

Interview with the historian Timothy J. Coates – *College of Charleston* – USA



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In mid-2012, during the commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the History course of UNESP (São Paulo State University in Franca, São Paulo, Brazil), the coordinators of the research group named “*Written about the new worlds*”¹ achieved the academic congress “*Images of the West in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*”. This congress, part of the efforts to expand the intellectual exchange established between UNESP, other higher education institutions and research centers in the country and abroad, with the support of the History Department, the Post-Graduate Program in History and the Center of Documentation and Support in Historical Research (CEDAPH in Portuguese) and was composed by three lectures of the historians Timothy J. Coates, from the Department of History at the College of Charleston (USA), Arno Wehling, President of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and History, and Caio César Boschi, one of the mentors of the Project “Historical Documentation Rescue - Baron of Rio Branco” and is currently teacher of the Department History of the Catholic University of Minas Gerais. The subject “*Images of the West*”, major guide of the conferences held during the homonym congress, proceeded from discussions among the members of the aforementioned research group and now is deployed, with the addition of articles produced by some of the most prominent Brazilian historians, into the dossier “*New Worlds Images in the Western Culture*” of the journal *História (São Paulo)*.

Professor Coates, one of the speakers, kindly volunteered to approach more carefully, in an interview, about some of the issues discussed into his conference. In a casual conversation, the American researcher tells us a little about his career as a historian and his

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¹ For more information about the activities of the research group “*Written about the new worlds*”, please access <http://dgp.cnpq.br/buscaoperacional/detalhegrupo.jsp?grupo=0330705FP1AIRL>

current research. Coates, a renowned scholar of Portuguese Overseas Empire, crossed step by step the itinerary of Portuguese settlers in America, Africa and Asia, and throughout his vast career produced several articles and books about the modes of punishment in the Portuguese Ancient Régime, most recently on African slavery. The historian is also known for his edition and dissemination work, in English, of documents relating to the Portuguese Empire, available in archives and libraries in Portugal, India (Goa) and China (Macau). In Brazil, his most known work is “*Degredados e órfãos: colonização dirigida pela coroa no império português, 1550-1755*” [1998] (*Convicts and Orphans: Forced and State-Sponsored Colonizers in the Portuguese Empire, 1550-1755*. Stanford University Press, 2001), originally published in Portuguese in 1998 by the National Commission for the Commemoration of Portuguese discoveries.

Ricardo A. Ferreira - Could you tell us more about your career as a historian, particularly about the research that resulted in the book “*Degredados e órfãos: colonização dirigida pela coroa no império português, 1550-1755*” [1998] (*Convicts and Orphans: Forced and State-Sponsored Colonizers in the Portuguese Empire, 1550-1755*. Stanford University Press, 2001)?

Timothy J. Coates - When I first began to consider this project, I knew that I wanted to write a work that dealt with the *entire* early modern Portuguese Empire and I wanted it to be something completely new and original. I was very much inspired by C. R. Boxer’s work (in general), especially *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, which I consider one of the finest books written on Portuguese history. In retrospect, I was very ambitious to attempt something so big; it would have been far easier to concentrate on one small part of the empire in a much more limited time frame as I did with Castro Marim, later.

I began the project with the orphan girls and their dowries, which I thought was a fascinating topic. In the beginning, I thought they would make a great subject for a study but themselves. Convicts were added at the suggestion of my advisor, Professor Stuart Schwartz. The combination of the two was a good one.

I lived and worked in Portugal for two years (1980-82) before I began graduate study of history and studied Portuguese at both the Universidades de Coimbra and Lisboa. This put

me in a very good position to start the research on this work in 1989, since I knew the country, people, and language. I completed the coursework and exams for the Ph. D. at Minnesota in 1989 and I was fortunate to be awarded with a grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for a year of archival work in Portugal. There are masses of documentation in Portuguese archives and I could easily have used a second or even third year to see all that I wanted, but I only had a year. Nothing in Portugal happens quickly, but I tried to use every day I could to conduct research. During that year, I visited about 20 different archives and another 5 libraries or so in Portugal finding small pieces of data here and there. That year was followed by a second one in Goa, India on a fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies to support a year of research in the archives of Goa. That was a magical year when I lived in a small fishing village near the archives and had sufficient free time to make two long trips around India, one to the north to see Bombay, Damão, and Diu and another to the south to see São Tomé of Meliapur (near Madras), Cochin, and Calicut. Once that year was finished, I wanted to spend a third year working in Brazil, but Professor Schwartz pointed out that I had already seen a great deal of documentation on Brazil in Lisbon and it was time to return to the US and begin writing.

The documentation from those two years became the basis for my dissertation, which took me two years to write, from 1991-1993. I guess I am a slow writer, and I had thousands of little pieces of data to fit together. To transform the dissertation into a book, it took three or four more visits to archives in Portugal during the period from 1993 to 1998 when the Portuguese edition was released by the Comissão dos Descobrimentos in Lisbon. I was also able to visit Macau but frankly did not find a great deal of materials for this work there. All together, I consulted over 40 archives and libraries for documentation for this work. The most memorable of these would have to be the library of the National Palace in Mafra, a visually stunning library with inlaid marble floors and 30,000 rare volumes from the eighteenth century in a palace the size of a huge city block. The library in Mafra is the Hollywood version of a European Library, built at the height of the gold boom in Minas Gerais. Consulting that many archives was quite an experience and it resulted in a good three or four articles that I published on them. Portugal has such a wealth of documentation. Everybody works in Lisbon at the Torre do Tombo and the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, but there are very rich underused collections in Lisbon such as the Arquivo Histórico Militar and the

Sociedade de Geografia, not to mention those beyond Lisbon in Évora, Coimbra, and many of the district archives.

The heart of the problem of conducting research on crime and criminals in the period from 1500 to 1800 in Portugal is that the 1755 earthquake destroyed the collections that would have been the most useful. There are virtually no legal cases (*processos*) or any sort of judicial data from this period, no court records, no galley registers, no lists of prisoners in jail, etc².

What I found were bits and pieces scattered throughout these many archives and libraries. I firmly believe that because the evidence for *degredo* and *degredados* is so scattered, so fragmentary, and so piecemeal this explains why no other study similar to mine has appeared before or since. I estimate that it would take a researcher three to four years of archival work (one year each in Portugal, Brazil, and Goa, with a long visit to Luanda) to write a second study. Very few people have that much time or the necessary resources. It is far more likely that at this stage we will begin to see regional studies, such as one *capitania* of Brazil. This is especially true now that the *Projecto Resgate* has made the Brazilian documentation available from the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, with detailed indices to assist consultation.

Ricardo A. Ferreira - Although there are previous records, exile eventually became a form of punishment typical of the *Ancient Régime*. What kind of crimes and criminals were convicted to exile?

Timothy J. Coates - The short answer to this is “just about anybody and for a long list of minor and major crimes.” The punishment of *degredo* had a double application: on the one hand, it was immediate manpower for some distant place, usually in the form of military service. An example of this would be sending 75 men to Goa or Recife in the 1600’s to fight the Dutch. The other, more subtle, application of *degredo* is social control at home. The population realized that if they broke the norms of society, even in small ways, they would be

² The one exception to this statement is the collection of registers called the *Juzío de Degredados*, in the Torre do Tombo. This is a collection of 40 small folios that begin around 1740 and end in the 1830’s. Daniel Domingues da Silva was kind enough to share his data from these volumes with me and it is clear they are centered on the civil war years of 1828-1834.

punished by being sent away. If they broke more serious laws, they would be sent to the other side of the globe and probably never come back.

Minor crimes such as insulting a judge or passing notes to someone in jail would result in possible banishment from town or being sent to internal exile not terribly far from the court. In Portugal, this was to Castro Marim or another border town. In Brazil, this might have been to the Colônia do Sacramento, in India this would have been to Diu. The four most serious crimes were counterfeiting, treason, heresy, and sodomy. These were punished by being sent the greatest distance to most difficult locales. From Portugal or Brazil that was to the galleys, São Tomé, or Luanda; from Goa it was to Mozambique Island. So, for example, when you examine the punishments for the very famous *Inconfidência Mineira*, which was of course treason, the leader (Tiradentes) was killed in a very public manner as an example and the others were sent far away to Africa.

Just about everything else (murder, theft, etc.) could be called a “middle range crime” with a distant locale as punishment but not as difficult as the “big four” above. From Portugal, that might mean being sent to North Africa or India; in Brazil that meant being sent to the far north (Rio Grande do Norte) or south; in India, perhaps to Sri Lanka or Chaul.

The one aspect that really strikes me about this scheme of crime and punishment is the nearly complete absence of the death penalty. Yes, it was used in rare occasions (such as Tiradentes, mentioned above) but these were **very rare**. Far more common was the *threat* of the death penalty, rather than its application. The Portuguese State never tired of threatening to use it, but it clearly was very reluctant to do so. As I recall, it was António Manuel Hespanha who conducted research on this topic and found that the early modern state only killed a handful of people over a very long period. In that sense, the Portuguese State was like the dog that always barked but never bit anyone.

Ricardo A. Ferreira - Professor Timothy, do you believe we can say that exile assumed a strategic importance in the development and consolidation of the "Portuguese Empire"? In what way?

Timothy J. Coates - The punishment of *degredo* was fundamental in providing the military with manpower. The Portuguese military was essential in expanding and defending the Empire. Without *degredo*, the Portuguese would have been forced to turn to alternative

methods of staffing the army and the galleys. So, let's pause a minute to think what that would have been. They could have turned to *impressment*, the way that the British staffed their navy. However, in emergencies, the Portuguese did that already, such as during the Wars of the Restoration of Independence from Spain. At that time, they had a list of the numbers of "soldiers" each *comarca* would provide for the army. What other alternatives did they have? They could have purchased slaves and made them soldiers, but that would have been a dangerous proposition, to arm slaves and hope they would not turn on the population or flee or both. They could have hired foreign mercenaries, but they lacked the funds to promptly pay their own troops, much less foreigners. So, to answer the question, I do not see any clear alternative for the military. *Degredo* worked (more or less) as a way to staff the military. On the other hand, the early modern Portuguese military did not have a glorious reputation and was known for being ineffective and unorganized. Can there be any doubt why, if convicts formed an involuntary and substantial segment of its ranks? This is rather well documented, that is, the collection of convicts for obligatory military duty. It is possible to find passages, for example, in André Ribeiro Coutinho's (now very rare 1751 manual) *O Capitão de Infantaria Portuguez* where he clearly states the way to find troops is to head for the local jail. As everybody knows, the Portuguese military was also poorly paid and frequently paid late, if at all. It strikes me that this link between *degredo* and the military is one that military historians of Brazil and Portugal might find very productive to investigate much further.

Ricardo A. Ferreira - You have recently expanded your research about exile. Please tell us about this new phase of your studies.

Timothy J. Coates - The year after *Convicts and Orphans* was published in English, my good friend Geraldo Pieroni and I completed a complimentary study for both our research on Castro Marim and internal exile within Portugal from 1500 to 1850. This little book, *De Couto do Pecado à Vila do Sal: Castro Marim 1550-1850* explored the dynamics of Castro Marim and the hundreds of *degredados* sent there for more than three hundred. Geraldo wrote the longer section on the Inquisition and Castro Marim and I wrote the shorter section on *degredo* and the state's courts. Unfortunately, the 1755 earthquake also damaged Castro

Marim and their local documentation only begins in the 1800s. While writing that, I slowly became more aware of the penal reform movement in Portugal during the nineteenth century.

When I completed *Convicts and Orphans* in 2001, I thought *degredo* probably ended in 1755 or so and that Portugal followed other European powers with judicial reforms and modern prisons in the nineteenth century. To a limited extent, it did. What I did not know then was that *degredo* continued to be a central feature of this “new” legislation during the nineteenth century. The punishment of *degredo* would become linked with New Imperialism and the scramble for colonies in Africa. Portugal faced the same problem the British confronted when the US became independent in the 1770s. The British had to look around and find another place for its convicts and it selected Australia. When Brazil became independent in 1822, Portugal could no longer send its *degredados* to Pará, Maranhão, and Santa Catarina as it had been doing since the 1740s. The Portuguese turned to Angola and Mozambique. Mozambique Island became a penal colony and Luanda was home to the *Depósito de Degredados*. These two spots continued to receive convicts until 1932. This is the subject of my forthcoming new book: *European Convict Labor in the Portuguese Empire, 1740-1932*. While it has a small section on Brazil in late colonial times, the main focus is on Luanda from 1880-1932.

Ricardo A. Ferreira - How do you see the research scene on the themes of the State and Justice in contemporary historiography, especially in the United States of America?

Timothy J. Coates - For the past 10 years, I have been working on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Portuguese Africa, so I have not been following a lot of the newer literature on other issues such as these as closely as I would have liked. I also have a heavy teaching load, which makes it very hard to keep up with the literature. I can tell you that there is virtually *nothing* written on New Imperialism in Africa and convict labor done by Europeans, that is nothing in English or Portuguese. I can make a few comments about the works that I have been reading for the past few years.

It has been the case for a long time that the study of early modern crime, convicts, and similar has been *much* more advanced in the British case than any other. This is in spite of the *Annales School* and the French leading with some path-breaking work on these subjects in the 1980's and earlier. The British and historians of the British case are more numerous and

have masses of excellent, organized documentation. So, for example, virtually every colony of British North America is the subject of a monograph on crime and punishment. Some of these are very old such as Raphael Semmes *Crime and Punishment in Early Maryland*, first published in 1938; some are more recent, such as Donna J. Spindel's *Crime and Society in North Carolina, 1663-1776*, published in 1989. Then there are broad overviews of the British case, beginning with the 1947 classic work by Abbott Emerson Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, as well as Ekirch's *Bound for America* (1987), and newer studies such as Morgan and Rushton's, *Eighteenth Century Criminal Transportation: The Formation of the Criminal Atlantic* (2004) and Jordan and Walsh, *White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America* (2008). This is not even mentioning the wealth of studies done by British historians on Australia or the Indian Ocean regions, such as Clare Anderson or Hamish Maxwell-Stewart.³ So, as you can clearly see, the British case overwhelms the others in its range, depth, quality, and sheer number of publications.

One very positive aspect of this situation is that these works provide some excellent models and pose numerous questions for my own study. Another aspect to keep in mind here (as I stated above) is that the *Projecto Resgate* has opened a very wide door of possibilities for historians of colonial Brazil. It would not surprize me if in the next generation (20 or 30 years), we could see a study of *degredo* and *degredados* in many of the colonial *capitanias*.

But I am wandering a bit. In the French case, I would argue that Philip Boucher's work continues to stand out in regard to early modern French America. Notably, he recently completed *France and the American Tropics to 1700* (2008). Peter Redfield's study of the penal aspects of French Guiana, *Space in the Tropics* (2000) is one of the most helpful and suggestive works for my own study on Angola. Kerry Ward's new work on the Dutch, *Networks of Empire* (2009) is a unique study on forced migration in the Dutch East India Company.

In the Portuguese case, there is a small but growing literature on crime and punishment in nineteenth and early twentieth century Portugal. This is led chiefly by the high quality and sophisticated work done by Maria João Vaz, but there are others as well, such as

³ Clare Anderson. *Legible Bodies. Race, Criminality, and Colonialism in South Asia*. Berg, 2004; *Subaltern Lives*. Cambridge, 2012; Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, eds. *Chain Letters. Narrating Convict Lives*. Melbourne University Press, 2001.

Tiago Marques.⁴ In Brazil, I have also been impressed by the publications of Professors Janaína Amado, Selma Pantoja, and Maristela Toma. This does not include the on-going studies of the Inquisition as it impacted Brazil by Gearlido Pieroni and many others.

Finally, I wanted to be sure to mention two younger scholars whose work will undoubtedly be of increasing importance along these lines: Anabela Francisca do Nascimento Cunha, working in Angola⁵ and Clarisse Moreira Aló, who wrote a very solid MA thesis on *degreedo* to Angola in the nineteenth century.

Ricardo A. Ferreira - Now that you have completed the manuscript on Angola, what do you see as your next project(s)?

Timothy J. Coates - For some years now, I have thought that one of the major reasons that Portuguese and Brazilian history are underappreciated, if not ignored, in the US is because of the lack of familiarity in the US with Portuguese. Few Americans study it and most of the classic works on Portuguese colonial history, works that we all know, have never been translated into English. As a result, I am very happy to be able to say that the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture at the University of Massachusetts in Dartmouth has begun a new series, "Classic Histories in Translation from the Portuguese-Speaking World." I am the series editor for this new project. The first work will be released this December or January, my translation of Antonil's *Cultura e Opulência do Brasil* (1711), which will have the English title of *Brazil at the Dawn of the Eighteenth Century*. It is hard to believe that as fundamental a work as this has never before been translated into English! The next publication will be José Pinto Azeredo's, *Ensaio sobre algumas enfermidades de Angola* (1799). We have an ambitious list of future publications and hope to be able to release one new title annually.

⁴ Maria João Vaz. *Crime e Sociedade. Portugal na Segunda Metade do século XIX*. Oeiras: Celta, 1998; Maria João Vaz, Eunice Relvas, and Nuno Pinheiro, eds. *Exclusão na História. Actas do Colóquio Internacional sobre Exclusão Social*. Oeiras: Celta, 2000; Tiago Pires Marques. *Crime e Castigo no liberalismo em Portugal*. Lisboa: Horizonte, 2005.

⁵"O degredo para Angola na segunda metade do século XIX. Os degredados e a colonização penal." MA thesis, Universidade de Lisboa, Faculdade de Letras, 2004.

In the Spring of 2014, I will be organizing a conference here at the College of Charleston on Catherine of Bragança, to be called “The Dowry that Made World History.” Her dowry was the largest (or certainly one of the largest) in European history and included not only the well-known two million gold *cruzados*, but also the city of Tangier, the island of Bombay, trading rights for the British in Brazil, and the immediate dispatch of British troops to assist the Portuguese in the on-going war with Spain. Then there are the major personalities around her, Charles II and James II of Great Britain, her brothers Afonso VI and Pedro II, and her parents. Then one could consider British-Portuguese relations and even the Carolina colony and Charleston itself! This conference will bring together specialists on all the many aspects of her dowry and (I trust) result in an edited volume that will discuss Catherine and her dowry (for the first time) in its complete, global context.