

# *Rebellion in the Backlands: Landscape with Figures\**

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**Abstract:** *Brazil's historical situation in the period immediately preceding the writing of Os Sertões<sup>1</sup> informs the very conception of the book. The Republic was proclaimed in 1889, one year after the abolition of slavery, and the early years of republican period were marked by a number of more or less serious and protracted insurrections, as well as small local uprisings. It took some time for the new regime to consolidate and begin to function properly. The Canudos War, which took place in the hinterland of Bahia in 1896-1897, is just one among the various revolts that punctuated the period of transition. Os Sertões is a chronicle of this historical event, to which the author was an eyewitness.*

Euclides da Cunha first came into contact with his subject matter when he was sent to Bahia by the daily *O Estado de São Paulo* as a special correspondent to cover the Canudos War. The series of reports he sent from the battlefield made him famous. But his journalistic writings now interest us mostly because they can be read as the origins of *Os Sertões*.

The tremendous impact of the war made it a turning point in the history of the Brazilian press: for the first time ever in the country, a large number of newspapers sent reporters to the scene of the events themselves. Throughout the duration of the war, the major dailies of Rio, São Paulo and Bahia kept a special column – simply titled “Canudos” in most of them – that was exclusively dedicated to the topic. Everything and anything related to Canudos was published: outright fabrications, dogmatic statements by party stalwarts, forged documents, faked letters. All these publications had the purpose of reinforcing the idea of an imminent restoration of monarchy. The importance of the press in this context cannot be underestimated: at a time when audiovisual resources had not yet been invented, the newspaper was the mass medium *par excellence*.

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\* Translated by Paulo Henrique Britto.

Returning from the war, Euclides da Cunha dedicated himself to the task of massing a broad range of knowledge in order to work on his book, which was published only five years later, in 1902. It was met with overwhelming praise. Like a majestic portico, the opening section of *Os Sertões*, entitled “The Land,” provides a splendid description of the spatial context of the war.

The author describes the region of Canudos from three points of view – the topographic, the geological and the meteorological – in a passionate language that creates imposing natural vistas. Rivers rush onward, waterfalls cascade; the land itself appears to mimic the flow of the rivers in the contortions of its features and the clashes between the different geological layers that underlie it. It is an extraordinary landscape, which seems to be man-made on a monumental scale, reminding one of colossal *menhirs* or the ruins of a cyclopean colosseum.

All of this, however, is seen from a great distance, providing a sort of God’s-eye view of an immemorial desert, parched by an unforgiving sun. The cosmic forces themselves can only be referred to by means of antitheses.

To convey to the reader a sense of the unfamiliarity of the *sertão*, the author relies on shock tactics: he presents a soldier who seems to be asleep, only to disclose that in fact he has been dead for months, his intact body having been naturally mummified by the dry air.

The scourge of chronic droughts is analyzed at length; a number of explanations are proposed for their occurrence, ranging from the influence of sunspots to the region’s peculiar wind patterns. Later on, the author will move on from hypotheses to actual proposals for solutions.

The vegetation of the *caatinga* must face two unfavorable conditions: the aridity of the land and the heat of the sun. Thus, its adaptive mutations all involve protection against death caused by a lack of water or by overexposure to the sun. The defensive strategies are varied: some plants turn into dwarfs in order to expose as little surface as possible to the harshness of the elements; other species bury themselves so that only a small portion of them appears above ground; yet others join together to form social plants, developing common roots that retain a maximum of water and topsoil, in addition to reinforcing mutual security.

Euclides da Cunha concludes that the *sertão* environment of Canudos is unique, since its characteristics do not coincide exactly with any pre-existing category, emphasizing that “nature here rejoices in a play of antitheses” (Chap. V).

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Having examined the physical environment, the author proceeds to analyze the ethnic groups of the region. He believes that the fundamental and most complex question in the study of Brazil’s population is the issue of miscegenation, a thorny issue that engaged the attention of all the nation’s intellectuals of the time. The mixture of races

had given rise to the *sertanejo*, a racial type with unique physical and spiritual characteristics inherited from the three ethnic groups from which it originated. These characteristics, Euclides da Cunha believed, had advantages as well as disadvantages. Their positive qualities were adaptability to a hostile environment, resistance and a stoic attitude. The handicaps were religious fanaticism, superstitiousness, a precarious psychological balance and a marked backwardness in relation to the progress of civilization.

The deterministic reasoning applied to the analyses of the physical environment and ethnic components is also applied to the examination of the personality of Antonio Vicente Mendes Maciel, the Pilgrim, also known as Antonio Conselheiro. Euclides da Cunha sees him as a synthesis of the historical process that resulted from the different populations that settled the land, shaped by miscegenation and isolation.

The author's diagnosis of Antonio Conselheiro is contradictory: the reader realizes that Cunha hesitates between admiring his greatness and branding him "a very sick man" suffering from paranoia. This leader of men, who concentrates in his person "the obscurantism of three separate races," "grew in stature until he was projected into History" (Chap. IV).

Antonio Conselheiro, a mystical Catholic leader, wandered through the *sertão* accompanied by his followers, leading a life of penitence, preaching and presiding over the building and rebuilding of churches, cemeteries and dams. He lived this way for thirty years with his following growing continuously.

In an attempt to elucidate the origins of the Canudos War, Cunha shows how the advent of the Republic brought about changes that disturbed the *conselheiristas*: new taxes, the separation of church and state, religious freedom and civil marriage, which was felt to be a flagrant rejection of a Catholic sacrament.

Shunned by all, around 1893 the pilgrims finally found refuge in the ruins of an abandoned farm known as Canudos, deep in the hinterland of Bahia. Gradually they erected the wattle houses that were constituted by what Cunha referred to as the oxymoronic "mud-walled Troy" (Chap. II).

There is no wood in the *sertão*, where the typical vegetation, the *caatinga*, is a stunted growth of a gnarled brush, twigs and cacti. The people of Canudos had, therefore, bought a certain amount of planks for the New Church they were building. The purchase was made, and paid for in advance, in the city of Juazeiro. But the goods were not delivered, and Conselheiro's followers marched unarmed toward Juazeiro, singing religious hymns. They were met by an ambush of state troopers whom the local authorities in Uauá had summoned. The soldiers decimated them but were then forced to retreat.

In January 1897, a new offensive was mounted with more and better equipped soldiers. Once again, the government forces were defeated.

The third expedition was to be commanded by Colonel Moreira César, who had recently crushed another insurrection in the South. His method of repression there had been so violent that he had earned the nickname "Cutthroat." After the two earlier losses,

Canudos was now perceived as a national threat that was too serious to be left to the responsibility of state troops. A major attack was prepared, with federal troops convoked from all over the country and with modern weaponry that included cannon, accompanied by a nationwide campaign to win over public opinion. Excitement was in the air, the buzz of patriotic demagoguery; some began to suggest that the events in the remote *sertão* indicated an attempt to restore the monarchy.

The whole nation was watching when the third expedition gathered in Salvador had departed for Canudos. The government forces attacked the settlement; however, a few hours later, having suffered heavy losses, including that of their commander, they fled in retreat. In order to run faster, soldiers abandoned their weapons and ammunition – collected and treasured by the rebels – and even parts of their uniforms, such as jackets and boots.

Euclides describes in vivid imagery the uproar that followed the third defeat. In Rio and São Paulo, the country's largest cities, there were demonstrations in the streets that culminated in riots; the crowd's fury turned against the most obvious targets – the few remaining monarchist newspapers. Four newspaper offices were destroyed, and the owner of one of them was lynched. There was a general demand that the threat to the newborn Republic be quashed. Students signed a petition calling for the extermination of the followers of the “degenerate.” Congress spoke of nothing else. The press described the defeat as a national disaster, disseminating a sense of insecurity and alarm throughout the country, publishing false information and forged letters, and speaking of domestic and even international conspiracies.

A fourth expedition was planned, this headed by an even higher-ranking officer than the previous one: the commander was to be General Artur Oscar de Andrade Guimarães, assisted by four other generals. The expedition even included a marshal, for the Minister of War, Marshal Machado Bittencourt, went to Canudos with his entire staff, effectively moving his ministry to the theater of operations. Troops were mobilized around the country. It was as a member of this expedition, in the double position of reporter and aide to the Minister's general staff, that Euclides da Cunha became an eyewitness of the war.

The fourth expedition headed for Canudos in June 1897. The rebel town was entirely surrounded so that no reinforcements or support parties could reach it. Most of all, the siege deprived the town of water, a precious commodity in the drough-ridden *caatinga*, laboriously fetched by the townspeople from water holes dug in the dry bed of the Varza-Barris, a seasonal stream.

Meanwhile, the people of Canudos, who previously had possessed no more than a few ancient muzzle-loading firearms such as arquebuses and blunderbusses, now owned some of the most advanced weapons of the time – including highly valued repeating rifles like the Austrian Mannlicher and the Belgian Comblains – which had been discarded during the rout of the third expedition.

As the siege began to have an effect and some sectors of Canudos fell into government hands, the obstinate resistance of the rebels began to defy understanding

and to be seen as something of an enigma. A few days before the end, a surrender was negotiated. However, to the chagrin of the army, the only insurrectionists who actually surrendered were about three hundred women, who had been reduced to walking skeletons by extreme hunger, accompanied by their children and a few old men; freed of this dead weight, the resistance became even more intense. Finally, after several days of heavy bombing, including the unprecedented use of a sort of improvised napalm (gasoline was poured on houses that were still occupied and ignited with thrown sticks of dynamite), Canudos was silenced on October 5, 1897, without having surrendered. Of the final four resisters, whose burned bodies were found in a pit on the central square surrounded by churches, one was an old man and the other a young boy.

According to the army's official report, there were 5,200 houses in the settlement. If we estimate conservatively that there were five people living in each house – in the *sertão* the figure was usually higher – the population of the rebel town was 26,000. This would have meant that Canudos was the second largest city in Bahia. (At that time, São Paulo had no more than 200,000 inhabitants). Antonio Conselheiro had died a few days before the final collapse of the resistance; his body was exhumed and beheaded, and the head was taken to the Bahia Faculty of Medicine for an autopsy. The purpose was to discover what had been wrong with him. According to Cesare Lombroso's theories, widely accepted at the time, measurements of the skull and dissection of the brain might provide an answer. Unfortunately, however, the results of the studies proved inconclusive.

This, in short, is the tragic plot of *Os Sertões*.

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After a war that turned out to have been an inglorious massacre of destitute wretches, it became clear that there had been no conspiracy; the desperately poor peasants had had no connection whatsoever with real monarchists – white, upper-class urbanites, who were horrified at the very thought of associating with such a “riffraff” of “fanatics” – and had enjoyed no logistical support from anyone in Brazil or abroad.

Public opinion underwent a striking about-face; the war began to be seen as a regrettable massacre of brave Brazilians engaged in a fratricidal struggle. In addition, it was no longer a secret that the army's conduct had been far from irreproachable. A few war correspondents had already disclosed that it had been common practice – approved by the commanders – to tie up prisoners and behead them in public.

Another important consequence of the Canudos War, the importance of which should not be underestimated, is the fact that it completed the solidification of the republican regime and finally exorcised the specter of monarchical restoration. On the basis of contemporary witnesses, it seems clear now that public opinion had been manipulated and that the “rebels” in Canudos were the scapegoats of this process. They were forced into the role of an internal enemy of the nation, an enemy that had to be faced in a common effort promoted national unity.

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The transformation of the newspaper stories into book form required five years of work and intense ambition. The body of information contained in the reports was unified by a naturalist style, the dominant trend in Brazilian literature at the time, with additional Parnassian touches in the evocation of the landscape. The typically Naturalist combination of impersonal description and generic concern – in the widest sense of “genetic” – is here put to use to chronicle a war in which the dramatic genre is necessarily concentrated.

However, as if by means of a process of contamination, the first and second sections, concerning the land and the people, are also treated dramatically. In the first, the components of nature are anthropomorphized and endowed with feelings and even purpose. In the second, the central theme is the fierce clash between three races in a struggle for hegemony. But, as often occurs in Naturalistic works, at each moment ideas and theories are advanced and acquire individual voices of their own. Determinism, scientism, evolucionism, the notion of ineluctable linearity of progress, heredity, all play major roles in the narrative. The polyphonic character of the book as a whole is the first element of its composition that should be underscored.

The second element is intertextuality. Throughout *Os Sertões*, a variety of texts and authors are quoted and discussed and provide the book with an encyclopedic texture. In the section titled “The Rebellion,” the author relies not only on his own dispatches and notebooks but also on news stories by other correspondents, the army’s orders of the day, and government reports. The opening section, “The land,” draws on geology, meteorology, botany, zoology, physics and chemistry. In “Man,” the most polemic part of the book and rife with conjectures of all kinds, Euclides da Cunha reviews works on ethnology, the history of Brazilian colonization, folklore, psychiatry, neurology and sociology.

The coexistence of polyphony with intertextuality, complementing each other without coming into conflict, poses the obvious problem of having to deal with an excessive body of knowledge and results in a succession of discordant paraphrases. Unable to reach a synthesis, or even a number of partial syntheses, the text advances through all kinds of antitheses, which often amount to oxymorons – thus Canudos is a “mud-walled Troy,” and the *sertanejo*, the inhabitant of the *sertão*, is a “Hercules-Quasimodo” – and a series of contradictions.

These are, in general terms, the complex issues surrounding the composition of *Os Sertões*. The complexity of the subject-matter is dealt with in the text by means such as polyphony and intertextuality that are in no way simplistic or linear. To confer unity on his material, the author relies on an eschatological view borrowed from the millenialists and messianists who gathered in Canudos, their Promised Land; they were waiting, praying constantly for the salvation of their souls and the Final Judgment that the end of the century heralded. By so doing, Cunha shows how it is possible, by a demonic inversion of the Biblical imagery of a salvationist myth, to get a glimpse of the insurrectionists’ own viewpoint. Their world had become disenchanted. “Belo Monte”

– “Mount Beautiful,” as they had renamed the town, their New Jerusalem – had been changed into its opposite: Hell. The river of the City of God, the river of eternal life, was embodied in the dry bed of the Vaza-Barris. The gold walls promised to the just are made of mud and twigs. The luxuriant vegetation of the Garden of Delights they long for decays into the dry and bare *caatinga*. And so on.

In this way, through mimesis of the great syntagmatic narrative of the Bible, which begins with Genesis and ends with Apocalypse, *Os Sertões* covers the full span of the story of Canudos, from the foundation of the town to its destruction by fire, in accordance with Biblical prophecy.

## Notes

- 1 The quotes are taken from Samuel Putnam’s translation *Rebellion in the Backlands*. (Translator’s note). This text was first published in *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* 4/5. BRAZIL 2001. A Revisionary History of Brazilian Literature and Culture by the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

## Works Cited

Cunha, Euclides da. *Rebellion in the Backlands*. 1902. Trans. Samuel Putnam. New York: Knopf, 1952.