

Parasitology, Communism, and the Cold War in Brazil (1950s– 1970s)

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Research Objectives

The main objective of my research project is to examine the intersection of medical parasitology, ideology, and politics in Brazil during the twentieth century from the perspective of two of its most important representatives: Samuel Barnsley Pessoa (1898–1976) and Amilcar Vianna Martins (1907–1990). Both are considered founding fathers of modern medical parasitology in Brazil. Pessoa taught at the School of Medicine of the University of São Paulo, Martins at the School of Medicine of the Federal University of Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte. Both were the chairs of medical parasitology in their respective medical schools. From the 1940s onwards, both, too, were active militants of the clandestine Brazilian Communist Party (PCB). In the mid-twentieth century, a considerable number of leading Brazilian parasitologists, most of whom were trained by Pessoa and Martins, were also associated with the Communist Party in the 1950s and 1960s. At the center of this story lies a major paradox: just as these parasitologists were recognized nationally and internationally for their research and contributions, they were also persecuted, both internally and externally, for their communism. Most of them were harassed, imprisoned, dismissed, or exiled by the military regime that was established in March 1964, ending the era of democracy inaugurated in 1945.

This study examines a chapter of the history of Cold War science and medicine little explored by historians and social scientists, at least in Brazil and Latin America. The study is part of a larger project on the interrelationship of public health, democracy, and development in Brazil after World War II, especially in the context of the Cold War. I have been carrying out this research at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation since 2008 with the support of Brazil's National Council for Scientific and Technological Development.

My aim is to understand the political, professional, and ideological affinities between medical parasitology and communism in Brazil. Those affinities endured

for at least four decades following the outbreak of World War II and were conditioned by the Cold War. It is important to highlight the fact that Pessoa, Martins, and their students and colleagues were directly involved with key national and international issues during the Cold War in Brazil: agrarian reform, decolonization, anti-militarism, anti-imperialism, movements for peace and against nuclear weapons, and denunciation of “germ warfare” by the United States during the Korean War. Part of that internationalist political activity was linked to a network of organizations that were under the Soviet umbrella. In the latter case, “the germ warfare allegations,” Samuel Pessoa was a member of the polemical and famous (or, for many, infamous) International Scientific Commission for the Investigation of the Facts concerning Bacterial Warfare in Korea and China (ISC), which, under the coordination of British biochemist and sinologist Joseph Needham (1900–1995), released a controversial report confirming the use of biological weapons based on a mission to North Korea and China in mid-1952.¹ Pessoa’s participation in the ISC figured importantly in his professional and political career until his death in 1976. He published a series of articles and lectured on the issue during the 1950s and early 1960s.²

The governments of the United States, the United Kingdom, and their allies considered the report a farcical tool of propaganda. They hotly contested both the ISC’s partiality—it was comprised of communists and sympathizers—and the limits imposed by Korean and Chinese authorities on the Commission’s work. Some members of the ISC, notably Joseph Needham, were lambasted with personal and professional criticism and were ostracized in a campaign orchestrated by the United States and England to discredit the Commission and its findings. A lawsuit was filed in the United States against the report’s promoters and sympathizers in climate imbued with anti-communist Cold War paranoia. To this day, the issue of biological warfare remains a matter of controversy among historians and experts in international relations.³ Despite its dramatic effects, which lasted until the 1960s, scholars have left this Cold War episode relatively unexplored.

The purpose of my research at the Rockefeller Archive Center is related to an important angle of my research project: the relationship between Brazilian parasitologists and several national and international organizations. The Rockefeller Foundation (RF), in particular, provided support for scientific research and medical training in Brazil from 1910 onwards. Samuel Pessoa's case is emblematic: his ties to the RF go back at least to 1922, when he was a fellow on the International Health Board (IHB), working directly with Samuel Taylor Darling (1872–1925) and Wilson George Smillie (1886–1971) in the Hygiene Institute of São Paulo and co-authoring scientific articles with them.⁴ Archival evidence suggests, however, that in the 1950s, the RF—through the Division of Medical Education and Public Health (MEPH)—withdrew the possibility of providing any support for Pessoa, as well as for his students and disciples, for political and ideological reasons.

On several occasions, Pessoa attributed his choice of parasitology and field work as his scientific and professional calling to Smillie's influence. He constantly expressed his gratitude for the support given for his first publications. When the Rockefeller Foundation decided to close its office in Sao Paulo in 1944, Pessoa gave interviews to newspapers praising the role of the International Health Division in Brazilian public health and in his training. Referring to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "good neighbor" policy toward Latin America, ironically suggesting that "the Rockefeller Foundation's policy of good neighborly relations preceded Roosevelt's own by many years."⁵ He continued to recognize the RF's role even after his political choices had definitively led him to distance himself from American philanthropy.

In order to explore the RF's relationship with Pessoa, in particular, I considered it essential to understand how the Rockefeller Foundation dealt with the constraints of the Cold War, in particular the McCarthyist environment, the Cox-Reece Commission investigations, and other pressures that affected the RF's policies. I am interested in how RF staff in Brazil interpreted and handled the

pressures of the United States' political environment and the demands of the Brazilian scientific and political context in their communications, reports, diaries and recommendations to RF administrators in New York. In sum, to understand Cold War science and medicine “on the ground.”

Related Sources at the Rockefeller Archive Center

The research I conducted at the RAC over a period of two weeks in September 2014 focused on three sets of documents belonging to different collections. The first set comprises the diaries and correspondence of Rockefeller Foundation officers who worked in Brazil between 1940 and 1960 and who, in the Division of Medicine and Public Health (DMPH, 1951–1955), in the Program for Medical Education and Public Health (MEPH, 1955–1959), and in the Medical and Natural Sciences Division (1959–1970), were in any way connected with Brazil.⁶ I gave special attention to some diaries, such as those of Robert Briggs Watson (1903–1978), the chief of the RF office in Rio de Janeiro who was responsible for programs in South America from 1954 until the office was closed down in 1961. I also systematically read the diaries of John Clifford Bugher (1901–1970), who was Director of the Medical Education Division in the period from 1955 to 1959. Bugher corresponded regularly with Watson on support programs for Brazilian institutions, professors and scientists. The diary of Ernani Braga (1913–1984), a leading Brazilian public health physician who worked in the Rio de Janeiro office between 1957 and 1961, and who was associated with Watson, is also an important source for understanding the relationship between the RF and Brazil in the 1950s from the standpoint of a Brazilian Rockefeller employee. These two diaries contain a detailed record of the day-to-day operations of the Rio de Janeiro office and the opinions of its key employees regarding people and institutions they related with and decisions and guidelines on whom to support in terms of travel, training and projects.

I consulted extracts from the diaries and correspondence of presidents of the Rockefeller Foundation (1948–1961) in the period under scrutiny, namely Chester Barnard (1886–1961) and Dean Rusk (1909–1994), examining them for mentions of Brazil. I also read and analyzed the correspondence among Watson, Bugher, Braga, and Rusk. Given the characteristics of these sources, it is possible to identify guidelines, criteria, evaluations, and decisions about those who could not receive support because of their political activities, as well as about the degree of tolerance and flexibility with which US philanthropy operated in everyday life in Brazil. Within this set of papers, I surveyed the “fellowship cards” of physicians and scientists who received RF support in the period from 1945 to 1964, in addition to those of the fellows of the IHB/IHD since the 1920s, who, from 1950 onwards, had their requests denied or who were simply considered “*persona non grata*” for political reasons.⁷ Some of the notes and comments on the fellowships cards of the Brazilian physicians and scientists who are the focus of my analysis are taken from these diaries and this correspondence.

The second set of sources I analyzed concerns the Rockefeller Foundation’s response to the complaints and investigations of the United States House Select Committee to Investigate Tax-Exempt Foundations and Comparable Organizations, better known as the Cox-Reece Committee of Investigation (1952–1953).⁸ The American Congress investigated philanthropic foundations, which enjoyed tax exemption, about possible financing of communists and subversives, and even of anti-segregationists. Under pressure and forced to defend the organization, RF President Dean Rusk made statements to the Commission and published a detailed account of its philanthropic activities.⁹ The Cox and Reece Investigations files provide access to a detailed listing of all individuals or organizations that received any type of RF support, in any field, from 1925 to 1952, and whom the Cox-Reece Commission considered, in the crude language of the Cold War, to be “politically questionable individuals” or “known or alleged communists and ex-communists.” This list includes everyone who requested

support, directly or indirectly, successfully or unsuccessfully. My goal was to understand the arguments the Foundation used to explain its policy of supporting and financing its grantees, over the course of nearly three decades, and to identify the guidelines its officials established in the new, markedly anti-communist political context.

Within the purview of the Cox-Reece Committee, the files on the British biochemist Joseph Needham are also worth mentioning, given his public sympathy for the People's Republic of China and his role in heading the commission that investigated the alleged "Bacteriological War" during the Korean War, and in which Samuel Pessoa also participated. The RF had supported Needham, but, as the documents show, the Foundation stressed that this occurred "before World War II."

In the listings—which are detailed, name names, and are accompanied by documents—several Brazilians appear who either received or were denied RF aid. From the information contained in the documentation, it is possible to identify the reasons they appear on the lists: at some point in their lives they sympathized with, had a relationship with, or had belonged to the Brazilian Communist Party or related organizations and activities considered to be anti-American. This document relates directly to the series entitled Program and Policy—National Security, which contains abundant correspondence regarding RF officials' dilemmas in granting funds and support to organizations and individuals in the Cold War era.¹⁰

The third set of sources I analyzed is the correspondence between RF officers and a variety of Brazilians, including university professors, deans of universities, scientists, and senior officials of the Ministry of Education and of the Brazilian development agencies and multilateral organizations such as the Pan American Health Organization and the International Cooperation Agency. This documentation is crucial for my research because it makes it possible to follow

the whole process of the request for support to the Rio de Janeiro office, including the evaluation of the request and the applicant and supporters (by both the office and the divisional directors in New York), communication with senior Brazilian government officials and information on the decision. It reveals, in particular, how candidates—seeking fellowships, support for travel, and financing of any kind—obtained political approval. This correspondence reveals strong connections between the RF office in Brazil and, among other liaisons, the high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Education to which all federal medical schools were subordinated. An important agreement was concluded in 1954 between the Rockefeller Foundation and the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Level Education (CAPES), an agency of the Ministry of Education that had the objective of sending to US medical schools approximately one hundred Brazilian professors in specific medical fields undergoing development in Brazil. This group of sources makes it possible to observe, over a period of almost five years, how the professional and ideological screening of candidates conducted by the two institutions worked.

General Remarks

Some initial considerations can be proposed after reading these RAC sources. First, and perhaps most importantly, the Rockefeller Foundation office in the city of Rio de Janeiro, under the administration of Robert Briggs Watson, implemented a policy of routinely (and consistently throughout the period) checking the political and ideological background of candidates (or potential candidates) applying to receive US philanthropic aid. In the case of the agreement with the Ministry of Education/CAPES for sending 100 professors from Brazilian medical schools for short periods of training in the United States (1955–1961), the Rio de Janeiro office retained and exercised the right to veto names proposed by the schools or by the Brazilian government. This veto was sometimes based on an analysis of the individual competence and quality of the

proposal. In other cases, however, it was explicitly based on the grounds that the candidate had had ties with the Brazilian Communist Party at some point in their lives.

Secondly, this practice of ideological and political surveillance was the result of the pressures the Rockefeller Foundation suffered during the McCarthy period, particularly from the Cox-Reece Committee. In his 1953 report, the president of the RF made it clear that “the Foundation refrains as a matter of policy from making grants to a known Communist.”¹¹ In Brazil, this environment coincided with a period that was strongly anticommunist and favored direct alignment with the US. The Brazilian Communist Party was outlawed in 1947; its deputies, senators and councilors lost their seats and the repression of its members, newspapers and periodicals, and trade unions intensified.

Although tax exemption for foundations continued to be debated, and anticommunism remained the backbone of international politics, there was a gradual easing of these pressures in the US, abetted by Senator Joseph McCarthy’s political decline and changes in the international environment. In Brazil, starting with the Juscelino Kubitschek administration (1956–1961), the government adopted more autonomous foreign policies. Internally, the Communist Party went through a period of “semi-legality” and communists even occupied some government positions, including in public health.

Despite this slightly more relaxed atmosphere, however, until it was closed down, the Rio de Janeiro office maintained its policy of checking the ideological and political background of grant applicants, even when it was no longer an issue in the eyes of the Brazilian government (and applications were submitted by the Ministry of Education) or was not explicitly required by the administration of the Rockefeller Foundation or even by the State Department. In some cases, even though the American consulate granted a visa for an applicant considered “suspected of subversive activities” (the grant or refusal of the visa was

considered the “best” ideological check), the RF’s regional office still withheld support in the belief that the consulate had been lenient. Although the US Embassy in Brazil saw the Rockefeller Foundation as an ally in the containment of communism in Brazilian universities, it seems that the Rio de Janeiro office took matters into its own hands. The documents analyzed reveal that Robert Briggs Watson fought the Cold War longer than the internal and external dynamics seemed to demand.

The documentation shows also that Watson was not alone in the effort to curb the influence of Samuel Pessoa from chairs of parasitology in Brazilian medical schools. It reveals that conservatives in the schools of medicine and the Ministry of Education lined up outside the RF office to try to create, with the support of American philanthropy, research and teaching areas in medical parasitology that would fall outside the sphere of influence of Pessoa and his students.

Finally, RAC documentation makes clear that Watson (and also John C. Bugher) were uneasy about the political activities and the influence of Samuel Barnsley Pessoa in Brazilian medical parasitology. Although parasitology was no longer an RF priority following the closure of its International Health Division, Samuel Pessoa’s engaged parasitology troubled the RF greatly—even though RF sources always referred to Pessoa’s activities in a complimentary manner. On the one hand, although he had been a brilliant RF fellow in the 1920s and had led an impeccable scientific career until the 1940s, this scientist, whom the RF had sponsored and supported, had become a communist and had been involved in a serious accusation leveled at the US government. The stance he had chosen made him persona non grata. On the other hand, there is a more personal dimension to this story. Watson was also a parasitologist and malariologist and working in fields similar to his “enemy,” Pessoa. There are indications that this closeness fueled the criticism of Pessoa. The words Watson used in reference to Pessoa belonged to the hardline vocabulary of the Cold War: “P. went to China, on the ‘germ warfare’ commission, thus prostituting his undoubted scientific ability as a

parasitologist (and invalidated it) to his political beliefs.”¹² Pessoa was not only barred from any activity that had funding from the RF; his students and employees were also excluded from positions or financing that depended on the approval of the RF in Brazil.

In short, the Cold War can be understood from this case as a temporally and spatially multifaceted process, combining international, national, local and even individual dynamics. The Rio de Janeiro office of RF under the direction of Watson fought an institutional, and personal, battle against communism in science and university much beyond the expectations of his bosses in New York and its Brazilian partners.

Publications

I have published two open access articles based on my research at the RAC:

Hochman, Gilberto. “Samuel Barnsley Pessoa e os determinantes sociais das endemias rurais.” [Samuel Barnsley Pessoa and the Social Determinants of Rural Endemic Diseases] *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva* 20, no. 2 (2015), 425–431. Available at http://www.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1413-81232015000200425&lang=pt

Gilberto Hochman, “Vigiar e, depois de 1964, punir: sobre Samuel Pessoa e o Departamento Vermelho da USP” [Surveillance and, after 1964, Punishment: on Samuel Pessoa and the Red Department of USP], *Ciência e Cultura*, 66, no. 4 (2014): 26–31. Available at http://cienciaecultura.bvs.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0009-67252014000400011&lng=en&nrm=iso

¹ Tom Buchanan. “The Courage of Galileo: Joseph Needham and the ‘Germ Warfare’ Allegations in the Korean War,” *History* 86, no. 284 (2001): 503–522. For a biography of Needham, see Simon Winchester, *The Man Who Loved China* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

² Samuel B. Pessoa. *Estudos Médico-Sociais* (São Paulo: Cebes-Hucitec, 1978 [1960]).

³ See, for example, Stephen Endicott and Edward Hagerman, *The United States and Biological Warfare: Secrets from the Early Cold War and Korea* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Milton Leitenberg, “False Allegations of U.S. Biological Weapons Use during the Korean War,” in *Terrorism, War, or Disease? Unraveling the Use of Biological Weapons*, ed. Anne L. Clunan, Peter R. Lavoy, and Susan B. Martin (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2008), 120–143.

⁴ Pessoa, *Estudos Médico-Sociais*, 56–58.

⁵ *Diário de São Paulo*, May 10, 1944, newspaper clipping in the Samuel Barnsley Pessoa File, Centro de Apoio à Pesquisa em História, Departamento of History, University of São Paulo.

⁶ Rockefeller Foundation (hereafter RF) records, officers’ diaries, RG 12, Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter RAC).

⁷ RF records, fellowships, fellowship recorder cards, RG 10.2, RAC.

⁸ RF records, Cox and Reece Investigations, RAC.

⁹ For an official but balanced history of the charges against the RF, see Eric J. Abrahamson, Sam Hurst, and Barbara Shubinski, *Democracy & Philanthropy: The Rockefeller Foundation and the American Experiment* (New York: Rockefeller Foundation, 2013).

¹⁰ “The President’s View,” *Rockefeller Foundation Annual Report* (New York, 1953), 27.

¹¹ RF records, administration, program and policy, RG 3, RAC.

¹² Extract from a letter to Bugher, in RF/RG 10.2 Fellowship Cards/Box MNS/Folder Brazil/Pessoa, Samuel B. Pessoa.