

## *Paul Rabinow est Mort: A Memoir*

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April 12, 2021

*I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order.*

—Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*

*How is one to decide where one is? And where one is going?* —Paul Rabinow, *Marking time. On the Anthropology of the Contemporary*



On January 23, 2002, a few minutes after my Air France Airbus took off, the captain of the ‘ship’ interrupted our thoughts with a message: “ I am grieved to tell you that Pierre Bourdieu est mort’. There were gasps, and even some tears as the French passengers discussed one or other of Bourdieu’s scholarly work but also his status as a public intellectual. French citizens were proud of him, and even if they hadn’t read any of his work they embraced him as their own, a French sociologist. His death mattered.

I am amazed that Paul Rabinow has not been given a proper obituary in *The New York Times* as had Marshal Sahlins who died on April 5<sup>th</sup> two days before the death of Rabinow< <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/10/us/marshall-d-sahlins-dead.html>> or months previously the death of David Graeber <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/04/books/david-graeber-dead.html>> Was it because Paul was as much a historian of the contemporary, a philosopher , or a molecular scientist as he was an anthropologist? Paul once told me that he felt alienated in the

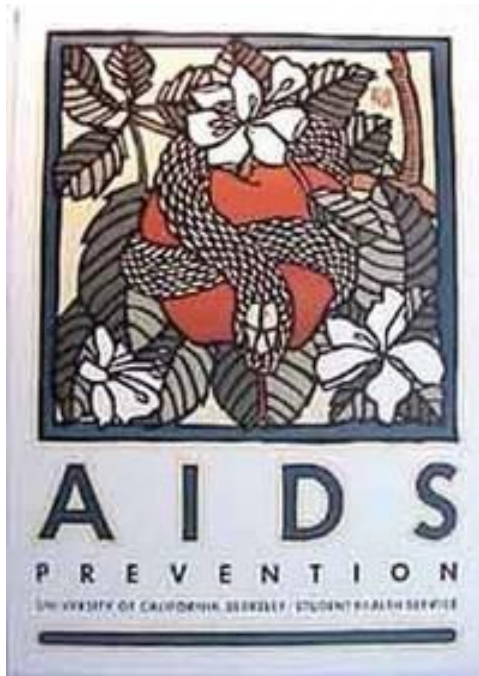
department of anthropology and that he might be more comfortable in another department. I told him that we all at various times feel that way. Anthropologists are the lone strangers of social science. But Paul's voluminous writings and interpretations of Michel Foucault should have been enough to be on those NYT's pages. His classic texts are read around the scholarly world and his invitation to Foucault to give a series of lectures in 2008 brought the house down and led to UC Berkeley briefly renamed, 'Foucault U'.

Paul, I missed saying goodbye to you by a day and now it will be a multitude of days of regret and sorrow.

### **AIDS Heretics: Comrades in Arms**

In the fall of 1992 Paul and I decided to co-teach the first UCB undergraduate class on AIDS. By then, AIDS was a disaster, having surpassed cancer, heart disease, and accidents to become the leading cause of death among men ages 25 to 44 in California. AIDS accounted for 24% of all such deaths at that time according to the first systematic study of its kind by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Paul had begun his research on DNA and molecular anthropology, while I was studying the much criticized and reviled AIDS sanatorium in Havana. Our class was held in a large room in Wurster Hall. A hundred students enrolled but just about anyone who wanted to come to the class were welcome.

Some of our Berkeley students, faculty and other colleagues had died or were dying of AIDS. For one, the Medical Director of then Cowell Hospital, Dr. Jim Brown had died of AIDS following an early attempt to educate Berkeley students about the risks of condom-free sex. Jim was a friend from our Peace Corps days in Brazil. I suggested that we pay the local poster artist, David Goines, to create a visual message warning of condom-less sex. The poster he produced and that the university paid for was immediately rejected as an anti-sex poster complete with a Biblical snake [devil] tempting the 'innocent' to eat the red apple (gay sex)



Paul Rabinow had begun his study of the HIV/ AIDS epidemic following Peter Deusberg, then a still highly respected UC Berkeley Professor of Molecular Biology, who in 1991 released a report entitled "Everything You Know About AIDS Is Wrong". As a member of the National Academy of Sciences, Deusberg was one of the world's foremost experts on retroviruses and HIV is a retrovirus. However, Deusberg concluded that the Immunodeficiency Virus—HIV— did *not* cause AIDS, thus dismissing the most cherished hypothesis of the world's AIDS experts. His alternative hypothesis was that AIDS was caused by toxins in the form of cocaine, speed, and other drug substances that were popular in the IV and gay communities, and which he said were destroying the immune system. Going against the grain of medical science, Deusberg described HIV as a harmless fellow traveler along for the ride. Paul Rabinow was initially intrigued by Deusberg's conclusions. Meanwhile I had recently returned from Cuba in 1991 where I was totally convinced that HIV/AIDS was a global killer and that the Cuban government was correct in its heretical approach to confining HIV patients to a well-structured sanatorium that was not a hospital but a complex of residential houses and buildings including art and recreation until there was a sound medical response to the AIDS virus.

Thus, in the fall of 1992 Paul Rabinow and I agreed to teach an Anthropology 119 class on "AIDS: The Disease and its Doubles". Paul covered the history of reason, life, and science while I covered irrationality, unreason, denial, and death. When I opened a lecture with Camus's *The Plague*, Paul demolished Camus as a weakling intellectual and brought Sartre into the dialogue.

Luckily, we brought many faculties across the disciplines to speak in the class from Deusberg to Tom Laqueur. In one of our classes we invited two men from San

Francisco, one white an affluent from the Castro district and one Black from Bayview-Hunters Point each of whom had been diagnosed with HIV. It was during their conversation and the Q&A period that they compared each other's T-cells and how these had interfered in their lives that Paul came up with the idea of biosociality which he quickly published as "Artificiality and Enlightenment: from sociobiology to biosociality" in a Zone book.

In November 1992 as our AIDS class was winding down Paul and I co-organized a special panel at the American Anthropological Association convention in San Francisco. We sent a late letter to the President of the AAA asking permission to organize a special event during the convention on December 5th in the Hilton Hotel on "AIDS and the Social Imaginary". It was not an official AAA panel but announced as a special event to all the AAA members. We invited what some members of the AAA saw as an elite 'celebrity' panel—Jean Comaroff, Mick Taussig, Renato Rosaldo, Ralph Bolton, Paul and me. Our purpose was to use whatever influence we might have in anthropology to make AIDS as visible as possible.

Paul and I entered a tense and over-crowded conference room. We carried a poster that read: "We All Have AIDS" meaning that we all had relatives, children, neighbors, students, etc. who were suffering and dying from the virus. It was to be a sign of solidarity. It did not work. To the contrary the room was over-crowded with protestors, many from SOLGA, the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists, now known as AQA, the Association for Queer Anthropology (AQA) wearing T-shirts and waving alternative posters: "*These Natives Can Speak for Themselves*" expressing their dissatisfaction with the senior, presumably heterosexual anthropologists who would be the speakers.

The room was a jumble, hot, loud and threatening. People were pushing each other to get inside the room. It felt like the beginning of an insurrection. I wanted to call the hotel security. But the speakers began. Jean Comaroff discussed the racism associating the origins of HIV with Black Africa (similar to today's Asian origin of Covid-19). Mick Taussig read a paper with extensive quotes from the book *Closer to the Knives, an AIDS memoir* by David Wojnarowicz supplemented with four slides of artwork which may have been painted or sketched by Taussig, but their relevance to the paper was questioned. I spoke about AIDS and Brazilian women, transvestites, prostitutes and street kids who had been infected with AIDS and left without any government health support, which I contrasted to the medical success of the Cuban AIDS sanatorium albeit at the cost of authoritarianism and individual freedom. Paul Rabinow spoke about AIDS, ethics, activism and politics in AIDS research. He compared the work of Peter Deusberg (the AIDS denier) and Robert Gallo, an American biomedical researcher who was once known for his discovery of HIV as the agent responsible for AIDS. Gallo and his collaborators published a series of papers in Science demonstrating that a retrovirus that they alone had isolated, called HTLV-III, was the cause of AIDS beating the French discovery. Both Rosaldo and Bolton were acutely aware of the situation and both stayed in the audience in an attempt to show their support for the protestors. When Bolton was called up to speak as the invited discussant he introduced a second uninvited discussant,

Steven O. Murray (who died in California in 2019 from an aggressive diffuse large B-cell lymphoma) repeated Bolton's "anti-elitist" and "anti-colonialist" accusation to the panelists and demanded that all AAA panels must include sexual diversity.

The floor then opened for the audience to respond. One member in the audience, a UC Berkeley visiting postdoc, rose and read a passage from *Mein Kampf* calling me a Hitlerite for my visit to the AIDS sanatorium in Havana. Another protestor was swinging a chain that had been wrapped around her body toward Paul and me. Time for tea? I asked.

During the open questions Paul Rabinow tried to respond to some of the criticisms. He began by saying that AIDS does not belong to one group or another, and that we all live with the disease in some sense. But when he began to say "Back in 1984, when my dear friend Michel Foucault died of AIDS."-- A loud hiss went up from the audience. Paul took a step back, shocked. Why could he not talk about Foucault? In the pause someone yelled out, "Foucault was a closet case!" Another said; "He never went public with his AIDS". "Foucault never said 'queer' he always referred to 'homosexual' another commented.

But Paul ended the panel defending his right to speak in behalf of the man that he loved, Michel Foucault, who had died in Paris in 1984. He feared that Foucault had contracted HIV/AIDS in the bathhouses of San Francisco during his invited series of lectures at UC Berkeley, in 1983. He felt that he was the cause of Foucault's AIDS by telling him about the bathhouses.

Paul Rabinow had this to say after the messy 1992 (AAA) AIDS panel:

"The pain, suffering, death, loss, bigotry, hatred and division brought forth by the AIDS epidemic are a pressing source of concern to us all. I entered upon the study of AIDS and co-organized this AAA session in an effort to make a simple statement of solidarity. That it was not interpreted in this way by some is a source of sadness...AIDS can and must be studied from different vantage points— from outside as well as from within the groups that have suffered from it, from the point of view of experts as well as those whose concerns arise from different perspectives.... There were many panels on the program that dealt with diverse aspects of the AIDS epidemic. The only group of anthropologists threatened with silence was we. Threats and attempts to muzzle others have all too often been the first reflex of those who consider this horrible epidemic their own property. ACT UP and others have courageously, imaginatively and constructively challenged this stance. Surely we all know that silencing = death. ... I studied the origins and identity of the HIV strains in Robert Gallo's Laboratory in 1983-4. Truth and Power are the main focus of my study. In this epidemic, the scientific establishment has shown us too much of the corruption of scientific norms, of attempts to silence their opponents, of abusive ambition of some of its leaders, of endless turf wars, of the manipulative recourse to the media, of bureaucratic maneuvering...One thing should be clear to all, once special interest groups control (or attempt to control) the production of truth, science and democracy are the losers."

## **Epilogue**

Years later Paul and I realized how naïve our early orientations to the AIDS epidemic had been. For Paul it was his first acceptance of Professor Peter Deusberg's denial of the agency and power of the AIDS virus. Prof. Deusberg, now 80 years old, was still sitting in the Roma café across from what was once Kroeber Hall, until the COVID shutdown. I wonder what he thinks about the Covid-19 virus? But until 2020 Peter still refused to accept that HIV is the cause of AIDS. Meanwhile, following the years of controversy surrounding a 1987 out of court settlement between the National Institutes of Health and France's Pasteur Institute, Dr. Gallo finally admitted the virus he claimed to have discovered in 1984 was in reality a virus sent to him from France the year before, thus putting an end to a six-year effort by Gallo and his employer, the National Institutes of Health, to claim the AIDS virus as an independent discovery of the United States.

Paul, of course, was a rational atheist and no believer in an afterlife. I was the irrational sometimes believer that, whatever an afterlife might be, our spirits will meet again. I love you Paul, wherever you are.

## **Reference**

A collection of discussions between Foucault and Paul Rabinow in 1983 are available by UCB archives. (The collection was generously donated to the Media Resources Center by Paul Rabinow, Professor of Social Cultural Anthropology and digitized, corrected and arranged by Gisèle Tanasse in 2009.

- [Discussion of Biopower in Paul Rabinow's Office, May 5, 1983](#)
- [Further Discussion of Biopower in Paul Rabinow's Office, May 11, 1983](#)
- [Discussion with Michel Foucault in Paul Rabinow's office, n.d.](#)
- [Rabinow-Foucault phone call \(in French\), May 21, 1983](#)