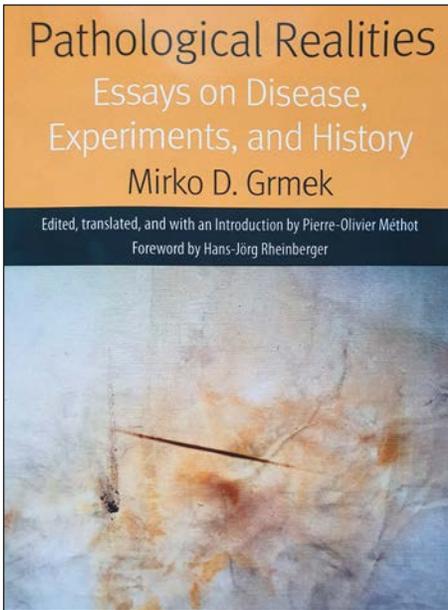


Mirko D. Grmek

Pathological Realities: Essays on Disease, Experiments, and History

Edited, translated, and with an Introduction by Pierre-Olivier Méthot.
Foreword by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger.
New York: Fordham University Press, 2019.



Every medical student in Croatia encounters the name Mirko Dražen Grmek early in their studies. The course Introduction to Medicine with History of Medicine at medical schools in Zagreb, Rijeka, and Osijek, as well as the course Medical Humanities at the medical school in Split, contain Grmek's works among the compulsory readings. Grmek's Platonic concept of disease is also frequently discussed during many lectures on ancient Greek philosophy and medicine at many faculties of philosophy

in Croatia. Historians of medicine thank him for his comprehensive medical bibliography, while his paper on Andrija Štampar is still considered the starting point in researching this pioneer of global health. Within a wider academic community, Grmek is celebrated as an internationally renowned Croatian historian of medicine whose fame stems from his important research in Paris. His contributions to the field are represented with several books in Croatian, among which his History of AIDS, Diseases at the Dawn

of Western Civilization, and *The First Biological Revolution* are the most widely known. Although Grmek did not establish a history of medicine in Croatia, his unprecedentedly successful career based on a predominantly internalist approach, further stimulated the recruitment of historians of medicine among doctors and strengthened their focus on medical epistemology rather than on social issues. Despite these influences, relatively little has been written about Grmek, while his main findings on Claude Bernard are known only among few. As the editor Pierre-Olivier Méthot informs us, the language barrier obviously precludes a more thorough engagement with Grmek's work outside the French-speaking academic world.

In the book *Pathological Realities: Essays on Disease, Experiments, and History*, Méthot offers us an indispensable introduction to Grmek's 'life and work', as well as a curated selection of Grmek's papers organized in four separate categories dedicated to pathocenosis, experiments and concepts in life sciences, epistemological issues in the history of science, and memoricide. In the first part, we are acquainted with Grmek's concept of pathocenosis as an 'ensemble of pathological states present in a specific population at a given moment in space and time' (p. 33). Synthesizing various approaches from ecology, geography, literature, medicine, and history, Grmek used the concept of pathocenosis in his retrospective diagnoses of diseases in the ancient world, as well as in the reconstruction of a 'postmodern' disease such as AIDS. There, he postulates that in the 'first half of our century, tuberculosis and a few other diseases made sporadic cases of AIDS invisible and prevented the dissemination of this disease' (p. 70–71). The second part is dominated by Grmek's fascinating analysis of Claude Bernard's research on the glycogenic function of liver. Based on Bernard's laboratory notes from 1843 to 1848, Grmek demonstrates the role of gradualism, coincidence, pure luck, and intuition in this major scientific breakthrough, and emphasizes many 'historical inconsistencies' that plagued Bernard's later reports about this discovery (p. 75). The third part consists of a single text dealing with the identification of various 'methodological illusions' ubiquitous in the history of science. One of such 'illusions' is Bernard's 'deformation of reality' arising from the need of a researcher to convince others in the process of reporting his findings, as opposed to his need 'in the lived experience of his work (...) to convince himself' (p. 130). In the final, fourth part of the book, we find two of Grmek's texts on 'memoricide', a term he introduced to designate systematic destruction of the Croatian past by the Serbian military. Although coined in the midst of the Croatian War of Independence, 'memoricide' proved to

be a valuable methodological tool that could also be applied retrospectively, such as in the analysis of the nationalization of Croatian pharmacies after the Second World War that left large parts of their inventories stolen or destroyed.

Clearly, Méthot approached Grmek synthetically, i.e., with the intent to faithfully represent his complex work in the history of science and medicine. Among the texts, there are some textbook-type articles, such as the one on the history of mechanical interpretations of life or the causes and nature of aging. This latter article is the first work on the history of gerontology in Croatia, which was included in the pioneering book *Symposium on Gerontology* from 1958, edited by the dermatovenereologist, fellow of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the head of its Department of Medical Sciences, Franjo Kogoj.

The heterogeneity of themes and approaches – from local to global, from particular to general, from synchronic to diachronic, from micro- to macro-studies – portray Grmek as primarily a methodological experimenter shaped by many intellectual currents of his time. Hopefully, Méthot's publication will be indispensable to all who endeavor to engage with Mirko Dražen Grmek, aided by the fact that Méthot enriched Grmek's texts with new references and provided the appendix of all of Grmek's published books. A special mention surely has to go to the translation of Grmek's prose to English. The introduction to Grmek's *History of AIDS* in Croatian notes, for example, that the book 'reads like a novel'. Indeed, Grmek does not dwell on explanations and refuses to follow the now-ubiquitous form of historiographic exposition used in the field of history of medicine. Méthot successfully navigated this potentially tricky problem and captured the idiosyncratic style characterizing the Croatian-French historian of medicine. Moreover, Méthot gives us a glimpse of Grmek's skepticism about the displacement of physicians by historians in the field of the social history of medicine and his dislike of the rise of the 'patient-based' focus. Thankfully, Méthot does not attempt to take sides in this but rather leaves room for the reader to autonomously get to know Grmek through his rich contributions to the global history of medicine.

Martin Kuhar