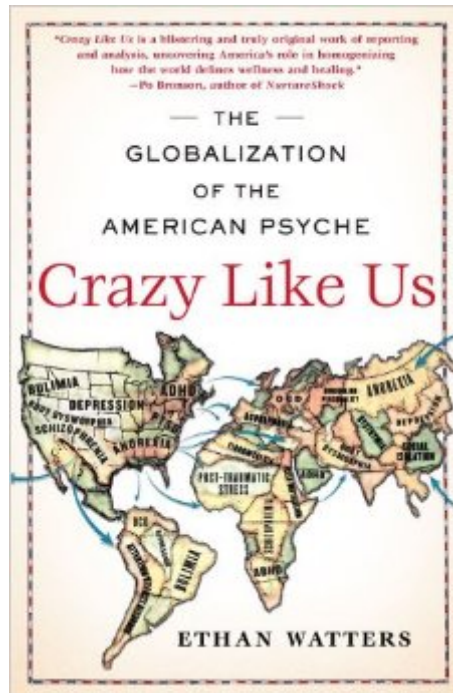


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Crazy Like Us: The Globalization Of The American Psyche



Synopsis

The most devastating consequence of the spread of American culture across the globe has not been our golden arches or our bomb craters, but our bulldozing of the human psyche itself. American-style depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anorexia have begun to spread around the world like contagions, and the virus is us. Traveling from Hong Kong to Sri Lanka to Zanzibar to Japan, acclaimed journalist Ethan Watters witnesses firsthand how Western healers often steamroll indigenous expressions of mental health and madness and replace them with our own. In teaching the rest of the world to think like us, we have been homogenizing the way the world goes mad.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Free Press; Reprint edition (March 22, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1416587098

ISBN-13: 978-1416587095

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.7 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (76 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

A successful virus is adaptive. It evolves as needed to survive and colonize new hosts. By this definition, contemporary American psychiatry is a very successful virus. Exploiting cracks that emerge in times of cultural transition, it exports DSM depression to Japan and posttraumatic stress disorder to Sri Lanka. Journalist Ethan Watters masterfully evokes the heady admixture of moral certainty and profit motive that drives U.S. clinicians and pharmaceutical companies as they evangelically push Western psychiatry around the globe. On the ground in Sri Lanka following the tsunami, for example, hordes of Western counselors hit the ground running, aggressively competing for access to a native population "clearly in denial" about the extent of their trauma. Backing up the foot soldiers are corporations like Pfizer, eager to market the antidepressant Zoloft to a virgin population. Watters has done his homework. Each of his four examples of DSM-style disorders

being introduced around the world is rich in historical and cultural context. Despite their divergences, each successful expansion hinges on the mutual faith of both the colonizers and the colonized that Western approaches represent the pillar of scientific progress. It is ironic that Americans are so smugly assured of the superiority of our cultural beliefs and practices, in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. Do we really want others to emulate a country with skyrocketing levels of emotional distress, where jails and prisons are the primary sites of mental health care? Does our simplistic cultural metaphor of mental illness as a "chemical imbalance," with human minds reduced to "a batter of chemicals we carry around in the mixing bowls of our skulls," represent true enlightenment?

This book brings up many thought-provoking points about the arrogance and in some cases, damage of the Western exportation of ideas about the origins and treatment of mental illness. But one of the author's main premises is that mental illnesses are different in different cultures and in different times. That's not the case. Some of how they are expressed may be different, and there may be some different variants, but accounts from the classical age of the Greeks and Romans on down the line all report clearly identifiable symptoms that could be clustered into affective disorders (depression, bipolar, etc.), thought disorders (schizophrenia and subtypes), and stress reactions (from withdrawal to eating disorders to PTSD). Symptoms of depression, mania, paranoia, and mental confusion have been documented for centuries. There may be many different human cultures on the earth, but we all have human brains. Another of the author's premises is that the Western medicine for mental illness doesn't work well in other cultures. That may well be true, but the author doesn't show examples of where it has worked or given us any kind of qualified evidence-based, broad-based comparative study; he has only selected anecdotes that support his thesis. I think any attempt to use Western medicine of any kind in a community that is not receptive to it, or for which the doctors ignore or dismiss cultural healing traditions, has potential for unforeseen and even disastrous consequences. But if done with cultural sensitivity and offering options rather than dictating treatment, it could be very helpful to people who are suffering greatly.

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