(Re)Producing Medical Anthropology in Central and Eastern Europe

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Medical anthropology today is one of the most dynamic and vibrant fields within the anthropological enterprise, contributing extensively both to the enhancement of anthropological theory and to a better understanding of crucial social processes in the contemporary world. Yet, in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) this anthropological sub-discipline seems to be substantially underdeveloped and in some countries even completely missing. This special issue entitled (Re)producing medical anthropology in Central and Eastern Europe responds to such unbalanced development and reflects the problematic position of medical anthropology in the production of local anthropological knowledge. Our aims are threefold. Emphasising its focus on CEE, the issue first provides an overview of the state of the art in the individual countries of the region. Second, it highlights the rich theoretical potential that this dynamic sub-field of anthropological inquiry holds for local anthropologists who usually pursue different topics. And third, we seek to encourage the further development of medical anthropology in the region.

In short, our desire is to bring diverse regional voices into conversation with one another. In spite of considerable regional differences, shared experiences of socialist models of healthcare, as well as the impending diversification of services in a neoliberal healthcare market, provide a common platform across CEE countries. The ways these transitions get translated in a post-socialist context and are felt by patients reveal new power dynamics and call for further ethnographic research of emerging changes.

The idea for arranging this special issue was born at the conference, “Health in transition: (Bio)Medicine as culture in post-socialist Europe,” held in Prague in 2011, organized by Edit Szénássy, one of the co-editors of this issue. The conference pro-

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vided a space for discussions among researchers from the region, as well as with their Western colleagues. In a similar fashion, we originally conceptualized this issue as a space for intellectual exchange among both local and Western medical anthropologists and researchers investigating health-related issues, while hoping to provide an inspiration to all. Informed by debates on power disparities in producing international scholarly knowledge, we worked hard to ensure a well-balanced representation of authors from within, as well as from outside the geographical area. However, contrary to our initial intentions and despite our intensive encouragement of local researchers to be part of this project, the vast majority of articles are written by non-CEE anthropologists of an Anglo-American background who are all women. In this context, the issue's geographical specificity awakens interest for yet another reason, because it successfully counters a trend in which non-Western, small journals have difficulties 'attracting' contributors based outside the journal's geographical scope.

This issue is structured around four main articles built on original empirical research, an essay that elaborates the key concept of biological citizenship, and around ten shorter contributions summarizing the state of the art of medical anthropology in individual countries of the CEE region. The idea that sparked the initiative to collect state-specific reviews was the simple fact that, to our knowledge, very limited information is available on the questions of who, where and how medical anthropological research is done, and indeed if it is done at all, in the countries of CEE. A publication by Elisabeth Hsu and Doreen Montag (2005) stands out as one of the few overviews of institutions in Europe which are involved in teaching and doctoral research in medical anthropology. Particular contributions in the 'state-of-the-art' section review research conducted both by home investigators and foreign scholars. These texts together show that in most countries of the region medical anthropology is, indeed, a rather marginal field. We want to point out that this also has important implications for the potential of the discipline to participate in on-going societal debates and policy formations in the region, and weakens the potential to advocate for the rights of those who are disadvantaged and bear the consequences of increasingly severe health disparities.

Medical anthropology reflects the development of socio-cultural anthropology; in most countries of the region it evolved from a particular type of ethnomedicine or folk medicine. While in countries such as Slovakia, critical reflection on medical care and treatment is almost entirely missing in both local scholarship as well as that produced abroad, in the Ukraine Western researchers have significantly contributed to establishing this field. In other countries, such as Latvia, Hungary or Romania, medical schools and research centres play a key role, whereas in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia medical anthropology is mostly present through interdisciplinary courses and research projects.

The collection of empirically based articles touches diverse issues, among which the theme of reproduction dominates. This not only corresponds to our own research interests, but also reflects a prevalence of this subject in this subdiscipline (see, e.g., Inhorn 2006). The opening article is based on research among American couples seeking reproductive treatment in the Czech Republic, one of the top destinations for assisted reproductive services worldwide. Amy Speier's writing gives a glimpse into the relatively new phenomenon of transnational reproductive travel (also referred to as cross border reproductive care or CBRS, or reductively as reproductive tourism). Through ethnographic interviews, Speier explores the contradicting discourses that surround CBRS from the perspective not only of those who opt for these treatments (patients/clients), but also of those who shape clients' decisions to undergo treatment in the Czech Republic (brokers/clinics).

Jennifer Carroll provides an analysis of how the work of public health professionals is shaped by - and is at the same time shaping - the discourses surrounding evidence-based medicine (EBM) in the HIV-prevention field of the Ukraine. The article reflects on the various players involved in creating and recreating the relevance of EBM, including high profile inter-governmental organizations positioned on the funding side, and small local non-governmental organizations placed on the receiving side of the spectrum. With one of the highest HIV rates in Europe in an extremely resource-dependent health care system, the production of evidence becomes a claim for legitimacy, personal agency and a politics of "deservingness" in the Ukraine.

Polina Aronson's article illustrates that post-socialist healthcare beliefs do not constitute a homogeneous ensemble. Through interviews with migrants from the former USSR living in Germany, Aronson demonstrates a fluid relationship between alimentation, migration experience and the conceptualization of health. She argues that the Homo Sovieticus, the compliant, inert soviet person disinterested in their own health, is as imagined as it is unrepresentative of the real-life health dilemmas and food choices of Russian-German and Russian-Jewish immigrants, the majority of whom exhibit substantial effort in adopting to what they understand as 'civilized' German patterns of consuming healthy food. The study illustrates what effects the transition to capitalism has on migrants' perception of eating right and being healthy in a 'land of the plenty'.

The last article written by Jennifer Speirs, a British medical anthropologist, gets back to the issue of reproductive medicine. The study focuses on the issue of anonymous semen donation as a medical procedure crucial for the treatment of infertility, but which also, however, creates new forms of family and kinship, thus extending the realm of medicine into processes of family formation. While building on ethnographic research in the UK, the study goes several steps further and provides a description of the European aspects of donor insemination and a compari-
son of the UK and Czech contexts, thus generating a set of new research questions for both of these fields.

The next essay written by Ana Andrejic provokes new reflections on a more theoretical level. Building on insights from the Serbian context, the author re-examines Rose and Novas’ concept of biological citizenship and the distinctions they make between its Western and post-socialist forms.

In addition to book reviews, an interview with Susanna Trnka and conference and research reports related to the subject, this special issue also includes a section on teaching medical anthropology. The section consists of two complementary reflections on one of the study programmes in medical anthropology in Great Britain. First, Karolina Dobrovska portrays her impressions and experience with courses she took as part of the medical anthropology curriculum during her studies at Durham University, Great Britain. In the second contribution, Andrew Russell - one of the co-founders of this programme - provides further details relevant from the lecturer’s perspective.

We firmly believe that these texts and the issue as a whole manifest the potential of medical anthropology to make relevant conceptual, empirical and methodological contributions to studying the interwovenness of culture and the politics of illness and health in the CEE region. We cordially thank the dozens of contributors and anonymous reviewers whose work is reflected in the upcoming pages. Despite a number of structural, institutional and technical obstacles that complicated the emergence of this issue, including the geographical distance separating co-editors across continents,2 we sincerely believe that the result is an interesting read which will meet all expectations, intensified even more by long waiting. It is our wish that this collection will stimulate more scholars to veer in this direction.

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2 The journal runs on a voluntary basis, with no remuneration paid to authors, reviewers or editors.
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