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## **Beyond Order and Progress: Understanding the Canudos Massacre in North-eastern Brazil (1893-1897) through the Eyes of Gabriel Marcel**

*In any case, who could fail to see at once the simple mechanism of the mental conjuring trick by which we belittle a danger that is past, simply because it is past, or because we believe it past? Is it really past? Or may it not in fact appear again, and in a form not radically altered?*

– Gabriel Marcel, *Man against Mass Society* (1978), p. 5

## Table of contents

Introduction: The Canudos War - a defining moment in the emergence of modern Brazil .....	3
1. The <i>visão do litoral</i> : a hegemonic account of the Canudos rebellion .....	5
1.1. Da Cunha and the <i>visão do litoral</i> : the Hercules-Quasimodo dilemma .....	6
1.2. Revisionist accounts: from primitive fanatics to rational agents .....	7
1.3. The <i>visão do litoral</i> : providing an empty signifier for the Canudos rebellion .....	10
2. The <i>visão do litoral</i> : a spirit of abstraction driving the Canudos massacre? .....	11
2.1. Fanaticism according to Marcel: who were the true fanatics in Canudos? .....	11
2.2. The satanic role of communication technology and the press .....	13
2.3. Justifying violence and war: the danger of abstraction and a fanatic believe in progress .....	14
1.1. Religion: the only authentic peacemaker or conformist powerhouse? .....	16
1.2. Writing history: chasing away the spirit of abstraction or keeping it alive? .....	17
Conclusion: The Canudos War – beyond order and progress .....	18
Cited work list .....	21
1. Primary literature .....	21
2. Secondary literature .....	21

## Introduction:

### The Canudos War - a defining moment in the emergence of modern Brazil

Besides being inscribed on the Brazilian flag, the words “*Ordem e Progresso*” (“Order and Progress”) are deeply enshrined in the nation’s collective memory. Much of that is due to the biggest civil war in the history of Brazil, the War of Canudos, which has given a particularly bitter connotation to this seemingly optimistic motto. The remarkable story of the Canudos massacre usually starts more or less as follows: “In 1897, at least 15,000 people died when the Brazilian army crushed a rebellion by peasants in the arid backlands of north-east Brazil. The rebels were led by a charismatic preacher called Anthony the Counsellor. The War of Canudos is now seen as a defining moment in the emergence of modern Brazil.” (BBC, n.p.). As the story continues, the mysterious man who inspired the backlanders to follow his path:

“wandered the northeast for some twenty-odd years, building churches and preaching sermons. “One day”, writes Laclau, “*Conselheiro* [the Counsellor] arrived in a village where people were rioting against the tax collectors, and pronounced the words which were to become the key equivalence of his prophetic discourse: ‘The Republic is the Antichrist.’ From that point onwards his discourse provided a surface of inscription for all forms of rural discontent, and became the starting point of a mass rebellion.” (Johnson, p. 31-32)

As his following grew, the Counsellor increasingly began to trouble the local and later federal authorities of the newly established Brazilian republic, who saw him as a monarchist and thus a threat to their legitimacy (Levine, p. 2). However, resistance was fierce and it took the Republican armed forces about two years and no less than four military campaigns to defeat the Counsellor and his followers in Canudos, where they had settled in 1893 (Levine, p. 2).

The unfortunate events that took place in Canudos have inspired many to create their own account in the form of movies, poems or novels, most notably *Rebellion in the Backlands* by Euclides da Cunha and *The War of the End of the World* by Mario Vargas Llosa. Clearly, the war of Canudos doesn’t lend itself to being captured in the kind of simplifying newspaper headlines civil wars are usually reduced to in the mainstream media. That a discussion of the Canudos war requires us to go beyond simple explanations of rivalry between two opposing religious, political or socio-economic groups is made clear by Johnson, a scholar at the Latin American Studies department of the University of California. In her analysis of the events, she quotes a conversation that took place between two Brazilian senators discussing the nature of the *conselheiros*, as the Counsellor’s followers were called, on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1897:

“The first senator (Sr. Seabra) comments rather ironically that “it seems that the *conselheiros* are ghosts frightening [or haunting] the Republic.” The second senator (Sr. Barbosa Lima) does not refute the claim that they are phantoms but disagrees that they are scaring the new republic: “They do not frighten, but they do not mix with the nature of the new regime.” They are, to use other words, incommensurable with the new republic.” (Johnson, p. 32)

According to Johnson, the fear apparent from this conversation and the senator’s inability to understand what was going on in Canudos should be seen as a sign that the *conselheiros*, consciously or unconsciously, undermined the single-mindedness Brazil’s elite at the time needed in order to create a modern nation-state. The reason why the Canudos settlement had to be crushed, then, is that the only way Brazil’s coastal elite could make sense of the movement was by framing it as threatening towards the newly founded republic and its ideals of order and progress. Johnson further argues that this can be attributed to the modern nation-state needing “a deep homogeneity” to exist, “the commensurability required for market exchanges.” (p. 23). This uniformity is produced when “everyday material practices become naturalized, so that standing in line for a passport, going to school, acquiring a marriage certificate, affixing a number to one’s house, or measuring a pound of wheat become as ordinary or banal as sweeping the floor or eating bread.” (Johnson, p. 23). Whereas “before, housing, modes of dress, eating, and drinking presented ‘a prodigious diversity’, not subordinate to any one system”, in a modern nation-state, anything deviating from the common denominator becomes unacceptable, unthinkable even (Johnson, p. 23). As put by Lloyd and Thomas quoted in Johnson, “certain paradigms become so self-evident as to relegate alternatives to the spaces of the nonsensical and the unthinkable. It is not so much that hegemony represses as that the dominance of its ‘forms’ of conceptualization renders other forms, other imaginaries, unreadable, inaudible and incomprehensible” (Johnson, p. 24). Johnson concludes that the Canudos rebellion has been precisely that: a subaltern experience, incomprehensible to Brazil’s coastal elite.

Shedding a different light on the War of Canudos, in this thesis I will examine in how far the conflict and its legacy can be analysed drawing on the work of the French playwright and philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973). To do this, I will outline the connection between Johnson’s analysis as presented above, which explains the conflict in terms of hegemony and subalternity, and Marcel’s notion of the ‘spirit of abstraction’. In *Les hommes contre l’humain* (English translation: *Man against Mass Society*<sup>1</sup>), Marcel describes his entire philosophical project as an “obstinate and untiring battle against the spirit of abstraction” (p. 1). Marcel concedes that making abstractions is necessary in order

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel, G. *Man against Mass Society*. South Bend: Gateway Editions 2.95, 1978. Translated from French by G. S. Fraser.

to understand the world in which we live and act in it (p. 155).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, he strongly believes that it becomes a particularly dangerous mental operation when “the mind, yielding to a sort of fascination, ceases to be aware of these prior conditions that justify abstraction and deceives itself about the nature of what is, in itself, nothing more than a method.”<sup>3</sup> (Marcel, p. 155). In that case, Marcel argues, we risk bringing to life and enforcing the imaginary abstractions we are making (p. 158-159). As an example, he talks about the realized abstraction of ‘the masses’, a concept that treats many individuals as one, thereby completely depriving the people involved of their individuality (p. 159). In this sense, Marcel argues that the spirit of abstraction can be understood as a “transposition of the attitudes of imperialism to the mental plane. (...) As soon as we accord to any category, isolated from all other categories, an arbitrary primacy, we are victims of the spirit of abstraction.” (p. 155-156). He takes this notion further by showing how, intertwined with issues such as fanaticism, (communication) technology, religion and historiography, the spirit of abstraction ultimately becomes a driving force towards violence and war. By applying these issues to the specific context of the War of Canudos and showing their interconnection, this thesis will discuss to what extent the repression of the community of Canudos by the army of the newly established Brazilian republic can be interpreted as a manifestation of Gabriel Marcel’s spirit of abstraction. Before moving on to Marcel’s work, however, the first chapter will elaborate on Johnson’s analysis of the War of Canudos and the particular worldview held by Brazil’s coastal elite at the time, the so-called *visão do litoral* (literally: coastal view) (Levine, p. 7).

### 1. The *visão do litoral*: a hegemonic account of the Canudos rebellion

In this chapter, I will outline the connection between Johnson’s analysis of the Canudos War, which explains the conflict in terms of hegemony and subalternity, and Brazil’s coastal elite’s *visão do litoral*. According to Johnson, Brazil’s coastal elite could only make sense of the Canudos settlement by framing it as threatening towards the newly founded republic and its ideals of order and progress.

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<sup>2</sup> Arguably, if we weren’t allowed to generalize in any way, it would be impossible to say anything about anything at all, since we would lose ourselves in the particulars of a given situation. For example, we would not be able to talk about cats, since no two cats are exactly the same. As put by Blundell, the process of abstraction “is necessary to achieve any coherence in our apprehension of the world; it is “a mental operation to which we must have recourse if we are to achieve a determinate purpose of any sort”. In other words, we need to abstract in order to think at all.” (p. 59)

<sup>3</sup> As put by Blundell, “There are dangers in this, however, for the process of abstraction can quickly overwhelm the concrete, embodied existence from which it is abstracting, detaching itself and becoming an independent system. (...) It is necessary to abstract, but equally necessary to acknowledge both that one is abstracting and that the abstraction is not the point of the exercise. To confuse the two is to initiate “a violent attack directed against a sort of integrity of the real,” which results in a wilful ignorance of the concrete reality before us.” (p. 59)

As put by Levine, professor of history and director of the Latin American Studies department of the University of Miami:

“For the first time in history, aided by the new telegraph lines that linked the North with the more prosperous South, newspapers sent war correspondents to the front. Their daily dispatches fascinated and alarmed the reading public: it seemed as if the very republic was on the verge of collapse. The inhabitants of Canudos were portrayed as primitive fanatics, “miserable and superstitious”, superhuman in their resistance, and dedicated to the destruction of the paternalistic, civilizing arm of government authority.” (Levine, p. 2)

Thus, the *conselheiros* were stigmatised as “crazed fanatics” who “refused to accept the Republic because they feared progress” – the kind of European-mirrored, positivist progress the republic stood for (Levine, p. 7, 10). The only solution for saving the Brazilian republic, then, was crushing the rebellion in its entirety. I will start this chapter by examining the *visão do litoral* through the eyes of Euclides da Cunha, one of the most important 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian authors writing on the Canudos War. Then, I will present two alternative ways of understanding the reasons why thousands of backlanders decided to leave behind their homes and follow the Counsellor to Canudos. Finally, I will provide an explanation for the dominance of the *visão do litoral* account based on Johnson’s analysis.

### 1.1. Da Cunha and the *visão do litoral*: the Hercules-Quasimodo dilemma

One of the journalist reporting on the Canudos War with the particular mindset described above was Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909), a military engineer who turned out to become “one of the most famous Brazilian thinkers in the beginning of the 20th century and wrote some of the most remarkable works in Brazilian social thought” (Ehlert Maia, p. 398). At the time of the Canudos War, Da Cunha was working as a journalist for the *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper, for which he travelled to Canudos in order to inform the readers in São Paulo on the final stages of the battle (Ehlert Maia, p. 398). Overwhelmed by the experience, it took Da Cunha several years to finish his account of the Canudos War, which “assembled scientific theories, poetical images, geographical data and an epic tone that resulted in a unique style.” (Ehlert Maia, p. 398). Eventually, “*Os sertões* (Da Cunha, 1995b) [English translation: *Rebellion in the Backlands*] was published in 1902 and it (...) became a huge success” (Ehlert Maia, p. 398). As put by Levine, Da Cunha “was a positivist, a disciple of the French philosopher Auguste Comte. In Latin America – especially in Mexico and in Argentina – positivism had acquired an immense following among elites seeking to modernize their nations under the leadership of the ablest members of society. Comtean positivists rejected religion as superstitious and

advocated universal public education (...) and they believed passionately in reason and in science” (p. 3). Whereas they were seeking to “elevate the urban lower classes through social welfare programs”, Brazilian positivists tended to ignore rural problems altogether (Levine, p. 3).

When describing the *sertanejos* (a term referring to the inhabitants of the Brazilian backlands), Da Cunha found himself facing a dilemma. According to Ehlert Maia, a sociologist at the CPDOC (School for Social Sciences and History of Brazil),

“Da Cunha’s perspective on the backlands was ambiguous because he drew on racial theories that looked down on *sertanejos*. Therefore he criticized the lack of civilization in that area but at the same time he stressed the strength of the *sertanejos*. Da Cunha believed that *sertanejos* had been developing as an isolated people, with no contact or seacoast influence, and that this geographical condition rendered them more authentic than the urban cosmopolitans of Rio de Janeiro. (...) Da Cunha considered the *sertanejos* to be the most authentic characters in Brazil (he called them ‘the rock of nationality’), but he thought that they would disappear with the advance of the civilizing process. In a very famous passage Da Cunha wrote that Brazilians were condemned to civilization.” (Ehlert Maia, p. 398-399)

Da Cunha himself “employed the oxymoron Hercules–Quasimodo in order to highlight the ambivalent features of the backlands people.”, where Hercules represents strength and courage and Quasimodo is used as “a symbol for the awkward appearance of the *sertanejos*” (Ehlert Maia, p. 399). Thus, Da Cunha “was so much a captive of imported European attitudes that he embraced them even when they ensnared him in contradiction. He accepted European racial doctrines, even though his own observations showed them to be wrong.” (Levine, p. 3). That is why, according to Ehlert Maia, “Da Cunha’s positivism was more a question of self-fashioning than an intellectual commitment with a doctrine” (p. 398). Nevertheless, Da Cunha’s work reinforced rather than criticized the view that the Counsellor and his followers should be seen as primitive fanatics.

## 1.2. Revisionist accounts: from primitive fanatics to rational agents

Naturally, the *visão do litoral* is far from the one and only view that can be used to analyse the Canudos settlement. At least two alternative accounts can be distinguished. Firstly, Machado de Assis proposes that the settler’s resistance to modern influences was a manifestation of rationality rather than crazed fanaticism. As one of the few writers at the time who showed sympathy for the ‘rebels’, he attempts to deal with the ambiguous relation between the settlers in Canudos and the kind of civilizing progress the republic stood for in the following fragment entitled *Canção de Piratas* (*Pirates’ song*):

“Newspapers and telegrams tell us that the followers of Conselheiro are criminal; this is the only word that could emerge from brains that toe the line, that are registered, qualified, voting, contributing brains. For us artists it is a renaissance. . . . They are the pirates of the poets of 1830. . . . Believe me, this Conselheiro in Canudos with his 2000 men is not what the telegrams and public papers tell us. Imagine a legion of gallant, audacious adventurers, without profession or reward, who detest the calendar, the clocks, taxes, social graces, everything that regiments life, forcing it in line. They are men who are sick of this dull social life, the same days, the same faces, the same events, the same crimes, the same virtues. They cannot believe that a world is a secretary of the State, with his appointment book, the fixed start and end of his work day, his pay docked for days missed. Even love is regulated by law; marriages are celebrated by law in the house of blacks, and by a ritual in the house of God, all with etiquette of carriages and coats, symbolic words, conventional gestures. Not even death escapes regulation. The deceased has to have candles and prayers, a closed coffin and a carriage that takes him to a numbered grave like the house in which he lived. . . . No, by Satan! The followers of Conselheiro remembered the romantic pirates, shook their sandals at the gates of civilization and left in search of free life.” (de Assis, 1894 in Johnson, p. 36)

Following de Assis’ argument, Johnson argues that “the word rebellion may be too strong, [...] given that by many accounts the Conselheiro and his followers simply wanted to be left alone by the republic.” (p. 32).

Does this imply that, following from Johnson’s analysis, the War of Canudos may be framed as a conflict between modernism (embodied by the Brazilian state) and tradition/primitivism (embodied by the Counsellor and his followers)? Levine, providing a second revisionist account, concludes otherwise. With his book *Vale of Tears – Revisiting the Canudos Massacre in Northeastern Brazil*, he aims to provide:

“an understanding of the events at Canudos (...) placing the settlement’s history in the context of its environment and times. This approach will be useful for cutting through the polemical, romanticized, and embellished generalizations that characterize traditional studies of Brazil’s rural population; moreover, it will dispel the stereotype of the backlanders as crazed fanatics and introduce the possibility that they were spiritual men and women captivated by a compelling leader whose motivations in seeking a refuge from hostile adversaries were in strong measure pragmatic, stemming from external pressures and perceived possibilities.” (p. 16)



Two main elements can be distinguished in this account: firstly, the more pragmatic, socio-economic reasons for following the Counsellor and secondly, the religious ones. Expanding on the pragmatic reasons backlanders might have had to leave their homes behind and voluntarily move to Canudos, Levine argues that “to Conselheiro’s followers, the state represented “structural, cataclysmic upheaval” in its efforts to extend its power to the remote rural interior. In response, the faithful willingly accepted prescriptions for life that provided comforting structure and direction.” (Levine, p. 227). This introduces the possibility that, rather than trying to escape their dull, regulated lives, the Canudos settlers, “traumatized by deprivation and by the vicissitudes of drought, clan disputes, and economic uncertainty”, followed the Counsellor precisely in search for this routine and security (Levine, p. 227).

Moving on the religious reasons, Levine points to the importance of analysing the spiritual context of the Brazilian backlands at the time in order to understand the Counsellor’s appeal to his followers. This context was characterised by a lack of formal religious instruction: “shortages of clergy willing to minister to the poor in remote parishes had left many rural Brazilian Catholics, especially in the *sertão*, virtually on their own.” (Levine, p. 30). Yet, this didn’t lead to a decrease in religiosity in the backlands. Rather,

“Wandering missionaries filled the breach during the first half of the century to some extent, especially in more remote and impoverished areas. (..) Because the church stressed spiritual salvation, not social change, when it did maintain a presence in certain locales, its priests only defended and reinforced the status quo. By the late nineteenth century, religiosity in the backlands was expressed in forms that differed significantly from those in regions with a more traditional church presence. (...) There, the penitential, Sebastianist, and potentially millenarian atmosphere provided the perfect setting in which an austere but charismatic religious seer could recruit simple people to follow him to a community that was subversive only in the most technical sense of the term.” (Levine, p. 33)

Thus, Antonio the Counsellor, according to Levine, was “a product of his unique backland religious environment” (p. 34). Take the concept of public preaching, for example. This “principal basis of Antonio Conselheiro’s reputation in the region, was introduced by the institutional church precisely as a gesture to engage the backland population.” (Levine, p. 32). Levine concludes that “Herein lay the gist of the clash between the “modern” and “backward” cultures involved in the Canudos conflict: the characteristics that coastal observers disapproved of and scorned were the very ones that brought vitality to Conselheiro’s followers.” (p. 34). In short, despite the fact that their analysis is very

different and even contradictory at first sight, both de Assis and Levine provide us with an alternative to the *visão do litoral*, framing the Canudos settlers as rational agents rather than crazed fanatics.

### 1.3. The *visão do litoral*: providing an empty signifier for the Canudos rebellion

The question that arises, then, is why it turned out to be impossible for the majority of Brazil's coastal elite to perceive the settlers in Canudos as the type of rational agents proposed by de Assis or Levine. In Johnson's analysis, the key term in this respect is hegemony: the point at which certain paradigms become so self-evident they start rendering alternative paradigms unthinkable. Describing how this kind of hegemonic relations are constructed, Johnson refers to the term "empty signifier" coined by the Argentinean political scientist Ernesto Laclau. To explain this concept, Laclau makes use of the following example:

"(...) a hypothetical situation of opposition to a regime by a number of different particular struggles; these struggles differ among themselves even as they all share opposition to the system. For a hegemonic relation to be constructed among these various points of opposition, a relation of equivalence needs to prevail over the differentials. A chain of equivalence is created between them so that a is like b is like c. The longer the chain of equivalences, and the more abstract, the less those separate struggles will share "something equally present." At the limit, their common denominator will be a pure communitarian being independent of any concrete manifestation – a community, moreover, that is absent because of the regime. Laclau argues that this community cannot have a representation (signifier) of its own, since such a representation would be simply one more difference in the series of differentials. The imaginary common denominator therefore borrows a signifier from somewhere in the chain and empties it of its particular, differential signified. The result is the emergence of an 'empty' signifier as the signifier of a lack of an absent totality." (Laclau, in Johnson, p. 26)

This notion of an empty signifier can, in my opinion, relatively easily be applied to the specific situation of the Canudos War. Through the eyes of the coastal elite, all 20.000 settlers were put into a single category of primitive, criminal monarchists. As put by Johnson,

"newspapers of the time register (or fabricate) a public hysteria in which rumors circulated that the Conselheiristas were merely the tip of a vast conspiracy to restore the monarchy. Monarchist newspapers were burned, one editor was killed, and it was even claimed that the people of Canudos were receiving aid and sophisticated arms from abroad and were being secretly led by foreign agents. The necessity to ascribe the source of agency to monarchists or

foreigners betrays the sheer impossibility of understanding the actions of a ragtag group of religious fanatics in terms of agency.” (p. 32)

Most probably, people who could be labelled as crazed fanatics actively opposing the new Republic were indeed represented among the Counsellor’s followers. Nevertheless, we have argued that they were far from the only group represented in Canudos: some of the settlers simply wanted to be left alone by the republic and its growing influence on daily life, others found in Canudos a place where they could escape the socio-economic insecurity of life in the backlands, yet others were attracted by the Counsellor’s religious teachings. Still, the *visão do litoral* decided to borrow “primitive, criminal monarchist” as the signifier representing an imaginary common denominator for all settlers. Thereby, this signifier was emptied from its original meaning and, by extension, arguably deprived the Canudos revolt from any meaning at all.

## 2. The *visão do litoral*: a spirit of abstraction driving the Canudos massacre?

In the previous chapter, we have examined how the hegemonic *visão do litoral* account stigmatised the Counsellor and his followers as crazed fanatics who refused to accept the Republic because they feared progress. I will now go on by analysing how this way of describing the Canudos settlers by Brazil’s coastal urban elites ended up functioning as a justification for crushing down the Canudos settlement, leading to the death of at least 15.000 backlanders. To do this, I will argue that the *visão do litoral* can be seen as a manifestation of Gabriel Marcel’s spirit of abstraction. In *Man against Mass Society*, Marcel links his notion of the spirit of abstraction to issues such as fanaticism, the role of (communication) technology and the press, violence and war, religion and historiography. Starting each section by outlining Marcel’s conception of the issue, this chapter will assess to what extent these particular issues can clarify the connection between Marcel’s view and the specific context of the Canudos War.

### 2.1. Fanaticism according to Marcel: who were the true fanatics in Canudos?

Regarding the phenomenon of fanaticism, Marcel makes four key observations in his book *Man against Mass Society*. Firstly, he points out that fanatics can never be aware of their own fanaticism, they can merely be recognised as such by non-fanatics (Marcel, p. 135-136). As a result, they can always run towards the explanation that they are being treated unfairly and not properly understood (Marcel, p. 136). Secondly, fanaticism cannot be a solitary experience: it creates a unifying bond between fellow fanatics and will constantly be reinforced through contact with the fanaticism of others (Marcel, p. 137). Moreover, in the vast majority of cases it is based on an individual fuelling the fanaticism rather than on an idea per se (p. 137). Thirdly, doubt and critical thinking threaten

fanaticism by definition since they undermine the social cohesion fanaticism is based on (p. 138, 141). Last but not least, the fanaticised consciousness “remains, as it were, numb and unresponsive to everything to which its own compass needle does not respond” (p. 145).

All in all, Marcel concludes that, by arbitrarily attaching a dogmatic importance to one particular view at all costs, fanaticism stems from what he calls “the slavery to words” (p. 113). When we become slaves to certain words, “we accord to any category, isolated from all other categories, an arbitrary primacy” (Marcel, p. 156). This is exactly where the fanatic consciousness, according to Marcel, falls victim to the spirit of abstraction and should thus be strongly rejected by philosophers. As put by Blundell<sup>4</sup>, “For Marcel, the spirit of abstraction is in play whenever the conceptual structures of a person’s thought begin to dominate the person who is doing the thinking.” (p. 58). Rather than being “merely an intellectualist problem (...), however, Marcel argues that the spirit of abstraction operates at the level of the passions, and that “it is passion, not intelligence, which forges the most dangerous abstractions.” (Blundell, p. 59)

Examining this conception of fanaticism in light of Johnson’s analysis leads us to question whether it is the *conselheiros* that should be considered as fanatics or rather the coastal elites themselves, who decided to label the Canudos settlers as such. Whereas there is no clearly identified individual fuelling the fanaticism in case we regard *visão do litoral* as a fanatic worldview, I strongly believe that the remaining characteristics mentioned by Marcel do indeed correspond to our analysis of the *visão do litoral* presented in the first chapter. That the fanaticised consciousness remains blind for everything that does not fit in its narrow worldview becomes apparent when, for example, people such as da Cunha stubbornly embrace the European positivist and racial doctrines which made up an integral part of the *visão do litoral*, even though, by visiting Canudos himself, he could witness with his own eyes that those doctrines were flawed. Doubt and critical thinking in this respect would have threatened the *visão do litoral* by definition since it would undermine the necessary social cohesion amongst Brazil’s elite this worldview is based on.

In this regard, it is clear that to create the necessary social cohesion and reinforce the *visão do litoral*, the role of the newly established telegraph system and the extensive newspaper coverage cannot be overestimated. As put by Levine:

“Dispatches from Canudos were the first to be sent via telegraph, the vehicle by which republican politicians finally consolidated the power of the federal administration. Because each dispatch was subject to rigorous military censorship, only a one-sided view was

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<sup>4</sup> Boyd Blundell is an associate Professor of Ethics at the department of Religious Studies at Loyola University, New Orleans. In *Paul Ricoeur between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return*, he discusses Marcel’s philosophy in the context of its influence on one of his protégés, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005).

transmitted. That Canudos was distortedly painted as a monarchist political plot only heightened its psychological impact. Jacobins and others seeking strong government measures to wipe out enduring pro-monarchist sentiment seized the opportunity that Canudos provided to eulogize the heroic role of the military and to justify strong-arm methods to suppress dissidence.” (p. 22)

This brings us to the second key pillar in Marcel’s philosophy: the importance of communication technology and the press in creating and keeping alive the spirit of abstraction.

## 2.2. The satanic role of communication technology and the press

Whereas he recognises the merits of technology under certain conditions<sup>5</sup>, Marcel points towards technological progress and war as two sides of the same coin and explicitly blames the “satanic role” of the press and communication technology such as the radio in spreading propaganda and easing the manipulation of public opinion (p. 53). In particular, he argues that:

“both on the world scale and at the level of national existence, (...) the development of communications entails a growing uniformity imposed on our customs and habits. In other words, this perfecting of communications is achieved everywhere at the expense of an individuality which is tending today more and more to vanish away: and we are thinking here of beliefs, customs, traditions, as well as of local costumes, local craftsmanship, and so on.” (p. 86)

Far from being an exclusively positive development, Marcel argues that this technical and industrial progress has created a common denominator, being wealth, which has become a breeding ground for desire and a degree of envy unthinkable between peoples who have kept their own tradition and pride (p. 86-87).

Marcel further stresses the lack of reflection in the popular press. Highlighting the importance of reflection in preserving peace, he argues that we tend to misleadingly regard the concrete as the pre-given starting point for our thinking (Marcel, p. 159). Rather than the concrete, however, “what is given us to start with is a sort of unnamed and unnameable confusion where abstractions, not yet elaborated, are like so many little still unseparated clots of matter. It is only by going through and

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<sup>5</sup> As Marcel puts it in *Man against Mass Society*, “the realm of the technical, as thus defined, is not to be considered as evil in itself; if we think of it in itself, as I have already said, a technique is rather something good or the expression of something good, since it amounts to nothing more than a specific instance of our general application of our gift of reason to reality. To condemn technical progress is, therefore, to utter words empty of meaning. But from the point of view of truth, what we must do is not to cling to our abstract definition but rather to ask ourselves about the concrete relationship that tends to grow up between technical processes on the one hand and human beings on the other; and here things become more complicated.” (p. 82-83)

beyond the process of scientific abstraction that the concrete can be regressed and reconquered.”<sup>6</sup> (Marcel, p. 160). As put by Blundell, “The concrete makes no sense without abstraction, but abstraction itself is not real, so the only way to proceed is in a constant reflective dialectic that is employed “for the sake of the concrete.” (p. 61). With regards to war and peace, then, Marcel warns us against “supposing peace to be a kind of preliminary, given state; what is given is something which is not even war, but which contains war in a latent condition.” (p. 160) As such, he concludes that the popular press has an inherent “bias against reflection”, creating abstractions and bringing them to life rather than grasping the concrete. (Marcel, p. 159).

Echoing these concerns, Levine’s account of the Canudos War talks about a “war of words” taking place in the popular press:

“Highlighted by the universal fascination with stories about crazed religious fanatics the Canudos conflict flooded the press, invading not only editorials, columns, and news dispatches, but even feature stories and humor. For the first time in Brazil, newspapers were used to create a sense of public panic. Canudos accounts appeared daily, almost always on the first page; indeed, the story was the first ever to receive daily coverage in the Brazilian press. More than a dozen major newspapers sent war correspondents to the front and ran daily columns reporting events. (...) newspaper accounts from the front continually painted the enemy as cunning fanatics. Nearly every politician in Brazil joined in the war of words, caught up in the frenzy.” (p. 24)

Once fallen victim to the spirit of abstraction, Marcel argues, the step from this “war of words” to a full-blown civil war such as the War of Canudos, causing thousands of casualties, is merely a matter of time. Which brings us to the third issue strongly intertwined with Marcel’s notion of the spirit of abstraction: violence and war.

### 2.3. Justifying violence and war: the danger of abstraction and a fanatic believe in progress

In *Man against Mass Society*, Marcel aims to convince his reader that “it is only through organized lying that we can hope to make war acceptable to those who must wage or suffer it. (p. 154). As put by Blundell, “One of the chief motivations for Marcel’s “untiring battle” is the tendency of the spirit of abstraction to lead to violence on a large scale. In the face of such ossified abstractions, the most

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<sup>6</sup> As Blundell clarifies, “it is important to note that Marcel is not against abstraction as such, because to be so would be to embrace the romantic notion that we begin in some pristine state of concrete existence, completely uncluttered by abstractions. Marcel argues that “nothing could be more false” than the notion that abstractions are not embedded in our experience of the concrete.” (p. 59).

significant casualty is the human person, who loses her concrete reality and thus her dignity, making it easier to account for violence against her in terms of an overall conceptual “system”.” (p. 59). In more concrete terms, he argues that:

“as soon as people (people, that is to say, the State or a political party or a faction or a religious sect, or what it may be) claim of me that I commit myself to a warlike action against other human beings whom I must, as a consequence of my commitment, be ready to destroy, it is very necessary from the point of view of those who are influencing me that I lose all awareness of the individual reality of the being whom I may be led to destroy. In order to transform him into a mere impersonal target, it is absolutely necessary to convert him into an abstraction: *the Communist, the anti-Fascist, the Fascist, and so on...*” (Marcel, p. 157-158)

As argued by Blundell, “Having lived and worked in France through both world wars, Marcel had experienced the full range of the effects of the spirit of abstraction and the violence that tended to accompany it.” (p. 59). Illustrating the danger of abstracting with an example in his conclusion, Marcel refers to a certain famous French palaeontologist:

“On one occasion, when he was dilating on his confidence in world progress, and somebody was trying to call to his attention the case of the millions of wretches who are slowly dying in Soviet labour camps, he exclaimed, so it seems: 'What are a few million men in relation to the immensity of human history?' A blasphemy! Thinking in terms of millions and multiples of millions, he could no longer conceive, except in terms of 'cases', of abstractions, of the unspeakable and intolerable reality of the suffering of the single person—a suffering literally masked from him by the mirage of numbers.” (p. 264)

Thus, blinded by the ‘greater good’, in this case a fanatic vision of progress, we become insensitive to the damage caused by violence and warfare.

It is my conviction that we can clearly recognise these ways of justifying violence and warfare in the specific context of the Canudos War. On the one hand, as we have seen, the *visão do litoral* put all 20.000 settlers in Canudos into a single category of criminal fanatics and monarchists. This abstraction provided the ‘technique of degradation’<sup>7</sup> necessary to mentally dehumanize the Counsellor and his followers. On the other hand, Brazil’s elite was blinded by a positivist vision of progress imported from Europe. For them, the greater goal was a technocratic society which should

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<sup>7</sup> A term coined by Marcel to describe “a whole body of methods deliberately put into operation in order to attack and destroy in human persons belonging to some definite class or other their self-respect” (p. 42)

“rely on enlightened leadership by the most capable for the general good” (Levine, p. 3). As put by Levine, referring to da Cunha as an example, “even if he was ambivalent about the foe - admiring the *sertanejo*’s perseverance despite his threat to the republic – da Cunha’s positivism encouraged him to see the military campaigns as crusades against the forces of darkness.” (p. 244). Together, and with the help of the press and new communication technology such as the telegraph, these two elements proved enough for Brazil’s coastal elite to justify the Canudos massacre. The issue of positivism and its fundamental believe in science rather than religion brings us to our next link with Marcel’s spirit of abstraction: the role of religion.

### 1.1. Religion: the only authentic peacemaker or conformist powerhouse?

Marcel, a devoted Christian himself, starts his argument in *Man against Mass Society* with outlining his “unconquerable conviction (...) that, so long as Christianity remained true to itself, Christianity could be the only authentic peacemaker.” (p. 4). This in opposition to the technocratic society our modern world is heading towards in which all spirituality would be lost and the spirit of abstraction would get free play. For a better understanding of how religion relates to the spirit of abstraction in Marcel’s view, I will now highlight the connection he makes between the phenomena of religion and fanaticism. Without thereby becoming a fanatic, the religious believer, according to Marcel, is justified to “treat the doubts that may sometimes assail him as temptations” and keep a critical discussion on the acknowledging of God’s reality closed (p. 141-142). As soon as the discussion no longer concerns an infinite God, however, but rather “an idol of any sort whatsoever, this reopening of the discussion (...) becomes, on the contrary, a duty imposed on us by our honesty as thinking beings.” (Marcel, p. 142). When fanaticism does “creep back into such religions, as we are well aware that it has done among the followers of Mahomet, though no more strikingly so than among certain Jews and among very many Christians”, Marcel believes this is “only due to the growth and intervention between man and God of certain mediating powers, such as the Church or the Prophet, which, instead of remaining mere mediators, are endowed by the fanaticized consciousness” (p. 142-143). This fanaticism within the Church could explain Marcel’s suspicion towards a Christianity of the right, of which he has “always thought that such a Christianity runs the risk of distorting in the most sinister fashion the true message of Christ.” (Marcel, p. 4). This because of Marcel’s believe that it is “conformist in spirit, that its essence is to try to appease and to manage by tact those who hold power in the world. Or even to lean on them for support” (p. 4). In conclusion, Marcel strongly believes that religion is what can save our modern world from complete disaster, if and only if it doesn’t succumb to the spirit of abstraction itself.

Examining the role of the Catholic church in the Canudos conflict, it becomes clear that a large degree of conformism is to be found. Levine remarks that “Brazil’s Catholic church fathers



shared a version of the *visão do litoral* with other elites” (p. 29). “The main goal for the Brazilian church during the late 1880s and early 1890s”, he argues, “was the intent, originating in Rome, that bishops reassert control over parishes and curtail heterodoxy. Ironically, though, the deeply felt religious expression of faith that outsiders labelled “mystical” and “fanatical” represented a continuation of a spiritual revival among both laity and rural clergy begun in the 1860s.” (Levine, p. 31). As a result, “although he was welcomed by some overworked backland priests, Conselheiro became a thorn in the side of the church from the 1870s through the early 1890s, thus stirring the church hierarchy to action. Not only was his presence – if not his theology – a major irritant, but he also railed against the new republican state, which the institutional church had grudgingly accepted.” (Levine, p. 30). The few supporters the Counsellor did have, a “handful of state legislators and others who considered Conselheiro harmless and who applauded his ministry saw him in the same way that French liberals saw the priests who devoted their lives to the poor.”, following “the preceding encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, which called on Catholics to concern themselves with the social welfare of workers.” (Levine, p. 32). Yet, as the saying goes, history is all too often written by the victors. With this in mind, Marcel frequently refers to historiography in his analysis of the spirit of abstraction. As such, this is the next and last issue we will consider.

## 1.2. Writing history: chasing away the spirit of abstraction or keeping it alive?

Linking his philosophical work to history and historiography, Marcel at more than one point in *Man against Mass Society* highlights the danger of dogmatic accounts of history. In such an account, so to argue haunted by the spirit of abstraction, certain ways of living or organisation are interpreted as pertaining to the ‘natural historical order’ while others, for example monarchist or aristocratic societies, are perceived as primitive and going against the course of history (p. 6, 128). “In a very deep sense”, Marcel argues, “history itself is also *a way of forgetting*, or, to put it more flatly, of losing that real contact with the event for the lack of which historical narrative so often reduces itself to a simple abstracting naming of events (p. 38). He especially criticizes modern historiography and its growing opposition towards “that kind of popular tradition which is still a living memory and a storehouse of the past” (Marcel, p. 38-39). While he recognizes that meaningful personal testimonials exist besides historiography, he fears that “there does come a moment in which such old diaries, letters, or memoirs begin to be read rather as we read novels; in which they annex themselves somehow to that indeterminate world of prose fiction which has such obscure, fantastic, and deceptive relations with the world of real activity.” (p. 39). Marcel’s concern with those personal testimonials can be related to the issue of objectivity in historiography: he reminds us that an event is not to be equated with an object, and when we pretend to fully reconstruct a historical fact, we are running the risk of replacing it with something which it is not (p. 41). Under these circumstances, according to

Marcel, it is the task of the philosopher-poet to capture the soul of the events, which escapes the historian ever more often precisely because of the precautions of objectivity he surrounds his reconstruction of the past with (p. 41).

Regarding the historic accounts surrounding the Canudos War, it becomes clear that it is the *visão do litoral* rather than the Counsellor and his followers' perspective which has survived over time. Levine concludes that "Canudos' most lasting impact on Brazil was psychological, largely thanks to Euclides da Cunha's remarkable prose, which was rich in imagery and emotional effect and immensely authoritative. Over the decades, critics have declared his book a classic, and historians have tended to grant *Os sertões* unchallenged status." (p. 244). As put by Ehlert Maia, "audiences read the book not just as one of the first major attempts to analyse the reality of those Brazilians by employing sociological tools, but as a great essay about the identity of the country as well" (p. 398). Examining da Cunha's historiographic tradition, Levine remarks that,

"as military history, it falls within the old romantic school of Sir Edward Creasy and the Prussian Hans Delbrück – a matter of seeking scapegoats – not in the tradition of John Keegan, where the goal is simply to present a humane study. *Os sertões* (and subsequent treatments of Canudos) (...) "bears all the marks of circumscription, over-technicality, bombast, and narrow xenophobia." (...) The European narrative tradition of battlefield description, followed by the Brazilian coverage of the military campaigns against Canudos, is set against the unspoken assumption, espoused by Creasy, that successful battles against barbaric enemies save civilizations from extinction – or, in da Cunha's case, at least from humiliation." (p. 244)

Within the scientific tradition of positivism, *Rebellion in the Backlands* turned out to become a "giant effort to interpret the War of Canudos", thereby leaving all other stories unheard (Ehlert Maia, p. 398).

### Conclusion: The Canudos War – beyond order and progress

We can conclude that Gabriel Marcel's notion of the spirit of abstraction provides us with important insights regarding how and why the Republican army was able to repress the community of Canudos as viciously as it did. As put by Blundell, "The process of abstraction, which Marcel also refers to as *primary reflection*, "is, roughly speaking, purely analytical and (...) consists, as it were, in dissolving the concrete into its elements." (p. 59). Once one of those elements is accorded, "isolated from all other categories, an arbitrary primacy, we are victims of the spirit of abstraction." (Marcel, p. 155-156). By connecting his battle against the spirit of abstraction with issues such as fanaticism, the role of (communication) technology and the press, violence and war, religion and historiography, Marcel

provides us with a unique perspective to use when analysing conflicts such as the Canudos War. Especially his emphasis on the role of language in the process of justifying war turned out to be particularly useful. As put by Johnson, “Naming, says De Certeau, is not “the ‘painting’ of a reality any more than it is elsewhere; it is a performative act organizing what it enunciates. It does what it says and constitutes the savagery it declares. (...) To understand subalternity thus is to side with the argument that it is a discursive effect.” (p. 30). Words, so it seems, are the primary vehicle through which the spirit of abstraction manifests itself.

That is why, before linking the Canudos War to Marcel’s philosophy, I have started by examining the so-called *visão do litoral*, the worldview held by Brazil’s coastal elite at the time. I have argued that this view, which labelled the *conselheiros* as crazed fanatics who refused to accept the Republic because they feared progress, should be nuanced. In particular, as made clear by Levine and contrary to what was believed by Brazil’s elite, many of the settlers had very pragmatic and rational motives, be it socio-economic or spiritual, to leave their homes behind and follow the Counsellor to Canudos. Using Johnson’s analysis of the Canudos War as a subaltern experience, we have concluded that the reasons why the *visão do litoral* account was so authoritative can be phrased in terms of hegemony: the *visão do litoral* became so self-evident it started rendering alternative paradigms unthinkable. As put by Prakash quoted by Johnson, “We should understand subalternity as an abstraction used to identify the intractability that surfaces inside the dominant system—it signifies that which the dominant discourse cannot appropriate completely, an otherness that resists containment.” (p. 31)

Taking this analysis by Johnson as a starting point, I have continued by showing the close connection between the *visão do litoral* and Marcel’s conception of the spirit of abstraction as outlined in his book *Man against Mass Society*. To do this, we have examined five issues – fanaticism, the role of communication technology and the press, violence and war, religion and historiography – that, according to Marcel, are or at least *can* be closely intertwined with the spirit of abstraction. After outlining Marcel’s view on each of these issues as well as their relation to the spirit of abstraction, I have analysed the issue under consideration in the particular context of the Canudos War and clarified its link with the *visão do litoral*. Starting with the issue of fanaticism, I have argued that, following Marcel’s description, it is the coastal elite and their *visão do litoral* that can be viewed as fanatic, rather than the Canudos settlers who were labelled as such. Next, I have examined the crucial role of communication technology and the press in creating and reinforcing this fanatic worldview. The Canudos War was the first conflict extensively covered by the Brazilian newspapers, something which was made possible by new communication technologies such as the telegraph.

Moving on to the issue of violence and war, I have argued that, in accordance with Marcel’s view, putting all 20.000 settlers in Canudos into a single category of criminal fanatics and monarchists

provided the abstraction necessary to dehumanize the Counsellor and his followers. Moreover, Brazil's elite was blinded by a positivist vision of progress towards a technocratic society. For them, the greater goal was a technocratic society which should "rely on enlightened leadership by the most capable for the general good" (Levine, p. 3). Together, these two elements proved enough for Brazil's coastal elite to justify the Canudos massacre. As put by Blundell, "This remains a salient issue today, when otherwise laudable terms such as "democracy" and "rights" slide toward a level of abstraction that robs human beings of their dignity" (p. 59-60). Next, we examined the issue of religion, which is of crucial importance to a devoted Christian like Marcel. Whereas Marcel is strongly convinced that spirituality is the only force that can lead us towards reflection and peace, he is very aware of the fact that religion has often been misused to become a fanatic worldview itself. This, so it seems, was what happened in Canudos when the institutional, conformist Catholic church embraced the *visão do litoral*, thereby "hammering another nail in to Conselheiro's coffin" (Levine, p. 31). Finally, I have showed how historiography, in particular Da Cunha's classic *Rebellion in the backlands*, contributed to keeping this one-sided vision alive at the cost of other, more nuanced interpretations.

In short, merely framing the War of Canudos as a conflict between modernism (embodied by the Brazilian state) and tradition/primitivism (embodied by the Counsellor and his followers), thereby keeping alive Da Cunha's *visão do litoral*, would entail that we ourselves fell victim to a spirit of abstraction. The reality, that is, is far more complex: the Canudenses fought back with the same, modern weaponry the Republican army tried to crush them with and often sustained pragmatic rather than merely spiritual reasons to become part of the Canudos community. This, according to me, is the main lesson to be learned from Marcel's philosophical project in regard to the Canudos War and the phenomenon of warfare in general: what would be needed is a new vocabulary. A vocabulary that, rather than forcing us to endlessly reiterate hegemonic accounts of order and progress, enables those whose voices are usually not heard in history to speak. A vocabulary that brings the doubt needed to expose the flaws of fanatic worldviews such as the *visão do litoral*. And, above all, a vocabulary that shows how making abstractions is a means rather than an end, thereby chasing away Marcel's spirit of abstraction.

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