

Attacks on Brazilian scientists grow amid COVID-19 pandemic

Guilherme Ferreira
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The gigantic international scientific effort to understand the multiple aspects of the novel coronavirus, produce unprecedented vaccines in record time and understand the dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as educate and warn the public about the dangers it poses, has clashed with the profit interests of the ruling elite in all countries. Consequently, scientists have been a frequent target of violent attacks, often instigated directly by government leaders, for exposing the refusal of the ruling elite to implement a science-based policy against the pandemic.

In early October, the prestigious scientific journal *Nature* published a report with the results of a survey showing that, out of the 321 scientists who have conducted media interviews and expressed themselves on social media about the pandemic, 15 percent have received “death threats.” The survey also showed that almost 60 percent of the scientists interviewed have suffered “attacks on their credibility” and more than 40 percent of them have suffered “emotional or psychological stress.”

These attacks have been particularly prevalent in countries where a more open policy of herd immunity has been implemented and promoted, as in the case of Brazil, ruled by fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro.

The persecution of Brazilian scientists has been brought to the fore in the months of November and December by a series of resignations and protests at the country’s leading science and education agencies against what the head of the Brazilian Science Academy, Luiz Davidovich, called a “political purge akin to those of 20th century authoritarian regimes.”

Among those targeted by the government was Marcus Lacerda, who had led a study in early 2020, later used by the US National Institutes of Health, to advise against the use of hydroxychloroquine—still promoted by Bolsonaro—for the treatment of COVID-19. Lacerda was stripped of his National Scientific Merit Order medal, prompting 21 scientists selected to receive the honor on November 4 to refuse them.

This week, after the country’s drug agency Anvisa cleared the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine for children from 5 to 11, Bolsonaro said he would reveal “extra-officially” the names of those who voted on the decision, for “the people to make their judgment on them”, that is, for his anti-vaccine far-right base to commit violent acts against them. Anvisa directors, including the Bolsonaro-appointed head, Rear Admiral Antonio Barra Torres, have received a number of death threats in case vaccine was cleared for infants.

Among those suffering the most barbaric persecutions is Lucas Ferrante, a doctoral student who led the main studies on the COVID-19 pandemic in the state of Amazonas. After almost two years of violence and threats, Ferrante is treating a very rare cancer connected to poisoning by heavy metals found in his residence’s water pipes bearing all the signs of intentional poisoning.

Lucas Ferrante: assaulted and poisoned after warning on second wave in Manaus

Ferrante is a researcher at the renowned National Institute for Amazonian Research and has been one of the scientists most attacked since Bolsonaro took office in 2019. That same year, he led a study published in the journal *Environmental Conservation* denouncing Bolsonaro’s environmental policies as a threat to the Amazon, its indigenous communities and the global climate. Since Bolsonaro took office, deforestation and wildfires in the Amazon have registered record highs year after year.

In April of last year, amid the health collapse in Manaus, Amazonas during the first wave of the pandemic, Ferrante published a letter in *Science* warning that Bolsonaro’s criminal negligence could threaten indigenous and traditional peoples.

The Brazilian Senate’s Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) into the Bolsonaro government’s response to the pandemic found its failure to implement measures to prevent the arrival and spread of the coronavirus in indigenous communities evidence of a “crime against humanity.”

In August of last year, Ferrante was also the lead author of a letter in *Nature Medicine* warning of a second wave if schools and non-essential services were not closed in Manaus. This warning was confirmed in January, with tragic consequences for the city’s population.

Another study led by Ferrante, published in the *Journal of Public Health Policy* in August, showed that “The emergence of the gamma variant in Manaus [at the end of last year] occurred due to the federal government’s strategy of encouraging the contagion of children with the return of in-person classes so that the population would reach herd immunity.”

These studies, published in the world’s most prestigious scientific journals, as well as his regular interviews in major dailies in Brazil and around the world, have made Ferrante a constant target of threats and attacks. In an interview with the *Intercept* in March of this year, Ferrante said he had received three death threats via cell phone, which included charges that “that I was interfering in matters of national security.”

In November of last year, Ferrante suffered an attack after he requested an Uber and the supposed driver threatened him for his warnings about the second wave in Manaus and assaulted him with a sharp object. According to a report last month by *Veja* magazine, Ferrante today is treating a very rare thyroid cancer after pieces of a battery were found in the plumbing of his home. “The doctors suspect that [the cancer] is related to my exposure to toxic substances,” he told *Veja*.

Pedro Hallal has left Brazil after conducting the largest study on the pandemic in the country

Pedro Hallal, epidemiologist and former dean of the Federal University of Pelotas, was another Brazilian scientist attacked by President Bolsonaro, his local political allies and the Brazilian state itself.

In May 2020, he began coordinating the largest epidemiological study on coronavirus in Brazil. Funded by the health ministry, the study would test 33,000 people in 133 cities in all 27 Brazilian states. Early in the fieldwork, several research teams were threatened by local authorities, detained by the police and hundreds of COVID tests were destroyed.

In July of last year, the study was halted by the Health Ministry. Hallal, at the time, said it was a “totally political” decision. Besides pointing out a six-fold sub-notification of cases in Brazil, the work showed that the risk of infection among indigenous people is five times higher, and among the poor twice, the national average.

In March, he was forced by the government to sign a deal committing not to express himself in a manner “disrespectful and disdainful” to the President in the next two years, in order to stave off legal persecution.

Threats by the far right were intensified after his testimony before the CPI in June, in which Hallal showed the results of a study demonstrating Brazil could have saved 400,000 lives with changes in the policies dictated by the Bolsonaro government. Since then, Hallal has been forced to take a position in the US in order to continue his career.

Marcus Lacerda: needed police escort after exposing hydroxychloroquine’s ineffectiveness against COVID-19

Manaus physician Marcus Lacerda, a researcher at FIOCRUZ, the largest epidemiological institute in Brazil, has been working for over 20 years on malaria in the Amazon region, where it is an endemic disease that has hydroxychloroquine as one of its main drugs.

At the beginning of the first wave in Manaus, in April of last year, he and his team of 27 researchers conducted the first randomized controlled clinical trial to evaluate the use of hydroxychloroquine, as well as the best dosage of the drug, in 81 severe COVID-19 patients, demonstrating its harmful effect. The study was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and became the second most cited paper in the journal in 2020.

After Dr. Didier Raoult’s fraudulent study, Lacerda’s trial was the first to show hydroxychloroquine’s ineffectiveness. Because of Dr. Raoult’s study, Trump and Bolsonaro began frantically promoting the drug as part of their campaign to fully reopen the economy.

One of Bolsonaro’s sons, Eduardo, the Latin American representative of Steve Bannon’s international organization, The Movement, posted on Twitter the lie that the Lacerda-led study, because it used high dosages of hydroxychloroquine, had killed 11 patients and that “those responsible are from PT [Workers Party].”

Exposing the international coordination in their slanders, three days before Eduardo Bolsonaro’s tweet, fascistic American activist Michael Coudrey, from whom Trump re-tweeted a post about Dr. Raoult’s hydroxychloroquine study, commented on Lacerda’s study, saying that the patients who died were used as “lab guinea pigs.” “Viva os conservadores e o presidente Bolsonaro (“Long live the conservatives and President Bolsonaro”), the post also stated in Portuguese.

After Eduardo Bolsonaro’s tweet, Lacerda began to receive death threats and needed an armed escort from the Military Police for two weeks. Three prosecutors from the Federal Public Attorney’s Office, all of them supporters of Bolsonaro, also initiated an investigation into the researchers’ actions in the clinical trial.

Commenting on his situation, Lacerda said, “Since the end of the military dictatorship, no Brazilian scientist has experienced this in Brazil.” In its 21 years, the military dictatorship established in 1964 in Brazil and lauded by Bolsonaro arrested, fired, tortured, killed or forced into exile hundreds of scientists.

Prevent Senior’s barbaric experiment and the “social holocaust” in Manaus

While Lacerda and his team of researchers were exposing the ineffectiveness and toxicity of hydroxychloroquine in use against COVID-19, Bolsonaro and his sons were promoting the results of a fraudulent and barbaric clinical trial conducted by the private health care company Prevent Senior, which tried the drug without the consent of the National Research Ethics Commission and hid the deaths of those who were treated without their consent.

The later government crimes in Manaus amplified the barbaric Prevent Senior experiment to the scale of an entire city: the government responded to the death of patients due to lack of oxygen in and outside Manaus hospitals by pushing the city to use the “COVID kit” that included hydroxychloroquine.

What happened in Manaus is just the most graphic example of what the WSWS has called a “social holocaust” committed by the world’s ruling elites against millions of human lives. In his complete downplaying of the danger of the coronavirus, his boycott of the most basic mitigation measures, such as mask wearing, and his systematic campaign against the COVID-19 vaccine, Bolsonaro aligns himself with the most barbaric anti-scientific traditions of global capitalism – from eugenics, to Social Darwinism to Nazism.

The attack on scientists is part of a broad campaign by the capitalist ruling classes in every country to make the world’s population “learn to live” with the coronavirus and its more infectious and vaccine-resistant variants like Omicron.

The same methods used against scientists, including open state repression, will be intensified against the working class as the social and economic crisis of global capitalism intensifies. Workers must not only oppose the witch-hunt against scientists but establish the closest alliance with them to eliminate both the deadly virus globally and what has impeded this necessary response, the capitalist profit system.



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