

Dialectical theory and the HIV/AIDS epidemic

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 - P30 DA11041 (Center for Drug Use and HIV Research)
 - R01 DA13336 (Community Vulnerability and Response to IDU-Related HIV)
 - R01 DA13128 (Networks, norms & HIV risk among youth)
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- **NIMH project**
 - R01 MH62280 (Local context, social-control action, and HIV risk)
- **Fogarty International Training and Research project**
 - D43 TW001037-06 (Mount Sinai New York State Argentina HIV Prevention)
- **Hundreds of participants in these studies**
- **Many collaborators and co-authors**

Statement of theme

- **Epidemics are clearly historical phenomena in that:**
 - They shape human history.
 - They are shaped by the era in which they emerge as well as by human responses to them.
- **We posit that epidemics are not merely historical but also dialectical, and exemplify this with the HIV/AIDS epidemic.**

In the years since HIV began to spread in New York in 1975 (and perhaps other countries before then), the dialectical processes of human history have clearly shaped it

Struggles against the virus by those at risk

- **These have involved both microsocial and larger-scale responses.**
- **On the microsocial level, drug users in New York may have been the first to recognize the existence of the new plague, and their responses to it seem to have slowed its spread well before medicine recognized its existence.**

History of New York City HIV epidemic among IDUs

IDUs know
of new illness

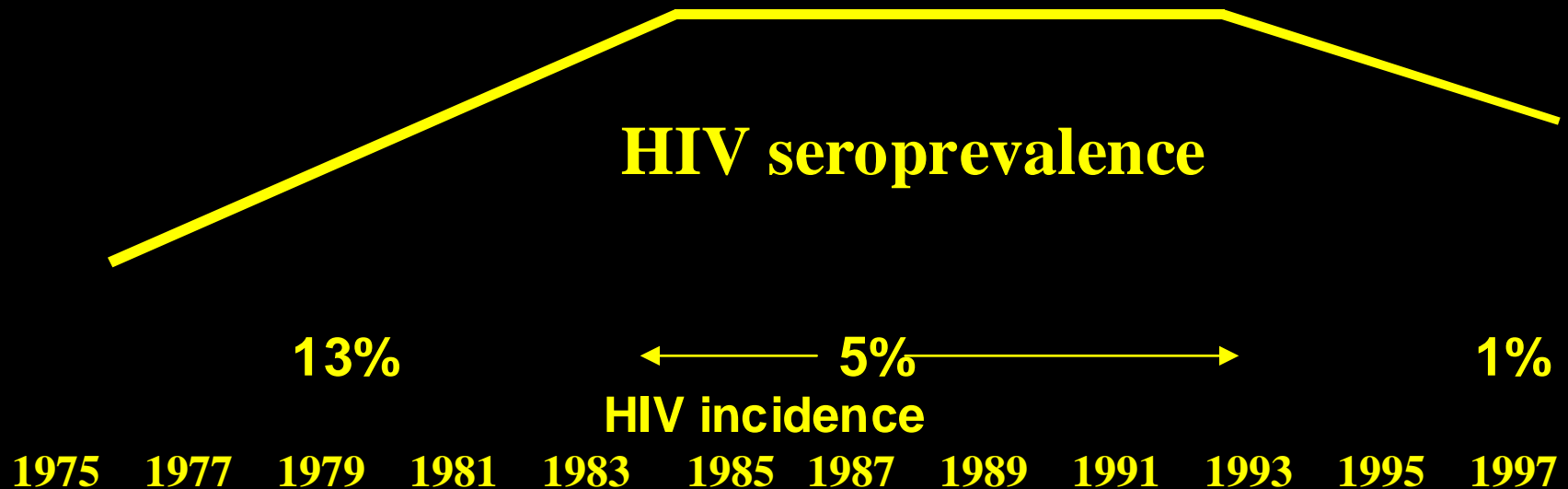
IDUs reduce
sharing

Medicine
discovers
AIDS

First
publicly-funded
“outreach”

First large
official syringe
exchange

Treatment programs
begin HIV prevention



Intravention and other-directed social protective action

- **We have shown in our studies of the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, which has had a long history of drugs and HIV, that more than half of the residents report that in the last three months they have urged others to take actions to protect themselves against sexual risks, drug risks, and/or HIV risks. These data are supported by ethnographic follow-up and by ethnographic observation.**
- **We have no reason to believe that Bushwick differs in this from similar localities elsewhere.**
- **Ordinary people are key public health actors. Dialectical processes of mobilization and de-mobilization, and of creativity vs. acceptance of “common sense,” affect what they do.**

Collective self-organization

- Well-known organized responses by gays and lesbians created another element to this dialectic.
- As have organized responses by sex workers (notably in Calcutta with the Sonagachai Project, which originally started in the context of occupational safety and health)
- And also users' groups in many countries, including the USA (though often semi-underground)

Macrosocial dialectics have also shaped the epidemic

- **Existing structures of exploitation and oppression have conditioned the spread of the virus:**
 - **In the USA, concentrating it among Blacks;**
 - **Globally, concentrating it in Africa, the poorest and most marginalized continent**
- **Human sociopolitical struggles have opened pathways for further spread through urban redevelopment processes and some (but not all) transitions.**

Urban redevelopment processes can spread HIV or the network and behavioral conditions for HIV transmission

- “Desertification,” urban renewal and gentrification—all of which are part of a larger global socioeconomic dialectic—can disrupt pre-existing social and risk networks, weaken protective social norms and social networks.
- This can lead to HIV outbreaks such as those in the Bronx and Brooklyn in the late 1970s and early 1980s.
- Wallace D, Wallace R. 1998. *A Plague on Your Houses*. New York: Verso.
- Social Networks, Drug Injectors’ Lives, and HIV/AIDS. Friedman SR, Curtis R, Neaigus A, Jose B, Des Jarlais DC. 1999. New York: Kluwer/Plenum.

Political and economic transitions

- **Regime changes in South Africa, Russia, Indonesia and elsewhere—themselves products of the global economic, political and cultural dialectic—have led to major HIV outbreaks**
 - **Neoliberal context; acceptance of globalized market dominance as official policy**
 - **In neoliberal world, transitions usually lead to long periods of unstable employment, increased incarceration, social demoralization, and cutbacks in health and social services**
 - **Can disrupt medical and other services**
 - **Can lead to massive increases in sex work, in injection drug use, and in youth sexual concurrency**

But ...

- **Why no HIV outbreak (yet?) in the Philippines, which went through transition in late 1980s?**
- **Argentina?**
 - **Argentina is not yet showing a major HIV outbreak after transition.**
 - **However, reports of increasing female and male commercial sex work in Buenos Aires and of a widespread increase in teenage violence may be symptoms of increased alienation that might lead to very widespread drug use and sexual risk taking transmission of HIV.**

Integration into Imperial Politics

- **Since large-scale HIV epidemics can threaten the military power of client states, and perhaps their economic viability, the USA and other imperial powers view HIV as a “security issue.” Thus, the politics of response to HIV have become part of Big Power politics and charitable endeavors.**
- **In some countries, HIV politics have become important domestic issues that affect electoral or other dynamics.**
- **An example is the dialectics of scapegoating and the maintenance of political economic power relations.**

Dialectics of scapegoating (1)

- **Public health researchers and practitioners often are puzzled at the failure of policy makers to adapt programs (like syringe exchange or condoms) that have been shown to prevent disease transmission.**
- **From the perspective we have laid out, such decisions can be understood as part of a wider social-political dialectic that has to do with the potential conflicts and risks of globalization.**
- **Policy makers and corporate leaders fear rebellion; they have seen many transitions in recent years.**
- **Throughout history, divide and rule – and thus scapegoating and stigmatization – have helped prevent successful rebellions.**

Dialectics of scapegoating (2)

- Scapegoating often targets women, racial/ethnic “minorities,” “enemy” nations, sexual minorities, criminals, and/or drug users.
- Keeping drug users, gays, sex workers, minorities, or even Africa from suffering the ravages of AIDS seems to be secondary in importance (in elite priorities) to preventing rebellion and maintaining the economic health of the system.
- Indeed, AIDS deaths may even strengthen the ideological barriers to rebellion.
- Thus, “elite non-compliance” with science may not be error or ignorance but rather enlightened self interest (which may, in turn, shape power holders’ perceptions).

Dialectics of nature

- So far, we have been considering the “social dialectics of HIV.”
- HIV also poses an example where a “dialectics of nature” may be useful.
- This is a controversial assertion.
- Our thoughts on this are by no means fixed. Here, we *explore* some ways in which a dialectics of nature approach might be useful.

Social and natural dialectics

- **The role of consciousness, intentionality and organization means that issues of subject/object are clearly different in social dialectics. (Lukacs—*Class and Class Consciousness*)**
- **Levins and Lewontin (*The Dialectical Biologist*) present dialectical models of natural ecologies and evolution.**
- **Ewald (*The Evolution of Infectious Disease*) shows models of interaction between infectious agents and human society that can be studied as dialectical processes.**

What might a dialectics of nature approach to HIV include? (1)

- **Does the rapid mutation of HIV mean that its response to human defenses against it mimic those of a strategic intelligence?**
 - **Antiretroviral therapies are met by mutating sufficiently rapidly to develop resistant strains. This has led to a situation where medicine and the virus are in a continual race to develop new therapies before the virus outstrips them.**
 - **When sexual transmission failed to bring about epidemic conditions in China, Central Asia, Russia, and parts of Eastern Europe, HIV “took advantage” of the spread of injection drug use in these areas to enter them in force.**

(dialectics of nature approach 2)

- **On another level, the self-other dynamics of immune systems also resembles dialectical processes, and this may in itself be part of the dialectic of viral mutation.**

Final thoughts (1)

- **Dialectical approaches help us think about epidemics in terms of the totality of human history and struggles.**
- **They thus help us avoid thinking too narrowly.**
- **Dialectics, of course, is not a crutch. Although it can guide us to hypotheses and perspectives, the hard empirical and theoretical work is still needed.**
- **Epidemics, like evolution, may be a “make or break” issue for a dialectics of nature approach.**

Final thoughts (2)

- **The dialectical analysis of the HIV epidemic highlights the need to have a grounded political understanding of the policies implemented in responding the epidemic.**
- **It also shows the crucial importance of the initiative, activities, thoughts, and power of the oppressed, exploited and vulnerable in helping humanity deal with disease.**
- **These thoughts may help us to change the world for the better, not only to understand it.**