The collective work *Léčení a léčitelství v lidové tradici* [Healing and natural medicine in folk tradition] is the result of a cooperative endeavor between museums, universities, and science centres in Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia. The work includes rich ethnographic and historical material in the field of natural medicine and healing, and deals with themes which are frequently of interest to ethnologists and sociocultural anthropologists. These themes are particularly pertinent in Slovakia in the present day as information about various forms of alternative medicine enters public discourse to a greater extent than previously; commonly discussed issues include patient rights, responsibility for health, and forms of healthcare provision. This causes us to think about what health actually is, how illnesses can be cured, and who can be trusted when treatment is sought. Knowing how people view health and healing practices is also a question of knowing cultural meanings. How we perceive these meanings changes over history and across social structures, power relationships, the communities and families in which we live, and our own unique worldview. When examining methods of healing, a moral world of individuals and communities is revealed to us, and the diversity in how social sciences look at health and healing is reflected in this monograph.

This book primarily comprises material-based studies, and 25 people were involved in its compilation. The authors mostly used written historical sources in their own writing, as well as interviews and participant observation in the collection of data. In terms of content, the various chapters are divided into six sections: symbols (concepts of magic in natural medicine); folk medicine; gender (women in natural medicine); plants; books on biomedicine and advertising; and one section which deals with various topics (alcohol in natural medicine, dental treatment, hospitals, and natural medicine and the cult of saints). These thematic sections are visually divided by black-and-white illustrations of healing plants; a picture of a healing plant is also present on the book’s front cover. Visually speaking, a sense of unity has thus been preserved. However, this form of presentation rather negates the actual diversity of topics present in the book’s chapters. The book’s conclusion contains a summary of content in English and in German.
Over more than 300 pages one can read 23 chapters which deal with a wide range of topics concerning the treatment of people and animals. The book does not just discuss healing plants and the use of animals in treatment; it also extends its focus to specialized health books. The book informs the reader about various forms of symbolic healing: the use of concepts of supernatural beings, natural elements, prayers, and confessions. A specific form of symbolic healing using family relationships is presented in Nadežda Varcholová’s chapter on the folk treatment of children’s illnesses (Ľudové liečenie detských nemocí). Other chapters discuss health and the family. Families could access specific methods of treatment or sickness prevention which were passed down over generations. These chapters also show the significance of the role of women in healing family members. Additionally, the book contains chapters dealing with fertility, pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding.

A considerable part of the book deals with the history of various medical professions (doctors and midwives), the professionalization of the provision of biomedical health care, and a description of various other health specialists engaged in treatment (e.g., herbalist-midwives and bonesetters). In the context of these topics, it is worth mentioning the chapter by Martina Kvardová on a medical book from the turn of the 19th century which describes how the copyists of such literature interfered with the content by, for instance, leaving some parts out, writing new parts in, and changing words and even entire sentences.

Warfare is a part of the history of biomedicine, which is currently the dominant medical system in our society. Political and economic structures are another significant area of research into health and medical systems, and this research topic is also present in the book. For instance, in writing about a medical book from the middle of the 19th century, Ludmila Tarcalová reveals the influence of warfare on the spreading of medical practices and their development. Just as important for the creation of a comprehensive picture of treatment are the book’s chapters on the commercial sale of remedies and natural medical services in the past.

How we view health and illness is related to our moral judgement. The chapter by Jana Raclavská on anti-plague measures illustrates the connection between morals, religion, and forms of treatment. In his chapter on the Buchlovice hospital in the first half of the 19th century, Petr Číhal describes, among other things, the requirements that needed to be met in order to have a person declared dead and the importance of maintaining standards of moral behaviour when working in hospitals.

The chapters of various length and content allow the reader to find out about different aspects of healing and natural medicine both historically and in the present day. In some chapters there is an explicit distinction made between “rational” and “irrational” (magical) healing. Here there is an implicit language of power present in the presentation of the qualitative character of certain phenomena which are assessed as not having a rational basis. However, perhaps in place of “irrational healing”, it is preferable to use the term “symbolic healing” when discussing the use of concepts and practices involving magic. Instead of describing healing practices as “rational” or “irrational”, the terminology of the type of medical system involved could be used (e.g., professional, traditional, and popular systems; biomedicine and holistic medicine).

Research into health and disease contributes to an understanding of both micro- and macro-level social structures. It also helps us understand that the social experiences of individuals are a part of these structures. Critical research into healing and natural medicine in folk traditions, and the preservation of various material artefacts and written material in museum collections, is therefore an important part of understanding human beings and society.

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The paper is an outcome of the project VEGA No. 1/0035/14 Spoločensko-kultúrna reflexia telesnosti v životnom cykle ženy (The Socio-Cultural Implications of the Body in the Life Cycle of Women).
The authors of this book write about everyday life from the cradle to the grave. The book’s chapters are divided into two main parts. The first of these is entitled “The background of the everyday: the world around us” (Kulisy každodennosti: Svět, který je kolem), which comprises five chapters, and deals with business, the home, health and hygiene, clothing, and food. The second part is entitled “Practising the everyday: a living world” (Způsoby každodennosti: Svět, který se žije). In sections dealing with the family, children, social life, the use of leisure time, holidays and celebrations, and old age and death, there is a detailed analysis of the various stages of human life. Leisure activities are specifically dealt with in chapters concerning readers and reading, exercise and sportspeople, and travel. The chapter on searching for cultural history is a methodological one and ultimately poses the question of how the history of Czech everyday life is to be understood. The book captures the main facts about everyday life in a period of transformation in Czech society in the 19th century, dealing with private and public life as well as secular and religious matters. The book contains a rich list of source material and a name index.

This publication presents the results of research into the transformations of the human body as viewed by historians. The authors present the body as a historical object which is inseparable from its cultural context. Great advances were made in the 19th century, thanks to a range of medical discoveries, including the use of mirrors in medical examinations (firstly vaginal mirrors and then otorhinolaryngological ones) and radiology, which made the body more transparent and simplified the development of clinical medicine. Surgery also developed at a rapid pace over the century. Additionally, there was an increasing interest in hygiene and the social and cultural environment within which the body “lived”. The authors of this book focus on both the male and “child-bearing” female body and how it was cared for. They present medical transformations as well as aesthetic perceptions of the body and clothing. They also discuss children’s bodies. In addition, there are chapters dealing with the history of vaccination in the context of legislation and government regulations, treatment practices, the emergence of hydrotherapy, and the emergence and development of unconventional healing methods (e.g., Kneipp and
Priessnitz) in the second half of the 19th century. One separate topic in the book is the change in attitudes to human corpses and their burial and cremation. This publication has a detailed set of notes and an index of illustrations and names as well as a list of sources and literature which have been accessed in archives as well as online.


This publication presents how historical scientific methods were used in the practical treatment of serious illnesses. It presents information which has survived concerning the achieved levels of biotherapeutic methods and their specific use in various historical periods in various parts of the world. These methods were gradually abandoned by biomedicine over time. This book is a useful one for ethnologists thanks to its rich use of literature, its sources of Slovak origin, and particularly those from abroad. More on this book can be found in Český lid/The Czech Ethnological Journal, 4/2015, pp. 501-503.


Sharon Kaufman is the Chair of the Department of Anthropology, History, and Social Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. Her book is based on interviews with hundreds of older patients, their physicians, nurses, social workers, and family members, which were gathered as part of a research project commenced in 2002.

In the past, medicine could not perform miracles to extend human lives. In today’s ageing society, however, the line between life-giving therapies and too much treatment is hard to see. Kaufman investigates what drives the “more is better” approach to med-
icine and where the line between enough and too much intervention can be drawn. Kaufman’s mapping of the sources of health-care dilemmas could help in rethinking and renewing medicine’s goals.

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The paper is an outcome of the project VEGA No. 1/0035/14 Spoločensko-kultúrna reflexia telesnosti v životnom cykle ženy (The Socio-Cultural Implications of the Body in the Life Cycle of Women).

ALEKSANDRA PAVIĆEVIĆ: From Mystery to Spectacle (Essays on Death in Serbia from the 19th – 21st Century)
Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Institute of Ethnography, Special Editions 83, Belgrade 2015, 158 p.

The important Serbian ethnologist Aleksandra Pavićević, who has been dealing with thanatology over the past years, published a book of essays which were created as a side product of her research focusing on dying, death and related issues and phenomena. As her texts gradually reveal, it is not only an interesting and inspiring, but also – from different perspectives in the Serbian context – pioneer work tackling previously little explored phenomena, such as attitudes towards cremation, changes in the approach to funerals and communication about death, the ways of burying of Serbian emigrants abroad, information about the victims of disasters during the socialist period, the “transfer” of mortal remains and spectacular funerals of important Serbians and their relationship to church or secular policies.

In the first book essay called In or Out of Cultural and Historical Matrix? Researching Death in Serbian Ethnology during the Second Half of the 20th Century, the reader learns about the pioneer works of the Serbian ethnology in the field of thanatology, namely the articles and books by Dušan Bandić, Slobodan Zečević, Ivan Čolović and other researchers, on the works of which from the 1980s and 1990s the author directly follows up.

In the essay Death and Funeral in Serbia at the Beginning of Third Millennia. Attitudes and Rituals of a Common People, the authors analyses various approaches of the present-day rural and urban population of Serbia to death, to informing about death and the ways of coping with it. She points out the ever increasing trend of the post-modern society to keep silence about death and minimise contact with it, which is a manifestation of fear and uncertainty. Various religious and traditional rituals help coping with death (vigils, funeral, funeral-feast, etc.), which are much more developed and more varied in the rural environment compared to the urban one, even though changes can be observed also in this field.

The next chapter is a Historical Overview of the Development of Cremation in Serbia. From Ecology to Ideology, describing the attitudes of Orthodox Serbians towards this way of burying. In Serbia, this idea started to spread mainly among the local intelligentsia at the end of the 19th century; however, the first crematory opened in Belgrade not before 1964. The author describes the historic development of people’s relationship to cremation overcoming the “pioneer” and the socialist-atheist period. Even though the number of cremations in the country has been increasing each year, most people and church representatives still consider it as something inappropriate and bad.

We learn about the approaches to death and burying among Serbian emigrants thanks to the essay Is Death “Ethnic” Enough? Dying in Emigration. The author analyses the cases of Serbian diaspora (in the US, France, Hungary and elsewhere), where and how Serbian emigrants are buried in these countries, but also how surviving relatives deal with the frequent requirements of the deceased to be buried in their “old homeland”.

The next essay of the book entitled Two Earthquakes. Ideological Influences on Media Reporting of Natural Disasters compares the information brought by contemporary mass media about natural disasters, namely about the earthquakes in Skopje, Macedo-
nia, in 1963 and in Montenegro in 1979 which left hundreds of people dead. The author analyses in detail the approach of the mass media influenced by the state propaganda on these topics. Unlike the current approach, journalists sought to push away the phenomenon of the existence of death and placed emphasis on the fact that the socialist society is advanced enough to be able to face also such critical situations.

In the essay called “Dead Man Walking” - Exhumations and Reburial of Famous Deceased in Serbia” we learn about the ways of enhancing ethnic awareness in the distant and recent past of Serbia by, among other things, moving the mortal remains of important countrymen from abroad to their “homeland”. During the Middle Ages, this mainly referred to the clergy and rulers with the status of saints, later it was important figures of the Serbian culture (the author describes in detail the repatriation of the remains of Vuk Karadžić from Vienna to Belgrade in 1897). After the fall of Communism, such transfers concerned mainly the bodies of important emigrants from before the Communist period: as if all these “dead men walking” became the hostages of power, church and political struggles of their descendants.

The last essay called Creating Heroes – Death, Religion and Politics compares the funerals of four important Serbs from the past decades: politicians Josip Broz Tito, Zoran Đinđić and Slobodan Milošević, and the patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church Pavle. On the basis of a detailed analysis of the events and media reactions accompanying the funerals of these personalities, the author comes to the conclusion that, in spite of all the differences, what they had in common was the fact that they helped create the “religion of the nation”.

The entire book of essays by Aleksandra Pavićević is characterised by the idea that death, the related issues and the attitudes towards death are important mainly for those alive.

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The magazine for cultural and social anthropology CARGO, Vol 13, No 1, 2/2015, is dedicated to symmetric anthropology. This volume is rather special in the Czech environment. It offers readers a specific and clearly formulated theoretical-methodological perspective conceptually embedded in the Czech context, presenting it through the example of particular empirical studies. The authors of the articles apply a symmetric approach to the study of various social science disciplines.

Luděk Brož and Tereza Stöckelová deal in their article The Promises and Pitfalls of Symmetry: Social Sciences in the Country behind the Mirror with the key topic of the volume: symmetry. The text presents its genealogy in social sciences, as well as the specificities of the term “symmetry” in science, technology and in the development of “symmetric archaeology”, and also describes the trends in the present-day social-science theory which is for many reasons considered by the authors as close explanation of the term “symmetry”.

The second article The Ontonorms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in War Veterans in Bosnia and Herzegovina by Jaroslav Klepal from the Sociological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities of the Charles University is based on field research conducted in 2007–2008. It reflects on the post-traumatic disorders in persons who were present at the incident in Tuzla in the north-eastern part of Bosnia. The author uses the ontonorm as a tool for the analysis of the side effects of the social-constructivist approach to trauma and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). He arrived at several ontonorms which, according to his research, can be observed in the war veterans suffering from PTSD in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On the basis of her field research conducted within the urban public space of Prague’s Petřín in 2011, the author Vlasta Stulíková prepared the study From Public to Shared Space: Urban Park in a Symmetric Perspec-
From symmetric anthropology she applies the theory of the actors’ network that she considers an appropriate perspective for the research of the public space. The author analyses the dichotomy of the private and public space and considers its extinction. She presents the reader with the eventuality of the symmetric approach and the territorial complexity concept. She pays increased attention to homeless people. In the final part she evaluates the benefits of the symmetric ethnographic description and replaces the dichotomy of space with the term “urban public space”.

The last article Unpredictability, Flexibility and Moderate Fluidity by Šárka Delanová is presented under her pseudonym. She conducted field research in a Czech global factory where she worked as an undercover assembly worker. She raises the question whether there is a demand for global industry among job seekers and whether employees and representatives of authorities consider a global factory a solid employer. She finds an answer through analytical observation and several factors that influence it, such as relations between people in manufacturing, impacts of the labour market and the environment in which the factory operates. The author based this article on the theory of fluidity of social sciences by Zygmunt Bauman, Marianne de Leat and Annemarie Mol which she linked to stability. Through this link she sought to understand the state of cooperation between people and machines whose smooth cooperation of which ensures job fixing.

In addition to the four studies, the journal brings an interview conducted by Luděk Brož and Tereza Stöckelová with Zdeněk Konopásek under the title Symmetry Is Often Party-Oriented, and the research report by Jan Werner On Fluidity of Bicycle(s): Trash as Development Technology. Other articles in the journal include a report on the workshop on symmetric anthropology Think Symmetrically: Report from the Blurred Lines Workshop with Lenka Kužvartová and Tereza Virtová as participants. The series of texts of the Cargo journal is closed by the authors of reviews Peter Gibas (Eduardo Kohn: How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human), Luděk Brož (Another View of the Thinking Forests by Eduardo Kohn), Karolína Pauknerová (Bjørnar Olsen: In Defence of Things. Archaeology and the Ontology of Object; Ian Hodder: Entangled. An Archaeology of the Relationship between Humans and Things) and Vojtech Pecka (Tereza Stöckelová, Yasar Abu Ghosh, Ethnography: Improvisation in Theory and Field Practice).

For conclusion, it should be added that the published articles represent unique topics and specific approaches to research through symmetric anthropology, yet unexplored in the Slovak and Czech environment. We should therefore appreciate the editorial focus and the choice of the articles.

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