



AIDS AS A GLOBALIZING PANIC

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In the present context of HIV/AIDS knowledge, marked as it is by the absence of a vaccine discovery, it falls to the social and health sciences broadly speaking to devise institutional responses to AIDS that will contain it. Here, containment is sought on two levels and it may be that a considerable fiction is involved in hoping that the HIV virus is, so to speak, *virus sociologicus*. While it is doubtful that the virus can learn sociology, it is certainly true that sociology cannot remain ideologically ignorant of virology. But this in turn means that the social sciences in general are obliged to rethink themselves before they can be adapted ready-made to the new limitations imposed upon our sexual conduct by the AIDS hazard. This is especially the case since the professionalization of the social sciences, like that of the medical sciences, has proceeded in terms of an ideological demarcation between factual knowledge and moral knowledge, a demarcation that, while honoured by hard line scientists of either ilk, is in fact breached by developments in the bio-technological sciences that have reopened the frontier of ethico-legal inquiry. The social sciences no longer have any neutral ground in these matters, and this is particularly the case with AIDS.

Although AIDS is a relatively recent phenomenon, and despite the complexity of the virological and epidemiological dimensions of the HIV virus, it may be said that we have acquired a considerable knowledge of it in the short span of little over five years research.¹ Indeed, AIDS has moved quickly through a cycle of first stage ignorance, followed by intensive research and discovery, to a plateau where we are waiting for the breakthrough which would permit us to counteract the virus by means of a vaccine. This state of affairs has only been achieved through a considerable pace of biomedical research² and the involvement of governmental health agencies from the federal to municipal level, including hospitals, clinics, gay community organizations, AIDS workshops, hotlines and pamphleteering, in addition to a constant reportage of AIDS information in newspapers and on television. AIDS has even gener-

ated its own art forms in theatre, film and folk art.³ All these activities, then, have combatted ignorance with awareness. The new height of conscience-raising is AIDS awareness which is now projected to recruit even pre-adolescent children. The cardinal virtues of contemporary sexual citizenship are exemplified in our awareness of contraception, abortion, AIDS and copulation. But the greatest of these is AIDS for it reminds us of monogamy – better ‘wed’ than dead, as the saying now goes!

I want to argue that, despite what we already know about HIV and AIDS, any further development in our knowledge and the pedagogies to be devised in public education programmes is confronted with the phenomenon I shall call *socially structured carnal ignorance*. Here, what I have in mind is a number of factors that determine bodily conducts as necessarily, wilfully and desirably matters of “unknowing”, of “spontaneity”, of “passion”, of “desire”, or of “fun”, and “fantasy”. In short, we use our clothing, eating, drinking and sexual behaviour to achieve relationships and end-experiences that may be considered moral or immoral, rational or non-rational, competitive or communal, safe or risky. It is not our task to pursue the cultural, class, and gender and age variations that operate here.⁴ Nor have we to recount the historical and ideological shifts in the codes that dress our bodily conduct. It is enough to articulate with regard to AIDS the following structure of ignorance that underlies the generalized fears of AIDS upon which so much public energy is expended:

- (1) the carrier may not be known to him/herself due to the latency period of up to 8 years;
- (2) the risk behaviours may not be known;
- (3) the AIDS person may not be known;
- (4) the pursuit of knowledge regarding the HIV virus may conflict with the civil rights affording non-knowledge of persons behaviour and associations;
- (5) the code of civil rights may guarantee non-knowledge of persons or ways that prevent or conflict with medical, police, educational, employment practices of identification of AIDS persons.

In turn, within the general population carnal ignorance may be valued in such experiences as:

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| (a) sex | (d) parties |
| (b) drugs | (e) affairs |
| (c) alcohol | (f) vacations |

The specific codes defining these experiences where reason goes on holiday, so to speak, will vary according to membership in a variety of settings and practices shaped by:

- (a) age group;
- (b) sexual ideology, e.g. consumptive rather than reproductive sex;
- (c) sexual identification, i.e. homosexual, lesbian and/or heterosexual;
- (d) religious beliefs;
- (e) ethnicity;
- (f) socio-economic class, i.e. level of education and income.

Specific empirical and ethnographic data on this social structure of carnal ignorance must be gathered. In part, it is already available or material collected from the standpoint of the sociology of knowledge, beliefs and opinions. There is, of course, an enormous bias in the sciences against the study of the ways in which our ignorance, misinformation and deception is socially structured. For this reason our enlightenment in this regard proceeds much more slowly than the deliverance promised to us by our present bias towards knowledge.

With these remarks in mind, I shall turn now to the development of a framework for the study of AIDS which sets national and local concerns in the context of the global political economy. From this standpoint, AIDS must be considered as one of a number of panics of a political, economic, financial and 'natural' sort to which the global order responds with varying strategies of crusade, sentimentality or force.

By a *globalizing panic* I understand any practice that traverses the world to reduce the world and its cultural diversity to the generics of coca-cola, tourism, foreign aid, medical aid, military defense posts, tourism, fashion and the international money markets.⁵ Since these practices are never quite stabilized, their dynamics include deglobalizing tendencies which will be reinscribed by the global system as threats to the 'world order'. Some nations may consider themselves to be the prime agents in this world order, while others can only maintain an aligned status, or else enjoy a toy nationality that can be appealed to in order to supply neutrality functions on behalf of the world order. The globalizing panics that confirm the world order rely heavily upon the media and television, newspapers, magazines, films and documentaries to specularize the incorporation of all societies in a single global system destined to overcome all internal divisions, if not to expand into an intergalactic empire. Such a vision is confirmed, for example, by the performance of chemical experiments under the gravity-free conditions of space flight which may enhance the future discovery of an AIDS vaccine. Thus sexual practices that would not be tolerated within the social system of the space capsule nevertheless provide ideological justification for global medicine's quest of a perfect

experimental environment. Furthermore, the relatively ghettoized sexuality of gays and black and Hispanic IV drug users finds its projection in the starry heaven of the heroes of all-American science, war and medicine. Meantime this medicine is largely unavailable to the poor in the United States and the so-called Third World whose infants are ravaged by disease and death amidst populations that are continuously uprooted by famine, flood and warfare. By the same token, media images from this part of the world are exploited on behalf of the promise of the global order whose own political economy is largely responsible for the natural disasters that ravage the third world.

The sexual economy, which must be treated as the framework for any grasp of the political economy of AIDS is subject to every other sub-system of the global economy and national political economy. It is so when it appears most disengaged because its disengagement celebrates the processes of disenfranchisement elsewhere in the society, i.e. the degradation of gendered economies, of family and of church authority, as well as of any politics grounded in these communities. When the general will is sexualized, politics are privatized; when politics are privatized, the general will is idiotized. The politics of desire are the desired politics of a global economy which entirely escapes articulation in the speechlessness of sexualized desire. Meantime in the West, the postmodern insistence on cultural fragmentation implodes all differences and reduces everything to shifts in fashion and its constant revision of the spatio-temporal order of global capitalism. This order remains class and colonial in nature and cannot be thought in terms of sexism, racism or anti-humanism which it has outlawed but which at the same time is the source of these very phenomena. Reformism on these issues, however, is not revolutionary.

It might be argued that postmodernism celebrates a fantasmatic economy of sex and power while remaining tied to the market for global rock, drugs and fashion and to the concert politics whose evanescent sentimentality reflects and deepens the global exploitation.⁶ From this standpoint postmodernism is the 'classless' culture of a globalizing economy that exports its industrial basis whenever labour is cheapest while dividing its internal economy into rich and poor service sectors. In these sectors activities are neither community nor self-building. Here the political economy of the signifier without sign (family, class, race, gender) is operative. Since there is nothing at the centre of a doughnut or of a dress, variety is everything. Since money has no absolute value, variety is the only norm. In this culture, those who look for signs are traditionalists, semantic fools, semiotic idiotics – they are out of style, out of touch. Nothing looks worse on television than nationalism, fundamentalism and anti-colonialism with their murders, their starving children, their destruction and immolation. The

same is true of the images of domestic poverty, urban decay, illiteracy and alienation that are floated without any attempt to implicate the class system. To be 'it' is to be 'out' in the game of global circulation.

The global economy is concerned equally with the promotion of individualism and its sexualized erasure. Its primary politics are those of corporate identity which, in turn, con-scripts an aggressive individuality pitted against his-or-her own nature and community. The active, young, calculating, realistic and hedonistic recruits to corporate capitalism and its cosmopolitan culture are the idols of global media culture. They move like gods and goddesses amidst the debris of urban crime and desolation, cocaine colonialism and the life and death struggles of high-tech medicine, war and 'communication'. To this end, global culture is perfectly 'homosexual', i.e., same-sex-culture – because its technological infrastructure is indifferent, benign or emancipated with respect to its male or female protagonists.⁷ In turn, this mono-culture refigures itself as 'difference' by means of its agonistic pursuits of profit, sex, drugs, peace, justice and progress. Here winners are real men and losers are less than real women who in turn have proven they can be winners within the agonistic culture of global high technology and corporate capitalism. That is why it is important that females not be excluded from the business and sociological professions and especially that they not be excluded from the police and military forces. Global capitalism is 'homosexual' and 'feminist' and offers every prosthetic and therapeutic aid to the monobodies required to service its way of life. Against this promise, AIDS may be understood as a global panic on two fronts; namely:

- (i) a *crisis of legitimation* and the level of global sexual culture;
- (ii) a *crisis of opportunity* in the therapeutic apparatus of Welfare State.

AIDS threatens to produce a *crisis of cultural legitimation* because it tempts highly committed individuals to withdraw from the sexual culture of global capitalism and to renounce its specific ideologies that:

- (a) sex is the most intimate expression of freedom and choice in the market society;
- (b) sex is consumptive and not necessarily productive;
- (c) sex is genderless, unfamilied, classless and homeless;
- (d) sexual repairs are available through the biomedical and psychiatric services of the therapeutic state;
- (e) all high risk behaviour on behalf of global capitalism will be supported by its prophylactic and prosthetic technologies whose ultimate aim is to immunize its members against the environment of their own risk behaviour.

The experience of AIDS panics the sexual culture of global capitalism in several ways. In the

first place, it has 'disappointed' those who were most committed to its ideology of sexual freedom. To its credit, the gay community has learned that its sexuality cannot be played out in the anonymous intimacy and extraordinarily high rates of casual contact that were enjoyed in the bath houses. This reevaluation has taken effect precisely because gays in fact constituted a quasi-community marked by levels of literacy and organizational skills beyond what can be found in the IV drug alleys. However, 'heterosexuals' have been tempted to turn against the gay community in a number of ways that threaten to degrade the civil rights achievable in capitalist democracies. Business, educational and medical institutions have all been strained by the fear of AIDS. At the heart of these delegitimizing strains in the social order is the immediate lack of any vaccine against HIV which would, as it were, immunize the society against its own responses to what I shall call AFRAIDS. Short of a vaccine, AIDS constitutes a panic both on the individual life level and on a collective level where AFRAIDS threatens to undermine the order of civil liberties. To the extent that panic spreads, especially where AFRAIDS or the fear of AIDS generates secondary fundamentalist and revisionist panics, the sexual economy of global capitalism is threatened with a crisis of legitimation. The AIDS panic, however, strikes most deeply into the legitimation process when it prompts the general population in a rationalized industrial society to question the probability value of scientific knowledge with demands for absolute certainty. Here modern medical knowledge is particularly exposed since rational experiment, placebo practices, and the ethics-legal issues in patient consent reveal the costs as well as the benefits of our commitment to the industrial order. This order is threatened less by proposals to ghettoize AIDS patients, however politically crude such a suggestion may be, than by any loss of commitment to the medicalization of health and happiness.⁸

At the very worst, the AIDS panic threatens the liberal order of global capitalism with a "rebarbarization" of its social bond. Hitherto, it was possible to sustain the global fantasy of an social order without deep commitment, as in the figure of the American Express man whose creditability lies in his credit and whose faith lies in the fiction of a card that would make him at home in the homeless world of global capitalism. Will the American Express Card guarantee immunity against foreign HIV tests, and even if it did, can we be sure that American Express will issue its precious cards at home to persons without a prior HIV test? Or will those who carry the American Express Card, having passed a HIV test, constitute a new biological order of eligible capitalists? However bizarre such questions may seem, they already have their counterpart in the experiment with AIDS-free singles clubs. What is extraordinary in such responses is that they threaten to return the capitalist order to a purity

rule, that is, to a social order founded upon a contagion model rather than on the contract model which has been the engine of its extraordinarily globalizing history. If this were the ultimate consequence of the AIDS panic, global capitalism would have succeeded in rebarbarizing itself due to an unfortunate contingency in its sexual culture, rather than due to its other fantasied threats of interstellar barbarism.

AIDS presents a crisis of opportunity in the global culture of late capitalism precisely because its immediate features

- (1) autotoxicity
- (2) fatality
- (3) absence of vaccine

renew demands upon the therapeutic state and its biomedical apparatus to provide interim care, socio-legal immunity and a vaccine. To do this, the social and health sciences have already been recruited to furnish ethical, economic and pedagogical discourses, conferences, pamphlets, multi-disciplinary research and media treatments to the public. Here, the supply of AIDS 'knowledge' to the public whose fears demand it creates a perfect symbiosis between State Power as Knowledge, on the one hand, and Knowledge as individual power/powerlessness, on the other hand. Individuals attempt to learn that only they can stop AIDS, or Drinking/Driving or Waste, whereas these are cultural complexes produced by and (re)productive of the ideological and therapeutic culture in which they live. In this process individuals learn that

- (1) The State is the ultimate producer of knowledge/science;
- (2) The State is the ultimate producer of Health, Education and Employment;
- (3) The State is the ultimate guarantor of civil liberties;
- (4) The State is the ultimate guarantor of all ideologies;
- (5) The State is the ultimate producer of the State and Society and the Individual.

Here then, the crises of global culture are at once extraordinarily nation state-building – at least with respect to the levels of the therapeutic apparatus of the State – and transnational on the economic and political level, depending upon shifts in the multi-national corporate agendas. Of course, these two levels interact, so that global capitalism responds to its own trans-state activities through the nation state and even through a layer of 'international' agencies.

In this context, AIDS is again simultaneously a globalizing panic and a national state epidemic, mobilizing government health institutions from the municipal level all the way to the World Health Organization. As a global panic, AIDS becomes a further charge upon the Third World, whereas US AIDS is principally an advanced economy, urban male (age 20-40 years)

anal partner hazard, with drug users and bisexual males as secondary transmitters. But gay subculture has been a highly articulate ideological element in North American society. The imperial dominance of American capitalism within the global system, of course, diffuses American 'life-style' ideologies through global mass culture, tourism, commercial and military travel. US AIDS has benefitted from the same routes of ultimately transmitted diseases.

Thus the global health system is only the promissory side of a world disease system. Each generates the other. Here once again, there is a potential for a rebarbarization of the global order through quarantine orders, immunization control and racism – witness the construct of AFRO-AIDS. The concept of AFRO-AIDS is marvellously suited to project on to 'world history' so to speak, an Afro-origin for AIDS whereas the socio-economic conditions of Blacks and Hispanics in the United States and its dependencies are clearly the principal source of American disease, crime and poverty. Similarly in Africa, where AIDS is a widespread heterosexual trouble, one must take into account shifts in marriage practices due to urban migration, poverty and a fragile medical infrastructure, before 'racializing' the disease. Yet the search for a simian-based HIV, endorsed by the *Scientific American*,⁹ inspires hopes of naturalizing a colonial and class history whose overwhelming dimensions cannot possibly be reduced by the bio-medical sciences. Since America's internal black population is the immediate source of virtually inorganizable and ineducable IV drug users, who are in turn viewed as the principal transmitters in the heterosexualization of AIDS, a third crisis looms within the US medical system inasmuch as so many millions of Americans are without any medical coverage but could hardly continue to be ignored should their deaths be attributable to AIDS. Here, of course, the ultimate breakdown is in *the class system* as an immunological order. Since this vision of things is already apparent, the democratic process is threatened with further degradation if class politics slide into caste politics in the hope of preserving a society where the principle of charity is sacrificed to group preservation. To the extent that this scenario develops, the global order will have collapsed into a barbarous conflict of biological elites each seeking to preserve its own purity whilst trying to eliminate the other as a possible contaminant.

NOTES

1. *AIDS: A perspective for Canadians* (Ottawa: The Royal Society of Canada, 1988); David Spurgeon, *Understanding AIDS: A Canadian Strategy* (Toronto: Key Porter Books Limited, 1988).

2. "What Science Knows About AIDS" *Scientific American*, volume 259, number 4, (October 1988).

3. *AIDS: Cultural Analysis Cultural Activism* Edited by Douglas Crimp. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988); Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
4. John O'Neill, *Five Bodies: The Human Shape of Modern Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
5. John O'Neill, "Techno-culture and the Specular Functions of Ethnicity" in *Ethnicity in a Technological Age* Edited by Ian H. Angus. (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1988): 17-35.
6. John O'Neill, "Religion and Postmodernism: The Durkheimian Bond in Bell and Jameson" in *Theory Culture and Society*, Special issue on Postmodernism, volume 5, numbers 2-3 (June 1988): 493-508.
7. See *Five Bodies*, chapter four, Consumer Bodies.
8. John O'Neill, "The Medicalization of Social Control" *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 23:3 (August 1986): 350-364.
9. Max Essex and Phyllis J. Kanki, "The Origins of the AIDS Virus" *Scientific American* (October 1988): 64-71.