brations—frequently created moments of fraternization between the owners and their workers. These moments virtually do not exist today. There almost never is fraternization. The sugar factory owners fraternize at a distance—in Recife, in Boa Viagem [Recife's beach], in Rio, in Paris, in Buenos Aires.

A few of them [though] preserve the old habits of the *senhor de engenho.* Their sons, or they themselves, when they are feeling frisky, still deflower mulatta girls and immediately abandon them. The girls then are forced to come to Recife, Maceió, Paraíba, to Fogo Street, to the Pateo do Carmo, to the Rosario Street, adding to the volume of prostitution in the cities. The new nobility do not traffic with them. The chic thing is to spend money on foreign women. These frisky *usineiros,* imitating gentlemen, prefer blondes, but they deflower mulattas.

The *usina* separated the owners not only from their labor force—that was the second family of the *senhor de engenho*—but from the pastoral countryside. . . . The social and psychic distances became greater and greater. They became immense. Virtually all of the lyricism in the relations of man with nature, with the forest, with animals, with rivers, with plants, with the earth, with other men, has disappeared. We have arrived at the dramatic point where either we reestablish this equilibrium between man and nature in the sugar region of the Northeast or man will become degraded to the ultimate extreme. Not only are workers affected, but the large property owners as well. Today, you cannot compare any *usineiro* from Pernambuco, Alagoas, or Paraíba—people who don't even read newspapers—with the Pernambucan *senhores de engenho* of the last half of the nineteenth century, among whom Herbert S. Smith found so many readers of French books and even English books, and subscribers to the *Review des Deux Mondes.* The most refined *senhores de engenho* were educated by priests, who were their uncles in the private schools of Recife, and at times, in Europe . . .

A Mirror of Progress

Dain Borges

Euclides da Cunha's Rebellion in the Backlands *(*Os Sertões*, 1902) is an epic chronicle of the punitive military expeditions that massacred Canudos's millenarian community in 1897. It barely mentions central national events, such as the abolition of slavery in 1888 or the republican military coup in 1889, yet it became the most enduring comment on Brazil's progress from monarchy to republic. It persuaded readers in 1902 that da Cunha had diagnosed the nation's illness—dangerous social dualism and splits, a schizoid soul—through scrutiny of an obscure symptom. Though no longer scientifically convincing,* Rebellion in the Backlands *is still compelling. It declares themes, such as the need to awaken the people, that have preoccupied Brazilian radicals throughout the twentieth century. Its themes and stark images—desert and water, death and resurrection, saints and bandits—have been adapted and challenged in forms such as Glauber Rocha's visionary film,* Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol *(*Black God, White Devil*, 1964), and the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa's political novel,* The War of the End of the World *(1981).*

It might seem that the political transition from the Empire to the Republic would leave the countryside apathetic. By mid-nineteenth century, Brazil's small farmers, big planters, and central government had worked out a conservative patronage deal that immobilized politics. Tensions over issues such as military recruitment for the Paraguayan War (1864–1870) and even the reform of slave labor (1871–1888) apparently did not break it. In the dry backlands, or *sertão,* of the state of Bahia, those who cared about politics played it as a sport of connections, schemes, and bloody election brawls.

But the republican coup of 1889, following three years of escalating abolitionist protest, did catalyze rural conflicts. In the far southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, the Republic unleashed a murderous civil war be-

tween factions in rural counties, in which some participants declared themselves monarchists. In Bahia and neighboring northern states, the republican regime's separation of church and state in 1889–1891 reopened old grievances about government interference in religion. Protest there took the form of pilgrimages, miracles, and prophecies: "In 1898 there will be many hats and few heads."[1]

A ragged lay preacher, Antonio Conselheiro ("the Counselor"), settled hundreds of his followers on an abandoned ranch called Canudos in 1893. At first, the community may not have been millenarian, but simply a penitential retreat, tolerated by priests. As it grew, Conselheiro became a local political boss, made some allies and many enemies, denounced civil marriage and other satanic republican reforms, and in 1896, was tricked into defying new taxes. "We have the law of God, they have the law of the Hound." The Canudos war began when military police were sent to arrest his followers.

Euclides da Cunha thought this conflict was the inevitable outcome of long-standing cleavages in Brazil. Trained as a military engineer, he analyzed Canudos according to then-prevailing (though not undisputed) sociological theories of the determining force of climate and race. At every level in the backlands, even on the scale of geological time, da Cunha finds imbalance, opposition, and conflict. He argues that the rugged, chaotic landscape itself constitutes "the remnants of a centuries-old conflict between the seas and the earth." The climate oscillates between killing droughts, when plants lose their "mute battle" with the sun, and sudden rains, "when the tropical flora revive triumphantly, in a transforming apotheosis." The people of the Bahian backlands, *sertanejos*, were formed by the impact of this unbalanced climate on their mixed-race bodies. They are mostly of Indian and Portuguese descent—a slightly more promising mixture, da Cunha thinks, than the mixture of African and Portuguese blood that predominates in coastal Brazil. He cares less about the traits of ancestral races, however, than about the mixture itself. The entire Brazilian nation, he believes, is a half-formed "body in fusion." The elements of ancestral races are "a play of antitheses" within each Brazilian; each Brazilian carries on a civil war inside his own body. Unlike national races with a uniform type, such as the Dutch or British races, Brazilians "have no race." Thus, in the struggle for life and in imperialist wars between national races, Brazil is at a malleable, vulnerable phase of its evolution.

The typical Bahian *sertanejo* is a cowboy, "condemned to life" in this volatile environment, prepared from childhood for struggle, "strong, cunning, resigned, and practical." If he is sometimes "incorrigibly indolent," he is also scrupulously honest in cattle deals and admirably resigned in droughts. The best one could hope for, da Cunha argues, is that the backlanders would abide tenaciously underneath modern Brazilians, like archaic strata in stable rock. Unfortunately, *sertanejos* add to their climatic and racial chaos a bizarre religious culture, a jumbled mix of medieval Catholicism with Indian and African superstitions. And like an earthquake, the republican revolution of 1889 disturbed the layers along this fault line. At Canudos, historical and environmental forces impelled the *sertanejos* to turn an unbalanced man into their prophet, in a process neither he nor they quite understood. "It is natural that these deep layers of our ethnic stratification would rise up in an extraordinary anticline—Antonio Conselheiro."

Revisionist historians in recent years have not only discarded da Cunha's unconvincing racial diagnosis, but have also interpreted Canudos as a normal community. They have found evidence that it grew quickly from its founding in 1893 to a thriving small city—perhaps, at times, as large as 20,000 people. It was not "centuries remote" from Bahia's capital, Salvador, but rather close: overnight to the Queimadas railway station, then two days by mule to Canudos. Pilgrims came from a cross section of the rural population: ex-slaves, paupers, cowboys, farmers, and merchants, as well as malcontents and bandits. Some came for refuge or the hope of work on nearby ranches; most came to repent and scourge their sins. Conselheiro apparently brokered their labor and their votes like any other rural godfather.

Da Cunha imagines Canudos growing as a morbid, "sinister *civitas*." He draws on new French psychological theories about urban mass politics and manipulated crowds. Antonio Conselheiro must be a degenerate borderline paranoid (like agitators in republican Paris). His influence over the people must be the sort of hypnotism that can operate on vulnerable, "mixed" people, fusing them into a criminal crowd: "his gaze—dazzling sparks. . . . No one dared look at him. The crowd, succumbing, lowered its eyes in turn, fascinated, under the strange hypnotism of that formidable insanity." The people at Canudos became "an unconscious brute mass, growing without evolving, without specialized organs and functions, through mere mechanical addition of successive stages, like a

human polyp." The *sertanejo* transformed into the backlands thug, the *jagunço.*

The diagnosis of contagious mob spirit and this image of a crazed city spoke to da Cunha's own experiences of "the cyclical progress of political disease" in Rio de Janeiro from 1880 to 1897, sordid experiences that made him wary of both democracy and military government. Born in 1866, da Cunha studied engineering at the Rio de Janeiro military academy. His post–Paraguayan War generation of cadets were a new breed, educated in geometry, positivism, and contempt for civilian politicians. Their senior officers were defying the government. In 1887, they declared that they would not perform police duty by chasing runaway slaves; this encouraged slave mutinies and mass escapes, and accelerated the declaration of abolition in May 1888. Months later, da Cunha was expelled from the academy for a republican provocation: breaking his saber while on parade review. In November 1889, senior officers, conspiring with disgruntled former slave owners, overthrew Emperor Pedro II. Of course, the military academy reinstated da Cunha, now a republican hero. But he found that when his classmates came to power under the second military dictator, Marshal Floriano Peixoto (1891–1894), they behaved less as scientific patriots than as opportunistic pseudoradicals. And he thought their civilian partners in the nationalistic Jacobin movement were agitators and assassins, "ambitious mediocrities," "cavemen in kid gloves." He denounced government repression during the feverish 1892–1895 civil war, was transferred out of Rio, and resigned from the army.

When the campaigns against Canudos began in 1896, however, da Cunha wrote two patriotic newspaper columns comparing Canudos to the Vendée revolt of monarchist, Catholic peasants during the French Revolution. This won him assignment as the paper's war correspondent—back among his classmates—in the last weeks of the siege, in 1897. At first, he sent back stirring propaganda pieces; then he reported sympathetically on prisoners; then his dispatches stopped. He was keeping silent, while taking notes, about atrocities he would denounce in *Rebellion in the Backlands,* five years later.

Most of *Rebellion in the Backlands* is a dramatized (and in places, fictionalized) narrative of the campaign, contrasting the tactical incompetence of the army to the cunning and courage of the millenarian guerrillas. In November 1896, a crowd from Canudos, singing hymns, routed 100 mounted military police coming to arrest them. Weeks later, *sertanejo* sharpshooters ambushed a second, hastily organized column of 500 soldiers under Febrônio de Brito. The army "subordinated its tactics to the rigid framework of classic war doctrine" and didn't adapt its geometrical formations to the tangled terrain of thornbush, "which fought for the *sertanejos.*"

For da Cunha, the most indicative episode is the defeat of the third army expedition, led by Colonel Moreira Cesar, which approached Canudos in February 1897. Moreira Cesar's republican career was a twisted version of da Cunha's: knifing a journalist in 1884, executing prisoners during the civil war in 1893. He was the model modern military demagogue, popular with the Jacobin crowds of Rio de Janeiro. "Our political fetishism needed idols in uniform. They chose him as their new idol." Da Cunha portrays him as the republican double of Antonio Conselheiro, an epileptic mad genius who mixes "clashing monstrous tendencies and superior qualities, both in the highest degree of intensity, . . . a protean soul bottled up in a fragile organism."

Advancing too fast into the outskirts of Canudos, Moreira Cesar was ambushed and killed. His army of more than 1,500 lost its discipline and stampeded, turning into a crowd, "a knot of men, animals, uniforms and carbines." *Sertanejos* strung up the mutilated corpses of officers in trees. The common soldiers, "most of them mestizos, made from the same clay as the *sertanejos,* shocked by the counterblow of the inexplicable reversal in which their supposedly invincible chief had fallen, came under the suggestive spell of the marvelous, invaded by supernatural terror aggravated by outlandish rumors."

Not only soldiers at the front, but also the people of "civilized" Rio de Janeiro panicked at rumors of monarchist hordes (armed by Britain!). In Rio, mobs assassinated monarchist politicians and burned newspapers. Here again, da Cunha argues that Canudos is significant as the mirror in which Rio de Janeiro can see its own savage face. The bonfires show that the fashionable Rua do Ouvidor—with its newspaper offices, tearooms, and shops—"was no better than some trail through the scrub." Republican democracy was nothing but crowd hysteria. Like other failed adventure stories written at the same time—Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or James Mooney's *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (1896)—*Rebellion* uses an imperialist encounter to question and ironically reverse the values of "savage" and "civilized," backwardness and progress.

More carefully then, the government organized the fourth expedition, in April 1897. It eventually took more than 6,000 soldiers, at least a third of the Brazilian army, and cost thousands of casualties. The war minister himself supervised a slow buildup of supplies near the front. Howitzer bombardment, sticks of dynamite, kerosene, and hand-to-hand fighting finally accomplished the siege. By the time da Cunha arrived at the dusty, filthy trenches, the battle was in its last days. Antonio Conselheiro had died; unburied corpses fouled the ground; a group of starved women and children, "human rubble," had surrendered; but the surviving men fought to the death. In describing them, da Cunha's sympathies, moved by the bravery of the fanatics, overcome his prejudices. "The bedrock of a nation was being chiseled. We were attacking the deep, living rock of our race. So, dynamite was called for. . . . It was a consecration."

Soldiers looted the charred shacks of the city, dug up Antonio Conselheiro to photograph and preserve his head in a jar, and—either under orders or with the tacit permission of their officers—slaughtered the few male prisoners they captured. Da Cunha describes one black prisoner as coming "from the last and lowest rung of our racial ladder. . . . His halting, infirm step, his woolly head, his shrunken face, flat nose over thick lips parted by bent and twisted teeth, his tiny eyes burning red in deep sockets, his long bare swinging arms—all gave him the hideous appearance of an aged orangutan."

Officers didn't even bring him in their tent. "He was an animal. It wasn't worth the trouble to interrogate him. Brigadier General João da Silva Barbosa, from the hammock in which he was recovering from a recent wound, gestured. A corporal, assigned to the engineering staff and famous for such deeds, divined his meaning. He approached with the noose. Being short of stature, however, he found it difficult to set it around the condemned man's neck. This man, however, helped him calmly; undid the tangled knot; ran it through his own hands, noosing himself. Nearby, a lieutenant from the General Staff and a fifth-year medical student contemplated that scene.

"And they saw the unfortunate man transmute, as soon as he took his first steps toward execution. From that blackened and repugnant frame, barely standing on the long, shriveled legs, there suddenly emerged admirable lines—terribly sculptural—of a splendid physique. A masterpiece of sculpture, modeled in mud.

"Suddenly the black man's stooping posture straightened up, showing

off, vertical and rigid, in a beautiful pose that was unusually haughty. His head set itself on shoulders which squared back, expanding his chest, and raised itself in a defiant gesture of aristocratic scorn. His gaze, in a manly glare, lit up his face. He moved on, impassive and firm; mute, his face immobile, his wasted muscles in sharp relief against his bones, in impeccable indifference. He turned into a statue, an ancient statue of a Titan, buried for four centuries and now emerging, blackened and mutilated, in that immense ruins of Canudos. It was an inversion of roles. A shameful antinomy."

Da Cunha argues pessimistically that the macabre and criminal episode of Canudos—the army's homicidal fury, the *sertanejos'* suicidal fanaticism—is the symptom of fatal antagonisms everywhere within Brazil's soul. He fears a twentieth century in which unified imperialist armies will invade and conquer a divided Brazil. Yet he insinuates that Canudos might be justified as a sacrifice for the nation, if it demonstrated transfigurations that could unleash the nation's energies. In peacetime, he had seen slack-faced *sertanejo* cowboys squatting in the dirt "in a posture of unstable equilibrium," apparently apathetic and inert. But a stray calf or "any incident that demands that he unchain his sleeping energies is enough. The man transfigures. He straightens up, showing new lines in his stature and in his gesture. . . . From the common figure of a clumsy peasant, there emerges, unexpectedly, the domineering visage of a coppery and potent Titan, in a surprising unfolding of extraordinary force and agility." He leaps to his horse and gallops off, "threading rapidly through the inextricable labyrinths of thornbush." Da Cunha's belief that the Brazilian people were only awaiting schoolteachers, missionaries, or inspiring leaders to lift them from apathy to vitality, from the Middle Ages to the modern age, became an enduring theme of Brazilian populist nationalism.

Note

1 I have consulted *Rebellion in the Backlands,* trans. Samuel Putnam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), but all quotations are my own loose translation from Euclides da Cunha, *Os Sertões: Campanha de Canudos,* 35th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1991).