

On Greek persecution of HIV-positive immigrants

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Sick Predators: How a dying regime preyed upon women with HIV, invested in wholesale racism, and endangered public health.

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This is my fifth article for the *Witte de With Review* (an initiative of Rotterdam-based Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art). It is a chilling tale best read in conjunction with Zoe Mavroudi's documentary 'Ruins'. Click here for the Witte de With site which contains photos and footnotes unavailable below. [1] The article's text follows...

1. Introduction: The Basement

It was five in the morning. The early morning April breeze was cutting into Katerina's underdressed flesh like a razor. But, with her mind clearing, a pressing hunger made her step out from her makeshift shelter. She turned the corner, on the way to the nearby corner shop in Psirri where she often spent her 'savings' on bread and chips. Suddenly she felt a firm hand on her shoulder and heard a voice asking: "Where do you think you are going?" It was a cop. And he was not alone. There were six of them, their parked vehicles forming a small convoy that she had failed to notice. There was even a van waiting, with its door wide open. "I am off to buy some bread," she replied. "No you are not. You are coming with us. For a quick check of your papers. Then you can buy your bread."

Katerina knew that the cops were frequently checking on paperless migrants in the area. She was reassured by this thought, thinking that, as a Greek, she would be released as soon as the police confirmed her identity. When they arrived at the police station, which she knew well from the many times she was caught for 'possession', she relaxed. Until they made her walk downstairs to the basement, rather than upstairs to the usual office. "Don't worry," the same cop said as her body began to tense up in fear. "Just a quick test to see if you are carrying HIV and then you will be on your way."

Katerina was made to offer her finger for pricking by one of the new generation of rapid HIV testing devices that, purportedly, deliver results within a few minutes. The basement was bare except for a couple of old metal chairs. Katerina sat on one of them, her hunger replaced by foreboding, as she waited for the device to come up with a 'verdict'. Last time she was tested, she had done so voluntarily after a social worker had suggested it. There were doctors and nurses around, a

comfortable couch, even magazines to look at while waiting for her blood to be taken. And when the result came back, days later, and it was negative, the social worker was on hand. This time it was just the two cops, the two chairs, and the device. After what felt like a lifetime, the device showed signs of life. A red light had come on, turning the look on the policeman's face sardonic: "You have HIV I am afraid. I have to arrest you."

And so, without counseling, without any human contact, the test to which Katerina had never consented became her arrest warrant. Handcuffed, she was thrown into a holding cell. Later, a doctor came and, while she was still cuffed, he took blood from her arm to confirm the 'findings'. This was to be only the beginning of an ordeal that lasted months. Weeks in a cell with no medical help; weeks during which a crumbling regime, in the midst of a gruesome economic crisis, struggled to survive by spreading fear and loathing through a combination of threatening 'respectable' Greeks with Grexit 2 and preying upon human wrecks like Katerina. It was perhaps the worst campaign of conscious misogyny and outright racism employed by any European government since the 1930s. And it went unnoticed by a Europe far more concerned with whether the same regime would manage to push through the illogical austerity policies that led to its disintegration.

2. Lying to the United Nations

The Greek minister of 'health and social solidarity', Mr. Andreas Loverdos, rises to the podium of the United Nations to address the 2011 High-Level Meeting on AIDS. It is 9 June, less than a year before Katerina and another thirty-one women were thrown in prison for carrying the HIV virus. At the United Nations' podium, the minister set out his thesis: Countries like Greece, recipients of large numbers of paperless migrants, were exposed to the 'AIDS epidemic' largely because of sub-Saharan African and Eastern European women arriving in Greece and being pressed into prostitution. With considerable theatricality, Mr. Loverdos explained to the meeting that Greece is facing an explosion of AIDS as a result of these women migrants and their illicit employment in the Greek sex industry.

In the audience, there were Greek AIDS experts working with a variety of research and medical institutions. They could not believe their ears! All epidemiological research showed that women prostitutes were next to absent on the map of HIV advancement within the Greek population. Like in most European countries, the primary group where the HIV virus was located, and through which it made headway, was that of gay men and, much less so, intravenous drug users who share needles. The incidence of HIV infection due to female prostitution was, and remains, statistically insignificant.

After the minister descended from the UN podium, full of himself, some Greek delegates approached him and questioned what study supported his extraordinary allegations. His response was: "I have my own sources." He had, of course, no such thing. Instead, he had an agenda. A virulent agenda for saving himself, politically, by spreading fear and appealing to the most heinous crevices of Greece's society; the crevices in which misogyny, racism, and moral panic buy politicians a handful of additional votes.

3. The Broom

Katerina's arrest, followed by compulsory HIV tests, was one of more than a hundred detentions that occurred over a few days in central Athens. Of those, twenty-nine women were found to carry HIV, were thrown in prison, and their photographs (complete with names, places of origin, etc.) were posted on the web—and, naturally, paraded across tabloid newspapers and television programs. The

press went into a feeding frenzy of sensationalism that came hand-in-hand with triumphalism along the lines of: "At last, the Greek state is serving its citizens by cleaning up the streets and alerting us to the imported scourge."

Operation Broom, which is how these arrests were referred to in the media, was the brainchild of two ministers: the aforementioned health and social solidarity minister, Mr. Loverdos, and Mr. Mihalis Chrysohoidis, the public order minister. These men had something important in common: Prior to the eruption of the Greek crisis, they had been thought of as up-and-coming members of the hitherto dominant socialist party (PASOK), entertaining hopes of replacing their leader Mr. George Papandreou. Each thought of himself as prime-minister-in-waiting. Alas, once the crisis hit, PASOK's calamitous handling of it led to copious electoral hemorrhaging. With the party on the ropes, the two ministers found themselves fighting for their political lives.

In November 2011, eighteen months after 'Bailout Mk1', and under the extreme pressure of the unfolding economic crisis, George Papandreou threw in the towel, resigned as prime minister, and agreed to the formation of a grand coalition between three parties: PASOK, the conservative New Democracy party, and a (now-defunct) small ultra right-wing unambiguously racist party (LAOS) that harbored a number of neo-fascists (as well as Nazis that were soon to cross over to Golden Dawn). That government, in which Mr. Loverdos and Mr. Chrysohoidis continued to serve, was headed by a former vice-president of the European Central Bank and was meant to be only a stopgap administration, until Greece's 'Bailout Mk2' was signed, sealed, and delivered in the spring of 2012. So, the two ministers knew that their days in government were numbered and that a general election would be called in May in which their own party, PASOK, was facing decimation.

Determined to survive PASOK's trouncing, Mr. Loverdos and Mr. Chrysohoidis combined forces and came up with Operation Broom as a private survival strategy. Invoking a piece of obscure legislation, circa 1940, that allowed the health minister, in extraordinary circumstances, to issue decrees that involved the incarceration of persons who may pose a public health 'peril', they staged an assault on the weakest of the innocent. Officers from the Health Ministry, in cahoots with the police, organized the detention of women along the lines of Katerina's experience. Operation Broom was thus born.

What was the two ministers' plan? It was carefully to engineer a moral panic akin to Greece's very own Dreyfus Affair. To invoke the image of the unsuspecting 'family man' (who may occasionally 'use' a sex worker) as the victim of migrants, loose women, and a deadly 'imported' virus. And to bathe themselves in the media limelight as the defenders of that average guy, of his... wife, of the nuclear family. Mr. Loverdos' earlier United Nations speech, with its rampant disregard for expert opinion, paved the ideological way for Operation Broom. And he patiently waited to unleash it, with devastating effect, a few weeks before the May 2012 election.

Did it work? It sure did. As Rupert Murdoch once said about television: "You can never lose money by underestimating the intelligence of your audience." Similarly in politics, it is hard to lose votes when playing the racist, misogynist card, especially at a time of existential national crisis. Indeed, the media performed their vile role on cue and precisely as the two ministers had imagined. Television anchors were extolling the ministers for "proving ready to break some eggs in order to make an omelet" and for putting "the state's coercive capacities in the service of the public." Full, front-page photographs of disheveled, desperate women appeared with labels such as: "The hooker who terrorized Athens' streets."

During that electoral campaign, of which Operation Broom was such a detestable feature, opinion pollsters were prognosticating that PASOK and the ultra right-wing LAOS party were crumbling while xenophobia was riding high and, with it, so too was Golden Dawn, the emergent Nazi party. It is a sad reflection upon the Greek electorate that, while PASOK lost many of its leading lights in the

election-day rout, Mr. Loverdos and Mr. Chrysohoidis retained their seats.

4. Sacrificing the Truth (and Every Public Health Policy Principle)

When the AIDS epidemic erupted in the early 1980s, I recall the long, nuanced debates that happened in Britain, where I lived at the time. The consensus amongst experts was twofold.

First, people should be encouraged to be tested en masse, and the only way of encouraging them to do so was to make them feel that their privacy would be respected at all cost, their test results would never be made public, and their human rights would be inviolable. Just as client-lawyer privilege was deemed a right and a means of ensuring the long-term justice of the legal system, similarly no doctor should ever perform an HIV test without the patient's consent and the results ought never be disclosed by the doctor even if the patient were refusing to tell his or her sexual partner. The clear and sound logic here was both Kantian and utilitarian: Kantian in the sense that a promise is a promise, and utilitarian in that breaking the promise to keep a patient's HIV status private (in order to protect his or her sexual partner) would jeopardize millions of people who would never find out if they carried HIV as they would avoid being tested due to a well-founded fear that a positive result may be conveyed to their families, employers, friends.

Secondly, the only protection from HIV was to use a condom and to assume that one's partner was infected. Even if there had been no concerns for privacy, and all people who tested positive for HIV were happy to have their photos and addresses uploaded onto the Internet, it would be silly to assume that protection was unnecessary just because one's partner's face was not on the said 'Facebook'.

Operation Broom managed brutally to violate both principles. On the one hand, the involvement of medical services, at the health minister's behest, in the administration of coerced HIV tests destroyed the legitimacy of the medical services in the hearts and minds of those most vulnerable to HIV. Whereas prior to Operation Broom drug addicts like Katerina did choose to get tested, Operation Broom ensured that none of them would ever trust the 'system' again. Potentially, the health minister and his public order buddy inflicted great damage upon the culture of HIV testing that they supposedly wished to promote. Turning to the protection of the 'customer', which the two ministers and their media minions seemed so dedicated to, nothing could have instilled a stupider false sense of 'safety' in 'his' mind than the thought that "if my prostitute is not on the ministry's 'Facebook', I must be safe."

5. Conclusion: A Revolting Legacy for Greece and Europe

Of those forcibly tested for HIV, like Katerina, thirty-two women were found to be HIV positive and charged with "repeated grievous bodily harm and conspiracy to commit grievous bodily harm." Of those, eight never went to trial while the rest were bailed out, ordered to stand trial on significantly reduced charges. However, after the twin elections of May and June 2012 had been and gone, and the two ministers had kept their seats, the ministerial decree was rescinded and Operation Broom was quietly suspended. The women swept up in it are now struggling to recover. Stigmatized, fearful of stepping outside, without resources, no counseling, lacking proper healthcare, still subject to being tried on the lesser charges, they live day-to-day as best as they can.

The reason that the draconian charges collapsed was a remarkable finding that the 'designers' of Operation Broom had never predicted: Of the arrested women who tested positive for HIV, the vast

majority were Greek! And they were not prostitutes! Indeed, only one HIV infected foreigner had ever worked as a prostitute by choice, and another one, a minor that the police unearthed in some brothel, had been being held as a sex slave. 4 In short, the moral panic of 'migrant whores' infecting gullible Greek customers with HIV went up in smoke once a thin ray of light shone onto it. Of course, by then, the damage had been done. 5

More recently, the ultra right-wing health minister who succeeded Mr. Loverdos resuscitated his abhorrent decree. As these words are being written, it is believed that hundreds of coerced HIV tests are being performed on paperless migrants apprehended under the new pogrom 'program' going by the name of Xenios Zeus. 6 Operation Broom may have left the front pages and the noxious spotlight of state power may have been mercifully removed from women like Katerina, but, nonetheless, once evil penetrates the social and institutional fabric, it cannot be easily removed.

Europe and the rest of the world have heard of Greece's Golden Dawn, our Nazi throwback. They rose at exactly the same time that Operation Broom unfolded. It was no coincidence. Both the plight of Katerina's ilk and Nazism's rise were inextricably correlated with Greece's never-ending economic, political, and social implosion, following the nation's bankruptcy within a European Union that forced the largest loan in history upon the most insolvent of its members—on condition, of course, of inhuman austerity. It is, I submit, pointless to blame the Nazis for whatever successes they score in the resulting mess. Evil is, after all, in their nature. But the same cannot be said for those who choose to behave like sick predators, e.g., the two socialist party ministers who opened the gates to serious evil in order to save their political skin. 7

When these Establishment politicians led a media feeding frenzy, preying upon the most wretched of the weak, and investing heavily into misogyny and racism, what other gift did the Nazis need? When the rest of the government indulged them, and parliament stood idly by, when medical personnel participated in the women's unlawful ordeal, and the electorate rewarded their sick predation with extra votes, why should the professional racist misogynists of Golden Dawn not take courage and feel vindicated? Is any of this Golden Dawn's fault? No! It is our collective guilt. Not just of us Greeks. But of every European citizen that sits idly by, thinking that Greece is being treated to some tough, but deserved medicine.

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<http://yanisvaroufakis.eu/2014/01/18/sick-predators-how-a-dying-regime-preyed-upon-women-with-hiv-invested-in-wholesale-racism-and-endangered-public-health/>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.wdw.nl>