



REVIEW: Charles E. Rosenberg. *Our Present Complaint: American Medicine, Then and Now*

Author(s): Martin J. Earl

Source: *Spontaneous Generations: A Journal for the History and Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2011) 83-84.

Published by: The University of Toronto

DOI: [10.4245/sponge.v5i1.14712](https://doi.org/10.4245/sponge.v5i1.14712)

EDITORIAL OFFICES

Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology

Room 316 Victoria College, 91 Charles Street West

Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1K7

hapsat.society@utoronto.ca

Published online at jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/SpontaneousGenerations

ISSN 1913 0465

Founded in 2006, *Spontaneous Generations* is an online academic journal published by graduate students at the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, University of Toronto. There is no subscription or membership fee. *Spontaneous Generations* provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

REVIEWS

A Present-Minded Collection

Charles E. Rosenberg. *Our Present Complaint: American Medicine, Then and Now*. 214 pp., index. Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.*

Martin J. Earl[†]

Charles Rosenberg's latest book is a collection of ten essays spanning twelve years' work on the history of American medicine, and seeks to provide both the historian and the practicing physician with an understanding of the framework that lies beneath our modern medical system. He states his cause explicitly in the opening chapter: "Insofar as I have a personal agenda, it is a desire to underline the need...for physicians to think and act on an understanding of [their] unique social and moral identity. It means thinking critically about...the world that informs and constrains clinical choices" (p. 11).

The ten essays—many of which have been published previously in journals such as the *Milbank Quarterly*, *Perspective in Biology and Medicine*, and *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* and the book *History and Health Policy in the United States: Putting the Past Back In* (2006)—are easy to read and the tone conjures the feeling of a well-prepared and enjoyable lecture series. The first chapter acts as an introduction to the major themes of the work, focusing on the idea that medicine—despite all of its advancement in both understanding and technology—has, in many ways, remained the same. Rosenberg writes on the first page that "[m]edicine...remains in some ways what it has always been, an intensely personal effort to deal with the pain and incapacity of particular men and women" (p. 1). Throughout the chapters that follow, this idea of sameness-despite-change continues to rear up, thus emphasizing Rosenberg's stated goal: to remind doctors of the foundation and framework in which they now operate. From concepts of disease causation and diagnosis to ideas about treatment and the role of technology, he uncovers, piece by piece, the evolution of medicine into today's professional practice.

Historians of science will like the topics that Rosenberg chooses to cover, and the socially-minded will particularly like the sociological emphasis that is

* Received 10 January 2011.

[†] Martin J. Earl is a graduate student in the Department of the History and Philosophy of Science at Indiana University. Despite his background in physics, he is currently pursuing questions regarding the history of botany from the Renaissance to Linnaeus.

employed in each essay. Indeed, the entire project is the analysis of the medical profession as seen not only by its practitioners but also as viewed and influenced by the public. The chapters are topic specific and, though no explanation is ever given for why they were chosen, they are placed in an order that advances from basic medical needs (diagnosis and causation) to more advanced problems (genetics and bioethics). Thus, each chapter is a support for the project's thesis; but as they were written separately and without a unified book in mind, they do not build *upon* one another, but *beside*. This is a strength, as it creates a broad base of support for the project Rosenberg has undertaken.

Within each essay the material is presented chronologically, and the characteristic breadth and depth of Rosenberg's research is made apparent in the use of primary sources including newspaper bits from the 1880s, notes from medical lectures 150 years ago, and first-hand accounts of disease sufferers. These sources help at times to lighten the mood of the narrative and at times to drive home the point of the discussion. Notes follow each chapter, which is convenient and emphasizes the fact that the book is not designed to be one single narrative but a collection of related pieces.

One criticism stems from what in other ways is an asset: the fact that these essays were not written together for the purpose of this book. This leads to the recurrent use of examples in several chapters. These include the mention and explanation of a now discredited disorder called neurasthenia (even going so far as twice telling about the doctor who was the main proponent of its recognition) and psychiatry's difficulty with the classification of homosexuality. These are small problems, but could have been edited away without much difficulty.

A mostly social account of the history of medicine in America, the book feels less like a piece geared toward curious-minded scholars and more like a piece geared toward policy makers in both government and medicine. (The acknowledgments deepen this feeling with mention of news items regarding healthcare and the constant cultural debate that medicine generates.)

This book deserves notice by historians of medicine for its social content and context. It does an excellent job of showing the roots, and the resonances of those roots, in medicine. By focusing not on the development of any one technology or procedure, Rosenberg allows the *texture* of the field to make itself known. In this way he is successful in his goal, and for this reason this book deserves notice by physicians as well.

MARTIN J. EARL
Department of History and Philosophy of Science
1000 East Third Street
Goodbody Hall 130
Bloomington, IN 47405
mjearl@indiana.edu