

## BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth Pisani

### **The Wisdom of Whores: Bureaucrats, Brothels, and the Business of AIDS**

London: Granta, 2008

*Every great cause begins as a movement, becomes a business, and eventually degenerates into a racket.*  
– Social critic Eric Hoffer, as quoted in *The New Yorker*

In her new book *The wisdom of whores*, Elizabeth Pisani, who holds a PhD in infectious disease epidemiology, argues that Eric Hoffer's words are nowhere more applicable than in the fight against AIDS. She takes as her starting point the creation of UNAIDS (the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS) and her own role in the "racket", recounting what I can only wish were a tall tale of "manhandled estimated infections", "manipulated maps" and efforts to drum up ever more cash. As Pisani writes, "HIV statistics often didn't support the conventional wisdoms of the AIDS world". She claims that, contrary to what most people think, what she calls "the AIDS industry" has operated with too much ideology and too much money – and that this overabundance has impeded its ability to act.

A self-described Catholic girl, Elizabeth Pisani entered the AIDS business by accident. She joined UNAIDS at its inception in 1996 as a journalist seeking a career in sex and drugs. Paradoxically, she landed the job because she could write, not because of what she had laboured so hard to learn at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Her experience reminded me of my own start in the UN, when I was hired by the reproductive health team at WHO for comparable reasons. In *The wisdom of whores*, we watch Pisani morph from writer to expert as she takes us on an odyssey through not only the UN system, with all its dirt and intrigues, but also some of the colourful places where HIV is transmitted: the brothels, the gay bars and the shooting galleries. One of the running subtexts of the book is that the refusal of most UN member states to confront these HIV breeding grounds on their own terms contributes directly to the infection's persistent spread.

But Pisani's own wisdom does not reside just in the bracing candour of her anecdotes. She also provides a useful corrective to "the conventional wisdoms of the AIDS world", reminding us for instance that in southern Africa, "getting married is one of the riskiest things an uninfected young man can do". The risk is due to the high numbers of infected young women, not all of who are sex workers or the poorest of the poor, as some would claim. Pisani further seeks to discredit the "innocent wife" theory by noting that "millions of African women have been infected with HIV while (voluntarily) having sex with men who are not their husbands". Yet when I solicited opinions of the book from friends and colleagues, these very points were among the many "offences" they enumerated. They argued that a woman's vulnerability, as

evidenced by the widespread "sugar daddy" phenomenon, in which a young woman has sexual relations with a substantially older man for financial considerations, should be the primary focus of prevention efforts.

Others I asked pointed out, and quite rightly, that countless people around the world have worked selflessly, voluntarily and often at their own peril to prevent and treat HIV, and to care for and support those living with the infection. These respondents took offence because they felt the book slights these efforts and, as Pisani herself must well know, these 325 pages of text will be reduced in the end to a few sound bites, to the effect that AIDS is big business, and that staff efforts are aimed in large part at keeping themselves comfortably employed.

Yet such simplifications miss the book's humanity and very real accomplishment. Those who take the trouble to read the book cannot deny that Pisani makes some cogent arguments that are directly applicable to many of us in "the biz" – or that, despite her pointed dissection of the industry's motives, she can be witty and passionate too. After all, she is herself an AIDS activist who makes her living from the epidemic. Consider for instance the story she tells from when she was promoting peer education in Indonesia:

As he saw me, he went rigid. A syringe clattered across the floor and a little bead of blood appeared on his arm, where the needle had dropped out. I spend my life telling policy-makers that HIV prevention programmes do not encourage risky behaviour, and now our own staff are shooting up in the office.... I was speechless with rage at his stupidity.

Is Pisani saying that peer education does not work? Far from it; she is just expressing anger at colleagues who imperil HIV efforts by their failure to live up to the standards the agency promotes for others. She introduces a greatly needed *human* perspective to the work of the great army of people engaged in fighting HIV – on the one hand a greater allowance for human weakness – e.g. risk-taking African women and vulnerable African men – and on the other less tolerance for hypocrisy and insensitivity among her colleagues. Such an infusion of human feeling and thoughtful observation can only, in the end, promulgate the goal of universal access to HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010 – as set out by the United Nations, with all its blind spots and failings.

Jeffrey V. Lazarus, PhD  
Communicable Diseases Unit  
WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, Denmark