

International Prize for History CISH 2024

Laura de Mello e Souza

The most striking features of Laura de Mello e Souza's intellectual and academic career, alongside her exceptional quality, are her originality and uniqueness. For more than four decades, she has engaged with various trends and waves in historiography, both international and Brazilian, but has never allowed herself to be dominated by them. Social and cultural history have always been her fields of choice, but she has also combined them with political, religious, and literary history. Favoring qualitative approaches, she never failed to use numbers when necessary, and made frequent use of iconography. Her writing has also included biography and even comparative history. Her initial research topic was colonial Brazil (17th-19th centuries), above all the gold region of Minas Gerais, but she has since pursued America's natural connections with Africa and Portugal and, more recently, studied European monarchies. Popular culture and religion and the history of poverty were her other initial interests, after which she went on to publish model studies on literate conspirators, noble governors, and even reigning figures. Her books have been translated into English, French and Spanish. Without exception, however, the literary quality and elegance of her work constitute an admirably distinctive style with rare parallels in Portuguese-language historiography.

Laura de Mello e Souza's early work and first books were inextricably linked to the University of São Paulo, where she graduated, where she obtained her first academic degrees, and where she began her academic career. In this remarkable initial cycle, the theme of Brazilian popular groups and cultures clearly prevailed. One of her first books was *Os Desclassificados do Ouro*, published in 1983 (translated into French: *Les déclassés de l'or. La pauvreté dans le Minas Gerais au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Le Poisson volant éditeur, 2020)), followed in 1986 by *O Diabo na Terra de Santa Cruz* (published in English as *The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross: Witchcraft, Slavery, and Popular Religion in Colonial Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); and in

Spanish as *El diablo en la tierra de Santa Cruz: hechichería y religiosidad popular en el Brasil colonial* (Madrid: Alianza, 1993)), and finally in 1996 *Inferno Atlântico: demonologia e colonização - séculos XVI-XVIII* (“Atlantic Hell, Demonology and Colonization, 16th to 18th centuries”). In her next cycle, she turned to studies of the exercise of power and forms of domination, including—beyond multiple edited works—the books *Norma e conflito: aspectos da história de Minas no século XVIII* (Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG, 1999) and the *magnum opus*, *O Sol e a Sombra: política e administração na América portuguesa do século XVIII* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2006; “The Sun and the Shadow: Politics and Administration in 18th-century Portuguese America”), as well as the award-winning biography of one of the participants in the 1789 conspiracy against the Portuguese colonial administration, *Cláudio Manuel da Costa: o letrado dividido* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2011).

From witchcraft in Brazil to the royal courts of Southern Europe, Laura de Mello e Souza's work has always incorporated innovative international scholarship in her research projects. Her career, moreover, has not been limited to writing history, but has also encompassed intense teaching activity, as well as participation in projects and numerous conferences. She taught for more than three decades at the University of São Paulo and then for almost a decade at the Université Paris IV, Sorbonne. In between, she was a visiting professor in the USA, Spain, Portugal, and Mexico. She has received numerous awards for her publications, and has also been honored by former students at various times, particularly in a recent book discussing the traces and legacies of her work (2021).

Less engrossed now in teaching, Laura de Mello e Souza continues to devote herself to writing the history she has always practiced with a mastery that is hard to match. The award of the CISH International Prize in History for her original and high-level scholarly and intellectual contribution to the discipline will be a further stimulus for the completion of her next book and for all the other writings she will undoubtedly offer us in the future.