

# THE ART OF NOT BEING A DOCTOR

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There are more doctors in Russia than anywhere else in the world. In order to support this thesis, which is not self-evident, I'd like to recall a rather edifying Italian folk story about the hero of popular legends, about the clown Gonella...

People often gathered at the court of Lorenzo Magnifico in order to have a hearty meal and a pleasant conversation. On one such evening a discussion broke out about what profession was the most widely spread in all of Florence. There were different opinions on the subject. Some people gave preference to jewelers, others favored gunsmiths. And when the discussion came to a deadlock, Lorenzo asked the same question to the court clown, Gonella, who claimed, without a second thought, that the most widely spread profession in Florence was that of a doctor. Since the guests knew about the existence of only three doctors in the whole republic, they had good cause to doubt the veracity of Gonella's statement. They made bets on a round sum, and the clown took on the obligation to provide an expedient proof of his words. Thus, the deal was struck.

During the whole of the next day, Gonella, with his head wrapped in a

woolen kerchief, walked around the streets of Florence complaining about a terrible tooth ache. And, since he was a public figure of sorts, everyone felt it was his duty to not just inquire about his health, but to furnish his own recommendations as to the means for a speedy recovery as well. Someone advised him to catch a cat on New Year's eve and eat three strands of hair that had been torn from its tail and set on fire. Another person told him to recite prayers while holding red wine in his mouth, and to swallow it in the process. Gonella patiently registered all the pieces of advice that were given to him and collected all the signatures of his various "healers." The clown spent the whole day on the streets of Florence, and, wherever he went, he met volunteers ready to render him a service by offering their own recipe. As a result, by the end of the day Gonella actually started to feel a tooth ache. The last person the clown met with was the duke of Florence himself. When he saw his sick servant, the duke assured Gonella that he knew what he needed much better than the court doctor, and prescribed to the clown a lot of drugs, such as chamomile, sage, and sand in a pouch.

In the morning of the next day, Gonella gave his guests a written proof of his words, emphasizing that even Lorenzo Magnifico was among his multiple healers...

If only Machiavelli, who, by all accounts was born fifty-sixty years after Gonella, was as smart and shrewd as the clown of the duke of Florence, and not so straightforwardly outspoken, then most likely, in the course of his diplomatic work and his scientific writings, he could have written a book on "social doctors" and forever enriched the history of political philosophy.

Such is now the case in Russia today – the number of doctors giving out free recipes is endless. What's more, they have recently begun to treat Russia herself as a patient. Some of them stop and step into the shadows after announcing a diagnosis, giving the right to heal to the people who are more competent and who have the required will and

resources. Others, after giving a diagnosis, proceed to a treatment with their home-made drugs. And here mostly anything can be used, from folk medicine to alternative means, both of which, of course, rarely bring about positive results.

However, some perspicacious people like Thomas Szasz, who is an opponent to punitive psychiatry, see this problem from a different angle. Szasz believes that, instead of democracy, we have the "power of doctors." In this particular case the term "doctor" is not a metaphor at all. Doctors, says Szasz, impose on us a pattern of behavior and a way of life: one should not smoke, eat bad food, etc. Despite seeing the problem from his own angle, Szasz has made a very important conclusion: if doctors decide that something is wrong with you and something needs to be done about it, then you are finished. You will be labeled and treated very harshly, even if you are perfectly fine.

Of course, the folk legend that I mentioned contains much more value-related ideas than one can see at first glance. The matter is that those who possess power can equally be "diagnostics" or "doctors," just like everybody else. So, they have to think carefully before prescribing a certain recipe. Let's pay attention to the fact that Lorenzo did not recommend red wine, or a cat on New Year's eve, but was actually useful and gave his advice on the basis of his medical experience. Unfortunately, this is not the case with everyone. Quite often there are many more quacks, manual therapy artists, and psychics than real doctors. If we look even deeper, we can note the irony that the precious advice of Medici or any other doctor was of course never needed by Gonella because he was not actually sick.

After all, making a diagnosis and administering treatment is hard work. But it is even more difficult to determine whether a diagnosis is needed at all. It is a fact that needs to be understood and accepted that, sometimes, a patient does not actually require any treatment at all. ■