

Book Review: Negotiating the Holistic Turn: The Domestication of Alternative Medicine

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Judith Fadlon, *Negotiating the Holistic Turn: The Domestication of Alternative Medicine*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. 157 pp. \$18.95 (paper).

Dr. Fadlon has conducted thorough and comprehensive research into the characteristics of non-conventional medicine (NCM) in Israel and the directions in which it has developed. The few reservations presented below in no way detract from Dr. Fadlon's insights and clear analysis, which are presented in a most orderly manner.

The research objective was "to focus on social and cultural discourse and the many ways in which CAM (complementary and alternative medicine) is acquiring situated meanings within institutional and social contexts" (p. 1). From the various prevalent terms used to indicate the 'other' medicine (non-establishment, alternative, holistic, etc.), Dr. Fadlon chooses NCM, as opposed to CM, which refers to biomedicine. We shall therefore adopt this terminology in our review.

The research spans the period 1992–2000, and uses a variety of qualitative methods: participant observation, textual analysis, and interviews conducted with practitioners and patients.

A superficial inspection suffices to convince us that NCM has gained significant status and an ever widening clientele within Israel's healing system, even though the medical establishment (the Ministry of Health and the Medical Association) does not confer legitimacy upon it. A closer and more methodical inspection of the practice of NCM, as provided by the author, exposes a more complex picture of a struggle for legitimacy, which uses the tactics of adopting terminology, symbols and diagnostic concepts derived from biomedical culture. The common denominator of these tactics is 'domestication,' whereby non-conventional healing practice is placed within the frame of reference and under the authority of established medicine. This is "a process in which the foreign is rendered familiar and palatable to local tastes," and which "can explain both the growing popularity of NCM modalities as well as the facility with which individuals move between conventional medicine and NCM modalities, and among the various NCM modalities" (p. 2). Through domestication, the exotic beliefs that underpin many NCM treatments are modified so as to render them more culturally acceptable and less challenging to Western consumers.

In order to substantiate this central proposition the author investigates the public domain in which NCM is practiced, discussed and taught: a hospital clinic, the press and a training college for NCM students. Each of these locations also constitutes a focus for further discussion: consumption (clinics); the spread of knowledge (the press), and institutionalization (colleges). To complete the presentation of NCM practice we are provided with data pertaining to clients, their preferences, and practitioners.

Dr. Fadlon provides a wealth of examples to support her arguments, perhaps too many. Fewer of these detailed case studies would have sufficed to establish the author's main points. On the other hand, these examples do impart to the reader a sense of authentic reality. The following excerpts are taken from the three different areas mentioned above.

- A clinic operating in a hospital building has no organizational link with the hospital. Its location confers legitimacy in the eyes of its clients. The head of the clinic, who directs clients to the various practitioners, is a doctor who specialized in NCM. The clinic prefers practitioners who hold an MD degree.
- An advertisement appearing in NCM journals features doctors who are also practitioners of NCM. They are referred to as 'cultural entrepreneurs.'
- Journal articles present case studies of patients treated by NCM. While both medical doctors and practitioners discuss the effectiveness of the treatment, the language used is entirely that of biomedicine. "The media thus becomes a postmodern arena in which knowledge claims and therapeutic claims are evaluated and disseminated." (p. 80)
- "In the institute of learning...a human skeleton stood in the corner of a room in which diagnosis was being demonstrated by means of the Chinese method of observing the tongue. There was no need for the skeleton, yet its presence signified the legacy of biomedicine" (p. 121).

An analysis of the demographic data of the patients attending an NCM clinic reveals no significant differences between them and a group that does not use NCM. The NCM patients do not perceive any essential difference between the two treatment modes, viewing NCM as an extension of the range of biomedicine, and point out that the clinic is located in a hospital. This finding confirms the author's main argument. My comment here is that it may be useful to distinguish between patients who attend this clinic and those who attend private NCM clinics. We may find that the 'domestication' process is less pronounced among the latter.

This book deals with an interesting and topical subject. The use of NCM is steadily increasing in the Western world, sometimes encouraged by the establishment and at others tacitly accepted. The Israeli case is of interest as it exposes a duality among consumers: on the one hand a wish to explore a different mode of healing (usually as a result of disappointment with established medicine), and on the other hand a reluctance to abandon the symbols and language that characterize that very medicine, which is still perceived as legitimate and as conferring legitimacy upon the other methods. At different points in the book the author draws comparisons and parallels with the situation in the Western world. I would have preferred these comparisons to be presented in a separate section and in a more systematic manner, by topic: legislation, extent of use, etc.

An additional comment concerns the editing. The book is an adaptation of a doctoral thesis and to my mind contains a surfeit of notes and theoretical references, some of which could have been spared the general reader. For instance, in the introduction the author proffers general propo-

sitions regarding globalization, with the case of NCM presented as an example of a more extensive process whereby the periphery impinges upon the center. However, the main part of the book deals exclusively with the medical domain and such generalizations are thus not fully substantiated.

To sum up, Dr. Fadlon reveals that the secret of NCM's proliferation in Israel is its successful fusion with conventional medicine, "creating a hybrid form of medical treatment that is ultimately foreign enough to be fascinating, but also familiar enough not to be disconcerting" (p. 7).

Upon reading this book one is led to wonder whether NCM is at an intermediate stage on the road to independence from the 'yoke' of biomedicine. The author does not express an opinion on this point. Research conducted twenty years hence will clarify whether NCM's right to exist in Israel is still dependent on the patronage of established medicine, or whether it will have become sufficiently independent to renounce the tactic of 'domestication,' as is the case, for example, in India.