Os Sertões as a Clash of Ontologies in Brazilian Intellectual History

Carlos Henrique Armani
Os Sertões as a Clash of Ontologies in Brazilian Intellectual History

In this blog post I would like to discuss ongoing research on the work Os sertões (Rebellion in the Backlands) by Euclides da Cunha, published in Brazil in 1902. Since its publication, Os sertões has been an object of study in Brazilian intellectual history; in a way, it was already born a classic.

Euclides da Cunha worked as a reporter for the O Estado de São Paulo newspaper during the Canudos War, a conflict between the military forces of the First Brazilian Republic and the residents of Canudos, a semi-arid region in the backlands of the northeastern state of Bahia. The war occurred between 1896 and 1897, a period in which Brazil was undergoing a process of modernization while transitioning from monarchy to republic. It included countless reforms grounded on the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, all of which implied overcoming backwardness through historical progress. During this time, a number of social movements combining agrarian demands and religious messianism emerged. Canudos was one of those residual forces in (and against) this advancing modernity.

Euclides’s work depicted the region, the people who lived there and the four military campaigns against the native people of Canudos. In the early twentieth century, Euclides used derogatory concepts to describe the latter as barbarian and uncivilized, such as sertanejos (backwoodsmen) and jagunços (militarized backwoodsmen). At the same time, however, he defined them as “the very core of our nationality, the bedrock of our race”.1 Samuel Putnam, one of the English translators of the book, remarks that Euclides was “a reporter of a most unusual kind”, one who, “writing amid the tumult of events and the emotional stress of the moment, succeeded in turning a journalistic account of a military campaign into an epic treatise on the geology, the geography, the climatology, the flora, the fauna, and the human life of the Brazilian backlands”.2 As Walnice Nogueira Galvão pointed out, Euclides had mapped the main themes that became central to intellectual production in the twentieth century “by focusing on the black people, the Indian, the poor, the backlands, the colonized condition, the popular religiosity, insurrections, underdevelopment, and dependence”.3

Grasping Os sertões is not an easy task. As Euclides noted in a diary in 1902, “I wrote this book for the future”.4 For a long time, this work defined dichotomies that still persist as part of the Brazilian imaginary. Some scholars saw it as the expression of

#English / Theory of History (Re)read
determinist thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For others, it was the invention of “the deep Brazil” (a concept in vogue in constructivist theories). In other words, it was to be the Brazil of big cities and the Brazil unknown to most of its inhabitants. But Os sertões is not limited to the internal borders of the nation state. In this sense, it can be said that it was a local thesis with universal analytical potential, in that it addressed issues that went beyond the borders of the nation state.

Taking advantage of a hermeneutic rebelliousness that the text provides us with, I would like to propose a brief reading of Euclides’s masterpiece based on what has been defined as the ontological turn in anthropology, especially the resumption of animist ontology as a specific disposition of the beings in the world, as proposed by Philippe Descola, an important anthropologist who writes about this ontological perspective. My hypothesis is that we can think Os Sertões not only through the traditional division between civilization and barbarism, (or between coastline and backlands) but also through the mobilization of two powerful ontologies that clash with each other in this work: the naturalist and the animist. Euclides thought of the diverse beings as a kind of humanity that was not restricted to army troops, nor to the jagunços. The human and non-human agents that make the history Euclides presents in Os Sertões circulate agonistically through those two ontologies. Sometimes the sertanejo is a physical extension of nature, and nature sometimes an animistic extension of the sertanejo. This animistic perspective is what interests us, as far as the sertanejo and nature have the same interiority, but a different physicality.

But what does this animist perspective mean? Taking his classification from Husserl’s phenomenology (which is the particular expression of a universal identification), Descola claims that if “humans try to experience any form of non-self by leaving out of account the instituted world everything it means for them, the only resources that they can avail themselves of are their body and their intentionality”. Descola prefers to call them “physicality” in the sense of “dispositions enabling a physical action” and “interiority” in the sense of “self-reflexive inwardness”. The author conveys this basic identification as “the elementary mechanism through which this subject will detect differences and similarities between himself and the objects in the world”. Since the only tools the subject can rely upon are his “interiority and his physicality, his patterning of the world will be based upon the selective attribution or denial of these attributes to other existing things”. The possible identifications, as can be inferred from the arrangement proposed by Descola, are limited. “When confronted with an as yet
unspecified alter; whether human or nonhuman, our hypothetical subject can surmise either that this object possesses elements of physicality and interiority analogous to his” [sic], which Descola calls “totemism”; or that “this object’s interiority and physicality are entirely distinct from his own”, defined as “analogism”. On the other hand, Descola defines animism as an object that “has a similar interiority and a different physicality” and “naturalism” as the object that “is devoid of interiority but possesses a similar kind of physicality”. According to him, these formulae define four types of ontologies, i.e., “systems of distribution of properties among existing objects in the world, that in turn provide anchoring points for sociocosmic forms of aggregation and conceptions of self and non-self”.

In his work, Euclides defined the sociocosmos of the backlands as a kind of “barbarian mysticism” and “naive animism”. His appreciation of the War of Canudos and the sertanejo world was based on social Darwinist understandings and naturalist conceptions of anthropology that were in vogue at the end of the nineteenth century. For him, the religion of the natives was “a miscegenation of beliefs”, notably the “anthropomorphism of the savage” and the “animism of the African”. As I will attempt to demonstrate in a few words, however, what permeated the consciousness of the sertanejo ended up impregnating Euclides’s work as well.

We can think the case of the Caatingas in Os sertões, the shrub-forest lands that are historical and political agents in his work. In this sense, the organic integrity that operated in the same physicality manifested itself not only in a cold nature indifferent to man, but also in the caatinga which had its own soul. It was, as such, an ally of the sertanejo:

“The caatingas are an incorruptible ally of the sertanejo in revolt, and they do in a certain way enter into the conflict. They arm themselves for the combat, take the offensive. For the invader they are an impenetrable wilderness; but they have numerous paths by which they are accessible to the backwoodsman, who was born and grew up there.”

The same caatinga that cooperates with the backwoodsman drowns, attacks and stuns the traveller: it “enmeshes him in its spiny woof, and holds out no compensating attractions. It repulses him with its thorns and prickly leaves, its twigs sharp as lances”. Euclides understood the “impoverished caatingas” as having a “clearly defined and important function in the military campaign”. This “function” meant an animist intention that worked together with the sertanejo. “In this case, the plants unite in an intimate embrace, being transformed into social growths. Not
being able to weather it out in isolation, they discipline themselves, become
gregarious and regimented. To this group belong all the Caesalpinia and the
catingueiras\(^{16,17}\) Other intentional agents are the inelegant and monstrous
cabeça-de-frade\(^{18}\), “the umbú tree” as the “sacred tree of the backlands” and
“faithful companion to the cowboy’s swift”, the “mournful-voiced seriemas\(^{19}\), and
“the treacherous, thieving pumas”.\(^{20}\) Together they form a world unveiled as a
tangle of entities that constantly and unstably occupy a space we dare to name
sertanejo cosmology. These social relationships of plants and animals are
responsible for part of the joint action that formed a deadly unity with the
jagunços.

We can find more of this intentional and humanized nature in his work. It is a case
of the apparently “extreme benignity” of the region when the forests “conceal a
vast strip of sterile land”, a “charm” that is broken by the “ parched and barbarous
backlands”.\(^{21}\) And the jagunços, as part of nature itself, are “as inconstant as
Nature”. “It is natural that he [the jagunço] should be”, continued Euclides. “To live is
to adapt one’s self. And she has fashioned him in her own likeness: barbarous,
impetuous, abrupt”.\(^{22}\) It is common to interpret this passage as an example of
natural determinism. But, at the same time, what is part of the nature to which the
jagunço belongs is something that is connected to the behaviour of the soul.

Reflecting on certain characteristics of the sertão in its ontological diversity, we can
see that in Os sertões, the backland itself operated as an intentional agent. The
reading that I chose to make of Os sertões is somewhat heterodox, for it implies
that men’s thought should not be an exclusive world builder in intellectual history.
When I suggested there were two ontologies that clashed in Os sertões, I meant
that the distribution of beings in the historical agency of the war sometimes led
towards naturalism, especially in the conception of a backwardness of the
sertanejos in relation to the Republic. Nonetheless, Os sertões leant towards
animism, when some human and non-human beings presented themselves in the
spatiality as agents endowed with intentions. The becoming of spatiality
attenuated the distance in time and challenged the temporal domination of
evolutionism, momentarily removing its authority. If time separates, space
aggregates. It aggregated, however, in the struggle between these two
antagonistic worlds that could never be reconciled.
Carlos Henrique Armani holds a Ph.D. in the History of Iberian and American Societies from the Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil) and completed a doctoral stay at the Institute for History and Theory of Ideas at the University of Coimbra (Portugal). He has been a postdoctorate research fellow in Theory and Philosophy of History at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). He was a visiting professor at Universidad de Cuyo (Argentina) and Universidad de La República (Uruguay). Currently, he is professor at the Department of History of the Federal University of Santa Maria (Brazil). He has experience in Intellectual History and Theory of History. His main research areas are Intellectual History in Brazil in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the History of Posthumanist Thought in Philosophy, Anthropology, and History.

**Tags:** Brazilian intellectual history / Euclides da Cunha’s Os sertões

/ ontological turn

---

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 141.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 110.
13 Ibid., 191.
14 Ibid., 30.
15 Ibid., 33.
16 Various plants that grows on the caatinga.
17 Ibid., 33.
18 Melocactus zehntneri.
19 Cariama cristata.
20 Ibid., 37.
21 Ibid., 55.
22 Ibid., 94.

#English / Theory of History (Re)read