

# A country called the past

For the historian, there is a lack of innovative researchers able to reach the general public

**Carlos Haag**

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“**H**istory requires imagination and a lot of effort, a lot of discipline, like a rehearsed stage show: the curtain rises, everything appears in its place, so harmonious and so fluent.

But months and years go by before this stage is reached. That’s why I’m fascinated by ballerinas—how much effort goes into every gesture beneath the apparent naturalness.” This statement is from historian Laura de Mello e Souza, a Full Professor of Modern History at the University of São Paulo (USP). Laura has recently published a biography of the conspiracy poet Cláudio Manuel da Costa (Perfis Brasileiros [Brazilian Profiles] collection, published by Companhia das Letras) that represents a beautiful historical *entrechat* from the researcher, who has constructed a portrait of the man and the age from minimal information about da Costa’s personality. This project was a *jeté* that demanded long searches in historical archives, a hallmark of Laura’s work. Similar to ballet, however, the work does not reveal her effort, but rather the beauty of the text. “I come from a family of storytellers,” she explains. She was not burdened when her teachers invariably asked, “Oh, so you’re the daughter of Antonio Candido and Gilda de Mello e Souza?” Laura belonged to a



family of intellectuals that was first and foremost a family, albeit one surrounded by books. “My relationship with my father was always good. They are special people. They have a good idea of their role but are modest and have a very nice relationship with knowledge.”

Before turning to history, Laura flirted with architecture, psychology and medicine. She united these passions in history, adding a substantial dose of social concern and political awareness. She was the first person to address marginalized people, in *Desclassificados do ouro* (1983) [*The outcast*], and her books maintain a strong relationship with and an engaged interpretation of Brazil without compromising documentary rigor. Although Laura says that she “lives” between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, her work helps to explain Brazil as it is today, including areas previously overlooked by academics, such as religiousness and witchcraft (discussed in *O diabo e a Terra de Santa Cruz* (1986) [*The devil and the land of Santa Cruz*] and *Inferno atlântico* (1993) [*Atlantic hell*]). More recently, she has considered how to write Brazil’s history. “The historian cannot cling only to the particular. It’s the history of the forest: if we see the tree, we have to see the forest. Otherwise, our understanding will be impaired.” Hence, her dedication to examining empires as a way to solve the dilemmas of the colony that Brazil once was is an important *temps levé*. This effort resulted in an FAPESP-supported project, *Dimensões do império português* [Dimensions of the Portuguese empire], which Laura coordinated, as well as books, such as *O sol e a sombra* (2006) [*The sun and the shadow*]. Below are extracts from my interview with Laura de Mello e Souza.

***How did your voyage “to the foreign land that is the past” begin?***

I love that phrase from *The Go-between* by [British writer Leslie Poles] Hartley, which I believe is a great definition of what history is. Since I was young, I’ve had a passion for history. History and stories. I had a dream of pursuing medicine, which I believe is not far removed from history because of its fascination with fragments that allow you to reconstitute something. Medicine doesn’t seem to me to be an exact science. We go to the doctor, and

he asks a series of questions to be able to build a hypothesis. I think that the historian does the same thing. We never have direct access to the past, and, therefore, the past is a foreign country. It would be great if we could have a direct line to the past, but we always have to consider that the past has to be looked at carefully via the traces it has left. Time ensures that these differences are considerable. We feel the difference between generations, between parents and children, so imagine between various generations, like the ones I deal with—remote periods going back as far as 400 years ago.

***How does your way of writing history differ from other styles?***

It was heavily influenced by my storytelling parents. My father is a great storyteller. But when I went to college, that type of history was highly discredited, above all at USP, where there was a predominance of structural history. I think that before television, the great media transformation, people told many stories. I grew up in the countryside, where I lived with my grandparents in a rural environment. People had many stories to tell. So the history I always liked was narrative history. In the 1990s, it came back into fashion. A more analytical history is very important. It makes fewer mistakes, but for me, it is less attractive. I think there’s an issue of temperament at play here. I’m not only interested because of historians. I love anthropology—above all, the classic dissertations that are narratives. I like the history of art and literature a lot. So these tastes led me to another type of history, which is perhaps more capable of making mistakes but maintains a stronger link to other disciplines.

***How did your parents influence you?***

I think that the family environment is very influential. Of course, the fact that I grew up in a house in which the intellectual environment was very marked

**“There are historians who write for the general public and do not innovate, and there are those who innovate but who do not write for the general public. It’s necessary to find a middle road.”**

had an influence, with its conversations and the presence of books, which I think are the most important things. We don't read all the books we have, but that business of dealing with books, going to the bookcase and looking at them—it's very important. My parents were very low profile people, so I only became aware of the weight they carried in the university environment when I went to college. I did not have much of an idea. Because I grew up during the military dictatorship, the situation was the opposite. Having the parents I had was a bit uncomfortable. For 10 years, we heard rumors that my father was going to lose his position. There was a very heavy atmosphere of insecurity, which wasn't something I'm proud of, but belonging to that environment was rather marginal. I then started noticing that they were respectable and prominent people. I don't believe they had very great expectations concerning me; they always gave my sisters and me room to be what we wanted to be. I even tried to drop out, to do other things, like architecture and medicine, but I didn't manage to. I'm traumatized about not having become a doctor.

***You were the first researcher to deal with the 'marginalized people,' and in your books, a vision of political engagement is noticeable.***

When I went to college, the dictatorship was at its height. That was reflected in my work. I think it's impossible to be otherwise, unless you live in the stratosphere. Historians live with their heads in the clouds a bit, particularly those who deal with remote periods. I think that I live with my head in the clouds more than I'd like to, but that was inevitable coming from a leftist environment. Even people like me, who had no vocation for political militancy, tried to write the type of history that, in one way or another, posed important questions for the country. I did this with a social history on the problem of inequality, which was an issue that was present at the beginning of my career. I think that it's something that marks a generation; it's an attempt at reaching an agreement with the past that started with Florestan Fernandes, from the time when he worked with Roger Bastide. I think that Brazilian historiography is now becoming emancipated, somehow. It's opening up a greater range of themes. My current research, for example, which was funded by FAPESP, is on the history of Brazil, but from a very European perspective, trying to understand the history of our country within the history of Europe. Nowadays, national history makes increasingly less sense. I'm no longer very interested in national history. One of the good aspects of globalization is the possibility of writing total history.

What do I mean by total history? It's not just the history of Brazil, but the history of Brazil in relation to other histories, other contemporary and correlated historical processes. I think we write about national or regional history for a thesis. It's like a young girl who, to do ballet, must start with classical ballet, must dance on her points, must work at the barre. Then, later, she can deconstruct that and do modern ballet and contemporary dance.

***How were you gripped by what you call the "document fever"?***

I began working with documents because I chose a theme on which there was nothing. In fact, I have a vocation for the abyss, for working with topics that are practically impossible to work with, like that book on Cláudio Manuel da Costa. I didn't write a biography, but I ended up doing something that gives that idea. But in the case of the 'marginalized', people said I wasn't going to manage to write it because there was no documentation. And there really wasn't. I worked with published documents, but the cream of it was the handwritten documentation. So I delved into the archives to see what there was, and there I discovered this extraordinary documentation that had been largely ignored before I started working on it, and that gave me a possible view of this socially marginalized layer of society. It was the same thing in the case of witchcraft; I had no alternative because there was no work on the subject, so I had to read the Inquisition proceedings. It was like fishing with a rod: you threw in the line and didn't know whether you were going to catch a fish. Then, before I realized it, I'd become an archive historian. I'm an archive historian, I continue being one, and I won't ever give up being one. I don't know how to work if I don't work with manuscripts; it's what gives me great pleasure.

***Is it in this sense that you say that the function of the historian has more to do with understanding than explaining?***

I think that understanding comes from what you mentioned at the beginning; the past is a foreign land, so it's difficult for us to explain it. We have to understand it. On the other hand, it's necessary to look for an explanation. There's a margin of explanation we can't set aside; if we do, we can't understand it. There's a margin of generalization we have to establish as well; if we don't, we can't convey the message.

***How does this generalization work in the case of Brazil?***

If we're being optimistic, I think Brazil really is a country of the future because, good or

bad, we're already dealing with an issue that is being posed in Europe now, namely, miscegenation. The problem of the blacks in Brazil is still very serious. People of African descent continue to be heavily excluded socially. But, in any event, Brazil is a country that could not have existed without immigration, that could not have existed without slavery, and that exploited the indigenous labor force atrociously. Even so, there are Indians trying to have an increasingly more active say in things. So Brazil is a phenomenon that has been stitching together its cultural diversity since it was colonized. It couldn't have maintained its unity if it hadn't stitched together its cultural diversity. We're the only country in the Americas that is authentically multi-cultural to the extent that it is experienced. It's not survival—it's a living experience. There's no Indian survival, no survival of Africa here; it's all a living experience. It forms part of our own experience, our DNA, which is basically indigenous. On the other hand, I think that it's a false issue to give up our European tradition because we're also Europeans. So I think that nationalism, precisely, and the need to create a body of intellectuals and original thinking for a young country meant that a series of explanations were constructed that go against the grain of this idea of continuity, which was always sold as a reactionary idea. But it may not be. I think that the history I wrote, including that biography of Cláudio, is always faced with the dilemma that Sérgio Buarque de Holanda expressed so clearly when he said, "We're homeless

outcasts in our own land," in *Raízes do Brasil* [*Roots of Brazil*].

***The evils of Brazil are often attributed to our colonization, the "heritage of the deportees." How do you view this?***

It's all true, and it's not. It's true because all this really happened. The most dramatic thing isn't being a land of deportees, because they all were: the USA, Australia, etc. The most terrible thing is that we had slavery until 1888 because that indeed generated virtually irreversible social dynamics. So the problem is not colonization, but slavery. Were we the only country to have slavery? No. But we're the one that dealt with the issue of slavery in the most perverse way. When a child today goes into his room, takes off his clothes and leaves his pants in a mess on the floor just the way they came off his body, I say, "That's a slave-based society." This disqualification of less qualified, less highly regarded work, for example, which exists to this day in Brazil. All workers are basically equal; we have to believe that. That's not the way it is in Brazil. Now, to attribute all the ills to colonization has to do with the affirmation of independence. Because Brazil underwent a different independence process, with a slave Empire, when the Republic arrived, those early republican generations had to attribute Brazil's ills to Portuguese colonization. I don't think that explains very much. That is why historians are always studying slavery; it explains things to us better.



**“There are no longer intellectuals who operate in society. I believe that this is connected to the fact that there is no more courage and frankness to produce explanations.”**

***Along with slavery, do the elite also help us understand Brazil?***

I don't know if the Brazilian elite are worse than any other elite. They are more stubborn concerning a certain type of privilege, depending on the region in Brazil. Look, the São Paulo elite are completely different from the northeastern elite. At least, I'm from São Paulo, and I see that the São Paulo elite today are no longer what they were at the time of my grandparents. They're different, but they reproduce the vices of the former elite. It seems to me that in the northeast and the north of Brazil, they're the same. I mean, we find the same names in the northeast and the north of Brazil. Not in the south. Who are the elite in São Paulo today? They're

no longer the Paes Leme, etc. Where are these people? They no longer exist. So the elite turn over much faster in São Paulo and in the south in general because of capitalistic development, of course. It turns over far faster because of the idea that society is open to anyone who has money and knows what to do or who has talent. I think that the elite are equally terrible in the United States, like the Brazilian

elite. I think that what characterizes the Brazilian elite is a great reluctance to give up their privileges. This has to do with the type of relationship that they established with the state machinery throughout history. The fact is that the Portuguese state is such an old one and that from the seventeenth century, it really opened up its coffers to its elite. I mean, the Portuguese nobility, especially in the eighteenth century, was a nobility that depended either on service to the Empire or money from the king's purse for its upkeep. Far more immediate attention was paid by the state to the needs of the dominant players, it seems to me. But I think it is a bit risky to say what I'm saying.

***We've had great intellectuals that thought about history holistically.***

***What about today?***

This is something that worries me a lot, more so every day. If someone asks me, “Laura, I want to read a general history of Brazil, what should I read?” I have nothing to tell them. The last great history of Brazil is *História geral da civilização brasileira* [General history of Brazilian civilization] by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda. This is a very serious problem in my mind because it's a global phenomenon, but there are certain historiographic traditions that continue maintaining general history. I think it's sorely lacking. When we want to have a particular general perspective of Brazil, we go back to Caio Prado Júnior or Sérgio Buarque de Holanda or to Capistrano de Abreu. No book written today and during the years after the arrival of the royal family will be better than *Dom João VI no Brasil* [Dom João VI in Brazil] by Oliveira Lima. I think we've jumped stages. We've glossed over a particular stage of historical knowledge, which in Europe was very well founded, which is historicity, the mass publication of document collections, the exhaustive description of certain ages. We skipped a stage and went straight into essayism, into university history, which demands that you focus on portions of things. Today, Brazilian historiographic production is good—according to FAPESP, in the humanities, it is the most prolific—with some absolutely extraordinary books, but it always has a very narrow focus. This has to do with the crisis of paradigms: that it's impossible to explain, that it's impossible to construct general explanations, that to understand a general phenomenon you always have to start from a specific angle, the impact of micro-history, of post-modernism.... I think we need to get over this phase, that it's possible to carry out monographic studies but also to provide general explanations—summaries that are more all-embracing. What we're seeing today is that there's an audience that's very hungry for history books, and it isn't always being served by professional historians but by individuals who do research without having any particular specialization. Those who have a more specific background but who chose to sell a lot



generally reproduce; they don't innovate. They do something that's correct, but they don't innovate. Those who are innovating are not writing for the general public. The next step needs to be taken by those who are doing original research and who should start writing for the general public.

***You often criticize young historians who discard the classics merely to look for new things. Why?***

When I was young, I was also someone who liked new things. I thought I was going to invent the wheel. Now, there are certain problems that are false and are attractive merely because they're new. Students come up to me and say, "I've read everything. It's all rubbish. No one is saying what I want to say." I say to them "So, explain to me why it's rubbish." Then, in the end, what rubbish remains is not such rubbish after all, and that great new aspect they wanted to talk about is not so new after all.

***Another important point is the absence of intellectuals acting in the public sphere.***

I view this with great sadness. I think this is a very serious problem. It's one of the most serious signs of this crisis of paradigms. I think that it must have been very good for those generations that had absolute certainty and truths. I have none, and this is very disheartening. On the other hand, it's provocative;

it leads to an environment of creative freedom. Our university production is very good, but there are no great intellectuals any more like there used to be, and that is a loss. I think it's a very big loss. I was very impressed in 1998, when I was a professor at the University of Texas, and I read *The New York Times* and found that the whole of the front page was a photo of the coffin of Octavio Paz with a headline that read, "The greatest thinker in the Americas has died." Perhaps he was the last great Latin American thinker. Now there aren't any. I think it has something to do with the fact that no one has the courage and frankness to produce explanations any longer. When I suggest *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, one of the most extraordinary books I've ever read, to my students, they complain, "No, for God's sake, don't give me Octavio Paz; he's a reactionary, fiction." It would be the same thing if I were to take *Raízes do Brasil* [*Roots of Brazil*]. Caio Prado Júnior is one of the biggest whipping boys of my generation. Several colleagues say they no longer talk about Caio Prado Júnior in their lessons because he's racist. The life of a university professor can be thoroughly dry and uninteresting. Very much so. I struggle desperately for mine not to be. But if I were strictly a university professor as I should be, my life would be no fun at all because I have to write a load of reports, I have to write a lot of opinions for Capes, CNPq, FAPESP, I

have to represent my area at Capes, the CNPq, at FAPESP, as I have done, because I have to supervise scientific initiation courses, master's degree courses, PhDs, post-doctoral studies. I have to go to I don't know how many congresses a year to be able to be recognized by the agencies that fund research. This creates a certain distortion. I've seen opinions saying that such-and-such a high-level historian only publishes books; he doesn't publish articles, and it's not good that he only publishes books. The fact that we've become professional takes us out of public life. Today, people who work in universities, with a few exceptions, are not involved in public life. Those who are heavily involved in public life end up investigating less.

### ***Why a book on Cláudio Manuel da Costa?***

He was a man divided, a man torn, who felt that who he was and what he did were not aligned with the world of the kingdom, but he was also unable to take a step outside it. So I think that he's very typical of the Portuguese-Brazilian world before independence, when it was neither one thing nor the other. There's a phrase in his confession in which he says that despite having said everything that he did, he does not think that informers are any better than those who fought, than those who were informed against. In other words, he says, "I informed, but I'm meaner and smaller than those who conspired against the king." It's one of the elements that makes me believe he killed himself, that he was sick about what he had done. It was also important to review the Minas Conspiracy and how, towards the end, they were putting on the brakes. They didn't want anymore. But the movement was headed toward generalized dissemination and a more radical path than it had been initially. For years, they used to go and say to the governor, "Oh my God, it could be better. And what if we had more representation? And what if Portuguese-Brazilians were listened to more?" And the governors [responded], "No, I don't think you're right." Then, the governors wrote to the Overseas Council, "Look at the things that are going on. You're seeing it from afar, while here, close to things, they aren't as you think they are from there. I'm here, and I'm seeing things. There's no way you can apply things the way you're ordering them to be applied." So the issue of trying to reach a compromise to maintain colonial domination went hand-in-hand with the desire for "light" participation on the part of the elite. It was in this type of situation that the governor was changed in 1784, and this special group decided to see if things really could be changed, perhaps even declare independence. I think that in the mid-

dle of the process, everything shifted into another type of movement, one that was more adversarial, more popular in character, more demanding, and that's when the literary men pulled the handbrake.

### ***And the person of Tiradentes?***

If someone is justly entitled to be called the hero of the Republic, I think he is it. I think he was really a great agitator; he was a political agitator. He was irresponsible and crazy, like all political agitators. He was a political agitator, and that's when he began to believe that things could really fall into place and become an emancipation movement, at least in the region. Nowadays, there are various studies that suggest that there was an attempt at organization between São Paulo, Rio and Minas, that the elite were trying to defend the economic interests that were heavily tied to these three regions.

### ***n You said that you live between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. What's your view of Brazil today?***

I have a very positive view of Brazil today, and I think we all have reasons for this because I think we're the only country in the Americas with its own project, despite what the press says, that we are always on the brink of the abyss and that no one has any project whatsoever. I think Fernando Henrique and Lula produced two very important governments. I think that everything began with the FHC government because he was Fernando Henrique, a respected man, a great intellectual at a moment of enormous international mediocrity. If we think about who the political leaders in the world are, we can wipe the floor with them, whether it's with Fernando Henrique, Lula, or Dilma. But the problems in Brazil are still the same, though on a smaller scale now because of the distribution of income and education. I think the biggest challenge for Brazil is the challenge of education, quality public education for elementary schools because nowadays, for better or for worse, we have a competent university system. The challenge going forward is education. I think even health is a consequence of education; as education gets into gear, health goes along with it. There is, however, the question of income distribution. There we go back to the issue of the Brazilian elite. There has to be greater motivation, greater participation, and that's where there's a lack of great public figures, which unfortunately we no longer have. There's a lack of great causes, great standards. But I'm optimistic about Brazil and pessimistic about the world because I think the world's coming to an end. In the world of today, I view Brazil with optimism. ■