

**REPRESENTATIONS OF PEOPLE WITH AIDS IN POLISH  
PRINTED NEWS MEDIA, 1993-2010**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on various representations of People with AIDS (PWAs) in Polish newspapers between the years 1993 and 2010. Through the means of discursive analysis, I intend to look at the way the discourse on HIV/AIDS shifted from a “tropical” model (Patton 2002) based on the concept of social marginality to racist discourse of “otherness” and difference. I will argue that this shift involved the “side effect” of reformulating such related concepts as risk, blame and choice. I will also use the biopolitical framework to raise the broader questions about the way in which discourse on HIV has been mobilized in Poland to establish political subjectivity of the country’s citizens and to set the boundaries between the state’s population and other groups which are presented as a threat to the health and well-being of the nation.

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## Introduction

In this thesis I intend to analyse the visual and textual representation of PWAs (people with AIDS) in Polish printed media from 1993 to 2010. In the analysis I wish to focus on the discursive meanings associated with public visibility, patterns of HIV transmission, risk, sexuality and gender which are stated openly or implied by the Polish printed media in the specified time frame. Due to limited space, I do not intend to provide a comprehensive analysis, but to focus instead on several tropes which were the most prominent in the Polish HIV/AIDS discourse of that period: the injecting drug user (IDU) as the main representative of HIV/AIDS, the notion of the social margin and the “narrative of redemption” which framed the stories of seropositive women. The analysis is divided somewhat unequally into two time frames: 1993-2006 and 2007-2010, as I will argue that 2007 was a turning point in the Polish discourse on HIV/AIDS.

This turning point was formed around the case of Simon Mol, a Cameroonian immigrant, social activist and poet put under trial in January 2007 on charges of causing deliberate harm to the health of his female sexual partners by hiding from them his seropositive status. In my opinion, this event necessitated a reformulation of the Polish HIV/AIDS discourse in relation to heterosexuals, and especially heterosexual women. The case will be put in a broader frame involving the following questions: how does the Polish society define its boundaries? In what ways are the limits between health and illness constituted through discourse? Finally,

The first chapter of the thesis provides the necessary theoretical background for the analysis. I will start by framing the issue of HIV/AIDS as a product of discourse and briefly outline the relevance of cultural activism in this context, stressing the need for such forms of activism in

Poland. Next, I will move to a brief summary of the concept of biopower and biopolitics in the works of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. These concepts, along with Ulrich Beck's risk theory will form the basis for my argument throughout the analysis.

In the course of the second chapter, I will to show that the Polish discourse of HIV/AIDS between 1993 and 2006 time was simultaneously expressing two contradictory positions: on the one hand it acknowledged the position of HIV/AIDS-related NGOs which claimed that HIV risk is not restricted to narrowly defined "risk groups"; on the other hand, it implied that HIV is contained within these "risk groups" by representing PWAs in the frame of social marginality. Specifically, I will argue that in the early years of news reporting the IDU became the paradigmatic representative of seropositivity, which subsequently led to the conflation between seropositivity and social marginality in the Polish discourse. This formulation created a line between the "healthy" political subjects and the "diseased margin" exposed to a social death. The final part of the chapter will address the gender-specific nature of the Polish HIV/AIDS discourse through the lens of biopolitics.

The third chapter will begin with an in-depth analysis of the Simon Mol case, focusing on the representation of the various participants and the explanations/solutions to the emergent problem provided by the printed media. Then I will compare the media coverage of Simon Mol's case with the representations of PWAs in the Polish HIV/AIDS discourse preceding the case, focusing on the way the issues of risk, sexuality and masculinity/femininity became reformulated in the transition. Finally, I will provide a brief analysis of the contemporary discourse on HIV/AIDS in Poland and its potential implications for activism.

# Discourse, Risk, Biopolitics

## *HIV/AIDS as Discourse*

The main assumption behind the thesis is that AIDS is more than a disease in a strictly medical sense: it is a discursive product with multiple, often contradictory meanings. This does not mean denying the factuality of AIDS, but rather asserting that the way we come to understand it is a result of various representations and practices. What we are dealing with is, in Paula A. Treichler's (2004) terms, an “epidemic of signification” - a proliferation of meanings and interpretations which enable us to make sense of the disease. To prove her point, Treichler lists no less than 38 ways in which AIDS has been conceptualised by various political actors. The examples provided by her range from the “official” interpretations sanctioned by the authority of the medical industry to the most paranoid flights of fancy, and it is clear that the list is far from exhaustive.

Similarly, Susan Sontag (1990) writes of the metaphors used for describing the issue of AIDS - war, pollution, invasion, plague, punishment - and elaborates on the stigmatising and moralising effect their use has on the people afflicted with the disease. The amount and diversity of the ways the issue of AIDS has been addressed is for her symptomatic of the relatively small amount of knowledge about the disease. Yet even though two decades have passed since the publication of Sontag's *AIDS as Metaphor*, it seems that her insight is still relevant - despite the recurring stories of yet another medical “breakthrough” which are endlessly recycled by the media, we are still far from fully understanding HIV/AIDS. Perhaps the most striking evidence for the medical ambiguities related to the issue is that even over 20

years after isolating the HIV virus there are still voices contesting the causal link between HIV and AIDS<sup>1</sup>.

Both Treichler and Sontag may agree on the importance of signification in relation to the issue of HIV/AIDS, but they push forward radically different projects. Sontag is an advocate of dropping metaphors altogether in order to strip AIDS of its stigmatising connotations and turn it into “what it really is” - not a declaration of war on the ill body or a case of divine punishment, but just a medical condition which can be put under medical scrutiny (Sontag 1990, 181-182). Treichler, on the other hand, is suspicious of such redemptive projects since the contradictory meanings attributed to AIDS are a “part of the necessary work that people do in attempting to understand - however imperfectly - the complex, puzzling, and quite terrifying phenomena of AIDS” (Treichler 2004, 15). In other words, metaphor and conceptualisation are a prerequisite for thinking about AIDS at all and it is only through them that the disease acquires meaning. Moreover, Treichler criticises Sontag's assumption of medical objectivity, since the members of the medical establishment are just as implicated in the process of signification as the “general public”. Instead of completely dismissing metaphors because of their potential to distort the “truth” of the disease, Treichler proposes to establish an “epidemiology of signification” (Treichler 2004, 39) - a thorough description and a critical analysis of the various ways in which AIDS is conceptualised. The goal of this project is to establish a common cultural understanding of the issue: “what AIDS signifies

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<sup>1</sup> See for example (Specter2007; Smith and Novella 2007) for a comprehensive list of AIDS denialism cases. It is also worth mentioning the upcoming conference “AIDS, knowledge and dogma” in Vienna (16-17 June 2010). The following passage comes from the organisers' website:

Has the virus become harmless? Plenty of evidence suggests that it always has been harmless - an endogenous virus (i.e. produced naturally in the body) such as may occur in any healthy placenta. Faulty interpretations of observations are likely to lead to flawed conclusions. Inaccurate forecasts, invariably unsuccessful attempts to develop vaccines, the obviously erroneous assumption of infectivity and the existence of HIV-positive individuals who have been in perfect health for twenty years without having had any treatment at all - these facts manifestly elucidate what critical physicians and scientists have argued since the very beginning, and what they are now able to vindicate and substantiate even more cogently: acquired immunodeficiencies can be caused by a variety of factors, but they are not the result of a malignant retrovirus. (<http://www.science-and-aids.org/index.php?s=179>)

must be democratically determined: we cannot afford to let the scientists or any other group of experts dismiss our meanings as “misconceptions” and our alternative views as noise that interferes with the pure process of scientific inquiry” (Treichler 2004, 39). Yet this formulation leaves us with as many questions as answers. How are we to formulate an “official truth” of AIDS in the face of the multiplicity of meanings associated with it? Moreover, how are we to ensure that all the voices have a say in the debate? How can we talk of a true democracy in the case when some voices are supported by authority, resources and political power while others are not? Does a “democratic” understanding of AIDS necessarily imply a “good” one? Finally, who exactly is this “we” that Treichler (and myself, for that matter) refers to?

Frankly, I am somewhat sceptical about the possibility of a democratic resolution of this issue, especially since I have mentioned AIDS denial a mere two paragraphs ago. The question of the causality of HIV in AIDS is perhaps the most symptomatic of this impossibility: I have to admit that I was reluctant to cite the contesting voices while mentioning the issue, and even if I bring them up, they can exist only as a footnote. I am performing a certain kind of violence to those voices, but it is a part of the violence established within the academic community on its dissidents. Does this mean that I am excluded from Treichler’s democratic “we”? Yet even if I am guilty of the abuse of power then perhaps at least there is a certain degree of self-reflexivity in it. I may not believe in a democratic meaning devoid of power relations, but I believe that power can and should be interrogated in terms of the meanings it attempts to produce and on that point I could not agree with Treichler more.

It has to be said, then, that AIDS is hardly an exceptional case amongst diseases. Sontag's work on AIDS follows her similar research on cancer and tuberculosis. Similarly, Sander Gilman (1988) notes the similarities between the visual representations of PWAs and the historical imagery associated with syphilitics, most notably a similar pattern of gradual transition from the image of the "male victim" to that of "female source of pollution" (1988, 107). But even though the author makes every effort to provide the reader with examples supporting his claims, his way of juxtaposing both diseases is somewhat problematic. First of all, Gilman compares 500 years of syphilis imagery to less than a decade of AIDS representation - even if we consider that in the age of an "information society" and mass media such representations can change much more rapidly, it is highly debatable if a comparison of such vastly disproportionate time frames can provide any insight into either one of the diseases. Moreover, his formulation of the way meanings have been transferred from syphilis to AIDS is highly problematic: he claims that "Icons of disease appear to have an existence independent of the reality of any given disease. This "free-floating" iconography of disease attaches itself to various illnesses (real or imagined) in different societies and at different moments in history" (1988, 88). Yet this separation seems to be nothing more than an intellectual sleight-of-hand, since it conveniently obscures the fact that our understanding of disease as such has changed considerably throughout the ages. Finally, such a mapping is necessarily selective in choosing the relevant imagery - Gilman does not acknowledge the multiplicity of meanings associated with AIDS and syphilis, focusing only on specific examples of signification. Instead, it might be then more productive to assume that this sort of imagery is just a part of the larger discursive field which produces the meaning of both diseases. What is valuable in Gilman's work, however, is its implication - that signification is a process connected not exclusively to AIDS but to diseases in general, that it takes similar forms and results in similar consequences for the afflicted individuals.

We might say that the meaning of every disease is established somewhere between objective medical fact and cultural representation, yet doing so only reinforces the distinction between sound medical evidence and popular folk tales, fixing the relationship of power in place without any possibility of questioning. Moreover, on closer inspection some medical facts may turn out to be less factual than they appear. In fact, the argument extends far beyond the field of epidemiology and onto the broader field of science in general. Michel Foucault criticised both the medical establishment (1991) and the field of social sciences (1972; 1994) by pointing out that their claims to “truth” are culturally and socially conditioned. Similarly, Bruno Latour’s claim that ““Science” exists no more than “language” or “the modern world”” (1993, 214) is a good summary of his incredulity towards the notion of an objective, scientific fact. If we consider this criticism, then we have to abandon Sontag’s concept of disease as a medical condition distorted by the false consciousness of metaphorical thought. To use Foucault’s terminology, we are not dealing with some Manichean struggle of truth with falsehood, but rather with the clash of competing claims to the truth of the disease.

This is where the representation of HIV/AIDS in the media becomes crucial. Because of their mass appeal and the claim to represent the facts, the media have become one of the key elements in the formulation of the “truth” of various events, and the issue of HIV/AIDS is no exception. In Stuart Hall’s words, the act of representation “connects meaning and language to culture” (Hall 1997, 15), and this understanding of the term will be used throughout this paper. Representation is a complex process through which meaning is produced in relation to real-life phenomena by various social actors, and as such it is not neutral. On the contrary each use of a linguistic sign draws upon the resources of a generally accepted ideological “truth” at the level of connotation, while

The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where *already coded* signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions (Hall 2006, 168; emphasis in the original)

Representation and language become the focal points of an ideological struggle for meaning waged between various parties. We have to note, however, that Hall uses the term “language” in a de Saussurean sense, as an organized system of signs. As such, his concept of language for becomes a very broad category and extends beyond speech and writing to encompass also images, fashion, music and any other organized form of expression (Hall 1997, 19).

Since we are dealing with printed media, we will focus on linguistic (in the narrow sense of the term) and visual representations. However, it the difference between the two modes of representation calls for a reconsideration of Hall’s rather uniform treatment of the two. Most importantly, they engage the audience in different ways – visual representations seem to have a stronger claim to the “truth” because they depict their object “as it is”. At the same time, they require more effort from the reader to interpret them correctly and situate in the proper context. This is what Sue Thornham calls the “*slipperiness* of the image” (Thornham 2007, 53; emphasis in the original) - visual representations grant a sense of “authenticity” to discourses, but at the same time they offer the audience with a possibility to move beyond their original context and establish new meanings. On the other hand, as J.W. T. Mitchell points out, the focus on difference between linguistic and visual representation only puts us in the vicious circle of arguments about the primacy of one over the other instead of focusing on “the basic construction of the human subject as constituted by both language and imaging” (Mitchell 1995, 24). The following analysis will follow this line of argument and focus on the space between images and words in the printed media, sometimes looking for similar patterns, sometimes pitting them against each other in order to uncover their ideological content.

Given the importance of representation, it is not surprising that there has been a proliferation of research in media representations of PWAs, focusing on countries such as the US (Juhasz 1990; Nelkin 1991; ), Canada (Clarke et al. 2005; Clarke 2006; Mensah et al. 2008), Australia (Lupton 1994; Wenham et al. 2009) . However, to my knowledge, no such studies have been performed in Poland. Although HIV/AIDS has been recognised as a site of the struggle for meaning by the National AIDS Centre in Poland, its engagement in the issue was restricted to the correction of erroneous information in the media and the insistence on the use of neutral vocabulary by journalists (National AIDS Centre 2002). When it comes to academic research, several publications about the social perception of HIV/AIDS have appeared in Poland, but they either leave out the last decade (Czaplicki and Muzyka 1995, Izdebski 2003, Kmiecik-Baran 1995) or target very narrow groups as their object of study, such as students from the University of Warsaw (Komosinska 2008). More importantly, most of them focus exclusively on the social attitudes towards HIV/AIDS or quantitative research on sexual behaviour with relation to safer sex, with the sole exception of one brief analysis of several American movies addressing the issue (Sokołowski 1995). Yet if we follow Treichler's argument, it becomes clear that in the case of a disease as imbued with meaning as AIDS, one can not separate issues of risk assessment, sexual practice or social attitudes from the associated cultural practices. For example, Carillo (2002) shows how HIV/AIDS activism can be rendered nearly useless by failing to apply it to the local specificities and meanings attached to such concepts as risk and desire. Similarly, we may assume that, since representation has the immediate effect on the way individuals make sense of themselves and the world around them (Hall 1997; Mitchell 1995), the discursive construction of risk groups on the basis of the representations of PWAs in the media has a profound influence on risk assessment amongst the general population of Poland. This in turn can have immediate

consequences for the success of HIV prevention programs, since they should be tailored to the needs and understandings of the issue amongst their target groups.

What is lacking, then, is an analysis of the discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS in Poland which would focus not only on the social attitudes of specific social groups, but also on the way these attitudes are discursively produced by the process of representation in various institutions and the media. In my thesis I intend to at least partially fill this gap by looking at the representations of PWAs and seropositive persons in Polish news reporting of the past two decades. The analysis is based on the archive of the National AIDS Centre in Poland covering printed news reporting in both local and state-wide newspapers from March 1994 to March 2010. The methods used will consist of critical discourse analysis, as defined by Fairclough (2001 and 2003). All the quotes from Polish printed media have been translated by me from the original, unless otherwise stated.

### ***Thinking AIDS in the Age of Biopower***

In the previous section I have outlined the basic issues connected with the cultural aspect of HIV/AIDS. Before proceeding with the analysis, certain provisions have to be made with regards to the theoretical background informing this work. In this section I will first attempt to summarise Foucault's concept of biopower, which will serve as the foundation of the analytical approach presented here, since it provides us with a critical framework for thinking about the way society creates the boundaries between the normal (healthy) and the abnormal (ill) parts of the population. Next, I will move to a brief description of "risk society" formulated by Ulrich Beck. Stefan Elbe's work on international security will be our next step, since it is an attempt to apply the theories of Foucault and Beck to the issue of international security in the context of HIV/AIDS in Africa, and emphasises some of the dangers connected

with thinking about HIV/AIDS in terms of risk and security. Finally, I will move to Giorgio Agamben's version of biopolitics, as it offers the possibility to address the relationship between power and the individual in the biopolitical framework of HIV/AIDS.

The concept of biopower originated in the works of Michel Foucault. In his opinion, the economic and socio-political changes in western societies of the 17<sup>th</sup> century marked a development of new forms of State control and governmentality, which took the population of the State, rather than its territory, as its main concern. Within biopower, Foucault distinguishes between the "anatomy-politics" of the state, which aimed at regulating individual bodies within the population through disciplining practices, and the later "biopolitics", which used regulatory mechanisms to control the population in more general terms through the assessment, prediction and modification of the processes which take place within it (Foucault 2003, 249). This transition in western politics from sovereignty to biopower, from the right to "take life and let live" of the sovereign to a right to "make live and let die" (Foucault 2003, 241) meant that the State became less and less concerned with the exceptional cases of transgression which were punishable by death, but at the same time it became involved in shaping the general life conditions of its population. This transition also involved a dissemination of power from the top-down model of the sovereign's control over subjects to a set of regulatory mechanism and institutions dispersed amongst the population of the State.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that Foucault's assessment of the modern State's obsession with the life of its population is a positive one. In fact, one of the most powerful elements of his analysis lies in formulating the paradox of biopower: the attempt to proliferate life works alongside the genocidal tendencies of biopower, since the survival of the population requires a perpetual state of war against those groups which contaminate it or

threaten its existence: “The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer” (2003, 255). Foucault refers to this turning of the State against its own population as “State racism” (62), and it is clear from the quote above that he understands racism in very broad terms – racism of mobilised not only against individuals defined by certain hereditary biological features, but also those designated by a specific “abnormal” social position or behaviour.

The concepts of the norm is crucial for the functioning of biopower, since it serves as the distinguishing element between those allowed to let live and those who are condemned to die. Not surprisingly, sexuality is one of the most important elements in the normalisation of society, since it binds the disciplinary practices of anatomo-politics with the regulatory practices of biopolitics (Foucault 1990, 145)

This formulation allows us to look at the implications of the concept of HIV “risk groups”, which in the initial formulation established by the US-based Centres for Disease Control between 1981 and 1982 encompassed the “4 Hs” of homosexuals, heroin users, haemophiliacs and Haitians (Treichler 2004, 20). This definition creates direct link between the “abnormal” condition or behaviour of the members of those groups and the risk of HIV infection, which inevitably separates them from the majority of the population. And even if this separation does not entail outward murderous impulses, it can lead to a calculated death on a mass scale. Issues such the prohibitive prices of medication set by pharmaceutical companies in the case of Africa, the legal battles over the production of cheaper generic drugs or the lack of preventive measures in the case of Asia, are clear enough evidence of biopower at work.

It is not surprising, then, that Foucault's body of work on biopower proved to be a potent tool for the analysis of HIV/AIDS related issues. In particular, the biopolitical framework served as the means for a critical approach to the HIV/AIDS policy of the medical establishment and various governments, covering topics as diverse as the issue of immigration in the UK (Ingram 2008), blood harvesting in China (Shao and Scoggin 2009), reshaping of the gay Asian sexual identity (Yue 2008), the social and medical invisibility of those PWAs in Brazil who are marginalised because of their poverty (Biehl 2005), the "technoneurosis" of "imaginary AIDS" (Biehl, Coutinho and Outerio 2001) and the "hybrid" approaches to health amongst South African PWAs (Decoteau 2008).

Foucault's theory of biopower provides us with a basic framework for thinking about the ways in which the concept of an external threat is mobilized as means to exercise power in modern societies and to designate the boundaries around the population which has to be defended from the external and dangerous "other". As such it offers a good starting point for our discussion of HIV/AIDS, since the issue is often conceptualized precisely as a threat to the "general population", a threat quite often finding its locus in the figure of the PWA rather than in the virus.

This conceptualization of society as permanently at danger finds its reflection in Ulrich Beck's notion of the "risk society". In Beck's opinion, issues of risk came to the forefront concerns in modern societies, since increasing modernization brought about a proliferation of dangerous "side effects" which can not be avoided, but instead have to be managed and redistributed amongst the population (Beck 1992, 19). In Joost van Loon's terms, "In the risk society, bads no longer complement goods, they *supplement* them. That is to say, they add but

do not add up” (van Loon 2002, 23; emphasis in the original). In other words, attempts to eliminate risk undertaken by modern societies result in the emergence of new risks which in turn have to be handled, causing an ever-increasing number of threats. Since these can never be avoided, the question is which members of the population become exposed to their effects and risk society is the next stage of capitalism, in which the economic inequalities are slowly overshadowed by the inequalities connected with the exposure to risk (Beck 1992, 23).

Even though it remains debatable if the distribution of risks is anything other than an inverse function of the distribution of wealth, risk society provides us with a more varied approach to the issue of HIV/AIDS than Foucault’s binary opposition between the biopolitical conflict of “us” and “them”. I will move on to Stefan’s Elbe works on the securitization of HIV/AIDS in Africa, as it combines the biopolitical framework of Michel Foucault with the works of Ulrich Beck. This may allow us to engage the issue of “risk groups” and “risk behaviour” in the context of HIV/AIDS within biopolitics.

Elbe (2005) notes how the formulation of HIV/AIDS in terms of a national and international threat paves the way for racism in its two distinct forms. The first one involves “pitting the interests of those living without HIV/AIDS against those affected by the illness through implying, however erroneously, that the healthy ones would be better off without the latter” (2005, 411). The second kind of racism is based on the distinction between those individuals who are indispensable for the functioning of the state and those that can be treated as disposable – it is based on the assumption that not all lives are worth saving, or at least are not worth saving to an equal degree as others, and it employs “a more subtle biopolitical racism that could end up deciding who is allowed to live and who will be left to die – a criterion that assesses human beings not in terms of any intrinsic value, but on the basis of their relation to

the objective of maximizing the health and well-being of the population.” (2005, 413). This reflects a clash within the concept of human rights between life as a value in itself against the politically qualified life, a conflict which will resurface later in this chapter with the presentation of Agamben’s take on biopolitics. For now, we have to note that Elbe points out one more distinct (although related) risk of securitization: namely, the normalising aspects of biopower. In other words, the attempt to reformulate HIV/AIDS as a threat to national security immediately moves into the moralistic discourse of what constitutes sexually (un)acceptable practices (2005, 414). In other words, the securitization of HIV/AIDS creates a certain version of “sexual hierarchy” (Rubin 1984) in which the “respectability” of specific sexual practices becomes a function of the risk of HIV transmission that is associated with them through normative practices (or through their representations).

So far, Foucault’s insights on biopower, population and racism allows us to look from a broad perspective at the way in which society secures its boundaries and ensures its own continuation. Elbe shows how this framework can be applied in the case of HIV/AIDS by addressing the two HIV-specific instances of racism. He also provides the welcome addition of “risk groups” and “risk behaviours” into this argument. However, we still need specific theoretical tools necessary for addressing the representation of individual PWAs rather than a broadly perceived population affected by (or at risk of) HIV/AIDS. The work of Giorgio Agamben may prove to be the solution to that problem.

Agamben’s theory sets out where Foucault left off: at the paradox of genocide within the life-affirming politics of modern democracies. He claims that the state of exception has turned into a rule of contemporary politics – its role shifted from a temporary disturbance in the workings of power to the main tool by which power operates, which puts it at “the threshold

of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism” (2005, 2). In Agamben’s model, the exception does not reside inside or outside of juridical power, it does not signify an abnormal state within the law or the general field of lawlessness outside of it, but rather serves as a “zone of indistinction” in which the boundaries between the rule of the law and lawlessness are blurred. Agamben uses the term “force-of-law” to account for the radical discontinuity between the law and its application in the state of exception, the law is still present, but not operational; at the same time, acts which are not sanctioned by the law attain its *force* without its status (2005, 38-40). The concept of exception is in this formulation crucial to the establishment of the juridical law, as it defines the point where the law must be suspended and therefore sets the limits on the sphere of law’s operation:

[...]The state of exception is the opening of a space in which application and norm reveal their separation and a pure force-of-law realizes (that is, applies by ceasing to apply) a norm whose application has been suspended. In this way, the impossible task of welding norm and reality together, and thereby constituting the normal sphere, is carried out in the form of the exception, that is to say, by presupposing their nexus. This means that in order to apply a norm it is ultimately necessary to suspend its application, to produce an exception. In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without *logos* claims to realize an enunciation without a reference. (2005, 40)

The state of exception, then, is an essential and defining element in the operation of the law by the constitution of the normal sphere in which the law can apply. Yet the designation of the normal sphere of law’s operation is possible only through a suspension of the law in the state of exception. This paradox is somewhat similar to Foucault’s assertion that biopower’s attempt at proliferating the life of the population is possible only through the exercise of racism on a part of that very population. We now have to look at the way in which Agamben links his model of power at work with the issues of population and the individual subject. If Agamben talks about a “pure violence” that is performed in the suspension of law, we have to ask on whom it is performed and for what purpose. In other words, we have to ask about the way in which life is introduced into Agamben’s model of power.

Agamben's formulation of the way in which life becomes the primary concern of biopower is perhaps his most radical departure from Foucault's body of work. First of all, Agamben rejects the notion of a sudden break between sovereignty and biopower. Instead, he claims that life has always been an element of politics by pointing to the classical Greek distinction between *bios* (life in the political sense, as a meaningful individual) *zoē* (the fact of existing as a living being). In other words, the main mechanism of biopower – the introduction of life into the political sphere - was present long before the “threshold of the modern era” as proposed by Foucault (Agamben 1998, 3-4). For Agamben, the difference between classical and modern operation of power consists does not revolve around the question is the life of the subjects politicised or not, but rather *how* is it politicised. The radical break of modern politics with the classical model consists of an attempt to dissolve the difference between *bios* and *zoē* – to make the simple fact of living the sole and sufficient condition for the acquiring of political life (1998, 10).

How, then, is political life produced with relation to the law and power? For Agamben, the originary mechanism for the production of political life resides in the legal concept of the ban. It is through the ban, understood as an “inclusive exclusion” in which the banned individual is subjected to the full force of the law by being completely excluded that politically qualified life comes into being (1998, 27-29). Agamben uses the obscure Roman legal term of the *homo sacer*, an individual who “may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (1998, 8) to describe the individual addressed by the ban. Through his exposure to death (a reduction to bare life) by the ban of the sovereign the man who is sacred becomes “the originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoē* and *bios*” (1998, 181). Therefore, the sacred life (or bare life, as Agamben seems to use both terms interchangeably) of the

individual under the rule of the ban becomes indispensable in the constitution of political life - it is precisely through the production of bare life which can be killed without any legal consequences that the politicisation of life takes place.

This prominence of the ban as the foundational element of political life has profound implications for the contemporary landscape of biopolitics. Agamben sees the emergence of the liberal political thought as an attempt to reformulate the relationship between *zoē* and *bios* by forming a seamless and immediate transition of the former into the latter, or, in his own words, by “constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the *bios* of *zoē*” (1998, 9). Paradoxically, the attempt to remove the figure of the *homo sacer* from the construction of politically qualified life only serves to exacerbate the problem of discontinuity between natural and political life, as exemplified by such phenomena of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the emergence of Nazism and the inability of human rights to address the issue of refugees (1998, 131-132). According to Agamben, the attempts to nest the political capacity of the individual within the sphere of natural life result in a situation in which each and every member of the population can be exposed to a death that is not a sacrifice. The attempt to expel bare life from biopolitics paves the way for a universal possibility of making a *homo sacer* out of each individual (1998, 115).

The distinction between *bios* and *zoē* and the figure of the *homo sacer* should prove helpful in the analysis of media material, as it allows for a rethinking of the position of PWAs with regards to the often recurring themes of social exclusion and the equation of HIV with a death sentence, as well as to the way in which the issue of HIV/AIDS becomes politicised in the public sphere. However, we have to make certain precautions about the use of Agamben’s concepts. We have already mentioned that Agamben is extremely sceptical about the liberal

attempt to secure the rights of the individual as innate, but we have to ask what kind of biopolitical solution does he offer as an alternative. He states that although we are unable to return to the clear-cut distinction between *bios* and *zōē*, we can reformulate it in such a way that “[the] biopolitical body that is bare life must itself [...] be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own *zōē*” (1998, 188). However, it has to be said that he does not offer any clues as to how exactly this new life that is “exhausted in bare life” should (or even could) look like.

It has to be admitted that, while Agamben’s works have been used in the context of HIV/AIDS, this use has also received valid criticism. Jean Comaroff (2007) sees bare life as a powerful metaphor which is nevertheless highly problematic when applied to real-life examples. Comaroff directly addresses the issue HIV/AIDS, since he criticises several scholars (Biehl 2001; Kahn 2004, Kistner 2003) for their use of bare life to describe the situation of various groups of PWAs. In his opinion, this leads to a “slippage between metaphysics and history, archetype and instance” (Comaroff 2007, 209). Yet there is no denying that media representations operate precisely within this slippage - somewhere between metaphor and stereotype on one hand and real life marked by factual events on the other – and it is precisely within this slippage that Agamben’s framework could be effective.

## Marginality, Tropics and Redemption: 1993-2006

In the previous chapter, I have outlined the theoretical background informing this paper. The main assumption behind the states that HIV/AIDS is more than a medical issue: it is a discursively produced web of meanings which has to be disentangled for any form of effective activism to take place. Foucault's concept of biopower serves as the basic model for thinking about the population at risk from an external threat. Ulrich Beck's concept of the "risk society" provides us with a broader understanding of the way in which risk becomes an indispensable element of modern societies. Agamben's take on biopolitics gives us an insight into the ways political life is formed. It is now time to apply these concepts to the issue of HIV/AIDS in Poland

It has to be noted that the popular understanding of HIV/AIDS in Poland owes much to the American discourse concerning the issue. Although the first cases of HIV in Poland were diagnosed in 1985, the recognition of a wider spread of HIV in Poland and the resulting formulation of HIV/AIDS as a pressing social problem took place in 1989 (Rosinska 2006, 94), which coincided with the fall of communism in the country. The transition marked a turning point which, as in the case of other post-socialist states, was characterised by a radical break from the experience of communism and the often troubled opening up to the "West". Along with the basic medical information about HIV/AIDS, the Polish discourse imported the notion of "risk groups" from its American counterpart. However, the "4H list" of groups at risk of HIV infection (homosexuals, heroin addicts, haemophiliacs and Haitians), which had been established by the US federal agency Centers for Disease Control (CDC) between the years 1981 and 1982 and served as the defining mode of thinking about HIV transmission in terms of group belonging rather than behaviour (Treichler 2004, 20), became transformed

after entering Poland. The last “H” in the list was discarded for obvious reasons and the third one hardly ever emerged in the analysed articles. The two remaining “Hs”, however, were easily adopted by the Polish media discourse on HIV/AIDS, although it has to be said that Polish newspapers in the 1990s devoted considerably more attention to IDUs than gay men as PWAs. This distribution of the media attention is somewhat surprising if we consider the first infections in Poland in 1985 – 6 out of 11 cases of HIV were identified amongst haemophiliacs, 5 amongst men who had sex with men (MSM) and one case involved a female sex worker (National AIDS Centre 2007a, 15). However, the focus of the Polish media on IDUs in 1990s becomes clearer when we look closer at the social context in which the discourse of HIV/AIDS was being formed in Poland.

First of all, the epidemic immediately started spreading amongst IDUs and their prevalence in the overall group of people diagnosed with HIV reached its peak in 1990, when they constituted 80% of the overall number of HIV cases diagnosed in Poland since 1985 (National AIDS Centre 2007a, 19). This is especially significant since the prevalence of IDUs amongst Polish cases of HIV was an essential element in local news reporting. Yet the articles which drew on these statistics very rarely acknowledged that the numbers may not be representative of the general situation in the country, since a substantial amount of data came from routine testing of IDUs, female sex workers, people diagnosed with STDs and patients of selected wards in hospitals (Komitet Helsiński w Polsce 1991, 17). Even if this information was mentioned, it was without any explanation how the routine testing of selected parts of the population could affect the statistics. These two issues: the factual and dramatic spread of HIV amongst Polish IDUs and the confusion between the specific issue of HIV detection and the general number of HIV cases in Poland contributed to the popular framing of HIV/AIDS as a problem predominantly connected with drug use.

The second reason lies in the specificity of Polish non-governmental responses to the HIV/AIDS. Cindy Patton notes the double-edged relationship between political activism and the concept of “risk groups” in the US context: the “[l]esbian and gay demands for visibility, a form of political resistance that enabled gay men to respond collectively and rapidly to the epidemic, was easily reversible into the lens of epidemiologic surveillance: The scientific idea of [transmission] vectors was nestled into the political idea of community” (Patton 2002, 67). This epidemiological translation of community-based action into community-bound patterns of transmission, which facilitated the inclusion of gay men amongst “risk groups, required first and foremost a clearly defined and publicly visible community. The model of HIV/AIDS employed by the US gay and lesbian movement was backed up by strong sense of community, long history of common struggles against oppression and access to resources (Altman 1994 and 1995; Cohen 1997; Takemoto 2003). Polish situation was different in this regard. Even though the Polish gay and lesbian movement’s responses to the AIDS crisis were in the early 1990s was based on the model at least partially inherited from their US counterparts, Polish activism had none of the benefits resulting from a long standing politically oriented community, since the latter was only being formed: the first official gay and lesbian activist group in Poland, Stowarzyszenie Grup Lambda, appeared in 1990. The preceding “Warszawski Ruch Homoseksualny” was a social organisation operating from 1987 to 1988 and never became officially recognised by the then-socialist Polish state (Kurpios 2002).

What is more, by the time official gay and lesbian movements in Poland were formed, there was already a very strong presence of drug rehabilitation NGOs in the space of HIV/AIDS related activism. The most prominent organisation was MONAR (established in 1981) which

started out as a single centre for drug dependent individuals in Garwolin, but in the second half of the 1980s it formed a network of similar facilities across Poland, expanded to HIV/AIDS activism, obtained financial support from the state and received a large amount of media attention. MONAR's visibility in the media was a partially a result of the charismatic and often controversial persona of MONAR's founder, Marek Kotański. The second reason was connected with the widely publicised protests against local MONAR rehabilitation centres housing seropositive IDUs voiced by the inhabitants of Kawęczyn, Rybienko, Konstancin and other towns between the years 1989 and 1990; these events often escalated into acts of violence and attempts at arson (Komitet Helsiński w Polsce 1991, 11). Following Patton's claim, we may assume that the large public visibility of MONAR as a NGO concerned with both drug rehabilitation and HIV/AIDS activism contributed to the conflation of the PWA with the image of the IV drug user.

This "selective inheritance" of two out of four "risk groups" from the US medical discourse and the focus on IDUs rather than gay men is reflected by the Polish news reporting in the second half of the 1990s. Although both in Poland and in the US the notion of the "4H club" has been abandoned in the early 1990s, the effects of this initial formulation of the HIV/AIDS "victims" lingered on for more than a decade. This does not necessarily mean that the risk of HIV infection was presented as belonging exclusively to those two groups. On the contrary, journalists in the mid 90s frequently quoted experts stating that HIV/AIDS is a concern not only for IV drug users or gay men but also for the "general population" since there are no "risk groups", only "risky behaviour", and this sort of disclaimer quickly became an indispensable element in all "responsible" news coverage of the issue. However, the message implied throughout the articles contradicted this statement, and this was the case with both local and national printed media regardless of their political affiliations or target groups.

Polish news reporting in the late 1990s was very often caught between the antagonistic positions of acknowledgment and denial, as the imagery and implications of the texts often expressed a message which was the exact opposite of the experts' opinions. Titles such as "AIDS threatens not only drug addicts and prostitutes" (*Sztandar Młodych*, 1 Dec 1994) could be quite happily married to a drawing of a PWA begging for money on the street – one of the stereotypical images of the heroin addict. The news reports surrounding the celebration of World AIDS Day follow a very similar route: a title such as "Girls fancy drug addicts" (*Dziennik Wschodni*, 29 Nov 1996) or "HIV from *kompot*" (*Dziennik Zachodni*, 23 Oct 1996) is immediately followed by statistics such as an estimate number of seropositive people in Poland or the popularity of anal sex amongst female university students as a proof of the universal aspect of HIV risk. The latter article makes the contrast even more apparent by showing a picture of an apparently destitute man asleep on the ground after falling off a bench, a symbol of both homelessness and substance abuse. Some articles use pictures of syringes, which can stand for testing and treatment, but through decontextualisation become transparent symbols of drug use (*Kurier Polski*, 24 Oct 1996). In many cases the images of IV drug users during self-administered injections serve as either the only one or the most prominent illustration (*Dziennik Bałtycki*, 30 Nov 1994; *Dziennik Lubelski*, 29 Nov 1994). Polish media reporting very often employed a sleight-of-hand which was able to use the alarming opinions of the experts while simultaneously reinforcing the public's comfort zone: it openly rejected the concept of "risk groups" only to implicitly reinstate it by constantly referencing to the culturally coded figure of the IDU as the general representative of HIV. This way, the reassuring boundary between the healthy and risk-free "general population" and the isolated and diseased IDU could remain intact despite the expert's claim that everyone is at risk.

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<sup>2</sup> The slang term for "Polish heroin", a crude version of the drug made out of wild poppies

A brief look at the more recent cases of media reporting from the years 2002 to 2006 reveals the persistence of this “double discourse”. Almost a decade later, the IDU “shooting up” or a decontextualised syringe remained a prominent and often the only symbol for journalists reporting on such broad and general issues as HIV risk amongst the “general population” (*Express Bydgoski*, 29 Nov 2002) or antiretroviral therapy (*Ilustrowany Kurier Polski*, 5 Feb 2002; *Dzień Dobry*, 11 Oct 2002). The latter article is especially interesting, as it starts with the following: “What to do if a junky stabs us with a syringe, or if we get hurt while cleaning the trash left by drug addicts? We can be saved from HIV infection by immediate antiretroviral therapy”. Reports on World AIDS Day bear titles such as “Diseased syringes” (*Konkrety*, 7 Dec 2005) or “Leaflets instead of syringes” (*Gazeta Wyborcza – Łódź*, 27 Nov 2002). Of course, most of these articles state that “everyone is at risk”, yet the textual and visual content inevitably pushes this risk away from the “general population” to the social margin inhabited by the ever-present IDU.

Visual representations of PWAs often extend this theme of marginality. This is a point that has been already argued by Gilman (1987), who claims that the “iconography of AIDS” employed by the US media in the 1980s reproduced the centuries-old imagery of syphilis, along with its stereotypical presentation of the person afflicted as isolated from society. Whether the correlation between syphilis and AIDS in the US case is accidental or not, the strategy of visual alienation was also employed in the Polish case. I have already mentioned several examples of associating HIV with the figure of a homeless and isolated drug user, and the visual representations of seropositive gay men employs a similar tactic – a solitary man sitting on a stairwell with his face darkened or turned away from the camera (*Super Express*, 1 Dec 1996; *Express Poznański*, 1 Dec 1998). It is true that this imagery can be justified by the textual content - the picture from the second example accompanies an interview with a

gay man talking about the social rejection he experienced after being tested positive. Yet sometimes the imagery of isolation stands in stark contrast to the text: the first example, showing a dark silhouette of a man with a cigarette is captioned “Marek was lucky – no one turned away from him. He still meets his friends, eats and drinks with them, enjoys their company”. This is especially striking if we consider that articles which focus on gay men outside of the HIV/AIDS context usually portray them in couples or groups (*Wiedza i Życie*, 11 Nov 1993, *Życie Warszawy*, 22-23 Jan 1994, *Super Express*, 24 Jan 1994.). This shows the persistence of the outcast trope, since the gay PWA is basically represented as a seropositive IDU minus the syringe. In most cases of visual representations the PWA is doubly isolated – s/he belongs not only to a group that is “outside” of society through the use of drug-related imagery, but is also literally all alone in the bleak urban landscape or an empty room which serves as the background. In this way, the imagery follows a circular logic since it offers an easy way to identify (and, quite possibly, isolate) the “carriers of the disease”. Alienation becomes both a recognisable symptom and an effect of illness, as well as the threshold between those who are at risk of HIV and those who remain safe.

If we compare this to specific visual representations of “healthy youth” in the Polish media coverage of HIV/AIDS related issues – especially the reports on various HIV awareness raising campaigns aimed at teenagers, student initiatives such as theatre plays, as well as HIV testing programs for teenagers - then the contrast becomes especially apparent. Contrary to the PWA or the seropositive person, the children, who are presumably all healthy and not at risk thanks to their increased awareness, responsibility or negative test results, are almost exclusively presented in large, closely knit groups (*Słowo Polskie*, 17 Dec 1994; *Tygodnik Ciechanowski*, 9 Dec 1994) or in the care of a nurse during blood sample taking (*Głos Pomorza*, 4 Jan 1995; *Super Express*, 16 Nov 1994).

The meaning associated with the IDU as the general symbol for HIV sometimes merges with other socially stigmatised groups, to the point where it is difficult to distinguish between them:

Not a long time ago, Marek took trips to Berlin Zoo station. His slim build, innocent blue eyes and feet in sandals worn from January till September were known to the enthusiasts of fast love [sic]. He came back infected with HIV. He squats around Katowice, meets his clients at the overpass near the station. Sometimes spends time in jail. He gets by.

“There are more and more cases of prostitution amongst young boys in Silesia” says Piotr, who works as a streetworker in the places of gathering for various human misfortunes: drug addicts, prostitutes, the outcast gay and lesbian couples from Katowice.

“In the past they were earning a living this way in Berlin, now they do it here”

The youngest ones are merely 13 years old. They inject “kompot” on the street. When they are out of drugs, they cruise the same street for the clients who could give them money for their next fix. Sometimes they steal and end up in the slammer. Later they return to their pimps, alcoholic partners, hungry children, back onto the street...  
(*Dziennik Zachodni*, 4 Oct 1999)

The way the article manages to seamlessly connect sex work, homosexuality, drug and alcohol abuse into one single package marked by HIV is nothing short of stunning. The first paragraph introduces a teenage seropositive sex worker, but he does not appear later in the article. The second paragraph’s opening sentence suggests that the article is about child sex workers, but from the second sentence onward it becomes increasingly difficult to identify the topic of the article. Even though each of the discussed groups is specifically listed in the first paragraph, the third one moves to a general description which fails to acknowledge any diversity in their lives, except for the honorary mention of the fact that they steal only “sometimes”, and for the list of their cohorts (to each their own: “pimps”, “alcoholic partners”, “hungry children” or “the street”, take your pick). The lines between the various groups are constantly blurred by the use of the all-encompassing personal pronoun “they”, which effectively eradicates any individuality in favour of an undifferentiated mass of “the

people who do not exist”, as the author calls them. Of course, it would be wrong to assume that the groups mentioned in the article are mutually exclusive and there are no drug users amongst sex workers or homosexuals, but the article treats those terms as near-synonyms. The element that binds groups (and the article in question) into relative coherence is the issue of HIV prevention, signified by interviews with experts and streetworkers, and the assumption that all of “them” inject drugs. Yet the opinions of various activists address mostly the issue of female heterosexual prostitution, while the author extends it to conclude that “It seems the authorities are afraid of the problem and decide to turn a blind eye to increasing number of transvestites offering love for sale [sic], men wandering around social care centres, as well as those Silesian lesbians who come out of the “underground” to talk about their mental, personal or professional problems”. The confusion could not be more explicit: on one hand we have the destitute IDU, on the other, lesbians who apparently have legal employment and face a completely different set of problems. The male sex worker serves as the link between the two extremes. The pictures and their captions confuse the matter even further. The first picture shows two women in minidresses, their faces away from the camera. The caption reads “They will do anything for money”. The second picture is captioned :“It is here, at the Katowice railway station, that the lines of drug addicts and prostitutes intersect”. The article fails to distinguish between drug users, gay male prostitutes and lesbians because according to its logic, all of the groups are marked by an increased risk of HIV infection. This may be surprising in the case of lesbians, who are usually excluded from the discourse on HIV risk (Treichler 2004, 246), but their position in the vaguely defined “underground” warrants their status as a “problem” in the context of HIV. The article fails to distinguish between the groups because all of them are similarly marked by marginality, which immediately becomes translated into HIV/AIDS – being “outside” of society means drug abuse, homosexuality,

prostitution and death of AIDS, all bound in a convenient category of “people who do not exist”.

Social marginality is often merged with the geographical one: “The Russian city of Kaliningrad lies less than 40 kilometres away from the Polish border. It is visited by smugglers from borderline Polish towns, truck drivers and businessmen from all over Europe. They are awaited by young girls on the streets and borderline parking lots.” (*Super Express*, 14 May 1999). Framing diseases as foreign phenomena (or as the dividing line between the “safe nation” and its “diseased other”) is a long standing mechanism in western culture, a point which has been recognised by Sontag (1990:135) and Gilman (100-102). Sexually transmitted disease is often thought to originate from “other” geographical areas inhabited by people engaging in “backwards”, “primitive” or “deviant” sexual practices, and the plague begins when the disease is somehow transplanted onto more “civilised” regions (which invariably coincide with the place in which a particular discourse of this type is formed). Other times this logic is inverted - the hotbed of the disease is conceptualised as a result of sexual permissivism and decadence resulting from economic development. Here, however, a slightly different mechanism takes place, since sex work can be labelled as deviant (“Some, like the very young Wiktorina, do not even wear panties. Wiktorina raises her skirt. The thin pantyhose doesn’t conceal a thing”), but it can not be presented as specific to the region, since it is impossible to deny the existence of sex workers in Poland. The line is then drawn not between the depraved prostitutes and the moral society, but between two groups of sex workers separated by both the issue of drug use and their social standing. The claim that “Ninety percent of prostitutes are drug users with HIV” by dr. Julia Frizen from the Kaliningrad AIDS Centre is immediately followed by the investigation into the total number of female sex workers in the city. When asked about this issue, the local policeman replies:

“A thousand, maybe more... Those who work in hotels have their own procurers and doctors”. The punch line, however, comes from the journalist: “Those who work on the streets have HIV”. The message is that HIV is endemic to a specific group of female sex workers who are outside of regulation and occupy the marginalised position associated with drug use. Yet this margin is better left alone to die out – the main concern is to protect those who visit the “contaminated” space, which is clearly specified by the article’s postscript: “In 1998, 1.8 million Poles passed the border of the Kaliningrad Oblast. In 1997, over 2.5 million”.

Looking at the mid 1990s representations of PWAs, one can not escape the impression that a significant amount of journalism simultaneously uses two contradictory discourses: on the one hand there is the “official” and openly stated claim HIV risk which is not connected exclusively to any specific group or groups, on the other, there is the implied acknowledgment of the vaguely defined social “underground” in which HIV appears in its “natural state”. The figure of the IDU serves as the paradigm and the primary “representative” of seropositivity in this context – a symbol of marginality which is both transparent and easy to employ.

This association of HIV/AIDS with marginality reflects Cindy Patton’s (2002) concept of “tropical thinking” about disease, in opposition to the “epidemiological thinking”. In her view, these two modes can be applied to the same disease in different contexts: tropical thinking situates the disease within a specific geographical territories and specific bodies which remain outside of the “civilised society”, whereas epidemiological thinking is concerned with mathematical models, patterns and vectors of transmission rather than specific bodies or spaces. In the tropical model, which is a legacy of colonial medicine, the disease is

always endemic to some exotic “other”, and the main preoccupation of medicine is to secure the coloniser’s safe return from the tropics, since this is the place where he is exposed to the danger of contagion from the infected colonial subjects, while the epidemiologic mode aims at reducing the frequency of transmission to an “acceptable”, sub-epidemic level. (Patton 2002, 39). Patton points to an example of tropical thinking in the US discourse on prostitution and homosexuality in the context of AIDS, and her model serves as a solid explanation for the ambiguous position of the IDU between the text and images, as well as for the conflation of sex work, homosexuality and drug use into a single category. Saying that “this is not only a problem of gay men and drug addicts” does not necessarily mean the same as “we are all facing the same problem”. The framing of this problem in the printed media has less to do with the existence and wide scope of the disease than with the fact that it may move beyond the safely designated zone of the “social margin”. The distinction between “civilized society” and “the tropics”, between the healthy and the sick, between the “general population” and “the margin” designates the limits of valuable life. In Agamben’s terms we might frame this problem as: which life can become politicized? Which can be put to death (or allowed to die) without sacrifice?

Indeed, it seems that the establishment of political life through an exposure to death becomes apparent even in the early incidents of violent protests against MONAR centers which were mentioned earlier in this chapter. Jill Owczarzak argues that the protests in Rembertów and Konstancin, which targeted MONAR centres and their inhabitants and often included violence and arson attempts, allowed the townspeople to “[invoke] the symbolism of legitimate citizens’ authority in the emergent democracy against the perceived illegitimacy of a failed socialist state to protect their health interests” (Owczarzak 2009, 430). These are perhaps the most dramatic examples of the way in which the inclusion in political life is founded on the

exposure to violence and death, but we are not talking here only about biological death through the use of violence – there is also the violence of exclusion which leads to a social death. This is the case of the media representations of isolated IDUs and the broader conceptualization of “the margin” as collectively marked by HIV. This is also the case of the “dual discourse” which simultaneously mobilizes the general public to act (since it is at risk) and designates a specific “risk group” on which these actions can be undertaken. The Polish discourse on HIV/AIDS provides many examples of the way power and various forms of violence are mutually constitutive.

If we take seriously Agamben’s argument that in contemporary biopolitics every political subject can become reduced to bare life, to a life that is condemned to (biological or social) death, then we have to move the analysis from the marginalized groups to the “zone of indistinction” (Agamben 1998, 9) between politically qualified and bare life. We have to look closer at the way in which the ban from politically qualified life to a state of bare life takes place. If we are dealing with the tropical logic marked by exotic visits, risky excursions and endemic conditions, we have to ask who can visit the tropics and on what conditions are they allowed to return.

The articles which seem to at least slightly break the clear division between health/inclusion and illness/exclusion present various first-hand accounts of seropositive people regarding their life and circumstances of infection. These can be divided into two groups. The first involves an accident during work (policemen or nurses infected during their work by IV drug users). The second type of confessions presents stories of heterosexual women infected by their partners (either IV drug users, or, less frequently, unfaithful husbands). On the one hand, it is notable that these articles are the only ones which present individuals from the “general population” as being at risk of HIV infection. On the other, the majority of the texts reproduce

the figure of the IV drug user as the source of transmission. Also, most of the articles repeatedly employ the same pattern – the narrators are pushed out of the “safety zone” by an exceptional, virtually unpreventable accident or by a malicious PWA.

One of the recurring stories throughout the printed media (especially, but not exclusively, tabloid newspapers and popular magazines) is a specific form of a fall from grace followed by redemption, which is reserved almost exclusively to women. The narrative starts with the young protagonist falling into “bad company” – sometimes this is a group of friends, but most often an IDU boyfriend: “As a teenager she was constantly moving towards the gutter. She started with the seemingly innocent pot smoking, later she was taking whatever was available” (*Gazeta Wroclawska*, 12 Dec 2003); “For her friends drugs meant happiness. She tried. Several times” (*Twój Styl*, Dec 2003); “She was dating a drug addict. They didn’t use condoms” (*Super Express*, 12 Aug 2005); “I rebelled against... Don’t ask me what, I do not know. Was it boredom? Stupidity?” (*She*, Dec 1998); “Her first love at seventeen, taking walks together, making passionate promises. A rebellion against the adult world which rejected her” (*Nowa Trybuna Opolska*, 11 Apr 1999). Then comes the period of heavy drug use, HIV infection followed by a long period of depression: “I didn’t want to believe. I told myself this is not true.” (*Pani Domu*, 28 Jun 2004) “This could happen to anyone, but not her... (*Super Express*, 18 Jan 2002). Finally, the protagonist overcomes the habit and “returns to normalcy”, which is usually followed by falling in love with a different man and motherhood: “Natalia was born healthy And I... it was as if I was also born, for the second time” (*Olivia*, 1 Mar 2005); “I calculated that I have to go on for 10-15 years. I want to be as long as possible with my husband and daughter. For the first time in my life I feel I’m heading in the right direction” (*Marie Claire*, 1 Nov 2005); “I will fight for myself and for my life, because I have people worth living for (*Moje Zdrowie*, Feb 2002). The other version of

the story replaces the young, naïve girl with an adult woman infected by her cheating husband. The resolution, however, does not change much – the protagonist usually devotes her life to childcare. In both versions the infection is an effect of the teenage naivety or the inability to “choose the right partner”: the protagonists are “good girls” who meet the “wrong guys” and make the wrong choices, but are finally able to return to society and start a family with a different partner despite their own seropositive status.

Of course, one of the main goals for HIV/AIDS activists is to stress that seropositive people can lead a life that is meaningful, and we might say that the type of redemptory narrative attributed to women by the media can contribute to breaking the stereotype of seropositivity as a death sentence. But it is also important to see how that the concept of “meaningful life” is invariably mobilised by the press in the context of family and heterosexuality through the narrative of a heroin-related fall and redemption.

The media discourse of HIV/AIDS seems to treat men less kindly, however. Men’s stories of a “return to grace” are considerably less frequent - most of them are condemned to die alone: “I have already died”, says one male seropositive IDU (*Głos Pomorza*, 30 Nov 1999); “University studies, family – I have left all that behind” (*Express Poznański*, 1 Dec 1998).

There is a certain contradiction in the apparent isolation of the male IDUs and the popularity of the story of transmission through sexual contact with men from the very same group of male IDUs. In fact, we may ask how could that many women get infected from their male IDU partners since all male IDUs are represented as completely isolated from other individuals? Moreover, how is it that in media representations women are able to return from the margin to politicised life while males remain locked in the bare life of the IDU?

The answer may lie in the way political life is conceptualised within the biopolitical framework. Ruth A. Miller (2006) argues that biopolitics' focus on life and reproduction requires a rethinking of the category of the "neutral citizen". The male, unmarked subject of Enlightenment is no longer viable (in fact, it never has been), since "it is the womb that has become the predominant biopolitical space, it is women's bodily borders that have been displaced onto national ones, and it is women who have taken the concept of consent to its logical conclusion" (p. 149). Of course, the argument about the relationship between the female body and the nation is not new (Mosse 1985; Mostov 2000; Janion 2006), but Miller's reference to the social contract in terms of defense against bodily violation rather than physical pain that turns the androcentric neutral subject on its head. "Pain is a violation of political rights - it is about the right to life and liberty, about the individual's freedom to continue living", she writes, adding that "[t]respas is a violation of biopolitical rights - about the right to health and dignity, about the population's capacity to continue reproducing" (p. 151). It is then the reproductive function that constitutes women as the neutral biopolitical subject, and it is through this perspective that we should address the way in which the boundaries between politically qualified life and bare life are drawn in the examples provided in this chapter: the women who became infected via IV drug use could let go of their habit, return to the "general population" and regain their politically qualified life, the transition itself sealed by the decision to mother a child and start a family. Gay men fall outside of this redemptory narrative, therefore they are not even considered as political subjects - this could also explain their relatively rare appearance as PWAs in the Polish media discourse on HIV/AIDS. As I have already argued, the media of the mid 1990s offered a binary and contradictory discourse, clashing the official concept of "risky behaviour" with the underlying logic of "risk groups". Yet if in the popular understanding IV drug users as a group defined by their behaviour, while gay men are defined by their (presumably non-reproductive) sexual

identity, then the latter offers much less opportunity for change. Subsequently, their biological condition offers no possibility “redeemed” to lead a “proper” and “meaningful”, politicised life.

## Panic, Responsibility and Blame: 2007-2010

In the previous chapter I discussed the several mutually constitutive elements of the discourse on HIV/AIDS in the Polish media from between the years 1993 and 2006. I have shown how a substantial part of this news reporting followed a “tropical” mode of thinking about the disease (Patton 2002), which conceptualised HIV as endemic to the groups which are “outside” of society. This “tropical” mode of thinking uses primarily the figure of the male IDU, who becomes treated as the symbol of marginality and the main representative of life condemned to death (both in physical and social terms). I have also argued that the figure of the isolated male IDU as an outcast condemned to death is necessary for the constitution of the female heterosexual PWA as the main figure in “a narrative of redemption” connected with a return to “normal society” through motherhood. In this chapter, I will describe how this “narrative of redemption” became reformulated in recent years and look at the implication of this change.

The analysis will start with an analysis of the Polish media coverage concerning the case of Simon Mol in 2007 and 2008. Simon Mol was a Cameroonian who immigrated to Poland in 1999, quickly gained the support of the Polish intellectual left by his claims of suffering political persecution in his home country, as well as by his work as a human rights activist. Mol was a prominent figure in the Warsaw cultural scene, established the *Migrator* theatre company, published a volume of poetry and in 2003 was awarded the “Anti-fascist of the year” award by the Polish “Never Again” society for his efforts in promoting tolerance. In January 2007, Mol was arrested on 11 charges of causing severe harm due to HIV infection of his female sexual partners, one charge of deliberate exposure to HIV and 1 charge of illegal

possession of a melee weapon. According to the police, Mol was informed of his seropositive status in 1999 by the Polish centre for refugees, but he never disclosed this information to his sexual partners. The case caused a huge scandal in the Polish public sphere and became one of the recurring topics in the media between Mol's arrest in January 2007 and his death of AIDS-related illness in October 2008, while his trial was still underway. I consider this case crucial in the reformulation of the Polish discourse on HIV/AIDS because of the amount of media attention devoted to the case and the outbreak of a "moral panic" which followed. I will analyse three characteristic features of this panic which had profound consequences for the Polish media discourse on HIV/AIDS. First of all, this was the first widely publicised case of HIV transmission through heterosexual intercourse which received an immense amount of media coverage in Poland. Secondly, one of the central issues in the case was the status of the infected women as victims. Lastly, it sparked a debate concerning Simon Mol's intentionality in the transmissions, which immediately took on racial and ethnic undertones. (National AIDS Centre, 2007b)

First we should define what exactly do we mean by moral panic. In his seminal *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Stan Cohen defines this term as a time when

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-think people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to...Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself (Cohen 2005, 1)

A moral panic, then, is a sudden outburst of social indignation at a specific real or imaginary problem and at the party allegedly responsible for it (the "folk devil", in Cohen's terms). This event usually involves various social actors who may effect more or less radical changes in

the structure of the society. Even though the concept was drawn up by Cohen to describe the public response to the subcultures emerging in post-war Britain, his framework proved to be effective in analysing other panics and found many continuators. Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (2009) provide an overview of the sociological models of moral panics and they distinguish between the “elite engineered” model, interest theory and the “grassroots” model. (pp. 52-56). The first one was used predominantly by Marxists and explained moral panics as the “diversions” used by a single, unified ruling class to draw the attention of the subordinate classes from “serious” issues which could pose a danger to its domination. In the second model, the initiative to conjure a moral panic comes from a particular group (or groups) of interest in the middle of the power structure in an attempt to advance its goals. The “grassroots” model explains moral panics in terms of genuine concerns the of society’s lower strata.

If we assume that moral panics are an element of discourse which is produced through dispersed sites of power, we have to discard the simple top-down model of “elite-engineered” panics. The remaining two models allow for a greater deal of negotiation between various groups, but they still restrict the control over discourse to a specific social stratum. The problem with these models lies in their rather simplistic assumption of specific objectives which appear out of nowhere and can be easily achieved through the production of a moral panic. We will borrow an alternative model from Simon Watney, who describes this problem in the following way: “Moral panics seem to appear and disappear, as if representation were not the site of *permanent* ideological struggle over the meaning of signs. A particular “moral panic” merely marks the site of the current front-line in such struggles” (Watney 1996, 42). We can treat moral panics not as singular breaking points or sudden and artificial ruptures in discourse, but rather as moments in which the debates around a particular topic reach their

boiling point. Yet the role of panics extends beyond mere representation of problematic issues, since they are also able to “provide the raw materials, in the form of words and images, of those moral constituencies with which individual subjects are encouraged to identify their deepest interests and their very core of being” (p. 43). Rather than merely drawing attention to specific problems within the society, moral panics serve as means to (re)define the society by addressing the safety and well-being of the “general public” and forming a divisive line between the “society at risk” and the threatening “other”. The productive character of moral panics is also postulated by Sean P. Hier (2008), who distinguishes between two related but separate modes of risk-based and grievance-based moral panics’ operation. The latter works as a response an event which has already happened, places the blame on “other” individuals or social groups and calls for a direct intervention in their actions. The former works through addressing a potential threat in the future, proposes undertaking preventive measures within the “endangered” population through an emphasis on personal responsibility and the individual corrective behaviour. As we shall see in the following analysis, Simon Mol’s case employed mostly the mode of grievance, but its consequences extended to the use of the risk-based mode.

Even though Simon Mol’s case could be treated as a paint-by numbers example of moral panic, it was hardly the first Polish case of a deliberate HIV transmission through sexual intercourse. It was also not the first case when an African immigrant was charged for hiding his seropositive status to his sexual partners: a very similar case took place in 2002 when a Nigerian man, Martin O., was sentenced for 6 years in jail for drug smuggling and exposing two women to the risk of HIV infection through sexual intercourse. Yet it was Simon Mol’s case that sparked a public debate, The debate, which often took on racist and moralist tone, can be seen as an attempt to reformulate the discourse of HIV/AIDS in relation to the “general

population”, since the latter was faced with a single case in which HIV was transmitted through sexual intercourse on an unprecedented scale. This reformulation of discourse involved a shift in the “tropical” thinking about the marginality of HIV and the status of heterosexual women PWAs.

The significance of Mol’s case in the media can be seen both in the quantity and the quality of news reporting in January 2007, the month of Simon Mol’s apprehension by the police. Reports of the National AIDS Centre in Poland (2006 and 2007) list 164 articles in 59 newspapers (about two thirds concerning the Simon Mol case) in comparison with 39 articles in the same month of 2006. This is especially evident since this period is usually a “cool down time” in the media coverage of HIV/AIDS after the annual “peak” connected with world AIDS day every December. The titles also leave no doubts as to the significance of the issue, as the newspapers opted for hard-hitting and direct headlines. In tabloids one could read: “He infected a hundred women” (*Fakt*, 4 Jan 2007); “A walking HIV time bomb” (*Nowości*, 4 Jan 2007); “Cameroonian as cruel as a knife” (*Super Nowości*, 12 Jan 2007); “Did you fall prey to him?” (*Fakt*, 6 Jan 2007). Even though the tabloid press was most eager to appeal to the reader’s emotions through addressing the reader directly and employing vivid imagery, the local newspapers did not fall far behind: “Infecting with death” (*Echo Miasta*, 8 Jan 2007); ; “Simon M’s crime” (*Dziennik Zachodni*, 4 Jan 2007). Even the so-called “quality press” sometimes used similar tactics: “Simon’s shocking finale” (*Trybuna*, 4 Jan 2007); “Call now if you’ve met Simon Mol” (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 5 Jan 2007); “All the nightmares of Simon Mol” (*Rzeczpospolita*, 9 Jan 2007). The media’s use of words such as “crime”, “shocking finale” “nightmare” “time bomb” and “death” and the exaggerated number of infected women do more than just elicit strong emotional responses from the readers; they also frame the event as an exceptional case, one that is a threat to the entire population of Poland. The use of direct

address towards female readers<sup>3</sup> through the phrases “Call now if you’ve met Simon Mol” and “Did you fall prey to him?” interpellates them as the subjects of Poland with an obligation to act for the well-being and security of the entire Polish society. The whole nation is faced with a deadly threat and women bear the onus of responsibility for its containment.

Whereas the women from the “general public” were presented as the safeguards of the population, the portrayal of Mol’s victims was completely different. The idealistic and naïve young girl quickly became the recurring image in the portrayal of the women infected by Mol: “he was always accompanied by a girl. Sometimes pretty, sometimes completely unremarkable, with her eyes fixed on him and a strong sense of mission. Convinced that without her the helpless refugee won’t be able to communicate or take care of himself” (*Rzeczpospolita*, 9 Jan 2007). Later, the article states that “He was the object of excitement for beginner female journalists for the cultural columns of Warsaw’s illustrated magazines and dailies”. The young, ecstatic female journalist quickly became a stock character in the news reporting on the victims and her descriptions were usually far from sympathetic: “Novice female journalists with their tiny notebooks would flock to his poetry readings to write their reviews in cultural columns” (*Polityka*, 30 Jan 2007). According to the article, these girls would later form a considerable part of Mol’s entourage, and the condescending tone disguised as humor is hard to miss: these hopeful girls with their “tiny notebooks” can not be treated seriously, since they only aspire to be “real” journalists (after all, who else could write about poetry for cultural columns?). The novice status marks inexperience not only in professional, but also social and possibly sexual terms. The issue of sexual inexperience of the victims is most strikingly emphasised by the following fragment:

No one knows how many girls running around Catholic youth movements did Mol manage to invite to his apartment in Żoliborz. We know of one: she is young, believes

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<sup>3</sup> Since verbs are not gendered in English, the female addressee of these headlines was lost in translation. The original headlines are “Jeśli spotkałaś Simona M.- dzwón” and “Czy padłaś jego ofiarą?”, respectively.

in God and the fact that it is not God, but the Church that has problems with tolerance. She also didn't ask about condoms, the Church prohibits them anyway. She lost her virginity with Mol. Later she told Kuba Janiszewski, the journalist who has been talking with the girls for the past couple of months, that it was wonderful, that Mol pushed the boundaries so gently. (*Polityka*, 30 Jan 2007)

The first two sentences do much more than simply state the fact that some of Mol's sexual partners may be unaccounted for: they suggest that Mol deliberately chose girls who were deeply religious. The statement that "we know of one" implies that there are probably many others. The stereotypical girl who "runs around Catholic youth movements" combines the elements of naivety, innocence and vulnerability, and it is notable that this figure also receives much more ridicule than compassion. Her defining features, apart from young age, are her beliefs – the conflicting relationship between her idealism and the intolerance of the Catholic Church, between her sexuality and the Church's condemnation of contraceptives. However, other media offered a radically different explanation:

The question that keeps returning in the heads of the girls infected by Mol is: why didn't they protect themselves? And they have no doubts – they were afraid to demand a condom precisely because Simon was black. Paradoxically, it was their liberal standpoint that made them sheepishly agree to sex. Without protection. They became victims of political correctness. (*Rzeczpospolita*, 9 Jan 2007)

Where the previous fragment tried to generalise on the basis of one woman whose voice was brought indirectly into the argument, this one provides the reader with the insight into the women's private thoughts without even bothering to warrant this knowledge with anything except the authoritative and condemning opinion of the reporter. Again, the women's "sheepish" agreement to unprotected sex becomes a clear indication of their helplessness and vulnerability. It is interesting how, according to the grievance-based mode of moral panics, blame becomes deflected through recourse to race, since it is "precisely" Mol's blackness that lies behind the women's inability to negotiate protection, as if women having sex with white men never face similar problems. Obviously, this is as much an attempt to provide an explanation for the girl's apparently irresponsible behaviour as it is a part of an ideological battle – *Polityka* leans heavily to the left, while *Rzeczpospolita* is one of the most prominent

newspapers from the political right. The most striking element of this battle is that both sides use their explanations of the same event for radically different aims. It is also worth noting how seamlessly it incorporated Polish fears concerning gender and sexuality.

In both quoted fragments, the women are presented as unable to undertake personal responsibility for their actions because of the double bind of the manipulative male and the constraints of their own belief systems. According to this logic, the fault of the women lies in misplacing their trust, not only in Mol, but also in a damaging ideology – depending on the political orientation of the newspaper, this can be either liberalism or the teachings of the Catholic Church. Placing the blame on ideology or helplessness can be seen as an attempt to reduce all the women’s stories into a single narrative which provides the reader with a coherent reason behind their “irresponsible behaviour”. At the core of this narrative lie concepts such as belief, truth and trust, which become threatening when they become displaced.

Belief and trustworthiness became the key concepts in the news reporting on the issue, and the media very often emphasised how skilfully Mol could manipulate both his sexual partners and his work associates. The journalists from *Rzeczpospolita* attempted to verify which elements of his biography were true. The authors wanted to prove that Simon Mol lied about large parts of his autobiography and that he has never been a political prisoner for his journalist work, since: 1) journalists in Cameroon are not being imprisoned for political reasons anymore 2) Simon Mol was never a journalist. Their conclusion is that Mol belonged to the group of *feymen* – Cameroonian confidence men who travel abroad, accumulate great wealth through swindles and return to their home country as local heroes<sup>4</sup>. The passage below comes from the fragment where the authors show how far the local journalism can go without

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the *feyman* phenomenon in Cameroon, see (Malaquais 2010) and (Ndjio 2008)

major legal consequences, showing the proliferation of homosexual “outings” of prominent political figures in the media as an example. Obviously, they find the justification for this phenomenon in “African shamanism”:

The obsessive interest in the homosexuality of politicians, which can be seen in Cameroonian newspapers, became understandable for us only after we have talked to the local anthropologist. Homosexual sex is considered there to be a magical ritual in which an individual performs evil in order to gain and good fortune and wealth. (*Rzeczpospolita*, 6 Mar 2007)

The assumption of the “obsessive” nature of this interest sets the Cameroonians in opposition to the “Western world”, which presumably exhibits a non-obsessive approach to homosexuality in politics. The distancing between the two worlds is further reinforced by the use of words such as “local” and “there”. This can mean that the question of homosexuality amongst politicians in the “West” is set within a certain range of “normalcy” or that it is not interesting at all. This, however, is not specified in the text.

In accordance to the logic of “tropical thinking” about HIV/AIDS (Patton 2002), racial difference is here codefined as sexual difference: it is both a completely different understanding of homosexuality (as a magical ritual) and a presumably heterosexual and obsessive interest in homosexuality. Yet the authors never even bother to mention that this sort of accusations can be a powerful tool in political struggle. As Peter Geschiere (2009) notes, the public debate about homosexuality in Cameroon was virtually nonexistent until the provocation by the local newspaper *L’Anecdote* aimed against the local elites. In a country where homosexuality is a criminal offence (as the authors of the article also point out), this sort of tactic has a significant political effect in a situation when reliability is not an issue, especially since it is nearly impossible to deny the accusation – “coming out” as straight is never a fully accomplished act, there is always a trace of doubt left in the air. The authors do not consider for even a moment that the Cameroonian “obsession with homosexuality” may

be not that much different from a European one - the difference comes from the fact that it is simply easier to publish a sensationalist outing story and get away with it in Cameroon than it is in Poland.

The text's focus on difference rather than similarity is crucial in this story, and it follows directly from the narrative of misplaced trust in the grievance-based model of moral panic, since it makes Mol's actions intelligible as a sign of "otherness". The article claims to reveal the "true story of the fraud from Africa", but Mol's biography is hardly relevant to the case, except as the proof of his exceptional skill of manipulation, which becomes a sign of otherness and threat. People sometimes lie about sex, but concealing one's seropositivity is a lie of extraordinary magnitude and consequence, so it has to be relegated to the tropical space of *feymen*, witch doctors and obsessive sexuality in order to be contained.

*Rzeczpospolita* quickly became one of the prime sources of this tropical rhetoric of otherness. In a infamous interview for the newspaper (20 Sep 2008), one of the victims put forward the theory that Mol was a Muslim terrorist who tried to destroy western civilisation by spreading HIV, although admittedly this view was strongly contested by the interviewer. The experts quoted by the newspaper in another article engaged in speculations which followed a similar logic:

"Please try to understand: we see an educated man who wears a tie and speaks fluent English. We naively assume that he thinks the way we do. As if he were a European, only a black one", says prof. Ryszard Vorbrich from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, one of the most eminent Polish experts on Cameroon. "But in reality this man can talk about Shakespeare in the same categories as we, while his views on life's essential questions are fundamentally different." (*Rzeczpospolita*, 9 Jan 2007)

The same expert, however, sees no contradiction between this opinion and his later claim that Mol's behaviour was "atypical for an African" and "possibly caused by a trauma". The article also offers the alternative explanation: in accordance with the practices of "African

shamanism” Simon Mol might have been trying to cure himself by giving the disease to someone else (notably, this opinion was voiced by an Africanist who wished to remain anonymous). The only explanation that did not conform to the tropical mode of thinking was formulated by Adam Leszczyński, who suggested that Mol might have been in self-denial about his seropositivity up to his death of AIDS (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12 Oct 2008). This was a part of the aforementioned ideological battle between left- and right-wing newspapers which involved not only the ideological reasons behind the women’s infection, but also involved two radically different conceptualisations of race and its role in the case: the calls to “judge the deed, not the skin colour” (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 10 Jan 2007) were put against the pleas to “introduce more restraint in the unequivocal philosophy of dialogue” (*Wprost*, 21 Jan 2007). The conflict escalated into a heated exchange between Leszczyński and Maja Narbutt, involving accusations of racism on one hand and ignorance on the other. Narbutt co-authored the news report from the investigation into Mol’s biography and conducted the interview which put forward the “Muslim terrorist” theory, both of which were heavily criticised by Leszczyński for conflating ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse groups into a single and unified group marked by primitive practices and an oppressive attitude to women (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 10 Dec 2008). Narbutt replied by stating that *Gazeta Wyborcza* and the leftist intellectuals are trying to deflect the blame for “creating the legend of Simon Mol – a moral authority who was engaged in human rights activism” (*Rzeczpospolita*, 12 Oct 2008). This way, the issue of tropical thinking became a site of contestation in a broader political conflict between the opposing political camps centred in the corresponding printed media outlets.

The prominence of tropical thinking about the Simon Mol case contributed to a displacement of the previous paradigm of HIV threat – the socially marginalised IDU – in favour of the new, geographically marginalised figure of the foreign “other”. The general framework in

which this shift took place did not come out of nowhere - the figure of a heterosexual naïve young girl who becomes “manipulated” into HIV by the “wrong guy” is borrowed straight from the “redemptory narrative” discussed in the previous chapter, as the teenage rebellion against society becomes replaced by the “oppositional” ideology of religion or political correctness, social marginality with geographical one, the IDU boyfriend by the manipulative refugee from the “tropics”.

However, it seems that the narrative lost all of its redemptive qualities – this time HIV means social death without the possibility to return through marriage and motherhood. See, for example the following fragment from the aforementioned interview in *Rzeczpospolita*. The first question of the interviewer immediately frames the issue of what constitutes a “life worth living”: “You say that you are afraid. What is there to fear for a person who already faced the worst - an HIV infection?”. Some instances of newspaper reporting also emphasised the outpour of racist and misogynistic comments which started appearing in the internet immediately after Mol’s arrest and targeted both Mol and his sexual partners (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 10 Jan 2007; *Polityka*, 30 Jan 2007; *Duży Format*, 13 Mar 2007;). This redemptive narrative also nearly disappeared from the popular magazines, with one notable exception (*Tina*, 18 June 2008).

Instead, subsequent news reporting focused on seropositive women as potential threats who endangered the male part of the population: this new “threat” appeared for the first time in July 2007 with the case of Emilia G., a 24-year heterosexual woman from Piła, who engaged in unprotected sex with multiple sexual partners despite having been diagnosed with HIV in 2000. April 2008 marked a genuine panic connected with one of Mol’s former sexual partners, Magda L., who engaged in sex work even though she knew about her seropositive

status since 2006. In both cases, promiscuity, rather than lack of protection, was emphasised: the titles of articles related to Emilia G. claimed that she “had sex despite being HIV-positive” (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 17 Jul 2007) or “gave her lovers pleasure and disease” (*Super Express*, 18 Jul 2007). In the case of Magda L. emphasised the scope of the threat either directly or indirectly, by stating the estimated number of sexual partners or by giving information about her monthly earnings from sex work (*Życie Warszawy*, 11 Apr 2008). In an ironic twist, the relationship between the “general population” and the margin became inverted – the earlier focus on an undifferentiated “tropical” hotbed of HIV became transformed into the threat coming from individual and promiscuous “sources” of the disease, while the earlier “narrative of redemption”, which took an individual heterosexual woman as its focus, turned into a story of a multitude of similar, naïve “girls with little notebooks”.

This shift also involves an inversion in the way in which choice is conceptualised as potentially threatening to women. The “narrative of redemption” formulated in it the simple terms of a “false step” through a rebellion against social norms and a relationship with a male IDU from the “social margin”. This offered a possibility of a return to society through adherence to its norms of heterosexuality and motherhood, no matter how dire the consequences of that temporary departure may be. The newer version of this narrative, however, offers no such possibility, most notably because it formulates the threat not in terms of choice, but rather its lack: as an effect of a misleading ideology or a manipulative partner. The issue of choice is important here, since this reformulation of HIV/AIDS bears a strong resemblance to the arguments raised by the groups on both sides of the debate on abortion – an issue which has not been resolved since the fall of communism and which still raise heated debates in the public sphere. It is then not surprising that the arguments on both political sides in the case of Simon Mol used the worn-down vocabulary of the hypocrisy of the Catholic

Church on one hand and the sexual threat of liberalism on the other, since the basic argument about the extent of personal choice and responsibility has an underlying question: what qualifies as life and who is able to decide on the issue. This way, the questions about the biopolitical subject and the limits between political life and bare life in the discourse of HIV/AIDS become reformulated from the possibility of reproduction to the rights to make decisions about reproduction.

## Conclusion

It would be wrong to treat HIV/AIDS as a merely as a problem connected with health: it is as much a political as it is a medical issue. It is political not only because attempts at HIV prevention or AIDS treatment may be thwarted or facilitated by government responses or their lack, it is political not only because the health of the population has become the key issue of biopolitics or because it is used to disseminate normative and disciplinary practices amongst the population. The issue of HIV/AIDS is political because it is one of the ways in which the field of politics is established: it helps to designate both the groups who fall within the jurisdiction of the law, and those who fall outside of its protection.

Moreover, the discourse serves as a springboard for the broader discussion on reproduction. The contemporary debate marks a shift from the “narrative of redemption”, which created the possibility for women to “return to society” through reproduction, to a larger discourse in which personal choice (or its lack) is politicised as potentially damaging and becomes a political tool for various groups of interest.

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