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Review by: Barbara Celarent

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*Rebellion in the Backlands*. By Euclides da Cunha. Translated by Samuel Putnam. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944. Pp. xxii+526. (First published as *Os sertões*, 1902.)

Barbara Celarent\*  
*University of Atlantis*

No theoretical work analyzes the contrast of modernity and tradition more clearly than does Euclides da Cunha's empirical masterpiece, *Rebellion in the Backlands*. Nowhere is the contrast clearer—nor the ambivalence greater. The book is long, to be sure, and the critical literature even longer. But that is all the more reason to read *Backlands* with care.

In the northern desert lands of the Brazilian state of Bahia, there emerged in the 1890s a millenarian movement focused on one Antonio Maciel, called Antonio Conselheiro: Antonio the Counselor. As it swelled, this movement became centered in Canudos, a former ranch that grew into a town of 25,000 or more. Who exactly was in Canudos, how they were connected to the Counselor, how they lived, whom and how they offended: all these things remain to some extent a matter of historical debate. But certain it is that after the failure of an ecclesiastical visitation and a secular police mission, the local, state, and national authorities of the young Brazilian Republic decided in late 1896 to suppress Canudos. By October 1897, after four expeditions and many thousands of deaths on both sides, the last remaining defenders were exterminated.

The battle about what happened then began. Writing in a framework of Positivism, progressivism, and race science, but at the same time torn by multiple ambivalences, Euclides da Cunha portrayed the events as a tragic encounter between atavistic barbarism and modern civilization, a confrontation in which civilization itself reverted to barbarism. Revisionists would later see Canudos as a peaceful commune destroyed by rapacious elites angry at the desertion of their laborers. Still others would treat the Counselor as an ultraconservative Catholic, with the reforming Church hierarchy as the villain of the piece. Others still would locate the Canudos affair within interregional or republican-versus-monarchist politics. But all of this revisionism responded first and foremost to the book of Euclides da Cunha. The book ordained that one discussed Brazil by discussing Canudos. And one discussed Canudos by discussing *Os sertões*, the epic itself.

Euclides da Cunha was born in 1866 in Santa Rita do Rio Negro, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. (So celebrated is *Rebellion in the Backlands* that its author customarily goes by his first name, like the ancient geometer: I follow that convention here.) Orphaned at four, Euclides was educated in varying schools by various relatives in various places. At 17, he entered the Colégio Aquino in Rio de Janeiro, encountered the ardent

\*Another review from 2050 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

Positivist Benjamin Constant, and wrote his first publications—some poems. Three subsequent years in the empire's Polytechnic and Military Schools were ended by an uncharacteristically dramatic republican protest by Euclides, who then became a civilian, only to be reinstated when a republic was proclaimed in 1889.

After some years' service as a military engineer, he again protested government policies and left the army in 1896 for civilian civil engineering. All this time, however, he had continued writing, and when the finale of the Canudos drama unfolded, he went along with the São Paulo military contingent as a newspaper correspondent. After Canudos, Euclides again returned to civil engineering, building a bridge by day and writing his epic by night. *Os sertões* was published in 1902 to acclaim that has never ended. In subsequent years, Euclides helped established Brazil's Amazonian border—a journey that produced its own small book. But his personal life was unhappy. Confronting his wife's longtime lover in 1909, he died of a bullet wound at 43.

*Rebellion in the Backlands* comprises two sections. The first introduces the reader to the backlands: the land and the place of humans in that land, including the rise of Antonio Conselheiro and the emergence of Canudos. The second section addresses the conflict itself. But neither the table of contents nor the title nor the critical literature prepares the reader for the book's shocking effect. For it is not really about a region, but about a war, and not really about a rebellion, but about the suppression of a community. As for the literature's critical view of Euclides's "coastal" point of view, his scientific racism, and his ignorance of the other side: the book is ultimately more sympathetic to the *Canudenses* than to the state, its racism is formulaic and inessential, and its ignorance of the other side stems almost inevitably from its author's position as war correspondent.

The book's shocking power comes rather from what is gradually revealed as its actual topic: the disorganization of civilized society when confronted by the puzzle that is Canudos. This disorganization appears in the first instance as the demoralization—in three cases the dissolution and defeat—of Brazilian military expeditions. But it is also the degeneration of the larger society itself: the book's final sentence speaks of "acts of madness and crimes on the part of nations" (p. 476). At a time when Gustave LeBon was painting the little people as irrational, emotional, and dangerous, Euclides da Cunha saw that Le Bon's portrait fit the big people as well.

The themes of disorganization and irrationality dominate the book from its opening. The first chapter takes the reader on a geological journey from the ancient rocks of Minas Gerais northward along the east bank of the São Francisco to the *sertão* of Bahía. There everything becomes irrational: the rivers "have no purpose" (p. 18); climate and geology interact "in an endless, vicious circle" (p. 21); droughts arise from "fugitive and disorderly agents" (p. 27); even the orderly *mandacaru* trees become

“an oppressive obsession” in their “unnatural monotony” (p. 34), as if only disorder has meaning in this landscape of “indescribable and catastrophic confusion” (p. 35). The plants of the backland *caatinga* become personified actors, warring with climate and land for survival, an analysis that will be repeated almost verbatim in the discussion of human types in the following chapter.

In this landscape, man figures only as yet another disorganizing force: slash and burn agriculture, alongside the clearance fires of the explorers, helped make the desert. With pride of profession, Euclides reminds us of the Roman engineers’ rescue of Tunisia from desertification. But both reader and author know that this was a brief and futile victory. Indeed, such undercutting recurs throughout. As an engineer and an educated man, Euclides from time to time makes decent if desultory protests against various underlying confusions and disorders. These are the passages, along with the facile race science, that have been read anachronistically to interpret Euclides as a middle-class apologist or a Republican triumphalist. But the central theme of the work is in fact dissolution and confusion. *Rebellion in the Backlands* breathes the late 19th century’s disenchantment with progress, even though it refuses the Nietzschean embrace of the irrational.

The chapter on man again begins with the contrast of north and south, in this case their contrasting cattlemen: the consistent discipline and graceful energy of the southern gauchos is contrasted with the strange lethargy, sudden activity, and vacillating stoicism of the northern desert cowboy, whom Euclides calls sometimes *jagunço* and sometimes *sertanejo*, as if he can’t make up his mind whether to accept the pejorative quality of the former word, just as the *sertanejos* sometimes cannot decide whether to remain in the desert during the dry season. But there is nothing confused about the description of the daily life and annual round of the *sertanejo* as he faces the roundup, the drought, the absentee landlord, the pitiless sun. These passages are both descriptively acute and magnificently written.

As for their theoretical argument, Euclides formally explains his human types by climatic determination, which he believes is reinforced over time by a Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics. (This theory was still scientifically acceptable at the time.) But that is only in theory. In practice his accounts of the *jagunço*, the *sertanejo*, and the *vaqueiro* rest on environmental, social, and cultural forces rather than on biological reproduction. The race science is a mere overlay.

A similar overlay occurs in Euclides’s account of the emergence of Antonio Conselheiro and Canudos. His theoretical language often invokes the then-popular organic and hereditarian theory of insanity in writers like the British psychiatrist Henry Maudsley. But his actual account focuses on the resonance that emerges between Antonio Conselheiro and his followers. Euclides argues that the Counselor’s “insanity” comes to capture and reflect the social and cultural life of the backlands, “doing

no more than to condense the obscurantism of three races. And he grew in stature until he was projected into History” (p. 129). Thus the people of the backlands invest their hopes and their fantasies in the Counselor, even as his own personality expands to fill the role thus created. This is a dialectical account of charisma, not only more detailed and elaborate than Max Weber’s, but also far more effective because it demonstrates charisma to be a social relationship rather than a personal quality. Euclides is however weak on the content of the external conflicts of the Counselor, first with the Church (by the late 1880s) and later with the state (by 1893). He describes this emerging social movement simply as it appears from the viewpoint of authority: as an incomprehensible spread of nonsense, misinformation, and irrationality among people who fail to see that authority’s wisdom. Canudos is for Euclides “the objectivization of a tremendous insanity” (p. 144).

Yet at the same time he grudgingly acknowledges the power the Counselor has come to exercise: his resolute defeat of government forces in 1893 on the retreat from Bom Conselho, his self-consciously apostolic gestures against the Church, and so on. And however blinded by his Positivism, Euclides does see that both state and church have failed to understand the nature of Canudos and its people. He recognizes the different cultures of coast and backlands, and if he overdoes the contrast of atavism and progress in his theoretical musings, his story evinces a good deal of respect for the Counselor: for his judgment and not uncommon restraint, for the military prowess and wisdom of the *Canudenses*, and for the other virtues of the backlands. By the end of the book, it will be the nation, not Canudos, that is said to be mad.

The first part of the book thus portrays the organic emergence of a social movement out of the natural and social forces that make the backlands: a moment that, however irrational it seems to the coastal culture, commands a certain respect. The second half of the book portrays the attempt of coastal culture to suppress that social movement. It is a 300-page tale of incompetence, demoralization, and brutality. The *Canudenses* here appear largely as preternaturally able adversaries: wily, brave, committed, occasionally whimsical in their brutalities, but always strange, always other. Their perpetual religious singing disturbs the dutifully Positivist Euclides; religion should be a thing of the past. Yet somehow this religion provides a vibrant moral core to the living community of Canudos—the one thing that the state’s forces lack.

The tale of the first expedition against Canudos—the 100-soldier expedition ordered by Euclides’s father-in-law General Sólón—is told as farce. The inhabitants of Joazeiro flee all the faster when they see how few soldiers the government has sent. At the town of Uauá (“pompously inscribed on our maps” but really “a sort of cross between an Indian camp and a village”; p. 183), the similar flight of the inhabitants is unnoticed by the army sentries. When the *Canudenses* arrive, in broad daylight, praying and singing, the soldiers are asleep. In the event, the army’s

repeating rifles kill dozens of *sertanejos*, but “the very idea [of another attack] caused the victors to tremble” (p. 188). They race back to Joazeiro.

The next expedition is larger, but because of a states’ rights controversy has two separate lines of command. After the inevitable delays, which allow the *Canudenses* to prepare, the army eventually arrives at Monte Santo (about 60 miles from Canudos), although not without having left many of its supplies behind. It then delays again. Morale plummets. The advancing troops proceed under classical military discipline, foolishly disdain guerilla or counter-guerilla tactics, and in the first engagement the *sertanejos* display great tactical cleverness. (Even while mocking the army’s troops for their credulity about the supernatural abilities of their opponents, Euclides shares some of that credulity himself. Their actual main advantage seems to have been a willingness to suffer great casualties.) We also see the first chaotic brutality of war, when 40 *sertanejos* are buried under a single cannon-induced rockfall. Despite their advance, the troops are low on ammunition, exhausted, and unable to dislodge the *sertanejos*. So the army eventually retreats. On their way back to Monte Santo an accidental encounter with a herd of wild goats leads to an ungodly banquet: “The flickering light from the coals glowed on their faces, like a band of famished cannibals at a barbarous repast” (p. 223). Already, civilization seems a thin veneer.

The tale of the third expedition elaborates the themes of confusion, demoralization, and degeneration. The Republic itself is now criticized: President Floriano Peixoto “put down disorder with disorder” (p. 226). Expedition commander Colonel Antônio Moreira César is presented as a caricature epileptic—Euclides follows then-standard psychiatric beliefs about the extreme confusions of that disease. (“Epilepsy, the truth is, feeds on the passions”; p. 233.) Euclides also makes what are by now his customary military criticisms (about taking the long road, about failing to adopt new tactics, about long marches at the peak of the drought season), but more important he dissects the psychology of the Brazilian common soldier and shows him to be undisciplined, emotional, and reactive, if brave and loyal. It is, in fact, the psychology of the *jagunços* themselves.

Arrived at Canudos, the troops attack. But Canudos “the weed-trap citadel” (p. 260) makes a mockery of standard tactics. It has “hundreds of corners” (p. 260). It has “the lack of consistency and the treacherous flexibility of a huge net” (p. 261). It is “a labyrinth of lanes” (p. 262). Overseeing the house-to-house fighting from a distance, Moreira César is mortally wounded, and command devolves on the genial but ineffectual Colonel Tamarindo. Since the enemy refuses to do the sensible and civilized thing (i.e., surrender), the army is perplexed. So it starts to withdraw from the town. Panic ensues. The soldiers quickly become “an army in an advanced state of decomposition, all that was left being a number of terrified and useless individuals” (p. 266). In the night Moreira César dies, and the troops lose heart. In the morning, the planned retreat becomes a rout as the *jagunços* harry the retreating army from its flanks. Only the

artillery behaves properly, covering the retreat. It is annihilated, its weapons and ammunition seized by the *Canudenses*. Colonel Tamarindo is shot, and the troops flee the entire area, many passing even Monte Santo to arrive at the railhead, Queimadas.

Militarily, the third expedition was a catastrophe, because the fleeing troops left behind their guns and ammunition, thereby arming their opponents with modern weapons and artillery. But Euclides's central point is not military. His theme is the moral dissolution of the troops and their commanders: the suggestibility and emotionality of the one, the inadaptability and foolishness of the other. This theme of moral dissolution leads directly into the account of the fourth campaign. For the suggestible coastal society sees in the third Canudos defeat a monarchist plot and therefore loots and burns the offices of monarchist newspapers. In a core passage, Euclides sets aside his progressivism: "We ourselves are but little in advance of our rude and backward fellow-countrymen" (p. 280). And he hammers that truth home with a joke, discussing the widespread story of the heroic Corporal Roque who died defending the body of Moreira César (which was left behind in the rout). "[The Corporal] cut short the immortality that was being thrust upon him by making his appearance in the flesh, along with the last remaining stragglers, in Queimadas" (p. 282). Rumor, suggestion, and irrationality are thus at the very heart of the civilized world. It is no better than the traditional one it seeks to suppress.

In the five-chapter chronicle of the fourth expedition we find at last a commander (Savaget) who realizes that the army must become overtly like the *jagunços*, must throw off the mask and choreography of "civilized" military practice. We find the randomness of war when a new and giant cannon (a "monstrous fetish"; p. 335) accidentally ignites a gunpowder keg. We find chaos and depression along the supply lines, as the wounded stagger back from the front (pp. 373–83), while the replacement brigades dissolve from disease, cowardice, and dejection (pp. 389–93). But finally the troops surround Canudos and commence a series of terrifying house-to-house battles, one that ends in the death of the last defenders and the execution of all male prisoners. The book closes with a precise parallel to the *jagunço* atrocities at the end of the third expedition. The Counselor had died a few weeks before the end, but the victorious army sends his head to the capital, where it is "greeted by delirious multitudes with carnival joy" (p. 476). The civilized coast has become what it thought to destroy.

Like Sarmiento's *Facundo, Rebellion in the Backlands* has seen generations of critique and analysis. Many of its facts have been questioned or disproved, its intellectual and practical roots have been analyzed a thousand ways. But all this has little importance for us as readers. Of course, Euclides was a particular man with particular literary habits and a particular point of view. Of course, he breathed the mephitic social and political theories of his time. All that is clear in the text to any careful

reader, as is Euclides's own bewilderment at the contradictions into which those theories inveigle him. But he saw clearly the fundamental problems of modern societies: that they weren't essentially different from the societies they defined as traditional and that their supposed universalism was often a cloak for particular interests. He also knew intuitively—what he could not explicitly formulate—that the mob psychology and insanity theories on which he relied were not really up to the task of serious social analysis. Although his resonance theory of the Counselor's charisma gropes toward a better argument, a full theory of cultural difference evaded him.

But greatness did not.