

Brazil's Canudos as a Millenarian Movement

Robert M. Levine
University of Miami

In 1893, the devout penitent known as Antônio Conselheiro convinced several hundred devout followers to join with him in creating a religious community at Canudos in the Bahian sertão. The Catholic Church did not object at first, and it grew precipitously, attracting pilgrims from every part of the region. Some walked from places more than two hundred kilometers distant. Within two years it had become the second largest urban center, after the capital, Salvador, in Bahia, Brazil's second most populous state. As soon as the effect on the traditional labor system began to be felt by landowners, pressure was applied to state officials, who, in 1896, agreed to take action to dismantle the settlement. This would prove arduous, but after four bloody military campaigns, Canudos was destroyed by the Brazilian army in 1897. The so-called "rebellion" left an indelible legacy on late nineteenth-century Brazil. Taken to be a symbol of the clash between urban rationality and rural "backwardness," Canudos was celebrated as a pivotal national victory for "progress" and "civilization."¹

Brazil's Republic, proclaimed in 1889, had confirmed the European model through which national progress would be achieved under a liberal-constitutional state, but the new Brazilian government at the same time rejected the complementary model of a state composed of citizens holding legal and political rights, directly served by the state.² The fall of the monarchy did not in any way alter the elites' implacable consensus that broad public participation in government was unthinkable, and that the mere existence of autonomous movements not subject to state control was antithetical to the national interest. Canudos stood for such autonomy, and therefore had to be destroyed.

Written by Euclides da Cunha, a positivist and former career military officer who had witnessed the final siege of Canudos as a war correspondent for a São Paulo newspaper, the book Os Sertões, published in 1902, immediately became the basis the official interpretation of Canudos's meaning. Not that it was unique: there had been an array of other voices--some of them dating from the first days of the foundation of Antônio Conselheiro's settlement--which shared the outlook I term the *visão do litoral*, the "view [from] the coast. Since at least the early 1870s, Brazilian intellectuals had worried publicly about the backlands population, mostly caboclos (formed by unions between blacks and Amerindians), who were almost all illiterate, and, in the sertão, followers of forms of Catholic observance deemed ignorant and superstitious.

¹ The author would like to thank colleagues Joseph L. Love, Gerald M. Greenfield, Joan Meznar, and Steven Topik for their useful and constructive comments during earlier period of writing, and Consuelo Novais Sampaio for her permission to consult her research in manuscript form. Roderick Barman, Nancy Naro, Sheldon Maram, Walter Brem, Tulio Halperin-Donghi, and José Murilo de Carvalho also offered useful observations and advice.

² See Eric Hobsbawm, The Age of Empire, 1875-1914. New York: Vantage Books, 1989, p. 22.

The success of *Os Sertões*, Brazil's greatest socio-historical document, fixed da Cunha's interpretation at the center of the way in which Brazilians of the upper classes came to understand themselves and their nation's character.

Yet Canudos never posed a political threat to the Republic. As others have already demonstrated, its leader, Antônio Conselheiro was not a fanatic.³ His community was not isolated; it was, moreover, law-abiding; and there was no legal reason for it to be attacked. Canudos was also the victim of circumstance. Its birth and explosive growth to as many as 30,000 or 35,000 residents in 1896 fatally coincided with the opportunity for politicians to mount an entirely false propaganda campaign depicting Canudos as a monarchist plot. In the aftermath of the terrible and bloody struggle which ensued, the eventual success of the final military campaign allowed patriots to wave the bloody flag and thereby shore up the shaky civilian administration of the Republic. Within a few years, that government was able to implement what became known as the Politics of the Governors, a brokered political arrangement through which the strongest states in the federation gained unprecedented power, and, through alliances between state machines and rural bosses, or *coronéis*, the agro-commercial oligarchy secured unopposed control of rural Brazil for at least another three decades.

Nationwide the transition from monarchy to republic had not been easy, especially so in Bahia. Although the last years of the Empire witnessed an economic boom in the Center-South and in the Amazonian North, in the Northeastern states the economy remained stagnant. In this region, the changes set off by abolition of slavery and the new military regime a year later alarmed the elite, apprehensive over the fact that in 1889 Bahia's taxable exports had fallen to levels not seen since 1850. Most prominent members of the Liberal and the Conservative parties in Bahia opposed the inauguration of a republic, insisting that a change would aggravate the economic crisis. The last president of the province refused the invitation of Marshal Deodoro da Fonseca to continue in office, on the grounds that in his view the Bahian people were still staunchly loyal to the monarchy. Salvador's municipal council voted to reject the national military dictatorship and reaffirmed its loyalty to the monarchy, and only adhered to the Republic around after the imperial family sailed for European exile. Business and commercial leaders worried that Republican rhetoric about expanded political participation and social justice threatened "anarchy and danger."⁴

Worse, the state political system immediately fragmented. In 1892, thirteen different parties elected state deputies to the new legislature. Reluctant converts to the new order, the so-called eleventh-hour republicans, formed a short-lived alliance with the Catholic Party; the first governor's Republican Party splintered and fell from power; there was even a minuscule Workers Party, which called for high wages and more outlays for education. The state Partido Republicano Federal (P.R.F.) took two years to organize effectively, and when it did opposition groups aligned themselves into a bloc powerful enough to counter most government initiatives.

Salvador, Bahia's capital, was inundated in 1890 by rural migrants--freed slaves, many infirm or otherwise unable to work, and by *sertanejos* battered by a severe drought which had spanned the transition from Empire to Republic. Influential members of the elite were so convinced that these Brazilians could not be gainfully employed that they appropriated funds to

³. See, for example, E. Bradford Burns, "The Destruction of a Folk Past: Euclides da Cunha and Cataclysmic Cultural Clash," *Review of Latin American Studies*, 3:1 (1990), 17-36; Rui Facó, "A Guerra Camponesa de Canudos," *Revista Brasileira* (São Paulo), Nov.-Dec. 1958; Ralph della Cava, "Brazilian Messianism and National Institutions: A Reappraisal of Canudos and Joazeiro," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 48:3 (August 1968), 408-420.

⁴. Consuelo Novais Sampaio, "Da transição política da República ao Movimento de Canudos," paper presented to the seminar, "A República e o Movimento de Canudos," Museu Eugenio Teixeira, Salvador, Oct. 17, 1989, ms.

pay the equivalent of \$100 each for up to 25,000 European agricultural colonists to be brought to the state.⁵ The state police force was so underfunded that 1,600 men and officers had to maintain order in all of Bahia's 120 municípios. Soldiers were paid the equivalent of less than two dollars a month, the same pitiful wage as a stone cutter's assistant.⁶ The state did nothing for drought relief except authorize special funds from which local authorities could hire temporary workers in order to provide jobs. The most frequent use of the fund in the mid-1890s was for the building of new cemeteries.

The bad times reinforced the sullen mood of the elite and engendered angry infighting in the new state legislature and between factions in the federal legislative delegation, or bancada. Lacking unified representation in turn gravely weakened Bahia's national position. Its state police force was nominally the largest, but in effective strength it was inferior to those of Rio Grande do Sul and, by 1896, São Paulo. Only 2.4% of Bahia's population voted in state elections through 1906 (and only 2.7% through 1930).⁷ Some Bahian municípios had fewer than fifty registered voters, and eleven had none at all.

In the early 1890s, the archdiocese of São Salvador da Bahia faced crisis as well. Its new archbishop, Dom Luiz dos Santos, suffered from failing health, and twice unsuccessfully travelled by ship to Rio de Janeiro to resign. Both times his requests were refused. In 1893 he became paralyzed and left for two year's treatment in Ceará.⁸ The Bahian Roman Catholic Church was especially vexed by the wave of reform measures emanating from the Vatican to restore orthodoxy and hierarchical control of local practices, since many of its diocesan priests, trained under the live-and-let live atmosphere of the Seminário de Olinda, regularly maintained families, were poorly trained, and were considered excessively permissive. The Church was so understaffed that most backlanders saw priests only once every two or three years; the priests they did see were often members of European religious orders, invariably shocked by local custom.

The reason that Conselheiro established Canudos in the first place was that he had been attacked in 1893 by a contingent of state police sent to arrest him. As the months passed, reports began filtering out of the region about the settlement's phenomenal growth, its reputedly bizarre religious practices, and its anti-republicanism. An onlooker reported that to build Canudos's new church, men and women conselheiristas hauled stone, salt, wood, and other construction materials in an oxcart loaned by a local landowner a distance of 36 kilometers. Conselheiro had turned down the use of oxen on the grounds that the sacrifice demanded of his followers in pulling the wagon would test their religious faith.⁹ Newspapermen, foreign priests, members of the elite, some (but not all) local vicars and at least seven contemporary chroniclers and eyewitnesses called the conselheiristas "madmen, criminals, ex-slaves, and, most of all, religious fanatics."¹⁰ This was the view, reinforced by da Cunha's haunting and brilliant narrative, that

⁵. See Falla com que abriu no dia 1º de maio de 1889...da Assembleia Legislativa, Provincia da Bahia o Des. Aurelio Ferreira Espinheira, 1º Vice-Presidente da Provincia, Salvador: Typ. Diario da Bahia, 1889, p. 98, blaming the necessity of importing foreign workers "due to the law of May 13th;" Secretaria da Agricultura, Viação e Obras Públicas, Relatório apresentado ao Dr. Gov. do Estado da Bahia pelo Engenheiro Civil José Antônio Costa, 1896. Bahia: Typ. Correio de Notícias, 1897, p. 31. In the end, unlike subsidized colonization programs in the south, which brought up to 200,000 immigrants from Europe each year, very few immigrants came and stayed in Bahia or in other northern states.

⁶. Sampaio, "Da transição política," p. 7.

⁷. The following groups were prohibited from voting: women, males under 21, beggars, men who could not sign their names, members of cloistered religious orders, and foot soldiers.

⁸. Padre Alexandre Otten, S.V.M., Só Deus é Grande, Ph. D. diss., Gregorian University, Rome, 1987, Anexo, pp. 4-5.

⁹. Antonio Marques da Silva, statement, Itapicuru, March 19, 1965, in "Jaguços" file, Núcleo do Sertão, Salvador.

¹⁰. Manuel Benício, Júlio Procópio Favilla Nunes, Aristedes Milton, Salomão de Souza Dantas, Frei João Evangelista, F. Benavides, Durval Vieira de Aguiar.

Brazilians had to believe in order to accept the staggering brutality in 1896-97 when the settlement was crushed, the throats of its male survivors slit even when they surrendered after a public promise from the military commander that their lives would be spared.

Conselheiro was clearly a product of his environment.¹¹ He followed in the footsteps of others, and although more of a success in his itinerant mission than others, he emphatically did not exploit the fact that some, at any rate, considered him a saint or the Bom Jesus. His sermons borrowed apocalyptic themes from liturgical sources of the day, notably the Missão Abreviada. Although his writings contained prophesies, there is no evidence that he frequently preached the coming of the millennium; or that he was a Sebastianist; or that he even advocated the abolition of slavery. He saw the need for an apocalypse as a question of power, and as a social visionary he invoked the vision of an imposed earthly paradise. In his dreams, millenarianism would reverse the polarity of the world.

He fulminated against the Republic for more practical reasons. He hated the positivist requirement for civil marriage, and he did at one point publicly witness a burning of new republican tax edicts. But this was part of a statewide opposition political campaign, and he was only one of many who performed similar acts. He was a monarchist although he had no love lost for the conduct of the monarchy in the 1870s during the Religious Question crisis. His community was virtually crime-free; he permitted girls and boys to study together in school; he and his advisors astutely maintained a populous community in a region considered a desert by initiating successful farming and pastoral activities. Mostly he managed this by setting Canudos's residents to hard agricultural work and by sending out workers to work for wages on nearly fazendas. He also used resources donated to him by admirers, and he sent out others to ask sympathizers for donations of money and materials, mostly to raise funds for his new church.

His major crime in the eyes of the republican government was his monarchism. The Jacobin wing, which sought radical restructuring of the political system along nationalist lines, led the invective, using the anti-monarchist cause as a battering ram against the still-fragile republican administration. The last minute conversion of Empire-era politicians to republicanism in the wake of the 1889 military coup yielded a divided republican movement, and in many ways, lent new energy to monarchists, who *after* the fall of the Dom Pedro II enjoyed more vitality, although in limited circles, than before the promulgation of the Republic itself. Before the 1889 coup, defenders of the status quo felt no compulsion to defend monarchy as a political system. Under the hated Republic, monarchists mobilized their efforts to turn back the clock.¹²

Unresolved strains accompanying (and surviving) the fall of the Bragança dynasty in 1889 and the imposition of military rule under the regime of Marshal Deodoro da Fonseca (1889-1891) and his politically ruthless successor, Marshal Floriano Peixoto (1891-1894) not only fueled monarchist sentiment across Brazil but led to vengeful acts of repression against monarchists, who were labeled traitors. As early as the 1870s, republicans berated the Imperial regime, referring to Pedro II as "Pedro Banana" and blaming the monarchy for national backwardness. Republicans reviled not only the monarch, but the fierce centralizing policies of the monarchy, particularly with regard to how these stifled local autonomy. The president allied himself with radical urban nationalists, the Jacobins. This was a powerful source of unrest, standing in sharp contrast to Brazil's tradition of minimizing political stridency. The early years of the Republic witnessed one traumatic confrontation after another. There was a brutal civil war

¹¹ See the author's "Mud-Hut Jerusalem: Canudos Revisited," in Rebecca J. Scott, ed., The Abolition of Slavery and the Aftermath of Emancipation in Brazil. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988, pp. 119-166.

¹² See Maria de Lourdes Mônico Janotti, Os subversivos da República. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1986.

in the far south in Rio Grande do Sul, which ended only in 1895; Admiral Custódio de Melo's naval rebellion in Rio de Janeiro in 1893; and, beginning in the same year, the unstructured "secession" of Canudos, allegedly held to be part of a centrally-directed plot financed by monarchist restorationists. Republican politicians were especially concerned that they not give the impression that they were, in the words of São Paulo governor Campos Salles, unable to control their own government.

Control at the national level remained, until mid-decade, in the hands of the armed forces, with the true republicans, not the eleventh-hour converts, holding most positions of influence. But like their counterparts in the Argentina Unión Civica Radical some years late, they lacked bureaucratic experience, and they became trapped in the middle of the civilian-military tensions of the early 1890s. Stung by the tug-of-war among state governments over tax revenues and other perquisites, and vulnerable to mounting journalistic bombast, the defenders of the new Republic cringed at revelations of cracks in the already-shaky façade of order, progress, and stability.

Under these circumstances, the attempt of Canudos' believers to retreat to a sanctuary beyond the arm of the menacing, intruding world of modernizing Brazil generated fears about the ability of the republic to survive, yet Canudos represented only one of many "disturbances" and uprisings of masses of the population throughout Brazilian history. The 1893-1897 conflict, seen through this prism, was part of a longer-term confrontation between rural Brazilians and the rising power of the State. Perhaps the most important lesson that Canudos offers is that it confirmed the elites' attitudes of rigid biologic determinism and their underlying, if unspoken, fear that the backwardness of the rural population would doom their attempts to rebuild Brazil on a European model. It reveals the fragility of the First Republic and the brutal lengths to which its officials were willing to go to crush discord.

Prudente's need for medical surgery in November 1896 put the federal government in the hands of Vice-President Manoel Vitorino Pereira, who, furthering his own political ambitions, moved immediately to ally himself with military dissidents and began to make personnel changes hostile to Prudente. Just two weeks after Prudente's operation, the Acting President fired the War Minister. In response, weeks before his physicians counselled that he should, Prudente hurried back from his convalescence and took charge again. Barely a few days later, news of the crushing defeat of the army's third military expedition against Canudos and the death of its commanding officer hit the press, triggering violent antimonarchist manifestations. Opposition newspapers fanned the flames of the emotional outburst by arguing recklessly and vociferously that the rebels were in fact being financed by monarchists. Rio's *A República* alleged that arms were being channeled through Minas Gerais, believed to be a monarchist stronghold, and shipped via the São Francisco River to Canudos.

Against this background, Canudos could not have come at a worse time for the national government. Rumors of planning for a Jacobin coup to restore Floriano's policies under a radical and nationalist dictatorship surfaced almost daily. Republican party boss and fellow *paulista* Francisco Glicério broke with Prudente over mutinies by military school cadets at several locations, creating a deep schism within the Federal Republican Party. City residents felt the sting of higher prices, ultimately the result of the fall in coffee export revenues. All over Brazil, rapid urban growth created new tensions and pressures, especially as unskilled rural migrants flocked to the cities. The characterization of Canudos as a monarchist "rebellion" heightened the sense of panic.

The longer news continued to arrive from the Canudos front detailing the frustrations of the legalist offensive against the "primitive rebels" of the backlands, the uglier the political climate became. Jacobins directed their invective at the president and at monarchists, especially paulista Eduardo Prado of the influential Prado clan.¹³ Eduardo had crusaded in print against what he termed the Republic's "financial pathology" and its electoral corruption. Reaching the end of his patience in October 1896, the then paulista governor Campos Salles decided to crush the state Monarchist Party. He rationalized his decision on the ground that while he "never gave importance to restorationist pretensions," he now feared that monarchist agitation would harm São Paulo's efforts to raise new foreign loans. Campos Salles warned that he would "hurl the police" on the monarchists and "not permit them to have more than the slightest liberty of movement."¹⁴ Eduardo Prado was a primary target. Police invaded private homes to break up peaceful monarchist meetings and were ordered to obstruct public rallies.

In January 1897, anti-monarchist abuse against Prudente's government so heated up the atmosphere of recriminations that some newspaper editors stridently advocated "elimination" of their political enemies--this a code in newspaper language for murder. Exactly in the middle of this, Rio's Gazeta de Notícias, on January 30th, printed the text of a telegram from a correspondent in Salvador, reporting on the "bloody Canudos drama" and stating baldly that the Conde d'Eu, Princess Isabel's publicly-despised husband, had provided funds to Conselheiro's rebels to open an insurrectionary military front aimed at monarchist restoration. Given that the republican forces were faring very badly, the timing of the allegation, however absurd, could not have been worse. Outraged monarchists protested vehemently but to no avail. There was a regionalist dimension to this as well: the progress-minded South was predisposed to view the North as retrograde, and urban Brazilians were prepared to believe all manner of fantastic things about the backlands.

It is now suspected that the shooting of the flamboyant federal commander Colonel Antônio Moreira César, on March 2nd, resulted not from jagunço gunfire but from his own troops, who hated him. The shocking news of the officer's death reached São Paulo city five days later, on a Sunday. Abetted by politicians, public opinion turned its wrath against the monarchist cause. The governor advised against violence but told the crowd milling outside his official residence that Moreira Cesar's death would have to be avenged. The mob proceeded nearby to the offices of the Correio Paulistano, shouting insults and threats, and proceeded to storm the building unhindered by mounted militiamen stationed there to prevent trouble. They sacked and destroyed it.

In the Federal Capital of Rio de Janeiro, the greatest degree of anger was directed at Coronel Gentil de Castro, a co-owner of Liberdade, a monarchist daily, and its editor. The police commander ordered his men not to defend the offices of monarchist newspapers under attack. Policemen, in fact, joined the mobs on Rua do Ouvidor, Rua do Sacramento, and several side streets, where the newspapers offices and typesetting facilities used by the three leading monarchist newspapers, Gazeta de Tarde, de Castro's Liberdade, and Apostolo were looted and burned. Vandals then turned to Gentil de Castro's elegant house, where they smashed furniture, carried off paintings, and overturned drawers in search of compromising documents or letters. A torrential rain then dampened the mob, which eventually dispersed. The following morning, de

¹³ His older brothers included Antônio, a leading slaveholder planter-entrepreneur and Imperial-era politician linked to São Paulo's commercial success, and Martinho Prado Jr., an outspoken republican. See Darrell E. Levi, The Prados of São Paulo, Brazil: An Elite Family and Social Change, 1840-1930. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987.

¹⁴ Darrell E. Levi, The Prados of São Paulo, p. 172.

Castro attempted to flee by train, but was followed, and, at the São Francisco Xavier station, was killed by a gunshot as he sat in his compartment waiting in vain for the train to depart.¹⁵

News of the attack inflamed the city even further. The president locked the doors of his palace and took no steps to quiet the atmosphere. The monarchist newspaper Apóstolo's Padre Scaligero Maravalho, with his attorney, sought police protection but were denied it and left to fend for themselves. "Death lists" with names of known monarchists were circulated, even to hospitals so that they would be refused treatment.¹⁶ Government officials and police cavalry stood by and watched buildings burn on the Largo de São Francisco de Paula. Some monarchists were driven into exile or hiding after the destruction of O Commercio. Writing under pseudonyms, Eduardo Prado bitterly blamed the republican administration for the regime's defeats at Canudos and for the convulsive atmosphere being stirred up in the press and by statements from such national figures as General Artur Oscar, the commander of the fourth expedition against Canudos, who wrote to opposition newspapers hinting bluntly at monarchist complicity in training the backlands defenders and in supplying them. The pro-government O Estado de São Paulo published manufactured evidence linking Prado to the Canudos conspiracy.¹⁷ In all of this lay irony of the highest magnitude: the fighting in the backlands, trumpeted as a threat to civilization, triggered brutal attacks in the heart of supposedly civilized society of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

Asked soon after the anti-monarchist riots why they had happened, the president replied that the reaction had been provoked as a display of "patriotic exaltation of the national soul."¹⁸ Euclides da Cunha observed later "a certain similarity" between the Rua do Ouvidor bonfire and Canudos, "one," in his words, "equaling the other in savagery." He added:

Backlands lawlessness was precipitately making its entrance into history; and the Canudos revolt, which all is said, was little more than symptomatic of a malady which, by no means confined to a corner of Ba(h)ia, was spreading to the capitals of the seaboard. The man of the backlands, that rude, leather-clad figure, had partners in crime who were, possibly, even more dangerous.¹⁹

Republicans, in turn, recommenced their attacks on Coronel Gentil de Castro. A República accused de Castro of sending arms and money to Canudos in the name of "monarchist chieftains" and warned that he was instigating national treason. On February 9, shortly after dawn, a group of men began to attack the building housing Liberdade and Gazeta da Tarde. When employees inside the building fired off warning shots on carbines stored in the newspaper offices, the assault ceased, but recriminations on both sides continued for days. Stirred up by the press and by the steady flow of alarming reports via coastal steamer and telegraph of government losses at the Canudos front, the crisis reached unprecedented fever pitch. Republicans as highly placed as Campos Salles coyly used every federal setback to stir up anti-monarchist feeling. "It seems to me," he commented, "that simple yokels or fanatics, no matter how numerous, could not completely rout a force organized, prepared for war, and commanded by a leader of the most

¹⁵ See Delso Renault, A vida brasileira no final do século XIX. Rio de Janeiro: Jose Olympio Editora, 1987, p. 178.

¹⁶ Carlos de Laet, "A Imprensa," p. 244.

¹⁷ Darrell E. Levi, The Prados of São Paulo, p. 174; p. 245 note 62. See O Estado de São Paulo, 1-20 March 1897. Prado's last major monarchist statement, Salvemos o Brasil, was published in Rio de Janeiro in 1899 under the pen name "Graccho." See also June E. Hahner, Civilian-Military Relations, p. 175.

¹⁸ Carlos de Laet, "A Imprensa," p. 246.

¹⁹ Cunha, Rebellion in the Backlands, p. 279.

solid prestige and proven capacity."²⁰ Meanwhile, the vice-president continued to maneuver against the president, blaming Prudente, in a speech to the Clube Militar, with having failed to heed the army's warnings to mobilize quickly against the monarchist threat.

These events broke the back of the opposition and defused the crisis. Public anger gave Prudente justification for shutting down the Clube Militar. It would remain closed until well into the next presidential regime. In many ways, the "rebellion in the backlands" brought the republican government closer to collapse than anyone might have suspected, but as it turned out the events which followed the final government victory ushered in at least seven years of political stability, although discontent lingered and partisan divisions within the state republican parties continued. Bahian Rui Barbosa, in a speech written but never delivered, attacked the army's killing of its prisoners and blamed "Brazilian indifference" for having not understood the realities of the backlands. César Zama, a Bahian partisan of Luiz Vianna, published under a pseudonym a vehement attack on the way Conselheiro had been misunderstood and falsely libeled.

The irregularly published, strident and violently nationalistic newspaper, O Jacobino (Rio), praised Floriano's patriotism and demanded that Prudente rehire large numbers of Florianists his administration had fired from their government jobs, ostensibly to save costs. Jacobins incited military discontent and hinted at the need for a coup d'état. Members of the prestigious Military Club published an antimonarchist pact, pledging to defend the Republic against changes "menaced by subversive groups" and linking the "destinies of the Republic" to the officers' "military honor." The humiliating defeat of the first two, relatively small military parties sent out to subdue Conselheiro, and in turn the humiliation of the massive third military expedition, fed fuel to jacobinist calls in major cities for a national crusade against the enemies of the Republic and for a general mobilization.

By January 1897, anti-monarchist invective and attacks on the Prudente regime so heated up the atmosphere of recriminations that some newspaper editors stridently advocated "elimination" of their political enemies. Exactly in the middle of this, Rio's Gazeta de Notícias, on January 30th, printed the text of a telegram from a correspondent in Salvador, reporting on the "bloody Canudos drama" and stating baldly that the Conde d'Eu, Princess Isabel's publicly-despised husband, had provided funds to Conselheiro's rebels to open an insurrectionary military front aimed at monarchist restoration. Given that the republican forces were faring very badly, the timing of the allegation, however absurd, could not have been worse. Outraged monarchists protested vehemently but to no avail. Starting in March 1896, a wave of violence abetted by the government saw monarchist newspapers smashed, monarchist politicians driven into exile, and at least one newspaper editor shot to death as he attempted to flee by train.

Voices of moderation were stilled. In the backlands of Ceará, in Juazeiro, veneration of the defrocked miracle-working priest, Cícero Romão Batista, took on massive proportions. In reaction to anticipated counter-rebellion, and to smash the Canudos "menace," incumbent governments in northern states mobilized their militias, even though these were poorly equipped and made up largely of untrained recruits. When, after the loss of thousands of lives over several months, word arrived finally that Canudos had capitulated, on October 5, 1897, the resulting nationalist euphoria permitted the government finally to take credit. It is telling that in his valedictory Ordem do Dia to the troops on October 6, 1897, General Oscar did not call the defeated conselheiristas bandits or fanatics. Rather, in an uncanny statement of respect, he reminded his listeners that "both sides in the conflict"--the legalist troops and their opponents--

²⁰ vi, The Prados of São Paulo, pp. 172-73.

had been "steadfast in their political ideas."²¹ Victorious troops severed Conselheiro's head from his disinterred body and displayed it on parade along every major city on the northeastern coast. In spite of this, jacobinist voices continued to assail Prudente. O Jacobino's editor, consumed by venom, blasted "the corrupting and unpatriotic policies of this sickly imbecile called Prudente de Morais...[who is attempting to annihilate the army, part of] the plan of restoring the monarchy...with the entire knowledge and frank protection" of the president.

The final scene was played on November 5, 1897, when a soldier, Marcelino Bispo, a passionate florianist, mounted the reviewing stand at a parade honoring troops returning from the backlands and tried to assassinate Prudente de Morais.²² In the struggle, the War Minister, Marshal Bittencourt, was stabbed to death while attempting to protect the president. Martial law was imposed. At the official inquiry, the soldier implicated O Jacobino's editor, Deocleciano Martyr, with having enlisted him to kill Prudente as part of a larger conspiracy which included officer members of the Clube Militar. The police report named the Vice-President and other leading politicians as principals, but Prudente hesitated against arresting them though mobs were allowed to destroy the offices of O Jacobino.

These events, culminating in the assassination attempt (in which the vice-president was implicated and placed under arrest) broke the back of the opposition and defused the crisis. The failure of the monarchists to defend themselves reduced their cause to the status of a curiosity. Just as in France in the 1890s, the old right ceased to be a political force in Brazilian life. Public anger even gave Prudente justification for shutting down the Clube Militar. It would remain closed until well into the next presidential regime. In many ways, the "rebellion in the backlands" brought the republican government closer to collapse than anyone might have suspected, but as it turned out the events which followed the final government victory ushered in at least seven years of political stability, although discontent lingered and partisan divisions within the state republican parties continued. Until 1930, when the tenente movement of young military nationalists and the civilian allies overthrew the state-based republican oligarchies, two interpretations of Brazilian reality coexisted. One, the republican version, emphasized the reformist acts which had carried forward political modernization: abolition, the 1891 Constitution, separation of Church and State, the creation of a stable civilian regime, and victory over dissidence from Canudos to the anti-vaccination riots of 1904 and beyond. The other, a far more pessimistic analysis, doubted Brazil's capacity to overcome its legacy of backwardness and race mixture. Many of these interpretations jelled during or immediately following the period during which the conselheiristas seemed to be able to hold out almost at will. "It is puerile," the mulato professor of forensic medicine, Raymundo Nina Rodrigues, wrote in his scholarly analysis of Canudos, "to expect that the [sertanejo] will ever be able to understand that the republican federation carries within itself the guarantee of future political unity."²³

Some intellectuals agonized over Canudos, and a few directed blame at the government. César Zama, a Bahian partisan of Luiz Vianna, published under a pseudonym a vehement attack

²¹ General Commandante em Chefe Arthur Oscar de Andrade Guimarães, Ordem do dia 102, Canudos, 6 October 1897, in Museu da Polícia Militar, São Paulo.

²² e would-be assassin was described a half-century later by Pernambucan historians and diplomat José Maria Bello as "a young half-breed soldier from the North." (Bello, History of Modern Brazil, p. 156)

²³ ymundo Nina Rodrigues, As Colectividades Anormaes, 1897, rpt, Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1939, p. 70. David Pace examines the broad nineteenth-century search for a systematic science of human nature, which motivated Nina Rodrigues and his contemporary analysts of Canudos. See his Claude Levi-Strauss: The Bearer of Ashes. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 79.

on the way Conselheiro had been misunderstood and falsely libeled.²⁴ Bahian Rui Barbosa, in a speech written but never delivered, attacked the army's killing of its prisoners and blamed "Brazilian indifference" for having not understood the realities of the backlands.²⁵ As the nominal spokesman for Bahian interests at the national level, apparently he did not want to sully his reputation by defending in public a cause which had so obviously lost.²⁶ Self-styled political "realists" accepted the bloody cost of perhaps 30,000 dead, and cited the lesson of the conflict to justify their support for the implementation of the "politics of the governors" arrangement which would tighten the mechanisms for social control by ceding absolute power to the rural coronéis.

The overwhelming expression of opinion following Canudos's destruction, to be sure, accepted da Cunha's hypothesis of the irrevocable duality of Brazilian society between backlands and coast. There was deep ambiguity in this way of seeing the events that had transpired: da Cunha, as a Spencerian positivist, was troubled long before Canudos by the question of national progress "stained" by Brazil's miscegenated population, considered his work not as a defense of the sertanejo but as an attack on the barbarity of the "civilized" leaders of the nation.²⁷ Da Cunha did not stand alone; he drew on the Darwinian-Spencerian notion of progress which had gained wide acceptance in Europe and in North America, and which in Brazil was reflected as early as 1871 in the work of Sílvia Romero (1851-1914), who studied themes as diverse as animal magnetism, evolution, literature, and the songs and poems of rural northeasterners and whose characteristic mood throughout the period was one of depression. Romero's writing clearly anticipated da Cunha's fears that Brazil's cultural, social, and racial Brazil's cultural gap between its coastal and hinterland population threatened Brazil's very future.²⁸ The same influences also affected the thinking of the Maranhão-born mulato, Raimundo Nina Rodrigues (1862-1906), whose writings while professor of forensic law at the Medical School in Salvador blamed national backwardness on eugenics and racial impurity.²⁹

What, then, of the movement's millenarian nature? Conselheiro's followers withdrew to Canudos to tend to themselves. They did not proselytize. They could take leave of the holy city whenever they wanted. Conselheiro's hatred of the Republic was real enough but his words were rhetorical, not summons to aggression. His movement was first and foremost a religious one, holding the republic's anti-clerical laws in contempt but never breaking the law. The movement was neither social nor political in motivation, although as a consequence of the alarmed reaction to it, it stirred up, of course, difficulties in both arenas.

²⁴ Wolsey" (César Gama), Libello Republicano: acompanhado do commentários sobre a Campahna de Canudos. Salvador: Typ. Diário da Bahia, 1899.

²⁵ e speech was scheduled to have been made to the Senate on November 6, 1897. It was published years later in Obras Completas de Rui Barbosa. Rio de Janeiro: Ministério da Educação e Saúde, 1954, Vol. 24 (1897), pp. 183-187.

²⁶ Interview with Francisco de Assis Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro, Fundação Casa Rui Barbosa, June 16, 1985.

²⁷ Samuel Putnam, translator's Introduction, Rebellion, p. v.

²⁸ e, for example, Sílvia Romero, Estudos sobre a poesia popular no Brasil. Rio de Janeiro, 1888. rpt. Petrópolis: Ed. Vozes, 1977; and his Ethnologia brasileira (1888). See also Dante Moreira Leite, O Caráter Nacional Brasileiro, pp. 191-210. The foreign thinkers included Gustave Le Bon, Scipio Sighele, Lewis Henry Morgan, Edward Tylor, John McLennan, James Frazer, and John Lubbock. See David Pace, Claude Levi-Strauss, p. 79. See Sílvia Romero, "O Carater Nacional e as Origins do Povo Brasileiro," in Carlos Sussekind de Mendonça, Sílvia Romero: sua formação intelectual, 1851-1880. São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1938, pp. 48-52; Cantos populares do Brasil. 1890. rpt. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio Editora, 1954 and the same author's Doutrina contra doutrina: o evolucionismo e o positivismo no Brasil. Rio de Janeiro: Liv. Francisco Alves, 1894.

²⁹ good overview of this theme is provided by Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz, "Identidade Cultural, Identidade Nacional no Brasil," Tempo Social (São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo), 1(1), 1989, 29-46, esp. 30-31. See Raymundo Nina Rodrigues, "O animismo fetichista dos Negros bahianos," published serially in Revista Brasileira between April 15 and September 4, 1896 and collected and reedited in Biblioteca de Divulgação Científica, Salvador, Vol. II, cited in As Coletivades Anormaes, p. 71; Márcio Nery, História e pathogenia da paranoia. Rio de Janeiro: n.p., 1894, esp. p. 59.

Millenarian movements based on utopian dreams with the idea of preparation for final judgment had occurred frequently throughout Brazilian history, especially among marginalized groups among Brazil's rural poor. They seemed especially attractive to folk whose precarious lives were threatened by change, and who were deeply religious but cut off from the institutional Church. Crises which shook the status quo produced fertile ground for terrified men and women to take risks and to follow interpretations of messianic prophesy, especially if the prophecies promised to reverse existing relationships, inverting the social order and placing unbelievers in servitude to the faithful.

Conselheiro did exactly that. He prophesied that the barren sertão would become fertile, and that the rainy coast would dry up. In 1897 there would be biblical plagues; in 1898, heads would roll, and in 1899 the lights would go out. The year 1900 would usher in the end of the world and the fiery day of redemption. He also convinced his followers to live lives of austerity, to reject the modernizing thrust of the new Republic, and to await the end of days with stoicism. Conselheiro did not worry about the possibility of his death, since he likely understood that millenarian prophesy survives although the apocalyptic moment passes.

Studies of the social character of millenarian sects emphasize accumulated tensions from social causes as well as from religious anxiety or fear. But the spiritual element, harder to pin down, is often slighted. After all, illiterates groping for meaning in the harsh landscape of poverty do not leave historical testimony.

Over time, Canudos' most lasting impact on the nation was psychological. More than anything else, this was the result of Euclides da Cunha's remarkable prose, rich in imagery and emotional effect, and immensely authoritative. On the level of intellectual discourse, da Cunha was one of the first of many, as we have noted, to lament the fate of groups excluded from the Brazilian mainstream. But he and his successors--Graça Aranha, Monteiro Lobato, Gilberto Freyre--never offered any concrete measures to integrate these excluded groups.

It is telling that Brazilians marked Canudos' centenary in 1997, the anniversary of its destruction, not in 1993, the anniversary of the utopian community's peaceful beginning. What forces drove tens of thousands of uprooted men and women to cast their lot with a religious mystic who never accepted any title of saint or even holy man, and who oversaw the transformation of a bleak spot in a near-desert region of the backlands into what became a functional social community of up to 35,000 souls even if it did not turn the land into a Garden of Eden? During the 1890s, coastal Brazilians wanted to see Canudos as a force for evil and a threat to religious orthodoxy. The passage of decades froze this erroneous interpretation into national myth.