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FACULTY RESEARCH NOTE

Linda Wimmer

In this era of globalization, free trade and export-driven economies, we should be reminded that these are not new concepts, but rather modern applications of the imperialism and mercantilism practiced by the European powers in Latin America and Africa during the heyday of colonialism. Professor Linda Wimmer of the History Department is conscious of current global trade relations and past colonial practices through her research, which explores the linkages between Brazilian tobacco production controlled by the Portuguese and Canadian fur trade under the direction of the English and French.

After spending a year examining archival materials in northeast Brazil and Rio de Janeiro and three months at the Hudson Bay Company archives in Manitoba, Professor Wimmer has been able to trace the inter-imperial trade that covered thousands of miles. According to Professor Wimmer, North American native groups preferred the Brazilian tobacco, which was twisted in long sticky ropes and covered with molasses over the more bland Virginia tobacco. The British and French fur traders, seeking desirable items to trade with indigenous groups for furs, stepped beyond their respective imperial boundaries, making regular purchases of Brazilian tobacco from Lisbon, the Portuguese imperial capital, to comply with indigenous consumer preferences.

Professor Wimmer's study of the tobacco for fur trade has led to more intensive examination of slave demography and family life in northeast Brazil at the height of the export economy in the 18th and 19th centuries. As a result of her research interest, Professor Wimmer delivered a conference paper at the Social Science History Association on slave demography in Brazil during the 18th century. Her paper explored population growth among African slaves who worked the tobacco plantations, a surprising development considering the living and working conditions of the laborers. Also, Professor Wimmer delivered a paper at the Organization of American Historians conference on tobacco farmers and local society in Brazil. This paper sought to investigate the social and economic positions of tobacco planters who owned slaves and to assess the relations between masters and slaves in colonial Brazil.



Professor Wimmer's study of slavery in Brazil has given her a unique insight into race relations. She found evidence of poor treatment of slaves, coercion by their masters, escape attempts and punishment by death. However, she also found evidence that many slaves raised families and went on with their lives despite their lack of freedom. Although Brazil was the last country in the western hemisphere to free its slaves (in 1888), Wimmer finds that race relations were constructed differently from prevalent patterns in the United States. According to

Wimmer, social and economic position, cultural factors, and a wide variety of physical traits, including skin color, hair texture, and facial features, are used to determine racial categorization, which includes a plethora of designations.

Professor Wimmer's research also has given her insight into the relations between the English, the French and the native Indians. Wimmer is convinced that even though the English and French enriched themselves with the fur trade, the natives were not without some leverage. In order to trade with the Indians, the British, in particular, were forced to make the long and difficult trading arrangements with Portuguese Brazil, even though tobacco was grown in colonial Virginia. The Indians, it seems, were able to demand the Brazilian tobacco and played off the English against the French in order to get the best deal.

The study of slavery and international trade during the colonial era in Brazil has further sparked Professor Wimmer's interest. She will be spending the summer in Brazil studying a period of time in which the Dutch controlled northeast Brazil for a twenty-five year period in the 17th century. Professor Wimmer is most interested to see what impact warfare between Dutch and Portuguese for control of the colony had on the slave-based society and economy, on race relations and on colonial identity.

Besides her commitment to research on colonial Brazil, Professor Wimmer has become active in introducing a number of new courses into the History Department curriculum. Needless to say, the courses are directed towards a better understanding of colonial empires, slavery and the evolution of Latin American societies. Although this is her first year at Bridgewater, Professor Wimmer has quickly shown her ability to meld research and teaching in ways that benefit the discipline of history and expand the horizons of her students. ❧