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Toward a political history of HIV in Brazil and worldwide



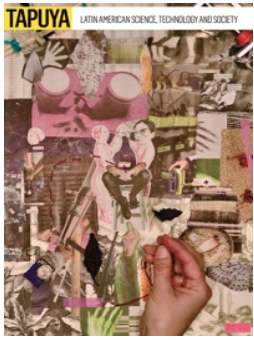
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Toward a political history of HIV in Brazil and worldwide

Uma História Global e Brasileira Da AIDS, 1986–2021, by Marcos Cueto and Gabriel Lopes, Rio De Janeiro, Editora Fiocruz, 2023, 174pp., R\$46,00 (print), R\$27,60 (digital), ISBN: 978-65-5708-183-9

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Toward a political history of HIV in Brazil and worldwide

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I finished reading *Uma História Global e Brasileira Da AIDS, 1986–2021* in the context of the re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and the statements made by Robert Kennedy Jr., Secretary of Health and Human Services, questioning the efficacy of vaccines and the funding of global health programs. Similarly, in Argentina, a massive march took place on February 1, 2025, against the homophobic discourse of President Javier Milei during the Davos conference. There has also been an effective dismantling of health programs and the dismissal of staff from the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) Directorate and the Vaccine Directorate. The book by Marcos Cueto and Gabriel Lopes, based on extensive archival work and a sophisticated theoretical framework, leads us to consider that these seemingly circumstantial measures can be explained historically. In a meticulous and orderly interweaving of national and international phenomena, they tell a story of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) in Brazil that provides clues to understanding broader social processes.

The picture they present comprises a multiplicity of local and international voices that allow us to understand that AIDS, like any disease, must be studied from the scientific, social, and political dimensions. They go through its history in terms of its stages in scientific discoveries, pharmacological discoveries, and prevention campaigns. The book reminds us that this disease of viral origin still has no cure, but significant advances have been made in pharmacological treatment, detection, and information provided by prevention campaigns that have increased the quality of life and survival of infected people. The authors use the contributions of the history of the present by covering the events of the political and social history of Brazil. They continue to review the milestones of the global history of health as they explore the international conferences of health agencies, the tensions, conflicts, proposed goals, and the distances between these objectives and the realities of implementation. Their cautions in this regard are noteworthy since they do not merge or make invisible the local history of the disease within global history. On the contrary, they help clear up the role of local events in an orderly manner in their connection with international agreements.

The research is divided into three stages organizing the chapters that make up the book. The first chapter covers the period between 1987 and 1996 when science and human rights were intertwined to control the disease and overcome discrimination against people carrying the virus. The process of political democratization in Brazil allowed the emergence of Social Organizations that actively fought for the rights of the sick. In this period, health reform was implemented: health was recognized as a right in the 1988 Constitution, and the Sistema Único de Saúde (Unified Health System) was created in 1990. The policies, as in other latitudes, were late both because of the lack of diagnostic methods and therapies and the usual tendency in epidemic processes to deny contagion and try to proclaim that this disease would not reach national borders and that it was a “foreign” problem. The first case to be declared in Brazil was in São Paulo in 1986 and, starting in 1993, prevention programs, testing, epidemiological surveillance, and training were designed. In addition, an active

relationship was initiated with international organizations such as the *World Bank* and the *Ford Foundation* with the aim of financing disease control programs. The voices of the sick are auscultated from the selection and study of the most outstanding Social Organizations in the fight against AIDS in Brazil. With their actions, they collaborated in defending the rights of people who had AIDS both in their treatments and in issues related to their stigmatization and discrimination. Organization leaders, their proposals, and their conflicts are reviewed during different moments in these four decades.

The second chapter covers the period between 1996 and 2007. Cueto and Lopes explain how it was possible to ensure that AIDS treatment had equal access in Brazil. This political decision, which was not free of conflict and tension, had to contend with the powerful interests of international pharmaceutical companies. The political and economic discussion revolved around the fact that certain drugs for diseases should be considered public goods. This meant patents could be made more flexible so that the state could buy antiretroviral drugs to lower the price. Brazilian officials and activists put this issue on the agenda of discussions in the national and international arenas. The authors describe a picture of relations through which the strategy implemented became a model to be followed in other latitudes and was also a scheme used to fight tuberculosis, hepatitis C, and other noncommunicable diseases. Universal access to antiretroviral drugs changed the course of the epidemic by dramatically increasing survival rates, and at this stage, both active government intervention and international agreements played a prominent role.

The last chapter covers the period between 2007 and 2021 and is marked by setbacks in terms of prevention and treatment policies due to local political conflicts, the strengthening of conservative and neoliberal religious movements, attacks on sexual health campaigns in schools, the questioning of the financing of health plans, and the higher cost of treatments. In 2019, Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil's president at the time) dissolved the National AIDS Program and defunded programs that were in dialogue with a set of actions that had been proposed for years. It is in this sense that Cueto and Lopes' book allows us to understand the threads of history in current policies and to reconstruct a complex scenario in which ideas and normative designs are present. The historical sources on which this research is based include health policies, newspapers, agreements at international conferences, and the selection and analysis of the voices of the main social and scientific leaders.

Uma História Global e Brasileira Da AIDS, 1986–2021 will be a reference book for the field of the social history of health and disease, both because of the approach it proposes for the study of AIDS, but also because it will serve as a template to study the multiple dimensions that are behind a social disease. The authors convincingly show that local scientific and political processes must be studied in relation to the global context to distinguish national particularities and aspects that transcend national borders.

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