

The fire consumed... a treasure!

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Dear Sir,

In June of 1897, in the luggage of Doctor Vital Brazil, who was moving from Botucatu city to São Paulo city (Brazil), I can imagine clothes, tools and some furniture. Also with him were his wife, Maria da Conceição, and two daughters, three-year-old Vitalina and one-year-old Alvarina. And, incredible as it may seem, there were also some specimens of rattlesnakes and jararaca snakes, animals that he had studied with the attitude of a biologist and that would mark his scientific career by taking part of the creation of a globally renowned unique institution, the Butantan Institute.

Until May 15th, these pioneering animals were preserved with many others in the Snake Collection of Butantan Institute, to where they were initially sent by the São Paulo rural population, then by people from the entire country and, afterward, even by foreign communities. The animals were also gathered by researchers for over a century and the collection became an international reference. Vital Brazil's vision and ideals comprised principles rarely respected in public institutions and universities: science, education, culture and production of goods for the society were nurtured and consolidated over the years at the Butantan Institute.

Now, instead of looking for culprits, it is necessary to rethink the future, revitalize the existing physical structures, restore the architecture of the historical complex, support

the affected departments, improve the salaries of the administrative staff and technical assistants, shake up the routine and definitively shift the focus to essential points, instead of merely starting new buildings and other restructuring projects. Just to illustrate the level of excellence of Butantan Institute's researchers, in 2007, of the ten articles published in Brazil that were most cited internationally in the field of biomedicine, five were produced by researchers of the Butantan Institute. Any current production of vaccines and excellent antivenoms is due to such highly qualified researchers who are capable of producing outstanding science. The main funding agencies including CNPq, FAPESP and FINEP have constantly given substantial support to relevant scientific or technological projects of Butantan.

And the institute became part of people's lives because Brazilian society, unlike many temporary heads of state, has always recognized the relevance of researchers' works and the importance of the antivenoms produced by Butantan, which save lives and relieve suffering. In 1897, and long afterwards, nothing was known about DNA or genetic code, while the French school of Louis Pasteur and the German school of Robert Koch led the experimentation in science, Darwin and Wallace were little read and Brazil was taking its first steps in the areas of immunology, bacteriology and parasitology. Among us, Adolfo Lutz, Vital Brazil and Carlos Chagas were innovating. By the way, the Snake Collection was, since the

beginning, innovative and from the 1990s on, it started to contribute decisively to studies on biodiversity and biological evolution through the techniques of molecular biology, which opened up a wide range of options for phylogeny, the study of the natural history of these reptiles. A unique treasure that was incomparable anywhere else on the planet! Unfortunately, mere common sense cannot apprehend what the fire consumed. This sad careless country, whose past matters little or not at all, therefore, has an uncertain, insipid, odorless... unhealthy future!

And the fire extinguished not only a collection, but also research projects (entirely or partially), such as the project of the National Institute of Science and Technology on Toxins, supported by CNPq and FAPESP, and also the works of students supervised by researchers from Butantan and other institutions of education and research.

Today, we wander according to the will of non-governmental organizations and organizations of civil society for public interests and, more than ever, we are subject to the immediate interests of the business elite, politicians and money bosses; between publicity and velocity, people live by appearances, inauguration of construction works and vanity. Mentally unemployed persons (most of the economically employed) barely know that the telegraph or the most modern cell phones are nothing but variations on the same theme, and their true relevance derives from the idea, this one extraordinary, of long-distance communication. We are citizens guided by stock exchange speculators and, worse, by mind speculators. Corrupts and venal persons propose the construction of new buildings while old ones are considered garbage, poorly preserved and inadequately maintained such as the buildings of

the Butantan Institute complex (the main building is dying)... Because only the new is attractive, the inauguration is worthwhile; restructuring is instigated regardless of the history of the individual or the institution. In education and science, the valuing of teachers and researchers is only political rhetoric.

After 42 years of studying, working and teaching in post-graduation courses at USP, UNICAMP and UNIFESP, this reality has become clearer than ever: how power exudes rot! What small-minded people are in this world! Do they propose innovations? As I have recently exposed at a meeting in FIESP, *INNOVATION IS A HISTORY TOLD IN THE FUTURE*. The fire destroyed one of these rare histories that will not generate new histories told in the future...

The misery is intellectual and the poverty will be endless.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There is no conflict.

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