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978-0-521-02881-3 - Power and the Ruling Classes in Northeast Brazil: Juazeiro and
Petrolina in Transition

Ronald H. Chilcote

Excerpt

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PART I

The traditional sertão

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The background

Private investors now come to the region, initially prospecting. The visit of Rockefeller, the experience of the Sampaio Ferraz, the grapes of Molina, the onion farmers along the river, the pioneering of the Coelhos . . . are positive indications that “the Valley is good business.” . . . In Petrolina alongside the Schumpeterian empire of the Coelhos . . . other investors begin to establish themselves. . . . The former governor of Pernambuco, manly leader of the clan, welcomes and orients these investors almost all of whom are his friends: from the South, the Northeast, and the outside. Rockefeller sends him letters and postcards. Pignatari lunches in the colonial home of Dona Josefa Coelho after having landed his executive plane . . . en route to the copper mines in Caraíbas. The executive president of Heinz – the great agroindustrial complex in California . . . writes him for information about land. . . . Besides the “big shots” of national and foreign industry . . . Nilo Coelho maintains frequent contact with Robert McNamara, president of the World Bank. . . . The agroindustrialists begin to appear. . . . The Simonsens plant alfalfa on the Bahian side. . . . Gustavo Coleço . . . begins experiments with national and foreign varieties of sugarcane. . . . Heinz of California wants to plant tomatoes and process them in order to penetrate the internal market and to export. . . . Pizzamiglio, São Paulo retailer, installs plantations of grapes and tomatoes; the Japanese of Paraná are in fruit; the Bentonite group of Campina Grande . . . wants to produce essential oils; the Pascuale Hermanos are in fruit; Prado Franco expects sugar production along the Bahian side.¹

This report from a Recife newspaper provides a glimpse of political-economic life in the early 1970s in Juazeiro and Petrolina, neighboring towns of some sixty thousand inhabitants each that are closely linked to each other, to their respective states of Bahia and Pernambuco in the Brazilian Northeast, to the federal government centered in Brasília, and, increasingly, to international capital. Juazeiro is ruled by a paternalistic bureaucracy, and competition for control of this bureaucracy has made it

¹ Mário Aurélio Alcântara, “Informativo económico,” *Diário de Pernambuco* (June 13, 1972), reprinted in *O Farol* 57 (July 15, 1972): 1. In its early years *O Farol* was published as *O Pharol* but here I use the contemporary spelling.

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dependent on the outside world, leaving local merchant capital to survive with difficulty under limited resources. Petrolina is ruled patriarchally, and the concentration of power in a single family has permitted it some autonomous capitalist development and integration into the national and world economy. The ways in which cohesiveness and factionalism within the ruling order have contributed to the development or underdevelopment of these two communities are the subject of this book.

My interest in these two communities of the *sertão*, or backlands, was sparked by Euclides da Cunha's *Rebellion in the Backlands*,² the classic account of the heroic resistance of a group of late-nineteenth-century settlers to government efforts to dislodge them. A century ago, Antônio Conselheiro led a band of followers into the heart of the Northeast backlands to a place not far from the São Francisco River they named Canudos. In 1896 Conselheiro contracted with Colonel João Evangelista Pereira e Melo for lumber to build a new church, but when it was not delivered he threatened to descend upon Juazeiro and take the lumber by force. In response to this threat the chief of Juazeiro urgently telegraphed Governor Luiz Viana for military assistance; Viana's family was prominent in the area, and the governor sent troops to prevent Conselheiro and his followers from invading the town. The siege during 1896 and 1897 lasted until "from the last trench the soldiers received the fire of the few last defenders of Canudos, faithful to the death. Two boys, one able-bodied man, and an old veteran still fought on until a volley from the soldiers laid them to rest, their faces turned towards the foe."³

The area Cunha described is the oldest and poorest of Brazilian regions and one of the most populous. Its semiarid landscape, home to nearly a third of the nation, gives the impression of suffering, "its skin baked and corroded by the rigors of the climate."⁴ Its *caatinga* or scrub brush stifles, blocks the view, strikes the intruder in the face, and "repulses him with its

2 Stefan Zweig described this work as "a great national epic" offering "a complete psychological picture of the Brazilian soil, the people, and the country, such as has never since been achieved with equal insight and psychological comprehension"; *Brazil, Land of the Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1942), pp. 159–160, quoted in Samuel Putnam, "Introduction," in Euclides da Cunha, *Rebellion in the Backlands (Os Sertões)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), p. iii. A valuable contemporary source is Donald Pierson, *O Homem no Vale do São Francisco*. 3 vols. (Rio de Janeiro: Superintendência do Vale do São Francisco, 1972).

3 Quoted in R. B. Cunningham Graham, *A Brazilian Mystic. Being the Life and Miracles of Antônio Conselheiro* (London: William Heinemann, 1920), p. 237. Graham, like most writers, romanticizes the events at Canudos. Edmundo Moniz criticizes such a tendency in a recent novel by the Peruvian, Mario Vargas Llosa, *A guerra do fim do mundo. a saga de Antônio Conselheiro na maior aventura literária de nosso tempo* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Francisco Alves, 1982). See Moniz, "Canudos: o suicídio literário de Vargas Llosa," *Encontros com a Civilização Brasileira* 29 (1982): 7–20, and his *Canudos: a luta pela terra*. 2d ed. (São Paulo: Global Editora, 1982), and *Guerra social de Canudos* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira, 1978).

4 Josué de Castro, *Death in the Northeast* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 23

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Figure 1.1. "Weneslau Braz," nineteenth-century river steamboat; the principal mode of transportation on the Rio São Francisco. Photo 1967.



Figure 1.2. Wood for the riverboats, brought by traditional means 15 kilometers inland to the edge of the Rio São Francisco, has depleted the sertão of much of its vegetation.

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thorns and prickly leaves, its twigs sharp as lances; and it stretches out in front of him, for mile on mile, unchanging in its desolate aspect of leafless trees, of dried and twisted boughs . . . representing, as it would seem, the agonized struggles of a tortured, writhing flora.”⁵ During the recurrent droughts, “the burning air is sterilized; the ground, parched and cleft, becomes petrified”; yet the plants, “the life within them latent, feed on those reserves which they have stored up in the off seasons and contrive to ride out the ordeal, ready for a transfiguration in the glow of a coming spring.”⁶

Since the devastating drought of 1877–79, the area has been recognized as a national problem. Droughts recur at random but average one in every ten years and vary in duration from one to three years. In the annual dry season from about June to December, most of the rivers dry up. The São Francisco, “the river of national unity,”⁷ flows 3,200 kilometers to the north year round, but the drop in water level at times brings boat transportation and the rural pastoral and agricultural economy to a halt. The region is semiarid, however, not desert,⁸ and receives an annual rainfall of 69 centimeters, although this is low for an area with high rates of evaporation.

In this ravaged and scorched landscape, “death is such a pervasive presence that in some towns . . . the cemetery is the most attractive spot in the community.” This fact caught the attention of a poet of the Northeast, who asked:

Why all these walls? Why isolate the tombs
From the more general boneyard,
The defunct countryside?⁹

Drought brings starvation, and an emigration that has been described as “a veritable death march.”¹⁰ The refugee population usually returns, however, with the first rains; the attachment of the *sertanejo*, or backwoodsman, to his land and his way of life is well known.¹¹

5 Da Cunha, *Rebellion in the Backlands*, p. 30.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

7 This is the title and theme of Orlando M. Carvalho’s *O rio da unidade nacional. o São Francisco* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1937).

8 This and other misconceptions of the Northeast are discussed in Stefan H. Robock, *Brazil’s Developing Northeast: A Study of Regional Planning and Foreign Aid* (Washington, D. C.: Brookings Institution, 1963), pp. 6–8.

9 João Cabral de Mello Neto, “Cemitérios Pernambucanos,” 1952, translated and cited in Josué de Castro, *Death in the Northeast*, pp. 24–25.

10 Castro, *Death in the Northeast*, p. 51. Under the Vargas regime the plight of refugees was considered a national problem – see, for example, Ademar Vidal, “Os movimentos nordestinos de emigração,” *Cultura Política* 3 (January 1943): 51–56.

11 Albert O. Hirschman, *Journeys toward Progress: Studies of Economic Policy-making in Latin America* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1963), p. 15.

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The sertanejo, says Cunha, “is always tired. He displays this invincible sluggishness, this muscular atony in everything that he does: in his slowness of speech, his forced gestures, his unsteady gait . . . in his constant tendency to immobility and rest.” Yet all this is an illusion. Once challenged, “the fellow is transfigured. He straightens up, becomes a new man, with new lines in his posture and bearing; his head held high now, above his massive shoulders; his gaze straightforward and unflinching. Through an instantaneous discharge of nervous energy, he at once corrects all the faults that come from the habitual relaxation of his organs.”¹²

Three backlands figures, in particular, have helped shape the history of the region: the *vaqueiro*, the *cangaceiro*, and the *coronel*. The vaqueiro, or cowboy, dressed from head to foot in cowhide or goatskin to ward off the rough caatinga, tended cattle believed to be the descendants of animals brought to Brazil by the colonists in the sixteenth century. According to Cunha:

He grew to manhood almost without ever having been a child; what should have been the merry hours of childhood were embittered by the specter of the backland droughts. . . . He understood well enough that he was engaged in a conflict that knew no truce, one that imperiously demanded of him the utilization of every last drop of his energies. And so he became strong, expert, resigned, and practical. He was fitting himself for the struggle.¹³

The vaqueiro was traditionally serious and honest; should a stray calf cross his path, it is said, he would return it to the owner or care for it until the owner turned up to claim it. He engaged in some rudimentary farming but considered cattle raising his only dignified work. At roundup time he branded three-fourths of his herd for his patron and took one-fourth for himself.

The cangaceiro, or bandit, lived on the booty from assaults on farms and villages and the proceeds of extortion and the sale of protection. He was as trustworthy as the cowboy even though he was considered a criminal at large.¹⁴ Lampião (1897–1938), the best known of the bandits of the Northeast, was born of a family of small landowners. In the course of a minor dispute he and two brothers murdered a neighbor and member of a rival clan, which brought revenge and the death of their parents. For protection, he and his family joined a renegade band, of which he eventually assumed the leadership.¹⁵ Under Lampião and others, bandits

12 Da Cunha, *Rebellion in the Backlands*, p. 90.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

14 See Estácio de Lima, *O mundo estranho dos cangaceiros: ensaio biosociológico* (Salvador: Editora Itapoã, 1965).

15 There are hundreds of books and articles on Lampião. Among the most useful are Oprato Gueiros, *Lampião, memórias de um oficial ex-comandante de forças volantes*, 2d ed. (São Paulo: Linográfica Editora, 1952); Ranulfo Prata, *Lampião, documentário* (São Paulo: Linográfica Editora, 1953); and Algae Lima Oliveira, *Lampião. cangaço e nordeste* (Rio de Janeiro: Edição O Cruzeiro, 1970).

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achieved virtual autonomy in the backlands. Through skillful employment of violence, they gained access to power and prestige.¹⁶

The coronel, or colonel, held a virtual monopoly of political power on the local level. The title sometimes was simply assumed by a person, sometimes bestowed upon him by a municipal or state government in recognition of his position in the community, and sometimes conferred on him by his participation in the Old Republic's national guard. With the establishment of the national guard in August 1831, each municipality maintained a regiment, and the military title of colonel was usually conceded to the local political chief. Thus, the colonel served as commander in chief of the local regiment of the national guard and at the same time dominated political decisions, sometimes dictatorially. Usually he had at least the tacit support of the ruling state government. Victor Nunes Leal has aptly characterized *coronelismo* as "a compromise, a profitable exchange between public power, progressively fortified, and the decadent social influence of the local chiefs, notably the landowners. From this fundamental compromise emanated the secondary characteristics of the coronelista system, such as *mandonismo* [dominant rule], *filhotismo* [favoritism], fraudulent voting, and the disorganization of local public services."¹⁷

It was not unusual for these local chieftains to become involved in mobilizing the population. In earlier times, they had led their private troops against bandits and intruders, and the remnants of these troops became their gunmen in battles against rival families. Violence sanctioned by local chieftains was generally accepted as part of *sertão* life. In the middle of the São Francisco Valley in the 1920s, for example, Colonel Franklin and followers in Pilão Arcado attacked Remanso, which was under the domination of Colonel Leobas, and drove him out of the region. Leobas was able to return and reclaim his property only when Colonel Janjão of nearby Sento Sé warned Franklin to remain in his own domain. The eventual restoration of peace in the area required the direct intervention of the governor of Bahia.¹⁸ Under Vargas during the 1930s, the government moved to disarm the colonels and, once patriarchal and mercenary private violence had been suppressed, turned its attention to eradicating banditry. In the process thousands of bandits were killed or arrested.

Violence, however, still permeates Brazilian life in general and life in

16 One of the best syntheses is Amaury de Souza, "The Cangaço and the Politics of Violence in Northeast Brazil," in *Protest and Resistance in Angola and Brazil: Comparative Studies*, ed. Ronald H. Chilcote (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 109–131.

17 The classic study of the *coronel* is Victor Nunes Leal, *Coronelismo, enxada e voto: o município e o regime representativo no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Forense, 1949); the quotation is from p. 20. Biographies of four contemporary colonels are in Marcos Vinicius Vilaça and Roberto Cavalcanti de Albuquerque, *Coronel, coronéis* (Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro, 1965).

18 Vera Kelsey, *Seven Keys to Brazil* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1941), pp. 186–187.

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the backlands in particular. At the local level, violence is evident in the struggle for administrative power. For example, it is not uncommon for private disputes to be settled by gunfights and murders. Violence, too, serves to repress any semblance of popular protest. Márcio Moreira Alves, a former federal deputy, recounts the case of a peasant from the interior of Pernambuco who refused an order to leave a plot of land he had worked on for ten years; his body was found days later without eyes, nose, lips, and the event went unreported in the newspapers.¹⁹ In a brief autobiographical account of his early years in the sertão, economist Celso Furtado referred to a politics that “consisted mainly in rivalries and conflicts between families and groups of families, and usually ended in violence.” According to Furtado, his was a “world of men in which power and despotism were more often identified than separated.”²⁰ Law is often premised on the will of landowners. Where there is a police force, it tends to be corrupt and partisan through its integration into the clan structure of society. One writer has astutely observed: “Violence is a tool the ruling classes of Brazil have never ceased to use in defense of their privileges and property.”²¹ Some writers have linked the traditional violence of the backlands to its periodic droughts and famines.²² Castro, for example, sees the bandit of the Northeast as “a personality in which the baser impulses released by hunger have won the upper hand over normal restraints.”²³

Violence has been a dominant theme in the popular verse of the hundreds of troubadours who roam the backlands even today.²⁴ Traveling from fair to fair, these singers recount events of popular resistance; they recall the siege of Canudos and idolize the bandits of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They tell of the miracles of messianic figures who challenged the traditional dominant oligarchy. These troubadours function as intermediaries between the outside world and the peasant milieu of the

19 Márcio Moreira Alves, *A Grain of Mustard Seed: The Awakening of the Brazilian Revolution* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Press, 1973), pp. 44–45.

20 Celso Furtado, “Adventures of a Brazilian Economist,” *International Social Science Journal* 25, nos. 1–2 (1973): 28.

21 Moreira Alves, *Grain of Mustard Seed*, pp. 44–45.

22 For example, Roger Bastide, *Brasil, terra de contrastes*, 2d ed. (São Paulo: Corpo e Alma do Brasil, Difusão Européia do Livro, 1964).

23 Castro, *Death in the Northeast*, p. 61.

24 Analysis of the popular poetry of the troubadours of the Northeast rarely deals with the theme of violence. Among the more useful works in this regard are Renato Carneiro Campos, *Ideologia dos poetas populares do Nordeste* (Recife: Centro Regional de Pesquisas Educacionais do Recife, 1959); Pedro Calmon, *História do Brasil na poesia do povo* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora A Noite, n.d.). Also useful are portions of the classic work of Gustavo Barroso, *Ao som da viola (Folklore)* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Editora Leite Ribeiro, 1921); Leonardo Mota, *Violeiros do Norte* (Fortaleza: Imprensa Universitária do Ceará, 1962); and Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Vaqueiros e cantadores: folclore poético do sertão do Pernambuco, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte e Ceará* (Rio de Janeiro: Tecnoprint Gráfica, 1963).

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backlands. The themes they stress make explicit the relationship of rulers to ruled, of dominant to dominated, of wealthy to poor. Running through their verse are past and present examples of exploitation and repression and ways of confronting them.

Political power in the backlands, as in Brazil in general,²⁵ is in the hands of a ruling class and a political elite. The ruling class has traditionally been composed of a small group of families whose power stems from the ownership of property – in the Northeast, mainly sugar plantation owners and cattle ranchers. The political elite consists of persons whose power is generated by their positions in the “patrimonial state” – the bureaucracy, the church, and the military. The political elite is concerned primarily with achieving public office and manipulating the patronage associated with it. It receives at least the tacit support of the ruling class through a quid pro quo arrangement in which the latter’s hegemony is guaranteed not to be disturbed by, for example, land-tenure reform.²⁶ The ruling class and the political elite may be separate from each other or closely intertwined. In contemporary Juazeiro, the former is the case; in Petrolina, the latter.

The power of the ruling class is rooted in the patriarchal family, whose values of loyalty, respect for authority, hospitality, and reserve are “reflected in a general way in the psychology of the man of the Northeast, transmitted from generation to generation.”²⁷ Historically, the big house on the large landed estate of the region was “the center of patriarchal and religious cohesion, the point of support for the organized society of the nation.”²⁸ It represented an entire economic, social, and political system, including a latifundary monoculture, a system of labor, a system of religion, and a system of politics based on *compradismo*, or political patronage and favoritism. Thus it was “at one and the same time a fortress, a bank, a cemetery, a hospital, a school, and a house of charity giving shelter to the aged, the widow, and the orphan.”²⁹ Power was concentrated in the patriarchs who ruled over this system: “They were the lords of the earth and of men. The lords of women also.”³⁰

The power of the patriarchs resided in a family system consisting of the clan with the married couple, their offspring, and relatives at the center

25 Riorden Roett, *Brazil: Politics in a Patrimonial Society* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972), p. 53.

26 For a helpful discussion, see Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1962), esp. chap. 11, “Traditional Domination,” pp. 329–359.

27 M. Rodrigues de Melo, *Patriarcas e carreiros: influência do coronel e do carro de boi na sociedade rural do Nordeste*, 2d ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Irmãos Pongetti Editores, 1954), p. 23.

28 Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves (Casa Grande e Senzala): A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 7.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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and extending to a periphery of godsons and rural tenants. Male supremacy served as the basis for decision making and the arbitration of disputes within the clan. Family solidarity and nepotism were the principles of its operation as a political institution.³¹ The clan flourished during the colonial period, and during the nineteenth-century empire it became the basis of the “electoral clans” that dominated municipal politics. The power of these clans was diminished somewhat in the Old Republic by the abolition of slavery, but they remained a force in backlands politics.

Especially in colonial and imperial Brazil but also during the twentieth century, relations among the clans were dominated by struggles for power and prestige that amounted to blood feuds. The desire for more land was at the root of many of these struggles in the early period; the dispute in the backlands of Ceará between the clans of the Montes and the Feitosas is one example. By the nineteenth century, these conflicts were tied to the struggle to gain control over municipal councils; the dispute between the Carvalhos and the Pereiras began in 1849, when the former lost local elections but prevented the latter from assuming office, and lasted into the 1920s (by which time the aims of electoral victory had been replaced by the objective of mutual extermination).³² These struggles for control of land and of towns resulted in the large landed estates’ becoming not only powerful economic institutions, but also military ones: The economic and social structure was “guaranteed and protected by the resistant shield of its warring clans.”³³

Because the political economy of the colonial period was based on agriculture, rural landowners were able to establish a *modus vivendi* with the central government that favored their private interests. Thus, the development of the nation became tied to the pride, individualism, and independence of property owners. Consequently, there was more interest in political struggles at the municipal level than in those at the state and national levels. The social organization of the nation tended to support the latifundio and the nepotism that derived from it.³⁴ Under the Republic

31 Francisco José Oliveira Vianna, *Instituições políticas brasileiras*, vol. 1 (São Paulo: Livraria José Olympio Editora, 1949), p. 197.

32 These two family feuds are described in detail in L. A. Costa Pinto, *Lutas de famílias no Brasil: introdução ao seu estudo* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1949), esp. chaps. 4 and 5. See also the appendix of Ulysses Lins de Albuquerque, *Um sertanejo e o sertão* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria José Olympio Editora, 1957). For a useful discussion of family life in the sertão, see Billy Jaynes Chandler, *The Feitosas and the Sertão dos Inhamuns: The History of a Family and a Community in Northeast Brazil, 1700–1930* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1972).

33 Francisco José Oliveira Vianna, *Recenseamento realizado em 1 de setembro de 1920* (Rio de Janeiro, 1922), p. 293.

34 Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz, “O mandonismo local na vida política brasileira,” in *Estudos de sociologia e história*, ed. M. I. Pereira de Queiroz et al. (São Paulo: Editora Anhembi, 1957), pp. 299–300. Published separately as *O mandonismo local navida política brasileira* (São Paulo, 1969).