional medicine, its main forms in Slovakia, its development, institutionalization, and professionalization. The authors point out that the identification of those healing practices that "have evolved without the direct influence of Cartesian dualism, such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, yoga or homeopathic treatment" (p. 16) is a major challenge for both doctors and practitioners as well as researchers in the field. During the late 1990s, the term 'unconventional medicine' gained significant popularity among researchers and reflected the fact that the terms 'folk', 'complementary', and 'alternative' medicine were approached from the perspective of their relationship with academic medicine. The concept seemed wide-ranging and value-neutral enough to encompass different healing methods, including those stemming from 'medical pluralism', which has gained widespread acceptance worldwide, including in Slovakia. However, the therapies associated with unconventional medicine "are not universal, unchanging traditions" (p. 19), and the practices vary significantly across different countries, so it is essential to examine them in a country-specific and regional development context.

It is important to note that Slovakia witnessed the emergence of several alternative therapies in the mid-nineteenth century, as documented in the book. In this period, it was difficult to distinguish between orthodox and non-conventional medicine due to the eclectic and broad range of healing practices. Although the number of university-trained doctors increased, the two fields were closely intertwined. The professionalization of medical training and the development of biomedical knowledge in the early twentieth century brought about the change. Despite the professionalization of medical training, there was growing distrust in the public healthcare system, which led to the emergence and spread of alternative therapies. In Slovakia, like many other European countries, homeopathy, mesmerism, and hydropathy gained popularity, and formal, academic medicine was sharply criticized by the founders and followers of these therapies. Their nature-oriented approach greatly contributed to their popularity.

As the authors point out, the history of unconventional medicine in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe has been varied due to the different paths of healthcare development in each country. In the case of Eastern European countries, including Slovakia, the period of communism brought drastic changes, as the materialist doctrine of Marxist ideology banned all medical practices that could not be scientifically justified. According to the principle of cultural evolutionism, folk medicine, and its associated practices were viewed as primitive superstitions that needed to be

eliminated. Despite the oppressive tactics of communism and the transformation of rural areas, the use of folk medicine and medicinal plants persisted. The political turn of 1989 granted healthcare system representatives the freedom and legitimacy they deserved. Unconventional therapies managed to emerge during the socialist period despite restrictions: e.g., the research of Chinese medicine and acupuncture has shown that from the 1950s onwards, several practitioners learned the methods in North Korea or China and then used them in Czechoslovakia. In 1965, a book was published, and a conference was held on the subject. In 1977, the Ministry of Health implemented a guideline that is still applied, stipulating that only licensed doctors are allowed to perform needle-sticking techniques. Ayurvedic medicine and yoga were known in the early twentieth century but gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the limitations imposed by socialism, literature on various forms of Eastern spirituality spread as samizdat in Slovakia. As a result, yoga shifted its focus towards physical exercise. The dilution-based method of homeopathy was banned in 1950, branded pseudo-scientific, leading to its unfavorable fate since the nineteenth century. The authors demonstrate that the liberal climate that emerged after 1989 was not the genesis of these therapies. Alternative therapies have been utilized to treat illnesses, and those healing methods that fall outside of academic medicine have existed for a considerable time. Slovakia followed suit and passed legislation regulating unconventional medicine, clearly outlining the qualifications and circumstances under which practitioners could operate.

The second chapter, titled "Understanding Unconventional Medicine: A Sociological Investigation," presents the results of a representative survey that analyzed patterns and trends in the use of unconventional medicine in Slovakia. The survey looks at the prevalence of different types of unconventional medicine and attitudes towards alternative healthcare. In September 2019, FOCUS, the research agency, collected data from 1027 respondents, comprising 494 men and 533 women, through an omnibus survey. To gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of unconventional medicine and its different aspects, the questionnaire was divided into three parts: the first concerned the types of unconventional therapies and their frequency. In the second section of the survey, participants were asked to report their frequency of visits to unconventional therapists. The third section delved into their level of satisfaction with these therapies. The construction of this was unequivocally influenced by the results of the International Questionnaire to Measure the Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (I-CAM-Q) and previous research on the undeniable prevalence of unconventional medicine. Using the comparative method, the authors effectively situate Slovak data within a European framework. This process notably illuminates country-specific traits, such as the comparatively lesser prevalence of acupuncture and chiropractic practices, as well as the heightened

employment of herbal medicine. It is important to note that Slovakia boasts a significant number of herbal specialists, making herbs readily accessible, reasonably priced, and frequently recommended by medical professionals as complementary treatment. Although not all details can be presented here, the survey data highlights that regular users of unconventional medicine are often dissatisfied with academic medicine, distrustful of doctors, and turn to alternative practitioners for philosophical, moral, or religious reasons. A critical question to consider is how patients acquire knowledge about different therapies. Interestingly, it is not the media or the internet that drives recommendations but rather the opinions of friends and relatives. Throughout the book, the authors emphasize that medicine is a complex cultural system and should not be interpreted in isolation. They suggest that data and conclusions should be considered in the context of formal medical care.

Chapter three of the book, "Understanding Unconventional Medicine: Anthropological Examination," discusses the ongoing debate surrounding the effectiveness of unconventional medicine. It examines the needs satisfied by therapies and identifies their effectiveness in promoting healing. What distinguishes the methodology of an alternative therapist from that of a traditional physician? How does the doctor examine the patient and search for the causes of illness? The interviews within this volume unequivocally demonstrate that non-traditional practitioners fill a crucial void that formal medical care fails to address. They consider illness from physical, mental, social, and spiritual perspectives, utilizing bricolage techniques to choose treatments and disregard medical diagnoses. The interviews help us understand the various aspects and motivations behind unconventional medicine. This chapter is fascinating and takes us one step closer to comprehending the intricate connection between theory and practice in the field of medicine.

I believe that the co-authored work of Ivan Soucek and Roman Hofreiter has attempted an interdisciplinary presentation of a relevant topic. It reflects on the complex structure of the courses of action that can be taken to overcome illness as an emergency. It looks at unconventional medicine in a broad historical, social, and cultural context, and the data and questions it raises should be of interest to an international readership.

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