

CLAS Open Seminars - Lent Term 2025

Mondays 5:15pm

SG1 Ground Floor, Alison Richard Building, 7 West Road, CB3 9DT

Monday 27 January - 5:15pm

When Plague Connected the World: Construction and Circulation of Microbiological Knowledge Between Brazil, India, and Europe (1894-1922)

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Chair: [Rosanna Dent](#) (University of Cambridge)

Abstract:

From 1894 to 1950, plague swept across all inhabited continents and killed more than 12 million people, a phenomenon known as the Third Plague Pandemic. Microbiology had a main solution to face it – the anti-plague serum, a drug made of horse blood. In the first three decades of the pandemic, experts, sera, and scientific data circulated between Brazil, India, and Western Europe. These interactions and exchanges resulted in new knowledge on how to produce, apply and evaluate the anti-plague serotherapy. Rather than following an exclusive North-South dynamic, these exchanges were marked by South-South and even South-North interactions. Brazilian laboratories adapted techniques from, and in parallel sent their serum to, India. Meanwhile, knowledge crafted in India and Brazil impacted the research developed in Europe. In the early 1920s, these exchanges between Brazil, India, and Western Europe faded away and a divergent image of serotherapy emerged. In Brazil, the plague years were seen as the beginnings of an independent local microbiology, whereas in India this period was understood as a failure of British science and politics. Relying on rich and largely overlooked documents held in institutional, national, and colonial archives, in this presentation I will reconstruct the early history of the anti-plague serotherapy and its global career. I will discuss the agency of actors based in Brazil and India to produce knowledge on plague treatment and to (re)shape global scientific dynamics. In so doing, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the history of serotherapy and immunization techniques at the time of the Third Plague Pandemic and to challenge established ideas about the globalization of

microbiology, by showing scientific exchanges between actors in the Global South and their ability to partially transform research carried out in the Global North.

Matheus Alves Duarte Da Silva: I am a historian of medicine and science studying pandemics, emerging infectious diseases, and zoonosis, focusing on Brazil, South America, and global history. After completing my PhD at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (September 2020), I joined the University of St Andrews as a postdoctoral research fellow in the Wellcome Trust-funded project 'The Global War against the Rat and the Epistemic Emergence of Zoonosis'. In the project, I investigate how anti-rat campaigns led to the invention of spatial and ecological concepts, such as disease reservoirs, sylvatic plague, and rural plague. In 2023, I was a visiting fellow at CRASSH. I have co-edited the special issues "Rethinking the History of Microbiology" (*History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*, 2024) and "Disease Reservoirs: Anthropological and Historical Approaches" (*Medical Anthropology*, 2023) and the books "Beyond Science and Empire: Circulation of Knowledge in an Age of Global Empires (1750-1945)" (Routledge, 2023) and "Rural Disease Knowledge: Anthropological and Historical Perspective" (Routledge, 2024).

