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The Children of Evolution: Euclides da Cunha and Positivist Discourse in Late Nineteenth-Century Brazil

Justin D. Barber

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Founded in 1889, the Republic of the United States of Brazil was constructed as a positivist state by republican idealists and pragmatic oligarchs; the political embodiment of *ordem e progresso* (order and progress). It was a form of government meant to overcome Brazil's imagined and concrete backwardness by strictly adhering to the Natural Laws identified by Auguste Comte, Charles Darwin, and, in particular, Herbert Spencer.

Spencerian "progress", however, entailed the elimination of the pathological and monstrous "savage lower races." Non-white degeneration in Brazil, especially amongst its substantial mixed-race populace, was thus understood to be a progressive and advantageous force of Evolution. For close to a century Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* (known to English readers as *Rebellion in the Backlands*) has been treated as the literary touchstone of mestiço degeneration. It is a work of monumental importance, despite that it is typically classified with the Spencerian "race science" of Arthur Gobineau and Raimundo Nina Rodrigues.

In this work, independent scholar Justin Barber demonstrates that this classification is incorrect, detailing the relationship of Da Cunha's determinism to that of Comte, Darwin, Spencer, and other important unified theorists such as Henry Thomas Buckle and Ludwig Gumplowicz.

Overturning nearly a century of scholarship, Barber precisely details how Da Cunha's work incarnates the totality of Brazilian progress--progress utterly superior to that of European civilization--in the body of his Children of Evolution. For Da Cunha, these chimerical jagunços (bandits) embodied a perfectly miscegenated balance of Brazil's fundamental "ethnic elements": the African, the indigenous, and the Portuguese.

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