

Pros and cons of the laboratory hypothesis: The struggle for the sovereignty of interpretation

[Martina Frei Infosperber](#) / 9.04.2023

After new, controversial statements in favor of the laboratory thesis, other scientists served the media with contraindications.

From the beginning of the pandemic, whether the Sars-Cov-2 coronavirus came from a laboratory or from animals was treated more as a political than as a scientific question. The course of events also shows how careful the media should be. The following is a chronology based on the latest «findings».

The Actors

[Robert Redfield](#), virologist and until January 2021 head of the largest US health authority "Centers for Disease Control and Prevention" (CDC).

[Florence Débarre](#), evolutionary biologist at the Center national de la recherche scientifique and the Sorbonne University in Paris.

[George F. Gao](#), virologist and immunologist. Until July 2022 Director of the China Center for Disease Control and -prevention, the counterpart to the CDC in the USA.

[Anthony Fauci](#), physician and immunologist. Until December 2022 Director of the Institute for Infectious Diseases and Allergy (NIAID) at the large US research institution "National Institutes of Health".

[Kristian G. Andersen](#), professor in the Department of Immunology and Microbiology at the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California. Was part of the narrow circle of scientists who exchanged views with Anthony Fauci at the beginning of the pandemic, on February 1, 2020.

[Robert F. Garry](#), Professor of Microbiology and Immunology at Tulane University in New Orleans. Also belonged to the narrow circle of scientists who exchanged views with Anthony Fauci on February 1, 2020.

[Edward C. Holmes](#), virologist and evolutionary biologist at the University of Sydney, Australia. Holmes initially considered the pandemic virus "inconsistent with expectations of evolutionary theory". Together with Andersen and Garry, Holmes published an important letter to the editor in Nature Medicine in March 2020.

[Jeremy Farrar](#), scientist and longtime director of the [Wellcome Trust](#), with around 38 billion one of the world's largest charitable foundations that finances health research and researchers (Infosperber reported). Farrar hosted the video conference with Anthony Fauci and the scientists on February 1, 2020. Farrar became WHO's Chief of Science in the second quarter of 2022. [Leiter Wissenschaft bei der WHO](#)

The chronology

For months, a US investigative committee has been trying to find out where the pandemic virus came from. For March 8, 2023, the committee summoned virologist Robert Redfield, former head of the US health authority's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC, with its 10,000 employees, are also responsible for outbreaks of infection. Redfield was part of the US coronavirus task force. Anyone who

knew his earlier statements could roughly calculate what he would say on March 8th.

Thousands of miles away, French evolutionary biologist [Florence Débarre](#) was trawling through the [Gisaid](#) database as Redfield's deadline approached. Many researchers store information on the genome of influenza and corona viruses in this large database.

On March 4, 2023, Débarre came across previously unknown genetic data. She accidentally stumbled upon it during her research, she told the science magazine «[Science](#)». She sharply rejected allegations that she had somehow arrived at this data differently. [scharf zurück](#) The gene data came from samples collected by Chinese scientists from January to March 2020 at the Wuhan Fish Market.

"This virus looked engineered to me."

(Robert Redfield, virologist, formerly head of the CDC and member of the US coronavirus task force)

Redfield's explosive statements before the committee

On March 8, Robert Redfield testified under oath before the investigative committee [vor dem Untersuchungsausschuss](#): "Based on my analysis of the data, I came [at the beginning of the pandemic - ed. Red.] to the conviction and still believe that Covid-19 was more likely the result of a laboratory accident than the result of natural spillover."

The virus contained a human genetic code at an important point, Redfield explained. "It was very worrying for me. This virus looked engineered to me." At the beginning of the pandemic, he said so to Anthony Fauci, WHO director Tedros

Ghebreyesus and Jeremy Farrar, then director of the Wellcome Trust.

Another indication for Redfield: Unlike the Sars and Mers viruses, which never learned to spread from person to person, Redfield believes that the pandemic virus was "too contagious" for people from the start.

Redfield said he had urged that both hypotheses of origin should be examined with the utmost seriousness. But because Fauci's team only wanted a narrative and because he, Redfield, had a different point of view, he was not included in important video calls or emails in which Fauci and Farrar exchanged views with various scientists about the origin of the virus (Infosperber reported several times).

Blatant contradiction to Fauci

The fact that he was not included in these discussions had "totally disappointed" and also annoyed him, Redfield confessed to the investigative committee. He only found out about these secret discussions between Fauci and other scientists when it came to light with the help of the Public Information Act.

It's part of science to encourage debate so that science eventually finds the truth, Redfield said. In this case, however, it had been decided a priori to bring only one point of view and to sideline anyone who did not agree with it.

The former CDC director made further clear statements: According to Redfield, the "National Institutes of Health" (NIH), where Anthony Fauci headed the NIAID, promoted "gain of function" research - also in Wuhan. "I think there's no doubt about it," Redfield said before the committee. He contradicted

Anthony Fauci, who had claimed the opposite under oath some time ago. So now the question is whether Fauci committed perjury. In "gain of function" research, microbes are modified in such a way that they acquire new properties, such as becoming more contagious or more dangerous.

Three "very unusual" occurrences

It is clear, according to Redfield, that a "significant event" took place in the Wuhan laboratory in September 2019. In earlier, normal times, he was in good contact with George Gao, his Chinese counterpart, the director of the Chinese CDC. But then this uncomplicated, informal exchange was suddenly no longer possible.

At that time, three things happened in the laboratory in Wuhan that Redfield describes as "very unusual": First, information on the genome of corona viruses was deleted from a database. Second, the laboratory in Wuhan has been placed under military control, whereas previously it was under civilian control. Third, the ventilation system in the laboratory has been renewed.

"Fox News" and other media immediately spread Redfield's statements. Nothing could be read about it in the Swiss media.

Proponents of the natural origin hypothesis look to the data

On March 9, 2023, the day after Redfield's hearing, Débarre said she realized the importance of the data she had discovered in the database. According to «[Science](#)» magazine, she immediately sought help from a group of Western scientists who strongly advocate the natural origin hypothesis.

They hurriedly searched the Chinese data they had downloaded from the GISAID database. If an intermediate animal host could be found, the mystery of where the virus came from would be solved.

Two days after Redfield's hearing, on March 10, 2023, the US House of Representatives unanimously voted 419 to zero in favor of a bill [419 zu null](#). This obliges the US secret service coordinator to disclose all information about the origin of Sars-CoV-2, in particular about the connections to the laboratory in Wuhan. At the time, it was unclear whether the US President would sign this law.

Then the news of the evolutionary biologist Florence Débarre and her colleagues has reached the public.

The gene data they analyzed is part of a scientific paper that Redfield's Chinese counterpart George Gao, the former head of the Chinese CDC, and colleagues had already published on a so-called preprint server in February 2022. [wissenschaftlichen Arbeit](#)

For some "nothing new", for others the confirmation

The Chinese team waited for reviewers to give their OK for publication in the science journal Nature. At least one reviewer insisted that Gao's team disclose all raw data. Gao told the science magazine «[Science](#)» that this data is nothing new.

The conclusion of his work: No animal host for Sars-CoV-2 was found. It can therefore not be ruled out that the virus was brought into the Wuhan market by people or via frozen goods. In order to evaluate the possible origin of the virus, more international coordination is needed. [mehr internationale Koordination](#)

"The Atlantic" receives information

However, Débarre and her colleagues read something different from the data: they discovered both raccoon dog genome and Sars-CoV-2 RNA in one sample. From this they concluded that the raccoon dog was probably infected with Corona. In their opinion, it could be the intermediate host from which the virus jumped to humans.

Even before Débarre and Co. published anything scientific for experts to check, the lay press received information: "A new analysis of genetic sequences collected from the market shows that raccoon dogs that were illegally sold there possibly carried and retired the virus in 2019.» This is "the strongest indication so far" that the pandemic came from an animal and was not caused by a laboratory accident, wrote "[The Atlantic](#)" on March 16, 2023.

On March 18, the [WHO](#) followed suit, which Débarre's colleagues said was informed on March 11. According to the WHO, the data would show that there were animals on the Wuhan market that were susceptible to Sars-CoV-2 and that "could have been a source of infection for humans".

On March 20, 2023, Débarre and her colleagues finally published their view of things: [veröffentlichten Débarre und ihre KollegInnen](#) "The data collected since the beginning of the pandemic clearly indicate an animal origin of the virus." The arguments for this hypothesis stand in stark contrast to the lack of evidence for any other origin story. They did not respond to the evidence for the laboratory hypothesis [vorgebrachten Indizien](#) presented by Robert Redfield and other scientists.

"Science is based on evidence and facts, not speculation. In particular, one cannot exaggerate in the media in order to mislead the public and politicians."

(George F. Gao, former head of the Chinese health authority CCDC)

George Gao, the former head of the Chinese CDC, described Débarre's analyzes as "misleading": "Science is based on evidence and facts, not on speculation. In particular, one cannot exaggerate in the media to mislead the public and politicians," Gao told the non-profit organization [U.S. Right To Know](#). He asked the group around Débarre to calm down and do "decent science".

On March 21, 2023, the Gisaïd database spoke up. Because carrying out analyzes with the data of other scientists and publishing these own analyzes even before the Chinese "owners" have published their scientific work - that's not the right way. Some users downloaded an incomplete part of the Chinese data, Gisaïd said and meant by this Débarre and her colleagues. Gisaïd reprimanded her: "Premature discussion of scientific data in the media threatens to undermine public trust in scientific research."

Chinese samples show "nothing at all"

In terms of the media, however, it was a huge success for Débarre and her colleagues. Because although nothing has been proven, dozens of media reported on their findings: The raccoon dog was traded as a possible intermediate host. German-speaking media [Medien](#) widely quoted the virologist Christian Drosten: "This preliminary analysis of Chinese data confirms my always favored hypothesis."

Statements such as those by the German virologist [Alexander Kekulé](#) on March 23, 2023, that the Chinese samples prove "nothing at all" [überhaupt nichts](#) and that some are even of a purity that is almost too good, came too late and were much less cited.

Potential conflicts of interest were not mentioned

Almost all reports of Débarre's news failed to mention her co-authors. A number of them already undertook their own analyzes in February 2022 with leaked Chinese data. [eigene Analysen](#). Their conclusion even then: the hypothesis of natural origin is much more plausible than the laboratory hypothesis.

A number of the co-authors are financially supported by the National Institutes of Health, the Wellcome Trust or, for example, by Anthony Fauci's former institute NIAID. The long list of their potential conflicts of interest was not an issue in the major media.

Three names stand out among the authors: Kristian G. Andersen, professor in the Department of Immunology and Microbiology at the Scripps Institute in California. Robert F. Garry, Professor of Microbiology and Immunology at Tulane University in New Orleans. And Edward C. Holmes, a virologist and evolutionary biologist at the University of Sydney, Australia. All three took part in the video call with Anthony Fauci on February 1, 2020.

It was Andersen who wrote in an [E-Mail](#) to Anthony Fauci at the end of January 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic: "Some properties [of the virus] look (potentially) fabricated." And: "I think the genome [of the virus] is not compatible [inconsistent] with what one would expect from the theory of evolution."

Holmes and Garry also found on February 2, 2020 that the corona virus was not in line with expectations of the theory of evolution". [nicht übereinstimmend mit Erwartungen der Evolutionstheorie](#) At the time, Garry wrote that he could not understand how SARS-CoV-2 could have evolved naturally. [Damals schrieb Garry](#)

Over the next two to four days, Andersen, Holmes and Garry changed their minds diametrically. Now Andersen suggested writing in a technical article that the virus was "consistent with natural evolution".

The draft was allegedly written on February 4, 2020. [4. Februar 2020](#) This article was published in "[Nature Medicine](#)" on March 17, 2020. "We don't believe that any laboratory-based scenario is plausible," Andersen, Holmes and Garry stated there at a time when nothing at all was clear. Nevertheless, her article had a significant influence on public opinion: The laboratory origin was then treated in the major media as the less likely hypothesis or even as a conspiracy theory.

First author Kristian Andersen changed his mind on the putative origin of the virus within days. In the summer of 2020, he received millions in funding from the Anthony Fauci Institute. © «Nature Medicine»

"Part of a narrative they created" - or sudden, new realizations?

Andersen later explained his sudden change of heart within a few days to the "[New York Times](#)" by saying that he had taken a closer look at the virus. Garry later put it into perspective and said that he had played the "diabolical advocate" in the initial discussions. [relativierte später](#) The group around

Fauci had exchanged various information and it had become clear to them very quickly that the pandemic virus was of natural origin.

On March 8, 2023, Redfield called the Nature Medicine article co-authored by Andersen, Garry and Holmes before the Inquiry Committee as "inaccurate, [...] part of a narrative they created."

In the meantime, Gao and his colleagues have uploaded a revised version of their publication [überarbeitete Version ihrer Publikation](#) to a Chinese preprint server and [Nature](#) published a preliminary version of their article - whereupon one of Débarre's co-authors immediately branded it as "very flawed" on Twitter.

The Chinese scientists stick to their core statement: the samples cannot prove any infections with Sars-CoV-2 in animals. In order to evaluate the possible origin of the virus, more internationally coordinated efforts are needed. [mehr international koordinierte Anstrengungen](#)

Strong allegations against the Chinese scientists

Criticism rained down from Débarre, her colleagues and other Western scientists, but also from the WHO: the Chinese scientists should have made this important data accessible immediately instead of withholding it for years. "Inexcusable" is the lack of disclosure, "[Der Spiegel](#)" quoted a WHO epidemiologist as saying.

What is not mentioned: Important information about the beginnings of the pandemic, which lies dormant in US archives, has not yet been disclosed or has only been disclosed under legal pressure. And even if they had to be disclosed, many

places were blacked out or hundreds of pages were simply white (Infosperber reported).

For example, the email correspondence between Fauci, Andersen, and the other scientists involved in the February 1, 2020 video call only came to light thanks to the Public Information Act. And just as these e-mails became public, Andersen's earlier tweets allegedly suddenly deleted themselves. [**löschten sich Andersens frühere Tweets angeblich plötzlich von selbst**](#)

In the article by Débarre, however, Andersen and all the other authors emphasize that they are supporters of the open exchange of data among scientists. [**Befürworter des offenen Datenaustausch unter Wissenschaftlern**](#)

Perhaps there is now more light in the darkness

The - for the time being - final act in this back and forth: On March 20. 2023, US President Biden signed the law proposed after Redfield's hearing. This obliges the head of the US secret service to make "as much information as possible" about the origin of the virus public. She has 90 days to do this.

However, it is still unclear which of the previously secret information the US government will disclose and when.

Originating in the Wuhan lab would be inconvenient for both the US and China

With the outbreak of SARS in 2003, it was quickly discovered that the virus jumped from bats to humans via civet cats. In the case of the Sars-CoV-2 outbreak in 2019, on the other hand, it is still unclear where the virus came from, even after three years and more than 80,000 samples collected.

China claims the pandemic virus came from outside the country. The USA, on the other hand, claim that Sars-CoV-2 comes from China.

Politically, it would be best for the US if the pandemic virus had been transmitted from animals to humans in China. Then the USA would have no complicity. If, on the other hand, the laboratory hypothesis was to be confirmed, the USA would also share responsibility because they funded the virological research in Wuhan to a large extent. The EU also funded research at the Institute of Virology in Wuhan.

Neither China nor the USA have an interest in confirming the hypothesis that Sars-CoV-2 came from a laboratory in Wuhan.

Original article in German:

<https://www.infosperber.ch/gesundheit/pro-und-contra-laborhypothese-der-kampf-um-die-deutungshoheit/>