Policymaking, Dissidents and Denialists

HIV/AIDS ‘dissidents’ have been compared with Holocaust deniers, to the point where there have been calls for them to be prosecuted in the manner of David Irving, the British historian jailed in Austria in 2006 for maintaining, amongst other problematic points, that there were no gas chambers at Auschwitz (Smyth 2006). The terms AIDS ‘dissident’ or ‘sceptic’ cover a broad spectrum of opinion. Dissidents are by no means unified. Different individuals and groups have made various claims about the nature of HIV, the link between HIV and AIDS, and the efficacy of antiretroviral treatments. Some have questioned whether AIDS as a disease exists at all. The majority of dissidents base their theories on what are perceived to be ‘holes’ in the science underpinning HIV/AIDS ‘orthodoxy’. For analysts and policymakers, the question at the heart of the debate is one of censorship. Should dissidents, in the interests of freedom of speech and scientific inquiry, be permitted a platform for their views? After all, in the best traditions of liberalism, and in the spirit of John Stuart Mill (1998), any theory, if ‘true’, should be able to withstand scrutiny.

The dissident debate may test the boundaries of democratic ‘freedoms’, but any exercising of this particular ‘freedom’ would, arguably, have been confined to the margins of the internet and sections of the popular press had it not been for the public statements of Thabo Mbeki – particularly those made between 1999 and 2008, while he was President of South Africa. When Mbeki, leader of a country with one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the world, announced his ‘scepticism’ concerning the causal link between HIV and AIDS in 1999, the world reacted with incredulity. Mbeki pointed to the inequity of Northern pharmaceutical monopolies and the socio-political construction of an unchallengeable scientific consensus that bore little reality to the
African experience. The backlash was immediate and vociferous. Indeed, if Mbeki is known for anything outside the confines of African politics, it is as the statesman who queried the existence of HIV/AIDS. Although he publicly recanted many of his more extreme views on the matter, his name has been forever smeared, particularly in the developed world. At the same time, Mbeki was not the only African leader to express doubts over the validity of established ‘AIDS orthodoxy’. Namibian President Sam Nujoma and Kenyan Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai entered the debate, both expressing concerns that the disease was laboratory-concocted by agents of Western governments.

From a policymaking perspective, it is critical to take into account the impact of the dissident stance in shaping political and social responses to HIV/AIDS. This chapter considers two specific issues relating to the dissident debate: it outlines the development and evolution of the sceptics’ case against the so-called HIV/AIDS orthodoxy and evaluates their claims that they have been unfairly marginalized by the scientific community. It then assesses the dissenter perspective in terms of its potential for harm, and considers whether this necessitates a curtailment of the dissenters’ right to disseminate their views.

**Questioning scientific ‘dogma’**

Are the perspectives of AIDS sceptics dangerous? As with climate sceptics, AIDS sceptics reignited public debate on the nature of scientific enquiry. If there is to be any faith in their validity, scientific theories must be able to withstand scrutiny. Shielding established views from debate is an anathema for most researchers, given the importance of fresh perspectives in advancing knowledge. Harvard academic Jerome Kagan (2009) has outlined the importance of ‘opposition’ to orthodoxy:

> Every democracy requires an opposition party to prevent one temporarily in power from becoming despotic. And every society needs a cohort of intellectuals to check the dominance of a single perspective when its ideological hand becomes too heavy. The first cohort of natural scientists, especially Kepler, Galileo, Bacon, and Newton, assumed this responsibility when Christian philosophy dominated European thought and their work catalyzed the Enlightenment.

Copernicus and Galileo are famous precisely because their work represented such profound threats to existing orthodoxies. In turn, Einstein