

## EUCLIDES DA CUNHA AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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*Folha de S.Paulo, August 31, 2009*

**In this decade we are beginning to react, to think in terms of the great country we are**

The 100th anniversary of the death of Euclides da Cunha was recently celebrated. Among many questions raised by the work of the great writer, a basic issue was to know why this author became so important for Brazil, why the only work on Brazil that rivals "Os Sertões" in significance is Gilberto Freyre's "Casa Grande e Senzala". Two essays published in the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* (August 12) offered important clues to answer this question. They attribute to "Os Sertões" a key role in the formation of national identity.

Walnice Nogueira Galvão argues that "Os Sertões" implied a "turnaround in opinion". When rebellions broke out in the country, as of the proclamation of the Republic, all of them, including the Canudos rebellion, were seen by the public opinion as a retrogression, as a monarchical conspiracy. Euclides shared this opinion as well as a relative disdain for the mixed-race people among whom these rebellions began.

But he changed his mind when he realized that, first, it was an authentic uprising and, second, a massacre of poor people, poorly armed and poorly fed. That it was an heroic uprising of mixed-race "sertanejos" [*backlands inhabitants*].

It is on this point that the beautiful essay of Lilia Moritz Schwarcz focuses. Euclides da Cunha went to Canudos based on a misguided view of Darwin and on the prejudice that was then widespread in Brazilian society against racial mixture. But he changes his mind when he comes into contact with the "sertanejos" from Canudos, this "synthesis of the soil, of the climate, and of life conditions". He still holds his negative view of the mixed-race coast

dweller, but is full of admiration for the "sertanejo". Hence his phrase: "o sertanejo é antes de tudo um forte" [*the "sertanejo" is above all a valiant man*]. He is a Hercules and a Quasimodo, or, in Lilia's words, "he is at the height of a game of antitheses... he is strong and weak huge and small - but, above all, he is an unknown".

Euclides da Cunha does not express warm approbation of racial mixture this role will be later played by Gilberto Freyre. He begins the work, contradictorily, but with grandeur. It is not by accident that his phrase on the strength of the "sertanejo" is the most celebrated phrase of the whole book *Os Sertões*, or even of the whole Brazilian literature. We, Brazilians, are the "sertanejos", or this is what we want to be: strong strong because "sertanejos", according to Euclides strong because of our mixed race, according to Freyre. There lies Brazilian identity. It lies not only in the joy and sensuality of the Tropics and the Carnival, in the cunning and subtlety of soccer it also lies in the mixed-race strength of the "sertanejo".

It is true that this identity is always under threat. That our elites are ambiguous, divided between dependence and the idea of a nation. That since the authoritarian military regime became nationalist, Brazilian society deepened this ambiguity, and that, since the early 1990s, it yielded to the North. This is why we lag behind economically this is why our economy grew less than half it could have grown should we have, as our Asian competitors, a national development strategy. This dependence, however, is not synonymous with fate. After all, there is also our "sertanejo" side, our mixed-race strength, our cordial and firm identity. This is why we are beginning to react in this decade. To think in terms of the great country we are. In terms of its international responsibilities, and, particularly, of its responsibility for itself, for this great nation of "sertanejos" that we are or want to be.