

BOOK REVIEW

American Medicine as Culture, by HOWARD F STEIN Westview Press, San Francisco, CA, 1990 \$29.95

The Sufi master, Samarqandi, is quoted as saying, "Different sections of the community are, to all realities, 'nations,' the clerics, doctors, literary men, nobles, and peasants really could be called nations, for each has its own customs and casts of thought." Howard Stein agrees and believes that medicine meets his definition of culture as "Shared and constantly renegotiated sense of definition and affiliation with a particular group or groups and the action that derives from and validates this self-definition" [p. 1]. By this definition one can, and physicians do belong to more than one culture.

Stein is uniquely qualified to be a commentator on medicine's culture. He has been a teacher of behavioral science in medical schools from 1972 (since 1978 at the University of Oklahoma) and a counselor and psychotherapist to house officers providing him with day-to-day knowledge of medicine. Another side of him sees culture and human behavior from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory and tradition. His last four chapters have captured the world of the young physician in the institution of the modern hospital as have few other recent works. Problems of time, money, priorities, the medical 'team,' and conflicts between physicians as a member of a family and as a doctor are dealt with extremely well. His working knowledge of these subjects and his sympathetic—even compassionate—treatment of his young charges still struggling to make sense and do good in the complex world of medicine and its institutions make interesting reading.

In this era there is coming to be an awareness that our knowledge of ourselves as individuals has outstripped our knowledge of ourselves as members of a community or culture. What is it that makes us a group and how? Any idea that the answers to these questions are self-evident or easy disappears when one tries to answer them without merely restating the question. One might say, as a simplistic instance, that we are a group because of outside forces, but if we are all particular individuals, how do outside forces create a group? Professor Stein's choice of medicine as the subject to answer these questions would seem excellent because medicine is small and focussed enough to examine the tension between individual and group in a new way. His is a process approach, but while we may agree that the group's sense of definition and affiliation is constantly renegotiated we are left to wonder at why it is renegotiated when it is, and how. Despite interesting aspects Stein's book ultimately fails its stated purpose because he has attempted to understand the culture of medicine as the agglomeration of the individual dynamics of its members.

It is in this context that I find his use of the psychoanalytic perspective regressive rather than contributory to his understanding of culture. By this time in the 20th century there should be no doubt of the enormous contribution of psychoanalytic theory and research to our understanding of the mental life. But there are several good reasons why it has

limitations in understanding culture. First, it is a systems error to apply generalizations true at a lower level of organization (cells or individuals) to a higher level (groups or nations, as examples). As a case in point he says, "Moreover, the very words used to express American values can be confusing if not misleading to the observer. For instance, 'individualism' is often wrongly assumed to mean individuation, whereas the former is a panicky retreat from relationships and the latter is a growing awareness of personal distinctiveness." [p. 33]. Whatever their perspective, social scientists cannot lose sight of the fact that individualism (in terms of this society and American culture) is a central tenet of Western political philosophy without knowledge of the origins and meanings of which an understanding of derivative culture is impossible. It is not, in itself, incompatible with strong personal bonds.

A second limitation of using psychoanalytic theory to understand culture is that unconscious meanings may be culturally derivative as well as perhaps having an influence on culture. In the chapter on money and medicine he ultimately tunes in for his several concluding pages on Freud's discovery that money is symbolically identified with feces. Oh dear! There may be some value in the treatment of an individual to discover that the patient equates the two. But as a cultural explanation for a complex problem by an anthropologist it borders on silliness. I know of no systematic evidence that in 1990 in the United States, people act on a symbolic identification of money and feces as we are asked to believe they did in Freud's Vienna in 1900. In fact, currently money and power seem to be associated, and so perhaps to the otherwise powerless infant the anal retention of feces is an attempt at exercising power over the parent, etc. etc.

A third limitation is the failure to acknowledge that there is not one psychodynamic tradition, but many. Not one set of interpretations for individual behavior but many—some, all, or none of which may be correct. Why should we accept his rather orthodox interpretations rather than those of (say) Jungians or self psychologists? Providing supportive quotations from the like-minded is not persuasive evidence. For example, many people currently jog in the United States without our having to wonder what they are "running for, perhaps running from, or running to" [p. 118]. Reading these sections of the book, which have a kind of old-fashioned flavor reminiscent of the heyday of psychoanalysis in the 1950's, one is led to wonder at the phenomenon that has converted revolutionary ideas of the 20th century, like psychoanalysis and Marxism, into conservative forces.

At the end of the book, I believe you will know much more about medicine and doctors, but not about culture.

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