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# Risky Sex – Risky Language. HIV/AIDS and the West German Gay Scene in the 1980s

Sebastian Haus\*

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**Abstract:** »*Riskanter Sex – Riskante Sprache. HIV/AIDS und die westdeutsche Schwulenszene in den 1980ern*«. This article focuses on the West German gay subculture and its early reactions to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It analyses how gay men coped with an uncertain epistemological situation in which the medical, social and political status of HIV/AIDS was far from being evident, and in which the ambivalent connection of AIDS, risk and gay sexuality became the object of strong scientific and public interest. The article argues that gay men distinguished between two dimensions of AIDS risk: risky sex and risky language. On the one hand, they developed a strong awareness for the riskiness of their sexual behaviour, resulting in the will to consider AIDS as a disease of their own. On the other hand, they were irritated by the ambiguity of the public AIDS discourse. Its imagery went far beyond AIDS as a medical entity and was believed to conceal antigay politics behind medical facts. In analysing the emerging gay risk strategies, the article points out that gay activists and organisations critically adopted virological knowledge and promoted Safer Sex practices, both strategies which eventually empowered them to represent their interests within the emerging expert networks of AIDS politics since 1985/6. Central to these strategies was the attempt to disentangle a sphere of politics and morality from a sphere of the natural world of viruses, an attempt which was aimed at ending the supposed dangerous spread of antigay AIDS metaphors in the public. The article concludes in trying to interpret the HIV/AIDS controversies as reactions to the general epistemological uncertainties of "risk societies" in the late 20th century.

**Keywords:** HIV, AIDS, sexuality, gay activism, Safer Sex, metaphors, science, virology, mass media, risk society.

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## 1. Introduction

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In our contemporary Western world, HIV/AIDS<sup>1</sup> and its corresponding risks are rarely the subject of a broad public discussion. The handling of this disease

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<sup>1</sup> Until 1986, the virus which causes AIDS, the human immune deficiency virus, carried several names due to research controversies: HTLV-III, ARV and LAV. To avoid misunderstandings, the AIDS virus is always called HIV in this article.

seems to be completely normalised. In the 1980s however, the situation was entirely different. Due to the mysterious novelty of the phenomenon, the knowledge about HIV/AIDS never seemed to be really settled or stable; it was rather fragile, ambiguous and highly controversial during the whole decade. Although almost all public problematisations of HIV/AIDS had a clear reference to medicine and science – the epidemiological and virological knowledge which made it to a blood-borne infectious disease – it belonged to the platitudes of the emerging AIDS discourse that AIDS was more than a medical problem. The West German Minister of Health between 1985-1988, Rita Süßmuth, for example, considered AIDS to be a complex matter of high sensibility, “maybe the largest moral, medical, social and political challenge of our time,” a challenge which “puts at stake our understanding of democratic society and democratic state” as well as “our idea of man” (Süßmuth 1987, 18, 24).<sup>2</sup> Such statements, which were very common in the political debates in the late 1980s, indicate that many politicians, journalists, scientists and activists considered HIV/AIDS to be an all-encompassing discursive arena. The disease seemed to politicise current cultural self-understandings, social transformations and basic moral values. Even a historian of science like Mirko Grmek, who published the first comprehensive history of AIDS research in 1990, was convinced that the immune deficiency syndrome was able to uncover a deeper historical meaning: “With its links to sex, drugs, blood, and informatics, and with the sophistication of its evolution and of its strategy for spreading itself, AIDS expresses our era” (Grmek 1990, xii).

That the meaning of AIDS went beyond its status as an epidemic disease, that contemporaries considered it to be a metaphor for the late twentieth century, has attracted much interest of historical, cultural and social research since the late 1980s (For a general history of the AIDS epidemic in the Western World, see Baldwin 2005; Berridge 1996; Engel 2006. Out of the many works on the cultural meanings of HIV/AIDS see, for example, Altman 1986; Watney 1987; Crimp 1988; Gilman 1988; Sontag 2012b [1989]; Martin 1994; Kruger 1996; Pulver 1999; and Schappach 2012). Brigitte Weingart (2002) argues that the enormous linguistic and visual imagery of HIV/AIDS emerged out of a search for adequate forms of representation for an unexpected phenomenon which seemed to bring back the once settled medical, political and cultural problematic of infectious diseases. Especially the epistemological openness of medical research in the early 1980s fostered a cultural process which overloaded HIV/AIDS with symbolic meanings. The instability of the signified, in other words, “provoked the excess of the signifier” and problematised AIDS as an ambiguous catastrophic sign: a sign for a divine punishment for sexual perversions and abnormalities, for the decadency of the permissive liberal era in the 1960s and 1970s, for a coming apocalypse similar to the environmental catastrophe, or for a political

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<sup>2</sup> This quotation and all following quotations from German sources are translated by the author.

manoeuvre, distracting attention from “real” dangers like the nuclear arms race (Weingart 2002, 21-5). While such multiple meanings of risks and hazards are quite typical for historical risk debates, the specifics of the HIV/AIDS controversies are furthermore characterised by the fact that many historical actors were *themselves* aware of the logic of the AIDS discourse and the corresponding overload of meaning. Based on their experience of a second discursive reality beyond the medical facts, many observers at the time identified the actual political problematic of AIDS in its twofold dimension: on the one hand AIDS, a lethal infectious disease, and on the other hand “AIDS,” a highly ambiguous and polysemous discourse.<sup>3</sup> In 1988, the cultural scholar Paula Treichler put that double structure in a nutshell, writing that “the AIDS epidemic is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification” (Treichler 1989, 11). This constructivist awareness of an “epidemic of signification” indicates that contemporaries did not only problematise medical facts, political implications and social consequences of the emerging AIDS epidemic. They even problematised “the boundary between the literal and figural dimension of language” (Weingart 2002, 21). Therefore, the role of language with regard to HIV/AIDS turned out to be problematic: language itself seemed to be risky because it could fail in mediating unmistakably between the spheres of science and politics, nature and society. Consequently, the awareness of a risky language complicated the question of what the reality of HIV/AIDS consisted of.

This article wants to address the issue of risky language in focusing on the social group of gay men in West Germany and their reactions to and their strategies against HIV/AIDS. In almost all Western countries, gay men were not only the social group which was most affected by the AIDS epidemic. Due to their political consciousness, social networks and a relatively high level of education they also started to organise self-help structures and prevention strategies soon after the appearance of AIDS and thus gained much influence not only in public health politics but also in the field of medical science. While historical and social research on gay AIDS activism mainly focused on the US-American AIDS movement (Epstein 1996; Gould 2009; Kayal 1993), this article analyses the history of HIV/AIDS in Germany, in general, and the role of gay men in West German AIDS politics, in particular. These two issues have just started to attract historical research (Tümmers 2012, 2014; Beljan 2014, 173-231). The article addresses the question of what West German gay men exactly perceived as dangerous and risky about the new epidemic in this early situation of an open and uncertain epistemology. It is going to ask which effects the appearance of HIV/AIDS had on their understanding of sexuality, emancipatory politics and identity, and which new political concepts and asso-

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<sup>3</sup> This differentiation between AIDS and “AIDS” refers to Sarasin (2004).

ciations emerged out of the confrontation with the ambiguous medical, social, political and linguistic problematic of HIV/AIDS.

However, the article does not only want to make a contribution to the history of gay AIDS activism. Looking at the broader historical background of the controversies on HIV/AIDS and the gay men's role therein, one can see that the deep irritations about the reality of AIDS risk reflected a general unease about the nature of risks, an unease which was quite typical for the late twentieth century. When the debates on HIV/AIDS began to emerge in the early 1980s, attentive observers like the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1986), for example, believed that it became considerably difficult to unmistakably determine what the reality of risks consisted of and who – which group, person or institution – was in charge of defining risks and risk strategies with the appropriate credibility, authority and political influence. As a consequence, knowledge about risks was unstable and uncertain. Risks became the subject of heated political debates, fuelled by growing skepticisms of social movements and self-help groups towards the risk rationalities of science, state agencies and government officials. From this perspective, "risk" did not only mean a threat or a specific mode of calculating potential futures. "Risk" rather designated a specific epistemological constellation, a "crisis of objectivity," as Bruno Latour has called this historical situation (Latour 2010, 37). The article therefore tries to look at the broader picture of the HIV/AIDS controversies. It tries to answer the question of what these controversies tell us about the political attempts to handle the ambivalences and uncertainties of risk knowledge in the late twentieth century.

The article consists of four parts. Part one is going to show how the association between AIDS, risk and homosexuality became an object of an intense scientific and public interest, thereby undermining gay men's struggle for emancipation in the 1970s. Part two analyses the first repelling and defensive reactions to AIDS in the West German gay scene. Part three shows how gay men started to develop a feeling of direct affectedness, resulting in the will to gain a perspective on AIDS on their own. Part four analyses the risk strategies of the West German gay scene which empowered gay AIDS activists to become a part of the emerging AIDS-political networks in the West German public health sector. Their strategies evolved around criticisms of "the epidemic of signification," that is the AIDS metaphors which were believed to conceal the "real disease" and disseminate antigay meanings. The article concludes in referring to the risk debates in the social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s. Taking the perception of HIV/AIDS as a symptom of underlying historical transformations, I am going to argue that the controversies about the new infectious disease were trying to find answers to the deep epistemological uncertainties described by sociologists like Ulrich Beck.

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## 2. AIDS Risk. Ambiguous Meanings between Medicine, the Mass Media and the Gay Scene

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On June 5, 1981, the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, a journal by the US-American *Centers for Disease Control*, reported about five cases of a rare disease among young homosexual men in Los Angeles. This report was the first attempt to thoroughly address a new medical phenomenon which later became known as the “Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.” Because the disease, *Pneumocystis Pneumonia*, was rarely seen in previously healthy persons, the researchers were looking for an explanation for their irritating findings. The patients’ sexuality called their attention. The report suggested an “association between some aspects of a homosexual lifestyle” and the supposed immune deficiency of their patients (CDC 1981, 251). In 1981, further research identified similar cases of rare diseases among young gay men which seemed to legitimate the focus on homosexuality as well as on a supposed defect of the immune system. Before the official term AIDS was coined in 1982, the new illness carried the name “Gay Related Immune Deficiency” (GRID) in some medical articles (Grmek 1990, 3-20; Engelmann 2014, 274-6).

Such categorisations of AIDS brought up an association between a disease pattern and a social group which should strongly dominate the further history of AIDS. During the first two years, when researchers presumed the existence of microbiological causes but lacked plausible evidence, it was especially epidemiological research which nourished the beginning medical AIDS discourse (Oppenheimer 1992, 51-9). In correlating certain social phenomena with disease patterns, epidemiologists identified some social practices of homosexuals – such as a high number of different sexual partners – as “risk factors” in the etiology of AIDS (Epstein 1996, 49-53). Within scientific discourse, the focus on the risky lifestyle of gay men proved to be very persistent, although some publications hinted at non-homosexual “risk groups” as early as August 1981.<sup>4</sup> Historian Gerald Oppenheimer explains this neglect by pointing out that the association of homosexuality and disease was credible within the medical field because some medical studies, published in the 1970s, had noticed an increase of venereal diseases among gay men. Such continuing medical interest in homosexuals added up to a long tradition within medical discourse reaching back to the nineteenth century which, a tradition which strongly related homosexuality to disease (Oppenheimer 1992; cf. Epstein 1996, 50-1; Pulver 1999, 290-310). However, notions like “risk group” and “risk factor” were important scientific tools of organising and rearranging social and natural realities in an unclear epistemological situation (Preda 2005). What epidemiologists may

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<sup>4</sup> In the early 1980s, three other groups besides the homosexuals were also considered to be “risk groups”: Haitians, intravenous drug addicts and hemophiliacs.

have believed to be an effective way to organise their investigations into a mysterious epidemic took on a different meaning when it left the research designs and medical journals and engaged with a non-scientific public. When scientific findings on AIDS entered popular science, mass media, political agendas and a critical gay community during the early 1980s, it was especially the correlation between the mysterious phenomenon AIDS on the one hand, and risky homosexual practices on the other, which structured the emerging political dynamic. The public appearance of homosexuality along with medicine and a lethal disease seemed to push homosexual men back into a problematic position which they had just tried to leave behind during their political struggles for emancipation in the 1960s and 1970s (Engelmann 2014, 276-7).

One of the early examples for the transition of HIV/AIDS, risk and homosexuality from a medical context into the mass media is the first cover story of *Der Spiegel*, West Germany's biggest news magazine, on the "deadly plague AIDS." Published on June 6, 1983, the story drafted a frightening scenario of "the homosexual plague 'Aids'" which would not be restrained to gay men alone. It would rather imperil heterosexuals, women and even children, too. Almost consequently, due to the supposed helplessness of the highly developed medical apparatus of the industrial world, the future of mankind itself seemed to be at stake:

Will Aids like a horseman of the Apocalypse on a black horse creep over mankind? Do we face a modern plague that will join death, hunger and war like in the Middle Ages? [...] Transmitted in a mysterious way, a mysterious germ is striking – in a century, in which all dangerous infectious diseases have seemed to be controllable" (*Der Spiegel* 1983, 144, 147).

In this early report, the *Spiegel* perceived HIV/AIDS as a hybrid risk, a phenomenon which was at once natural, social, historical and geographical: It killed people, linked continents and countries, gay men with heterosexuals, women and children, it messed up historical times, questioned the technoscientific progress, made modern societies look as helpless as the Middle Ages, and eventually darkened, in the shape of an apocalyptic agent, the future horizon of the human race. The *Spiegel* left no doubt that homosexuals were in the midst of this problematic, especially by its visualisations of AIDS risk, for the cover of the issue strongly associated gay sexuality with the "mysterious disease." It depicted two naked male bodies, obviously having sexual contact, while an image in the form of a petri dish, showing a microscopical enlargement of an indefinite germ, covered the genital area. On the one hand, this visual arrangement suggested that, when having a close look, gay men were not alone any more in their sexual practices. Their sex became risky through the interference of a third party, some dangerous pathogen. On the other hand, the microscopical focus on the genital area expressed a strong public interest in gay sex which, in the face of the "deadly plague AIDS," now seriously mattered for the heterosexual majority. Gay sex had to be made visible, should be investigated and discussed if the epidemic ought to be defeated. Homosexuals only

appeared to speak for themselves if they served as witnesses of the alleged risky conditions in their subculture (Pulver 1999, 321-4).<sup>5</sup> This cover and the corresponding story give an idea of how the situation of gay men changed in the context of the early news coverage on AIDS. Gay men were depicted as carriers of disease who did not only endanger their partners and friends, but also heterosexuals, women and children. It is no wonder that gay men perceived such reports as a plea for harsh public health interventions into the gay subculture. While gay men in the wake of the counter culture movements of the 1960s had considered themselves as a strong political *subject* that longed for full legalisation and emancipation, the early mass media reports on AIDS seemed to transform homosexuals into a precarious *object* of a medicalised, public gaze.

Gay media were well aware of the political implications of AIDS metaphors and images in the mass media from early on. In a 1985 interview with the Berlin gay magazine *Siegessäule*, gay journalists asked the leading AIDS journalist of the *Spiegel*, Hans Halter, why he was always mixing “the factual coverage with this metaphorical dimension.” In his answer, Halter considered metaphors to be an important part in the prevention of HIV/AIDS. In referring to possible catastrophic futures of the disease he said: “To understand this dimension of the disease [...], to anticipate a threat and to realize it in its extent, a metaphorical coverage is legitimate, I think.” Halter thereby did not deny that metaphors created emotions like fear. Rather, he took fear to create awareness: “Fear results in the search for solutions” (*Siegessäule* 1985a, 33). It is remarkable that one of the most famous news magazines in West Germany acknowledged the semantic role of metaphors in a “vacuum of meaning” (Pulver 1999, 361) where no one seemed to know exactly what a mysterious lethal disease will bring in the future. To prepare its readers for all eventualities, to raise emotional awareness for a new and indefinite risk, mass media journals like the *Spiegel* decided to max out the polysemy of language, images and statistics.<sup>6</sup> Even some inconsistent historical analogies seemed to be allowed in “times of plague,” for the powerful imagery of phantasms and imaginations was believed to mobilise the necessary collective preparedness. This language was far from being restrained to the *Spiegel* and other mass media newspapers and magazines. Even politicians, experts and health officials often used the full potential of language and images to create the atmosphere of a severe state of emergency (cf. Pulver 1999). As we will see however, West German gay men, the object of so many *Spiegel* articles, disagreed with such an approach to the AIDS epidemic.

<sup>5</sup> See the short story about gay men in West Berlin in the mentioned cover story. See also the comment “Is there sex after death” by the gay film-maker Rosa von Praunheim (1984) in *Der Spiegel* in November 1984. Because of this comment, Praunheim was often criticised in the gay community.

<sup>6</sup> The metaphors of AIDS statistics in *Der Spiegel* is analysed in Rauer (2012).

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### 3. The "Wende," Kießling and AIDS: The First Reactions in the German Gay Scene

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Around 1983 and 1984, the issue of AIDS and homosexuality in the mass media began to draw the attention of the gay subcultural media. Although homosexuals developed an intense and critical exchange with scientists and scientific knowledge, gays were concerned with AIDS as a mass media phenomenon in the first place. As the 1985 interview with Hans Halter has shown, they were especially aware of the metaphorical dimensions of AIDS in the public debates. In his influential book on the issue, the German gay activist Frank Rühmann, for example, analyzed at length the international mass media coverage on AIDS and concluded that, as an effect of the news coverage, one could never be sure what exactly was meant when someone talked about AIDS:

The disease has become a metaphor of many things which many people feel uncomfortable with. Often you can't be sure if something different is meant than the medical facts when it comes to the potential ways of infection and the causes of disease. Behind these facts there is often an irrational fear and aggression towards a sexuality and towards human beings who are different than the others.

"Language," Rühmann warned, "is treacherous" (Rühmann 1985, 14).

The modes of response from the gay community to this risky and ambivalent language, though, remained indistinct for the time being. Homosexuals criticised the supposed discriminations of the AIDS discourse but did not yet know what kind of language and discourse could represent their worries and interests. The early reactions on HIV/AIDS therefore remained rather defensive and skeptical about HIV/AIDS. Almost all homosexual journalists repelled the disease as a typically scandalised tabloid issue. In August 1983, the gay magazine *Rosa Flieder* set the agenda in one of the first cover stories on AIDS in the German gay media. Repelling the disease as a severe medical problem, AIDS was primarily seen as a pretext for antigay ideologists, demanding discrimination and punishment of homosexual men (cf. Jarzombek 1983). Even one year later, this view on AIDS was quite credible in the gay scene. In August 1984, a *Rosa Flieder* article directly criticised the *Spiegel* for exaggerating the consequences of HIV/AIDS. The author even doubted that AIDS was an epidemic like the *Spiegel* claimed so vigorously. He also put AIDS in the context of a perceived conservative backlash against homosexuals in which the mass media in general and the *Spiegel* in particular seemed to be actively involved: "Concerning AIDS the *Spiegel* is about to set trends. After having created full publicity for the issue one year ago ... [it] now prepares the second, decisive step, the obviously legitimate repressive action of the authorities" (Offermann 1984, 37).

Discussing HIV/AIDS in terms of state oppression mirrored the general political position many homosexuals considered the gay scene to be in at the

beginning of the 1980s. Already prior to the appearance of HIV/AIDS, German gays found themselves in a precarious situation. During the 1970s, they had succeeded in establishing a broad subcultural infrastructure in West German cities which encompassed gay cafés, bars, clubs, cultural centres, publishing companies and magazines. However, the self-confidence of the gay movement seemed to have disappeared by 1980. Many homosexuals of that time complained that the uniting emancipatory impetus of the early 1970s was gone (For the history of male homosexuality in West Germany in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s see Beljan 2014; Blazek 1996, 238-330; Haunss 2004; Pretzel and Weiß 2011, 2013; and Whisnant 2012). Furthermore, the election of a conservative government in 1982/3 and especially its resolute rhetorical emphasis on traditional lifestyles and family values seemed to be at odds with the liberal and emancipatory atmosphere of the last two decades. This political event was, at the time, publicly debated as a “spiritual-moral turn” (“*geistig-moralische Wende*”) and gave reason to believe that the West German society was undergoing a conservative roll back against participation, liberal values and alternative ways of life (Hoeres 2013). When a general of the West German military was accused of being a security risk because of his alleged homosexuality as part of the “Wörner-Kießling scandal” in 1984, gay men felt confirmed once more that the political culture was changing to their disadvantage (cf. Hengelein 1984 and Holz 1985; Wirsching 2006, 59-65). After a decade of strong and self-confident political visibility, the gay scene in West Germany seemed to be confronted with “harder times for gays and lesbians” (Grumbach 1984).

Gays’ repelling attitude towards the mass media reports on AIDS was linked to such scepticism towards the conservative government. They feared a “Wende-State” (Offermann 1984, 37) planning to use AIDS as a pretext for the repression of groups that did not match with conservative world views. The infectious disease seemed to be opening a further field of emancipatory struggle in which the hard-earned political liberties had to be defended. To this end, the above-mentioned author of the magazine *Rosa Flieder* refused to tolerate the interference of physicians, politicians and mass media journalists into the autonomous realm of gay sexuality:

Let us take *Der Spiegel* as a seismograph and let us already prepare for a worrisome development. It is not yet too late to warn the gay scene of the panic-mongers’ hidden intentions. We know about the risks of our sexual lifestyle and we should be responsible enough to decide, if we should change it or not. Only we ought to be the decision-makers [*Entscheidungsinstanz*, S. H.] and not a repressive state! (Offermann 1984, 37).

Opinions like these clearly reflect the strong emancipatory consciousness which many homosexuals had gained during the 1970s in the context of the movement for gay liberation. This political identity provided the frame for repelling the way AIDS was depicted in the mass media, for example in the first cover story by the *Spiegel* mentioned above. While the *Spiegel* did not

consider homosexuals to be politically acting citizens but mere objects of science and contagion control, many gay men claimed a realm of autonomous decision making even in the field of health and AIDS prevention.

However, in spite of the author's certainty about gay risk knowledge, it remained to be seen if the context of gay liberation and its political logic was appropriate in addressing and handling a complex threat like HIV/AIDS (cf. Engelmann 2014, 276-7). The fact that gay journalists wondered if HIV/AIDS really was an epidemic shows that these early approaches missed to address HIV/AIDS as a serious medical issue. If gay men really knew enough to assess the risks of their sexual lifestyle in the face of a new, incurable disease, it was far from evident. Within the following months and years, though, the assessment of HIV/AIDS changed. The logic of gay emancipation was complimented by, or even transformed into a new discourse. At the beginning of this transformation the gay scene started to recognize that HIV/AIDS is more than "AIDS," more than risky language and a scandalised mass media issue. This was the result of a long and heated debate within their own subculture, a debate which was fuelled by two aspects: the personal and informational exchange with international gay communities and the increasing visibility of the HIV/AIDS in the West German gay scene.

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#### 4. Our AIDS: Global Risk – Risky Sex

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From May to July 1984, Jürgen Roland, a board member of the *Deutsche AIDS-Hilfe*, travelled to New York City to visit one of the largest gay communities in the United States. At that time, the city's gay scene already had to face the severe impacts of the epidemic, with over 1500 known AIDS cases by May, and already 2100 cases when Roland left New York three months later. During his stay, he accompanied members of the *Gay Men's Health Crisis*, the "biggest and most effective gay organization which I have ever seen," as Roland noted. Alongside the organisation, he visited AIDS patients in hospitals, he got a read of the immense juridical, social and emotional efforts of self-organised AIDS help, and was astonished by the gay activists' engagement, courage and sense of community. Three months later, when he reported his experiences in the Berlin gay magazine *Siegessäule*, Roland made clear that the direct personal contact with ill homosexuals and a caring community has deeply changed his views on AIDS. His initial indifference has yielded an emotional affectedness:

Who has not yet seen it, will not be able to imagine. Who has heard about it, will not believe it. Who thinks that the worst has been overcome is terribly wrong [...] AIDS is more than an indefinite virus. The calmness, with which I have taken notice of the latest figures on AIDS in the United States, is gone (Roland 1984a, 27).

Roland's account from New York City is one of the first articles which did not address HIV/AIDS as a mass media phenomenon. It is a careful attempt to give meaning to an "indefinite virus" beyond the context of ambiguous AIDS metaphors and a perceived repressive climate in West Germany. Such new approaches often referred to gay communities in other countries and their handling of HIV/AIDS. The first books by gay authors on the issue also described in detail the epidemic in the US-American gay scenes (Hinz 1984, 167-87; Rühmann 1985, 123-69). Furthermore, the *Siegessäule* regularly published interviews with international gay AIDS activists and articles about homosexuality and HIV/AIDS in countries such as Great Britain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland, the Soviet Union or Hungary (Salmen 1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1985d, 1987; Hederström and Salmen 1985; Langhein and Salmen 1985). Hence, gay men and media in West Germany did not only take part in the emergence of international information networks on HIV/AIDS between different national gay communities (cf. Aurin 1984); they also began to recognize that AIDS was a global risk which homosexuals all over the world were collectively facing.

This growing sense of a collective global affectedness in gay publications corresponded with the increasing visibility of HIV/AIDS in the West German gay scene since the end of 1984. By finding its way into the subcultural media in two different epistemic settings, HIV/AIDS lost its status as an abstract object of science and mass media and took on a concrete, community specific meaning. Starting in December 1984, the *Siegessäule* decided to regularly publish official epidemiological statistics on the prevalence of AIDS in West Germany. The first statistics divided the known AIDS patients in five risk groups. Homosexuals provided by far the largest group of victims: on October 15, 1984, 91 out of 110 AIDS cases in West Germany were gay men, and on June 30, 1985, 174 out of 220 (*Siegessäule* 1984, 1985b). These numbers were not only some of the first examples for a slow appropriation of scientific knowledge in the gay subculture. They also visualised the presence of a deadly infectious disease among German homosexuals. The effect of "seeing" the epidemic, the visualisation of the fatal operating of "an indefinite virus," is not trivial. The AIDS statistics, as formal and abstract as they may be, showed for the first time *in a subcultural context* that homosexuals in Berlin, Frankfurt and other German cities were directly affected, too.

These visualisation effects were intensified by a second form of making HIV/AIDS visible. From 1984 on, a laboratory test was available to detect antibodies against HIV in the blood of an infected person. This test was the technological condition for the visibility of a new social group, the HIV-positives. The HIV antibody test produced a group of symptomatically healthy persons who had nevertheless to cope with severe psychological and social problems of self-esteem and identity and, above all, with the existential fear that there was no, and probably will never be a cure for their infection. The availability and effects of the test became a much debated issue in the German gay scene: How

reliable was the antibody test? Who actually should get tested? Which social consequences were supposed to be drawn from a negative or a positive serostatus? Was the knowledge about a person's serostatus the precondition for preventive behaviour or did this knowledge actually make no difference considering the lack of HIV/AIDS remedies? These questions were highly controversial in the gay subculture as well as among public health experts (cf. Marcus 1984; Roland 1984b; Rosenbrock 1986, 89-132). Meanwhile, HIV-positive gay men started to found self-help groups, in West Berlin for example the group "*Positive Schwule*" (Positive Schwule 1985). In January 1985, two journalists of the *Siegessäule* interviewed three HIV-positive gay men of that group, making HIV-positives visible for a broader gay public (*Siegessäule* 1985c). The reader was confronted with the specific difficulties and problems of infected persons, about how these persons emotionally coped with the knowledge of being infected in the absence of symptoms and medical treatments. The interviewees made clear that they considered HIV/AIDS to be a turning point for the whole gay scene, a scene which would not bother about health issues and its responsibility for the infected. Nevertheless, the HIV-positives thought that AIDS could force gay men "to think about issues about which we should have started to think much earlier." Especially the role of promiscuous gay sex which so often had been associated with freedom and autonomy became the object of a heated debate between the interviewees. "After the necessary history of liberation," one interviewee said, promiscuous sex is now, in the face of the AIDS epidemic, "turning decadent, it is becoming a danger for the dignity of the individual." AIDS thus has shown that "'only free sexuality' has been a wrong aim" for the gay scene. Homosexuals, they argued, therefore needed to develop a sense of responsibility between sexual partners, and should not only dump their responsibility in front of the infected. To this end, "gay culture has to change" (*Siegessäule* 1985c, 31). Opinions like these fuelled a beginning subcultural debate on the meaning and limits of gay liberation and the corresponding political expectations which gay men had initially related to a free and emancipated sexuality.

In this subcultural context, AIDS risk seemed to further lose its indefiniteness and abstractedness. AIDS risk, which first appeared as an ambiguous issue of mass media sensation, then as a global risk threatening the international gay community, a risk which furthermore took on the formal, but visual presence among German homosexuals in the AIDS statistics, was now a risk which was a serious matter of gay men's lives. In this process, opinions from the gay community who just claimed to "fuck on" in spite of AIDS were more and more marginalised (Schernikau 1984). With the HIV-positives, the disease produced new gay identities, new gay specific problems and therefore a need to handle these issues from their perspective. Hence, by the end of 1984, gay men in West Germany started to consider AIDS as a problem of *their own*. Refer-

ring to the gays' defensive reactions to AIDS, gay author Matthias Frings wrote in 1984 that

always and everywhere we are criticizing the hetero-press. But where is our press which continuously deals with this problem? [...] As cynical as it is, not until we have accepted the disease we are able to fight on all levels: AIDS is not 'gay cancer,' but it is a disease which mainly affects gays. Homosexuality and AIDS cannot be separated. The mass media knows that and has pleasureably exploited it. Now it is on us to put this connection in the right perspective, without surrendering gay positions, without shame and self-betrayal (Frings 1984, 202-3).

By 1985, out of a feeling for direct affectedness, opinions like Frings' crystallized more and more to a consensus in the West German Gay scene. But how to problematise AIDS and homosexuality, how to put HIV/AIDS "in the correct perspective" without confirming public discourses, metaphors and prejudices about infectious gay sex?

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## 5. Gay Risk Strategies: Purifying Language – Safer Sex

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The "right perspective" on AIDS and homosexuality emerged from the gays' concern with language. The will to develop their own perspective and strategy brought homosexuals to face the metaphorical ambiguity which they perceived as one of the main obstacles in the AIDS problematic (Beljan 2014, 178-82). In a public atmosphere where language seemed to be itself infectious and dangerous, where many gay men believed that the public discourse often would have little or nothing to do with "the disease itself, but often enough with the morality of the scientists and publicists involved" (Rühmann 1985, 15), the emergence of a gay risk strategy against AIDS started with a the question of what the "reality" of AIDS consisted of. On the one hand, this question resulted in criticisms of and a fight against the "gigantic metaphor Aids" (Frings 1986, 40), because the metaphorical ambiguity of HIV/AIDS was believed to have "vast consequences for the life quality in this society" (Rühmann 1985, 16). On the other hand, some gays even went a step further and addressed the question of the ambivalent representation of the natural world in the AIDS discourse. Especially the sociologist Frank Rühmann distinguished clearly between the medical "reality" of AIDS and the metaphorical language of AIDS. He argued that politics in the shape of metaphors – values, morality, ideologies – should not be entangled with the nature of the epidemic. "The mixture of two levels, the medical and the political" had to find its end. Therefore, he demanded, politics must be clearly separated from biology again:

The political instrumentalization of the AIDS disease must be separated again from the real disease. This disease is not a metaphor for social immorality and disorder. The real disease and the real suffering is already fatal enough in that

it [AIDS, S.H.] should not additionally exist as a political source of danger (Rühmann 1985, 16).

The concern with language, the awareness for the political dimensions of words in the context of AIDS, was not new in the history of gay activism. Historian Magdalena Beljan has shown how gay men in West Germany were well aware of the performativity of language, especially when they used the pejoratively connotated word “*schwul*” to express a new, emancipatory subjectivity during the 1970s (Beljan 2014, 83-106). However, the politics of language which gay men like Frank Rühmann demanded in the face of “AIDS” was different. In the context of mass media reports that created a state of emergency in mobilising the polysemous potential of language and images, the attempt to disentangle the “real disease” from its political connotations and meanings can be regarded as a purifying practice, which aimed at the restitution of two clearly separated spheres, the sphere of nature on the one hand, and the sphere of society and politics on the other (cf. Latour 2008). In separating the natural world, that is the “real disease” and the world of the virus, from the realm of social and political life, the uncontrolled meanings, moralities and ideologies of the AIDS imagery, Rühmann implicitly tried to re-establish an order between nature and society which seemed to get mixed up in the context of HIV/AIDS. In this order there was a clear and distinct language which could unmistakably mediate facts from the realm of nature and provide the necessary information for a political prevention strategy which did not discriminate minorities. To strengthen his point, Rühmann explicitly drew upon Susan Sontag’s essay “disease and metaphor,” published in 1978. According to Sontag, illness always was associated with “fantasies of punishment” – a fact which, Sontag argued, had severe consequences for all people suffering from diseases. Therefore she demanded to “put as much resistance as possible” against metaphorical thinking which would be the “healthiest way to be ill” (Sontag 2012a, 9). But similar to Sontag’s essay (Weingart 2002, 51-66), the attempt to disentangle “reality” from metaphors, facts from morality, was not that self-evident and must have invoked some difficult questions: How should this separation work? How should gay men recognize if a fact referred to “the real disease” or if it just concealed discriminations? Which authority, in other words, spoke for “the real disease,” which authority should decide which language represented the natural reality?

The authority gay men started to accept in the context of the critique of AIDS metaphors was science. Starting around 1984, gay men began to develop a serious interest in scientific knowledge. Having in mind the history of gay emancipation in the 1970s, and set against the background of some early reactions to HIV/ADS, which repelled the interference of physicians and experts into the autonomy of gay subculture, this turn towards science is quite remarkable, if not paradoxical. While during the 1970s, the gay movement had often made science to one of its main enemies, “medical facts” were now believed to give unmistakable information on the “real disease” and scientific knowledge

was considered to be the purest form of dealing with HIV/AIDS. It would be wrong, though, to take this shift as an uncritical belief in the truth of science, as a simple submission to the supremacy of medical facts. In contrast, homosexuals dealt with scientific facts with a certain awareness for how these facts were made in the epistemological oscillations between science, politics and the mass media (cf. Frings 1986). Summaries of scientific findings in gay media often pointed out that some facts were overestimated, while others were not considered or wrongly contextualized by medical researchers (cf. Rühmann 1985, 26-50; Salmen 1984, 1985e). These critical assessments also involved attempts to criticise science in its own rationalistic style. In January 1985 for example, Karl-Heinz Albers discussed an epidemiological study on the prevalence of HIV among Berlin homosexuals by a Berlin research institute which was originally published in the scientific journal *The Lancet*. Albers challenged – in the style of a rational, scientific argumentation – the institute's interpretation that the results would unmistakably point to the spread of HIV among West Berlin gays (Albers 1985). Although the influence of gay men on scientific research was much greater in the United States (Epstein 1996), the West German debate on HIV/AIDS also included the self-confident critique of science by a new class of lay experts: gay AIDS activists.

Against this background, homosexuals started to disseminate scientific knowledge through their subcultural channels. On the one hand, magazines like the *Siegessäule* and *Rosa Flieder* regularly published articles on the science of HIV/AIDS in this period. The *Siegessäule*'s special edition on AIDS for example dedicated a third of its pages on “a medical part.” Gay readers, probably mainly laypeople in regards to medical science so far, thus learned about virology, immunology and the genetic history of the HI-virus, about T-lymphocytes, the difference between CD4 and CD8 receptors, and the tactics of the virus against the immune system (*Siegessäule* 1985d; Albers 1985). On the other hand, the *AIDS-Hilfen* which gay men founded in different West German cities since 1983 became increasingly important platforms of information and education on HIV/AIDS. Especially the umbrella organisation of the local *AIDS-Hilfen*, the *Deutsche AIDS-Hilfe* (DAH) in West Berlin, concentrated its efforts mainly on planning gay specific education campaigns and information materials starting in 1985 (cf. Wübker 1988, 47-51). Besides information material held in the style and language of the gay subculture, the DAH regularly published leaflets called “state of knowledge” and “AIDS information service” which had a considerably high circulation and informed about the current state of research on HIV/AIDS (DAH 1985a, 1985b, 1986).

The content of this information mainly based on virological knowledge. This was not self-understanding, although US-American and French virologists had detected a microbiological cause for AIDS as early as 1983. However, at the time when German gays started their education campaigns in the mid- and late 1980s, the knowledge about the etiological role of the virus faced a wave

of criticism. The most famous critic was the renowned molecular biologist Peter Duesberg, a member of the US-American “National Academy of Sciences,” who doubted that HIV would cause AIDS and consequently refreshed the older lifestyle etiology (Epstein 1996, 45-142). Such criticisms were far from being shared by the majority of scientists. But they were picked up and popularised by a few US-American gay journalists and achieved considerable mass media coverage in the United States. In West Germany, homosexuals repelled these criticisms and became strong allies of virology, mainly for one reason: Virology had the great advantage to single out one, non-human cause for the AIDS epidemic. In contrast to epidemiology, which dominated the first two years of AIDS research, virology did not consider social or cultural aspects of the disease. Causes and origins of the epidemic were transferred from the realm of social behaviour like promiscuous sex into the non-human world of viruses. This epistemological shift therefore strongly corresponded with gay men’s interests in separating the political from the natural world. Lukas Engelmann illustrates this process with reference to scientific images which depict the HIV-virus. These images did not only play a decisive role in strengthening the virological paradigm but also in redirecting the focus from gay lifestyle to a threatening non-human agent. Engelmann argues that images of the virus had the tendency to close down the ‘epidemic of signification’ because the visualised HIV “takes a ‘natural’ position beyond the human body, exterior to culture and society and materializes the disease in the allegedly independent universe of microbiology” (Engelmann 2012, 252). Against this background, it can be argued that homosexuals did not only refer to virological knowledge simply because they considered it to be true. It rather empowered gay men and organisations to clearly distinguish between a “real disease” and the AIDS imagery. While on the one hand, virological knowledge enabled homosexuals to repel metaphorically mediated fears, prejudices and generalizations about gay sexuality with reference to science, it also helped to address the problem of risky sex with reference to a virus, located in an exterior natural world. The adoption of virological knowledge, the knowledge about a microbiological cause for the riskiness of their sexuality, therefore made plausible a couple of sexual practices which had been developed in US-American gay scenes since 1982/3: Safer Sex.

Safer Sex became the keystone of the homosexuals’ AIDS prevention strategy in West Germany starting at the end of 1984 (Pulver 1999, 405-43). Safer Sex should offer a solution to the problems which came up as a result of the gay debate about the riskiness of their sexual practices. Increasingly, the gay scene began to consider AIDS risk as a problem of their culture, everyday life and ethics. In 1985/86 gay magazines and especially the DAH started a Safer Sex campaign which tried to handle these concerns with regards to risky gay sex. With a microbiological cause to these problems they had the possibility to present Safer Sex as a strategy which aimed at excluding the virus from gays’ everyday life and sexuality. The DAH furthermore tried to make Safer Sex to a

question of gay responsibility and solidarity. Many of the DAH's Safer Sex posters visually addressed these two issues.<sup>7</sup> They depicted gays as capable of balancing responsibly lustfulness and health protection by Safer Sex practices. Set against the background of the "homosexual modes of seeing" in the twentieth century (Weiermair 1987) and compared with the imagery of gay magazines during 1970s and 1980s, Safer Sex posters drew upon the familiar aesthetics of gay lifestyle and thereby suggested that there was a continuity between the era of free and liberated sexuality and the period of Safer Sex. Condoms would not make a difference, was the message of the DAH; Safer Sex would be as exciting as unprotected sex. Thus, Safer Sex should keep a certain degree of an autonomous sexuality which had become decisive for gay identity in the last decade. Responsibly balancing desire and health protection furthermore contested the caricature of reckless and sex-addicted gays in the mass media (cf. Halter 1984) and pushed the idea of a medically informed individual who is able to handle certain risks on its own. A second image pattern in the DAH's Safer Sex campaign was also seemingly influenced by the will to reject public stereotypes. Some posters showed solidary gays open for discussing gay sexuality, responsibility and the risks of their lifestyle. Such "antipodes of the over-masculine macho-gay" (Pulver 1999, 414) were quite new in regards to the usual images in gay magazines at the time which often depicted individualized male bodies. Such pictures reflected and stimulated the concern to address AIDS as a matter of solidarity and ethics.

It is important to note that the Safer Sex strategy as it is expressed in these posters did not find an unequivocal approval of all homosexuals. While the DAH tried to present Safer Sex as a lustful practice, many articles in the *Siegessäule* contested the DAH's idea that condoms would not make a difference. In contrast, for many homosexuals, they mattered a lot (cf. Müller 1986; Schachtenbeck 1986). In spite of these new Safer Sex-induced problems however, the West German gay scene, its new AIDS organisations and activists, equipped with self-appropriated scientific knowledge and their own strategy against the virus, was able to present itself as a self-confident actor in West German AIDS politics. When in March 1986, the health committee of the West German parliament organised one of the first expert hearings on the AIDS problematic, the Bundestag administration did not only invite the "usual suspects" – clinicians, virologists, epidemiologists, health officials and deputies of the health insurance system – but also several German gay activists like Frank Rühmann, as well as Gerd Paul and Ian Schäfer of the DAH. In this hearing, in the midst of the assembled public health establishment, gay activists presented themselves as AIDS experts, they clearly formulated their interests, needs and their own view

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<sup>7</sup> Historical Safer Sex posters by the DAH are available on the website of the Deutsche Hygiene-Museum Dresden: <<http://www.dhmd.de/emuseum/eMuseumPlus>> (Accessed March 20, 2015).

on the problem (Deutscher Bundestag 1986, 37-41, 61-78). Such political efforts to present the gay scene as a serious and informed partner in public health issues resulted in several cooperations with state administrations. The West Berlin Senate agreed to finance the Berlin *AIDS-Hilfe* in 1985 (Salmen 1985 et seq.). The Federal Ministry of Health followed this example and began to cooperate with the DAH since the end of the same year. Furthermore, the federal government's beginning state-wide prevention strategy against HIV/AIDS was based altogether on an educational approach and the individualistic logic of Safer Sex similar to strategy of the DAH. Thereby, the government dismissed traditional contagion policies of state intervention and quarantine (Geene 2000; Reutter 1992).

By 1986, gay organisations and activists became a part of an emerging AIDS-political network between scientists, health officials and politicians, state agencies, education campaigns, condoms, posters, and Safer Sex practices. These associations should prove to be very stable when, in 1987, the Bavarian Government decided to leave this consensus and tried to fight AIDS with a traditional interventionist strategy based on the Federal Infectious Disease Law which did not include the cooperation with self-help organisations (Reutter 1992). The involvement of gay men and gay risk strategies in these stable networks was the result of their acknowledgement of AIDS as a disease which mainly affects homosexuals and the subsequent appropriation of virological knowledge. However, by adopting this knowledge, as critical as this might have been, gay men had to accept the dependence on science to be able to empower themselves and to become an influential political force in the field of AIDS policy. Thus, it is not surprising that many homosexuals who were socialised in the 1970s, the period of gay liberation, considered AIDS to be an irreversible break in gay emancipation history. After a decade of liberation politics, which was believed to have broken the repression of law and the paternalism of science for the first time in history, they regretted the renewed power relations towards science and the (re-)regulation of gay sexuality by Safer Sex practices. In 1991, the sociologist and gay activist Martin Dannecker wrote that “‘Safer Sex’ shines on the past sexuality and assigns to it the odium of the dangerous. Thus, it [Safer Sex, S.H.] does not only take the current sexuality under the controlling economy of Aids, but also the sexuality lived in the past” (cited in Beljan 2014, 210). Therefore, some gay men believed that their AIDS politics had to be accompanied by a “practice of mourning”: not only because of all the AIDS patients who fell victim to the epidemic, but also because gays seemed to have lost the utopia of radical sexual self-determination (Beljan 2014, 193-231; Engelmann 2014, 287-92).

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## 6. Conclusion: HIV/AIDS in a Risk Society

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This article has analysed how the West German gay scene reacted to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early and mid-1980s. It pointed out that gay men distinguished two kinds of AIDS risk: risky sex and risky language. On the one hand, they started to consider AIDS as a disease of their own due to an emerging subcultural controversy about the relation between AIDS and their sexual behaviour. This debate was fuelled by an exchange with international gay communities, the visualising effects of regularly published AIDS statistics in gay media as well as the growing subcultural presence of HIV-positive gay men – aspects which all contributed to establish HIV/AIDS as a serious medical, social, political and sexual problem of German homosexuals. What appeared to be a typically scandalised mass media issue designed to discriminate homosexuality in the first place was transformed to a concrete and meaningful risk to gay men's lives in the West German gay subculture by 1984/85. On the other hand, West German homosexuals were concerned with a risky language – a language which was ambivalent in its meanings and which did not seem to be trustworthy in representing the facts and evidences of the natural world. While some mass media magazines mobilised the full potential of metaphorical language and images in order to raise both a collective awareness and preparedness for the epidemic, many gay men of the West German gay community strongly disagreed with the indefiniteness and ambiguities of metaphorical news coverage. They criticised and rejected a metaphorical language which they believed to be dangerous in terms of politics. Metaphors would conceal the medical facts and evidences of the “real disease” which more and more gays suffered from and create a second discursive reality of HIV/AIDS consisting of antigay morality, ideologies and fears. Therefore, they demanded that “the mixture of the medical and the political” had to find its end.

These two dimensions of gay men's reactions to HIV/AIDS are not only characteristic for the HIV/AIDS debates in particular, but also for controversies about risks in the late twentieth century, in general, for controversies about the consistency of reality, about the boundaries between facts and metaphors, evidence and morality, science and politics, are typical for the emergence of so called “risk societies” since the 1970s. One of the main characteristics of risk societies according to Ulrich Beck was the unclear epistemological basis of risks like HIV/AIDS. What risks were and by whom they were defined turned out to be the subject of intense public debates. These debates were not exclusively dominated by scientists or other institutional experts. Risks created new forms of affectedness and therefore new actors and experts like gay AIDS activists. They claimed to have the necessary legitimisation and credibility for interpreting and defining risks, thereby challenging the social and political status of scientists, scientific facts and even the methodological grounds of science. Sociologists like Ulrich Beck and Bruno Latour therefore diagnosed a severe

“crisis of objectivity” (Latour 2010, 37). This crisis expressed itself in growing skepticisms by new social groups and movements towards the scientist’s monopoly on rationality and truth as well as in a simultaneous awareness for the fundamental dependence of Western societies on the techno-scientific apparatus in order to determine and visualise the character, nature and dimensions of risks. However, the ontological status of many risks – entities which Latour called “hybrids” or “hairy objects” – were far from being evident and uncontroversial (Latour 2008; 2010).

With reference to these sociological analyses of risks in the late twentieth century I would argue that the reactions to and strategies against HIV/AIDS by gay activists and organisations can be interpreted as specific reactions to the historical situation described by sociologists like Ulrich Beck and Latour. The “crisis of objectivity” with regard to gay AIDS politics was based in the irritation about the two realities of HIV/AIDS – the reality of “the real disease” and the sphere of metaphors and ambivalent meanings. Gay men’s reactions to these double structure of the AIDS phenomenon resulted in a close relationship to science and scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge was believed to purify the AIDS discourse from metaphorical language. It should help to end the “epidemic of signification,” a controversy consisting of ambiguous meanings about a dangerous gay lifestyle which was considered to have severe political consequences for the gay subculture. Gay men’s strong relation to scientific knowledge thereby stabilized the reputation and influence of science during a period of general skepticism towards the role of science in modern societies. This was quite paradoxical with regard to gay liberation movement of the 1970s which had longed for a greater independence of medical categories and paternalism. Therefore, many gay men socialised in the period of the gay emancipation movement considered this renewed dependency on science as a restriction of gay autonomy and even as the end of an unique age of radical sexual self-determination. However, gay men did not just submit to the political supremacy of scientific facts. In contrast, they took on a critical relation to science and were aware of the social construction of facts. By the critical appropriation of scientific knowledge gay activists empowered themselves to become a part in the emerging AIDS expert networks within the public health establishment since 1985/86 and were able to shape the emerging AIDS education campaigns and Safer Sex strategies to a considerable extent. The prevention of a health risk like HIV/AIDS therefore included the active participation of affected groups like male homosexuals with regard to both the planning of AIDS prevention campaigns and the concrete prevention practices. The controversies about HIV/AIDS thus did not only mean a break in the history of gay liberation because Safer Sex seemed to establish a new regime of power and therefore afforded new political approaches beyond the logic of emancipation (cf. Engelmann 2014). HIV/AIDS and gay activism also exemplify a turning point in the history of risks in the twentieth century, for the controversial negotiations of the nature, meaning

and consequences of AIDS risk resulted in new political constellations and readjustments of the relation between science, society and politics.

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