

## Review

Catherine Campbell (2003) *'Letting Them Die': why HIV/AIDS intervention programmes fail*. London, Oxford UK, Bloomington IND, Wetton CP: International African Institute/James Currey/Indiana University Press/Double Storey.

Nicoli Nattrass (2003) *The Moral Economy of AIDS in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Bill Freund

This reviewer recently read for pleasure the great nineteenth century Italian novel, *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni, a long narrative that has elements of Walter Scott, Charles Dickens and other English classics in it. One famous sequence concerns the impact of the plague on seventeenth century Milan: harrowing, not lacking in sentimental elements but also ironic and showing a considerable interest in the history of medicine. The reader can discover fear, panic and shame on the part of the ill and dying, selfish and greedy behaviour as well as saintly self-sacrifice on the part of a few, a lot of faith in false theories and false remedies and a great deal of denialism. The policy of the Spanish imperial state in Milan – including the views of the famous general who thought his military campaign was what mattered and who rejected any distractions on such minor matters as mass death through disease – interested Manzoni a great deal. This was a classic epidemic – tens of thousands died – until the arrival of the autumn rains and change in the weather finally brought an end to a terrible episode. A South African reader could not but be struck at how little we have advanced

compared to the seventeenth century in how we are dealing with AIDS. It casts a very dark shadow over the increasingly tiresome celebrations of 'ten years of democracy' that seem to play endlessly around us. The two books under review are some of the first to appear on AIDS specifically with regard to South Africa and yet there seems to be an unwillingness to understand their importance. They should be, but are not, hot items on newstands in Soweto, Umlazi, Khayelitsha and elsewhere as well as on the bookshelves of anyone concerned with social policy. The editors of *Transformation* hope that perhaps our recent special edition on education and AIDS is a very tardy but helpful addition to this growing literature. Perhaps this review can also remedy the matter a little bit. Both books bear the hallmarks of research reports and, it must be admitted, are far from bedtime reading beyond any squeamishness with which one might approach the subject. Yet both are important interventions that should cast a heavy stone in the waters of debate and discussion about disease but also broader issues concerning contemporary South Africa.

Campbell is a social psychologist. In 1995 she became involved in what she calls the Summertown HIV-Prevention Project. Summertown is a pseudonym for a mining town west of Johannesburg and 1995 was a time when it seemed logical to focus this kind of project on miners and prostitutes (no doubt the project was conceived some time earlier yet). There was also a town youth component as well although this seems to have been rather tacked on. Mostly when we hear about well-meaning development projects in the media what we get are the dots and bullets approach, a bland and tiresome list of the many, often inconsistent or unlikely goals that they are intended to address. By contrast Campbell surveys a project that was almost a total failure despite, no doubt, considerable funding. This is one reason why it is so important and also less fashionable to write about.

There are two important aspects to her study. First, she tries to explore the fundamental issue as to why 'knowledge' has been so unsuccessful in leading to prevention. She explores to some extent the vulnerability and irregularity of the lives of the prostitutes in explaining why they find it hard to insist on safe sex while also taking up the punctured and injured masculinity of the miners to explain their lack of interest in changing sexual behaviour. These are people who do not want to believe that AIDS is incurable any more than the other harsh factors that dominate their lives. She is less successful in taking up the problem of township youths in this regard, but opens the door to further enquiry. AIDS starkly poses for us the

reality that, for most African people, while many aspects of biomedicine have been adopted and accepted when they represent a quick fix, the broader understanding of science and scientific knowledge is very poorly grasped. It also poses the limits of biomedicine, not so much as all too many 'Africanist' [I am tempted to say pseudo-Leftist] historians and anthropologists go on about these days in the technical sense, but in the alienated and alienating way in which it is delivered.

Secondly, Campbell yields up a revealing and rather painfully detailed picture on what so often goes wrong with development projects more generally. The central concepts of the project were partnership and participation and she exposes how problematic they can be. She shows up how falsely the community representation issue can often be played and how poorly the stakeholder concept can work. In her pages we see an American aid worker bringing her tourist mother to visit the prostitutes as she might any other colourful local exhibit, the sometimes cynical hand of business, the grasping imprint of many an ambitious 'aid worker' from the 'community' (who saw the project only as a source of income), and a sometimes uncooperative and certainly suspicious public. In this sense, her book is in fact an important contribution to understanding what really goes on in development work as opposed to the feel-good pap with which television and the newspapers mostly like to feed us.

A reader of *'Letting Them Die'* must feel that Campbell has captured a moment in time from which we have moved on in the nature of things. HIV status has spread so widely in the general young adult pool that it no longer makes a lot of sense to think of prevention in terms of miners and prostitutes. On the other hand, the availability of medicine that seems to enable most HIV positive individuals to lead normal lives for many years, and perhaps indefinitely, also represents a major shift. However, with regard to her main concerns, the issues she takes up have hardly lost their power.

As we turn from Campbell to Nattrass, we leave the world of social psychology for the one of economics. Nattrass includes many pages of calculations on the costing of various sorts of treatment for AIDS in a book that seems directed more to policy makers than the general public. She makes the case that there are major hidden costs in letting the disease run its course but in the end concludes that it is finally a question of what kind of society we think we are constructing morally that is in question. It is true that the impact of AIDS may be limited in what Thabo Mbeki has called the 'first economy' where many people can pay for their own chronic health

requirements and where business can lay out funds for those it considers essential workers. But what does it mean to allow the devastation of the majority living in the 'second economy' whose struggle for survival and chances of improvement are going to be all the more rampant? 'South Africa is infamous for its obfuscation and prevarication on AIDS policy' (2003: 41) – I agree: that, as well as the broader issues raised, is why debate on these issues must be foregrounded.

This raises basic questions about South African society and its progress. Clearly South Africa cannot now afford to become a thoroughgoing welfare state but providing some kind of rational and reliable social welfare system is another story. A decade ago, Nattrass was all too vocally concerned with the horrors of 'macro-economic spending' and what the 'new democracy' could not afford. It is very salutary indeed to see her reconsider these issues so thoughtfully.