

9 The politics of phosphorus-32

A Cold War fable based on fact

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Prologue

Two—and only two—of the characters in my story, Giuseppe Di Tomaso and Prof. Dr Angelo Rincaldi, are fictional. Yet they are historically plausible people. Di Tomaso is an Italian crane driver, injured in an accident at the docks. It is 1949, and he is being treated in Rincaldi's sanatorium in Trieste, Italy. Though their words and actions are fabricated, the people with whom they interact, and who are constitutive of the networks in which they are embedded, are not (as the notes make clear).

Most studies of the relations between recent science and US foreign policy follow, often in great detail, the evolution of the policy as the negotiated outcome of debates between the elites who were involved in framing it. They are usually limited to the views of American scientists (with inputs from their senior colleagues abroad) and of American administrators: they provide a view of "the world according to Washington."¹ The central section of this paper follows this traditional pattern.

While essential, such approaches tell us little about how those general policies, once implemented, were interpreted and given meaning in specific local circumstances, and how they were used to promote local aspirations and agendas that sometimes overlapped, and sometimes did not, with the aims of the American scientists and administrators who originally hammered out their general framework.²

This chapter aims to overcome this limitation.³ Science, American foreign policy, and the cultural politics of the Marshall Plan materially intersect with each other in the thoughts and lives of our two heroes, Giuseppe and Angelo. The primary node drawing these disparate strands together and giving them meaning in their lives was the need to cure a potentially lethal disease. That anchoring, however, also engaged their attitudes towards the United States, their love for the then-occupied city where they lived—Trieste—and their desire to see it free from external domination. The radioactive isotope phosphorus-32 (³²P) was a polyvalent, plastic substance invested with a multitude of meanings by diverse actors depending on the local context in which they encountered the element, be that Washington or Rome, Oak Ridge or Trieste... or one of the many other places in the world where, thanks to the nuclear piles built during the Manhattan project, it was cheaply produced in large quantities and made available for research or medicinal purposes. This story is thus no less a contribution to the social history of the Cold War.