

"AIDS concerns us all!" Rita Süßmuth's Self-Help Book "AIDS. Ways out of Fear" (1987)

by Magdalena Beljan

Amid the "AIDS crisis" (1987) CDU politician Rita Süßmuth, at the time federal minister of Youth, Family and Health in the FRG, published a book with the title "AIDS. Ways Out of Fear." The cover gave notice of a "consulting information address." As said by Süßmuth herself in the forward, she wanted to make her policies clear to her citizens:

This book shall contribute to the reduction of uncertainty and fear by relaying available knowledge of experts. Different points of view should not be concealed from the public. They should be put in a position to understand these differences and make their own judgments. Fear is difficult to dispel, especially if the individual fears he or she may be deprived of information or even, as the case may be, that only filtered knowledge will be passed on.[1]

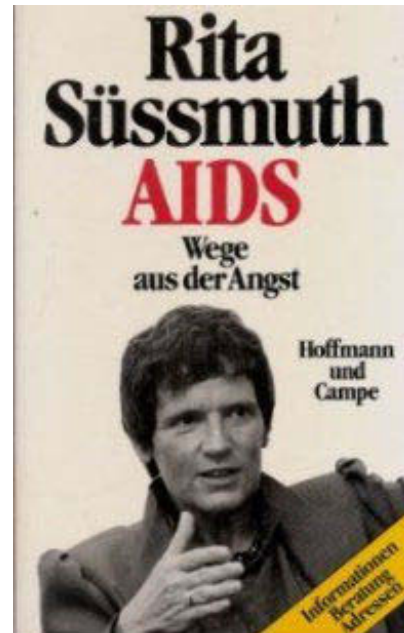
Here the medium of the book is assumed to have the potential to have a direct influence over the emotional being of the reader: it is assumed that knowledge accumulation can be conducive to regulating emotions. Unquestionably it is also assumed that for potential readers, in the context of Aids one emotion in particular would be dominant: "fear". Thus Süßmuth refers back to a central element of the Aids discourse of the 1980s: time and again the media as well as surveys and analysis would bring the "fear" of this previously unknown disease to the forefront. Also, large-scale demographic studies were and are to this day regularly asking what percent of those asked have "fear of Aids". However, what this fear actually constitutes is for the most part vague. As well, how this fear was defined, who felt it and by whom it was articulated changed (as did the disease) over the years.

The assumption of a common fear of Aids seems initially plausible, when one considers that in the beginning of the 1980s, those who were affected often died shortly after the first signs of the disease and so must have seen an "Aids diagnosis" as a death sentence. Yet Süßmuth's self-help book is not only addressing the ill and infected. Rather for her it was of generating public concern. As a CDU politician, who was also appointed in 2006 as the honorary chairman of the German AIDS Foundation, she was often praised in the past for her liberal and forward-thinking Aids policies. At the same time, her objective style is underscored by strong emotionalized policies. However, take a close look at her book from 1987 and one wonders at this assessment. Here exemplary strategies of the emotionalization of politics and the politicization of emotions are highlighted, which are much more than "factual". Süßmuth's book seized upon the fear discourse of the 1980s, to position her policies of public concern in opposition to the fear discourse.

The first Aids diagnosis of a patient in Germany was in July 1982 in Frankfurt am Main. Just two months earlier, the *Spiegel* reported on a mysterious disease, which was spreading quickly in the US. Particularly homosexual men were affected by the disease, which led relatively quickly to death. In Germany as well, homosexual men were at first primarily affected, and after them hemophiliacs and intravenous drug users. The HI-virus was identified as the cause of the various symptoms a few years after its first appearance - *Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome* is not one disease, but an immune deficiency that provokes a greater susceptibility to a variety of other diseases. From today's perspective, reports in the press as well as past assessments from virologist and other experts seem highly dramatized. As was already criticized at the time, the media's representation of the virus would stir up fear of the illness as well as fear of the minorities who were associated with the virus. Though it may be easy to judge retrospectively, it must be taken into account that the case with Aids dealt with a hitherto unknown disease, for which there was no treatment, and where experts were also unsure as to how many could be infected. Only one thing was clear: within a short period of time, many people died. And the numbers only went up.

Süßmuth described having fear as a natural and useful reaction. In her book, she firstly assumes that all people are afraid of Aids and that this is also understandable, for the absence of fear leads to thoughtless behavior. Therefore

[F]ear [has] a good and harmful side: it protects people from risks, thoughtless and imprudent behavior and strengthens the need to protect oneself from danger. But fear can also be overwhelming and domineering and because of this, it is in most cases an extremely problematic and surely a poor adviser. The more people are guided in their thoughts and actions of the conviction that it is within their power to avoid as much risk as possible, the stronger the reaction to the newly existing dangers, to diseases not researched and thereby undefeated. Fear spreads with the realization that we are humans who, regardless of our advances



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in knowledge, are at the same time ignorant and limited in our ability to avoid life-threatening hazards. This ability is reflected in the fear of the sinister nature and the exceptional power of this disease. Of this comes new conditional behavior, restrictions in our private life, and sacrifice of our individual freedoms.[2]

For Süssmuth it was not about a fight or a negation of fear, but rather a certain regulation of emotions.

This is effective to constructively use both concrete and diffusive feelings of fear to transform human strengths. The objective cannot be the taboo or denial of fear. The aim should instead be to have a productive relationship with fear; this will always happen successfully, if shown a way out of fear. [3]

One has to overcome "fear". Thus she advocates "love instead of fear" and chose this motto as the heading of her introduction. Secondly Süssmuth claimed, without clear evidence, that statistically, those most concerned with fear also had the highest risk of infection. Thus, she continually refers back to the model popular in the early 1980s of particular risk groups, which are charged with being at particularly high risk for infection. Süssmuth herself continually emphasized wanting the goal to be exactly the opposite: namely, not to classify a *group* but rather *practices* according to the degree of risk. The change in attitude that it is not specific minorities, but rather specific practices which are dangerous, became important in the mid-1980s and was central for prevention work.[4]

However, statistically speaking Aids did not and does not affect everyone equally. Nonetheless, it was Süssmuth's concern to convey exactly the opposite. Likewise with her assumption that everyone has a fear of Aids (differing in groups and in different manners), she operated with the universal position "AIDS concerns us all!" This continually repeated statement, this universalism of risk and emphasis on a problem for the whole of society, remained the ultimate message of her book. In this sense it can be said that the central goal of Süssmuth's book, and even more so of her policies, was to provoke *public concern*, namely in two ways: on the one hand, the reader is led to feel concern as well as empathy for those infected and on the other hand, to point out and claim that every individual is affected by Aids, regardless of their background, sexual preference, gender or age. Aids is a communal problem, whereby each individual is held responsible to protect themselves. To that effect, the first line in the introduction already claimed "AIDS is an oppressive disease and it concerns us all!"[5]

Admittedly, Süssmuth differentiated among the different risks of infection that apply to different groups, but above all different practices. Nonetheless, she did not become tired of emphasizing that Aids is not a problem of individual people or groups, but is something that it affects the whole of society. However, the consequence that she drew from this is not that the state has the task to protect every individual citizen from infection, but rather that the state can and must call for *personal responsibility*. Aids is an individual risk. As such, she advocated the concept of individual responsibility for actions as proclaimed by her CDU colleague Ulf Fink. Fink was, as the Berlin senator for Health and Social Policy (1981-1989), regarded with his "Berliner Way" a pioneer in preventative policies, which ultimately would become the model of Aids policy at the federal level. This policy placed "trust in the potential of individual help of the affected, in the self-protection of the population and voluntary exercise of provided measures."[6]

However, there remains a fatal element: within this concept it is assumed, that one "catches" Aids his or herself (note Süssmuth's eighth chapter title: "One catches Aids") and within Süssmuth's continual appeal to individual responsibility of the citizenry, it is suggested, that most of those who were directly infected were themselves guilty.

Babies and hemophiliacs could not protect themselves from infection. But in most cases, Aids is largely avoidable. With no other disease is the behavior of the individual so crucial: one does not receive AIDS, it is chosen. AIDS is not yet curable, but it is avoidable. Sexual activity is crucial, but the problem is not limited to just that.[7]

With this, a guilt-motif is indirectly introduced that, with the shift away from the model of certain at-risk groups, had long since been overcome: those who were infected did not sufficiently protect themselves. At the moment it is not about retrospectively judging each policy in return, but rather highlighting their effects. And here is the point where the history of Aids manifests its critical potential within the perspective of the history of emotions: Contrary to widespread assessment, Aids policy of the late 1980s is anything but "objective policy", which represents a refusal of any emotionalization of politics.

Süssmuth suggests with her concept that protection is possible and is entirely dependent on the behavior of the individual. Thus she, for example, ignores the fact that some people could have become infected before ever becoming aware of Aids and HIV, i.e. before definite knowledge about its path of infection and preventative measures were entirely established and prevalent. Likewise, it remained overlooked that even with her representative model of individual risk there still remained an incalculable residual risk. Thus she also argued against her otherwise representative stance, namely that the origins of absolute certainty are an illusion.

The emotionalization of policy is also shown on another level: particularly homosexuals were insinuated as being closely tied to Aids and HIV in the 1980s and as such as being promiscuous. Süssmuth also described promiscuity, namely sexual intercourse with a variety of different partners, as a huge danger. However, she emphasized that this related to *everyone*, "who is having unprotected sexual intercourse with

varying partners, who is living a promiscuous life." [8] However, instead of differentiating consistently between promiscuity and unprotected sex, Süssmuth equates the two in her self-help book. Thus she suggested that promiscuous behavior is fundamentally guilty of infection and the spread of Aids. At the same time, she emphasized elsewhere that protection with condoms, *Safe Sex*, is absolutely possible. It is the "Sexual Revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s, according to Süssmuth, regardless of its positive effects, which led to an "apparent liberality" and to a "loss of emotional intensity." Thus she sized up to a cultural criticism of the consequences of the "Sexual Revolution": Aids is an opportunity or a "chance, to rethink relations between two people and to rethink mutual responsibility and love." [9]

The claim that a new emotionalization of relationships is necessary in the era of Aids was seized upon by a variety of contemporaries. Not only Süssmuth emphasized a partnership of trust in terms of prevention, but also ultraconservative CSU politician Norbert Geis claimed that in regards to Aids, children ought to be raised with a renewed sense of fidelity. [10] Likewise, Peter Gauweiler in 1987 also assumed that Aids represented a consequence of the "Sexual Revolution." [11] Gauweiler also emphasized that Süssmuth was downplaying the danger of Aids, as *Safe Sex* was anything but safe: "The infected should have been told that even a relationship with condoms still puts their partner at the risk of death." [12] With these drastic words, it is becoming clear how the policy Süssmuth advocated collided with coercive measures ordered by the state, which was mostly put forward in Bavaria and supported by Peter Gauweiler. Two years after Süssmuth's book, Gauweiler published his 'counter-book': "What to do against AIDS? Ways Out of Danger" (1989). The subtitle blatantly represented a direct adaptation of Süssmuth's subtitle "A Ways Out of Fear". In the foreword, *Spiegel* journalist Hans Halter and the TV-journalist Dagobert Lindlau claimed:

Under the current laws to combat sexually transmitted diseases, prostitutes are continually forced to undergo screening - if necessary, with police force. Regarding Aids, the first group at risk were male homosexuals. Have necessary measures, which women must bear, been overridden because it concerns men? This poses very serious questions of constitutional equality. [13]

In a seemingly objective ton, restrictive measures were called for under a cloak of political non-discrimination and described as a rational course of action. Reactions to Süssmuth's book varied widely [14] - within the party as well. Ulf Fink had some praise: "She found her line." [15] In contrast, Peter Gauweiler criticized, that one has "more fear after reading than before," [16] as Süssmuth's book bases itself on false assessments and on low estimates of the number of infected and of Aids' controllability. Gauweiler also criticized, as did, interestingly, other self-help groups, the federal government for informing the public very late about Aids and for implementing required blood tests for blood banks too late. Gauweiler defended himself against the assertion that compulsory reports (i.e. reporting blood tests) would be counterproductive by referring to common practices in other countries. [17] In fact on the federal level, Aids was barely a topic of discussion until the second-half of the 1980s. The Federal Ministry for Youth, Family and Health, led by Heiner Geissler, at the end of 1985 was still assuming that Aids should not be considered a massive threat. However, in 1987 Aids transformed into a campaign issue. [18] Süssmuth's policies (and in place of this also her book, published in 1987) thus represented a huge reversal. She emphasized the relevance of Aids, simultaneously to promote certain policy, which assumed that fear and repression are counterproductive for preventative work. According to Süssmuth, fear by itself does not drive people to change in behavior. [19]

Thus her book can be described as an attempt to formulate feeling through the medium of its advice and popular intervention of "expert knowledge" and thereby change and regulate them. It is supported by the assertion that by means of knowledge transfer, judgment processes and emotions can be changed. In this sense, it is not a de-politicization of emotions, but rather the opposite: a strengthening of politicized emotions. Likewise, it is related to the emotionalization of politics and most importantly, prevention work. A goal of this preventive work is "it has to cause public concern, linking emotionality and objectivity". Through this, "deconstruction of irrational fears and overreactions in the population" is possible. Another goal is the "creation of the feeling, that AIDS concerns everyone." [20] This declaration is above all interesting and essential because it states as performative speech act what it "only" intends to rename. She created public concern and the feeling, that Aids concerns everyone. However, it seems this feeling is fading, in both politics and the public consciousness.

Further Literature

- Peter-Paul Bänziger, "Konstellationen und Koalitionen im Sprechen über Aids in den 1980er Jahren," in *Diskursiver Wandel*, Achim Landwehr, ed. (Göttingen: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010), 31-51.
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- [1] Rita Süßmuth, *AIDS. Wege aus der Angst* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1987), 7.
- [2] Süßmuth, *AIDS*, 11f.
- [3] Ibid. 72.
- [4] See also Peter-Paul Bänziger, "Konstellationen und Koalitionen im Sprechen über Aids in den 1980er Jahren," in *Diskursiver Wandel*, Achim Landwehr, ed. (Göttingen: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010), 31-51.
- [5] Süßmuth, *AIDS*, 9.
- [6] Raimund Geene, "Aids-Politik. Ein neues Krankheitsbild zwischen Medizin, Politik und Gesundheitsförderung", <http://www.aids-politik.de> (access 11 January 2010), 121.
- [7] Süßmuth, *AIDS*, 10.
- [8] Ibid. 12.
- [9] Ibid. 19.
- [10] See "Küssen und Kondome," *Der Spiegel* 4 (1988), 97-99.
- [11] Peter Gauweiler, *Was tun gegen AIDS? Wege aus der Gefahr* (Percha: R.S. Schulz, 1989), 24.
- [12] Gauweiler, *Was tun gegen AIDS?*, 29.
- [13] Ibid. 11.
- [14] "Wie geht's, wie steht's, hoam S'Aids?," *Der Spiegel* 21 (1987), 17-19.
- [15] Ulf Fink, "Sie hat ihre Linie gefunden," *Der Spiegel* 21 (1987), 66-67.
- [16] Gauweiler, *Was tun gegen AIDS?*, 67.
- [17] See. *ibid.*
- [18] Because of that the Health Scientist Raimund Geene assumed that the discourse of AIDS underwent a politicization in the second half of the 1980s. See Geene, "Aids-Politik".
- [19] Comp. Süßmuth, *AIDS*, 11f. Also the historian Bettina Hitzer explains the good current research position with the assumption that very often fear is considered an incentive for action. See Bettina Hitzer, "Emotionsgeschichte – ein Anfang mit Folgen", *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 23 November 2011, <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/forum/2011-11-001>, 16.
- [20] Süßmuth, *AIDS*, 72, 76.

Citation

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