Book Reviews

Inventing AIDS *by Cindy Patton* (Routledge, New York and London, 1990), pp. ix + 176, £35, ISBN 0-415-90256-8 (hbk), 0-415-90257-6 (pbk).

Among the great raft of literature on AIDS which has emerged since the subject was first recognised in 1981, this book stands out as being qualitatively different. For one thing, it is rare to find an author who is explicit about either the biases she brings to her writing or the political purposes of her authorship. Cindy Patton explains in the first few pages that she writes from the perspective of having worked with people affected by HIV and AIDS for a number of years, and that her purpose is to "inform both local and global resistance to the social repression accompanying the HIV epidemic".

It is also clear from the very beginning that this is no ordinary account of the history of the epidemic, nor of some sociological theme or themes arising from it, though both play some part in the narrative. Rather, the author uses the insights she has gained into the social and political processes which have shaped the response made by society to HIV/AIDS to offer the reader an unusual opportunity to address critically some of the assumptions that are commonly made concerning the nature of knowledge. This is knowledge about HIV and AIDS specifically, but also about scientific knowledge in general, and how aspects of the world are construed through the 'truths' it promotes.

The main portion of the book is set out in six chapters. The author sees these as standing in pairs, "independent, but moving between linked systems of knowledge". Chapters 1 and 2, she suggests, are concerned with the different representations of HIV and AIDS which emerge through the media, the medical industry and AIDS service organisations: chapters 3 and 4 look at the way in which scientific knowledge is socially constructed and used to shape policy: and chapters 5 and 6 are concerned with "pedagogy and cultural productions".

Chapter one concerns the multiplicity of non-profit private sector agencies working in the HIV/AIDS field, which grew up during the 1980s. Here, as throughout the book, Patton explores the many possible meaning and discontinuities in concepts which are all too often taken for granted. First she tackles the notion of 'community' and shows the conceptual penury of the term as applied to people affected by HIV/AIDS. For instance, policy makers and service providers alike frequently see gay men, drug users and black people as distinct groups at risk from HIV for different reasons, who require different types of health education and service delivery. Such approaches fail when faced with, for instance, the black gay man and the white heterosexual girl who share a syringe to inject steroids at a health club. What is important, says Patton, is to retain the concept of community as a political formulation in order to exert leverage over civil rights and social resources, while acknowledging the importance of de-linking practices and identities.

The importance and variety of individual identities are further explored in relation to the rise of AIDS service organisations. Although many of these grew from the original self-help groups run by and for people with AIDS, Patton sees them as having become institutionalised and less representative of the needs of the many different kinds of people now affected by HIV/AIDS.

In chapter 2, Patton concentrates on the effect on people's values and attitudes of the different sorts of information that have been available about HIV/AIDS. Some of the detail in this chapter relates very clearly to the American experience of media coverage, testing and health education programmes, which was sometimes different from that in other countries. However, the arguments are universal and show very clearly how myths concerning, for instance, the nature and content of people's sexual activities can be perpetuated even in the face of clear refuting evidence.

Although each chapter in this book is full of interesting and thought-provoking ideas, I found chapter 3, 'What science knows about AIDS: formations of AIDS knowledges', easily the most fascinating. It essentially tells the story of two scientific disciplines, immunology and virology, both of which have been closely involved with HIV and AIDS. Patton shows how looking at the same set of symptoms from two standpoints can produce completely different social constructions of the same illness, leading to quite different ways of dealing with it.

Also interesting in this chapter is her suggestion that HIV/AIDS has precipitated two "unique but related" developments in 20th century medicine research subjects able to talk about their conditions, and the disruption of notions about the conduct of medical experiments. This has come about because, for the first time, information about a new disease has been widely available to both doctors and patients, making the traditional 'doctor knows best' attitude difficult to sustain, and leading to questioning of traditionally accepted methods.

Following this, chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of the ways in which the HIV epidemic in Africa has been represented in Western society. There is much food for thought here, but given that she is clearly arguing that "dramatic media accounts of Africa as a continent devastated by a virus" were misrepresentations, Patton is disappointingly inexplicit about the contradicting evidence and alternative explanations which might have supported her assertions.

Although chapters 5 and 6 are seen as a pair by the author, to my mind these have nothing in common with each other in thematic terms. However, they do share with chapter 4 a more overtly partisan approach than is evident in the first three chapters, with Patton being concerned to emphasise the role of what people perceive as 'knowledge' in promoting social control and discrimination. Chapter 5 is mainly concerned with education, and how knowledge about HIV and AIDS is passed on and reconstructed during that process. Chapter 6 is very short and discusses the different forms of power that can be exerted through societal groups and through the language they use in different contexts.

As a whole, the book is of the most stimulating and thought-provoking books I have read for some time. It is true that Patton's text is very dense, and one feels that it would take many readings to appreciate the full depth of her thesis, but to balance this, Patton also, from time to time, demonstrates an unusual facility for encapsulating the whole of her argument in one memorable and illuminating sentence. For example. she points out that:

> for a poor, urban, single mother, AIDS may feel like more of the same; her experience of AIDS may not be easily rendered in the rhetoric of "living with AIDS" or the often referenced reorganisation of life priorities which comes with the distress of diagnosis in people whose lives held more promise before their diagnosis.

The insight of the author into the realities of the HIV/AIDS issue, demonstrated by such observations, could probably have come only from someone heavily involved in the field to a much greater extent than is usual for people writing academic texts. However, Patton's intimate knowledge of the subject is not only one of this book's major strengthens, but also the source of some weaknesses.

The first arises, probably inevitably, from the author's obvious emotional involvement with the issue. Although she is clearly aware of this, and acknowledges the political purpose behind her writing, I feel that, particularly in the last three chapters, she does not try hard enough to present enough of the arguments and counter arguments to allow individual judgements to be made. By the end of the book, readers could easily be left with the feeling that if they cannot wholly endorse her views, they must needs be wholly against them, thus encouraging the very polarisation of attitudes based on inadequate knowledge that she so deplores.

The other main problem, which relates to the breadth and diversity of material the author had available, is that of achieving coherence. Despite Patton's suggestion that the chapters are paired, they are all very different. I would defy readers of chapters 5 and 6, in particular, to discover the linking theme had they not already been told it existed. Nor is it just the diversity of the chapters; the author tends to leap from topic to topic even within chapters, as a brief perusal of the section headings will demonstrate.

The truth is, as the author quite clearly states in the acknowledgments, that the chapters are largely constructed around separate papers produced at different times and for different audiences. To my mind they are none of the worse for that. Indeed, it is the breadth and eclecticism of this book that is so appealing, and to try retrospectively to find linking themes is confusing, and diverts the reader's attention from the messages within each individual chapter and section.

On the other hand, this book and the concepts about the nature of knowledge within it deserve a wider audience than just those who are closely involved with HIV/AIDS. I wonder whether those less familiar with this specific field would have difficulty in deducing the whole argument from the sum of its parts. It might have helped enormously had there been a more comprehensive introductory chapter, perhaps including some of the historical, sociological and technical background details which were relegated to the notes section, and a concluding chapter which addressed the underlying theme of the nature of knowledge and its social construction at a more general level.

Despite these caveats, I commend this book, particularly perhaps to those who would not normally pick up a book on AIDS. At the very least they will find the perspective a fascinating one, and though they may not learn much about the epidemic, Patton's ideas about science, education and how knowledge is 'invented' by society can be applied to many different domains and deserve wider debate.

Chris Bennett
Warwick Business School