

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Therapeutic Revolutions: Pharmaceuticals and Social Change in the Twentieth Century**

***Jeremy A Greene, Flurin Condrau and Elizabeth Siegel Watkins (Eds.)***

Paperback, 320 pages  
University of Chicago Press  
November 2016

“Therapeutic revolution” has become a shibboleth of analysts and historians of science and a trivialised slogan, particularly of physicians, health planners and publicists of the pharmaceutical industry and its products. This book, written largely from an American viewpoint, is an attempt by medical, cultural and other historiographers and social critics to define whether there really have been therapeutic revolutions and what effect they may have had on various aspects of health.

Major topics include careful disagreement with McKeown’s hypothesis that most improvement in public health has come from economics rather than medicine, the effects of neuroleptic drugs on US psychiatry, changes in the treatment of tuberculosis, the “Pill” in America, an analysis of drug marketing versus sales in West Germany, and the volatility of “pharmaceuticals” in Nigeria. The emphasis throughout is on economic and social factors and the marketing strategies of the pharmaceutical industry.

The book’s greatest value to many may lie in the initial arguments about how to define a revolution, how to recognise that one has occurred, and the forceful reminder that retrospective assessments must be made in the terms and understandings of the time when the alleged revolution occurred. Interpreting yesterday’s events in terms of today’s understandings is unhelpful unless the intention is to explore counterfactual notions or present futuristic speculations.

The wide range of relatively unfamiliar sociological, economic and philosophical sources cited, many of them books, could be useful to those diving into these intriguing areas but lacking a strong background in the socioeconomic literature.

The focus throughout is on therapeutics as medicines, but there is no direct account of the major effects on their supply or their use by national health services, nor are the consequences considered of the equally important advances in medical devices and surgery. The final chapter ends by warning analysts that therapies may have very different effects at different levels of society and that revolution and evolution can co-exist.

**Anthony D Dayan**  
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