Entrevista

Digital History of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: An Interview with David Eltis.

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Abstract: Interview with David Eltis conducted on June 14, 2018, in the city of Niterói.
Keywords: Digital history; Transatlantic slave trade; Atlantic world.

História digital do tráfico transatlântico de escravos: uma entrevista com David Eltis

Resumo: Entrevista realizada com o historiador David Eltis, em 14 de junho de 2018, na cidade de Niterói.
Palavras-chave: História digital; Tráfico transatlântico de escravos; Mundo atlântico.

Article received on December 15, 2018, approved for publication on December 19, 2018.

DOI: 10.1590/TEM-1980-542X2018v250212.

Few people know as much about the history and historiography of the transatlantic slave trade as historian David Eltis. Besides various articles and edited volumes, Eltis has written two great books on the theme: *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (1987), still the most complete study on the organization of the illegal slave trade and its transformations in the nineteenth century, and *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (2000), which explores the colonial era. His vast intellectual production shows the great possibilities offered by Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database (available at: <www.slavevoyages.org>), of which he has been the main coordinator. It is hard to think of digital history initiatives that have produced comparable impacts on the historiography.

1. **Leonardo Marques: Let's begin with a basic question. Why did you decide to study history?**

   David Eltis: It was the only thing I was any good at. I didn't do very well at school but I was always able to write. I don't know where the numbers thing came from. My MA thesis was about the parliamentary career of a 19th C British liberal reformer who was a minor character in the British abolitionist movement, but I was 27 before I got this far.

2. **LM: And did publish anything related to your MA thesis?**

   DE: One of the chapters was on his role in the abolition movement. I thought that given the Civil Rights movement maybe someone would be interested in publishing it. Looking back I can't think why I would want anyone to read it. But it came out in the very first issue of the *Journal of Caribbean History* (Eltis, 1970, pp. 41-56).

3. **LM: Was that your first academic piece?**

   DE: Yes, I was 30 years old before I got anything published. And then I thought "oh this is easy, maybe I'll try again". In those days the Canadian government had an agency called Canada Council, which entertained applications from non-academics (which I then was) and would evaluate them and assign funds on their merit, which would be absolutely unthinkable these days. I wrote a grant application to work on the FO84

series in the UK,[1] supported by the essay that I published in the *Journal of Caribbean History* and I was very surprised to find that I was able to go to London. But in the meantime I also wrote to Philip Curtin, who had published his book on the slave trade in 1969, asking him about his data, in particular his nineteenth century data (Curtin, 1972). He has a chapter in his *Census* book based on records that he extracted from the parliamentary papers of 1845. It turned out that he had computerized the complete run — he had punched an IBM card for each voyage that the British Foreign Office knew about between 1817 and 1843. There were 2,313 of them. So within a few weeks I got two big boxes in the mail with the cards.

4. **LM: Curtin mailed them to you. That is fantastic. Did you know him before that?**

DE: No. He was into his Senegambia book by then (Curtin, 1975) and he was obviously prepared to get rid of all this other material, although he did publish a revision of his figures in 1975. And there's a very interesting point here. This was before the various Klein datasets became available, and I believe that this was the only machine readable voyage data that Curtin used in his 1969 book. For voyageids he used the numbering which was in the *Parliamentary Papers*. One to 2,313. And these still form the first 2,313 records in the *Voyages* database.[2] Curtin is the foundation of the database. I didn't know anything about computers or statistics, but I took these two boxes to the computer room of the community college where I was then teaching, and they gave me a printout. Wide sheets with holes on the side of them. If you look carefully at the database you'll see that some of them are not there because there were double counts or voyages that were not for slaves.

5. **LM: Were your next two publications based on that?**

DE: Didn't quite work like that because I read an article by Eric Williams [laughs]. Without Curtin and Williams I would not have had a career [more laughs].

6. **LM: So you read the piece by Williams and...**

DE: And it wasn't on any of the big issues at all. It was an essay on the intercolonial slave trade. The British shut down the inter-island slave trade in 1806 just before they

[1] Foreign Office: Slave Trade Department and successors: General Correspondence before 1906, documentation related to the slave trade deposited at the National Archives in England..
[2] Available at: <www.slavevoyages.org>.

shut down their transatlantic slave trade. They did this in 1806. And it was because they had conquered Trinidad and what became British Guiana, and the planters in Jamaica and the eastern Caribbean started to migrate with their slaves to these virgin and undeveloped lands, despite the possibility that Trinidad and Guiana would be returned to the Spanish and the Dutch, respectively, at the end of the war. So the British restricted the movement from island to island. And that was the first erosion of the right to trade in slaves, apart from the *Dolbens Act*.[3] The Williams article said "well, that didn't work, because between 1806 and 1833 the planters were shipping out slaves in huge numbers". So I went back to look at the records and found this wasn't the case. Thus my second article was on the intercolonial slave trade and basically said Williams wasn't quite right on this. It came out in 1972 in the *Economic History Review* (Eltis, 1972, pp. 55-64).

7. LM: And the third one?

DE: The third one was on the *Journal of Maritime History* and it was just the opposite in a sense, because what I was doing there was highlighting the British ships that continued to trade in slaves on the African coast after the 1807 abolition act (Eltis, 1974, pp. 1-11). I added these to the database.

8. LM: What happened next?

DE: A lot of people were doing what I was doing and I didn't know. It was the computer revolution. And there were no laptops or even desktops, just an IBM mainframe, but a lot of people using punchcards. Herb Klein started before me, of course, and possibly even before Curtin. He created a half-dozen databases on Brazil, Angola, Cuba and Virginia. When his book, *the Middle Passage* (Klein, 1978), came out, he put them all into the Wisconsin archive for us all to use. At the same time, Johannes Postma was doing the Dutch traffic, David Richardson was pushing ahead on 2,200 Bristol voyages (Richardson and Bristol Record Society, 1986) and with Maurice Schofield was collecting data on the Liverpool and Whitehaven trade; Jean Mettas and Serge Daget were putting together their monumental *Catalogue* on the French (Mettas, 1978).

[3] Act limiting the number of people that British slavers were allowed to carry.

9. **LM: So you met those guys at that moment?**

DE: I met David in 1975 at the first academic conference I attended at Colby College. But nothing much really happened for a while. We were all accumulating material independently. I did an article in 1977 for the *Journal of Economic History* on the nineteenth century (Eltis, 1977, pp. 409-433), but meanwhile at that conference in Colby in 1975 I met Stan Engerman and talked to him about the possibility of doing a PhD, and then talked to my wife about the possibility of doing a PhD, which was much more important [laughs]. And two things made it possible: one, she had a job. The other was that I got leave with something like 75% pay from the community college. So for a year I was able to do coursework.

10. **LM: And have classes with Peter Linebaugh, Eugene Genovese...**

DE: Not Genovese, because he was in Cambridge at the time. I only met him when he returned to Rochester and I was finishing my PhD. I took only three or four courses and went back to Canada and wrote the thesis. And when Genovese read it he said "this reads like an appendix to a thesis" [laughs].

11. **LM: And that's when you decided you had to...**

DE: Rewrite it. He was right. He had very acute sense of what would fly and what would not. He probably thought the same thing about my 1987 book (Eltis, 1987) but he never said so.

12. **LM: So what triggered the idea of making all the data you had been collecting available to everyone?**

DE: Well, by the 1980s there were a dozen or so printed Catalogues of slave voyages published and then Postma's book came out in 1990 (Postma, 1990). I met Steve Behrendt in Kew around 1988-89, and we were both standing in line, waiting for documents, and started chatting, and he said "oh, I'm studying the slave trade" and I said "oh, so am I". And told what he was working on was his PhD thesis. And being Steve he had just about everything that was available in the archives. So we said: "we should put all this stuff together". Then together with David Richardson and Herb Klein we put together the 27,000 records that became the core of the CD-ROM (Eltis et al., 1999).

13. LM: And how did the Portuguese role in the slave trade appear?

DE: Well, we were aware of the vast role of the Portuguese, as Curtin had already pointed out based on Maurício Goulart's book (1949). Pierre Verger's book was already available by then (in a sense, another appendix to a thesis) (Verger, 1968). So it was not like we were stumbling in the dark altogether. But we were aware of the hole, especially for the beginning and in fact there is still is a big chunk missing at the beginning, plus the internet was taking off. As a consequence, David and I applied for money from a British Agency, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and we got the single biggest grant that the project ever received. That allowed us to set up bases in both Rio and Lisbon. We hired Jelmer Vos to go to Lisbon and we were lucky to connect with Manolo Florentino for Rio. Without Manolo none of this would have happened. He was absolutely central to accessing the South Atlantic trade.

14. LM: Ok, let me change the subject a bit. You told Fraser Harbutt in an interview ten years ago that the field of Atlantic history was going towards more micro-history at the time.

DE: Is that what I said? [laughs].

15. LM: Yes. Do you still think that? Because I remember when I got to Emory and I started to take courses with you, some important micro-historical studies of the slave trade had indeed been coming out and we were reading and discussing them with you.

DE: I think actually the database has helped micro-history more than anything else. Because people who do micro-history can find out both specific cases and quickly establish the backdrop for them. So I don't see any particular tension between what I'm doing and micro-history.

16. LM: Sure, sure, there's no tension. But you gave the impression that the big issues did not engage people as they used to anymore. Do you think that's still the case?

DE: Well, if you limit the comments to the slave trade, certainly the big quantitative issues have been, more or less, if not settled, at least accepted.

17. LM: What about Atlantic History as a field?

DE: I think Atlantic History has given way to Global History.

18. LM: But hasn't Global History brought the big issues back?

DE: Well, the big issue now is the East and the West.

19. LM: Right, the place of Asia in global dynamics. But is there a way of looking at the Atlantic as part of these global dynamics without completely diluting it?

DE: What drives all this is the dominant economic power and obviously with the emergence of China the interest inevitably shifts. Not many outside Britain do British history, or learn Russian. And interest in the Atlantic coincided with the peak of American power, which obviously set a pattern in terms of attracting overseas migration and continues to do so in global terms today. What happens east of the Cape of Good Hope is still some years away from having the same amount of readily available sources as we have for Atlantic History. So as far as your career, and certainly my career are concerned, we are fine.

20. LM: One last question: why is the database important to Brazil and Brazil for the database?

DE: I just think one of the side effects of US domination in the last century or so is that the rest of the Americas got pushed aside. And, in fact, American domination is extremely recent. And it was the Iberian world that really mattered as late as 1800 and beyond. In fact, probably until the mainland Spanish empire collapsed and Brazil became independent. So I think it's extremely important to get the Iberian world at the center of attention. And the parallel to this is the pattern of migration in the Atlantic. Migration in the Americas was overwhelmingly African until well past 1800. And while everybody nods in that direction, and says "yes, that's right", the implications of this have not been explored. So this is not just the question of raising the profile of the Iberian world but raising the profile of the African part of the Atlantic world. The database helps to do that.

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