



“The barbarous glebes of Central Brazil:” the hinterlands of Mato Grosso and Goiás in the travel narratives of Hermano Ribeiro da Silva, 1935-1936

*Luciana Murari*ⁱ

ⁱProfessor, School of Humanities/Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul; Graduate Program in History/Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul.
Porto Alegre – RS – Brazil
orcid.org/0000-0003-1517-1016
luciana.murari@pucrs.br

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Abstract

The article analyzes the travel narratives to the hinterlands of the states of Mato Grosso and Goiás published in 1935 and 1936 by the São Paulo-based explorer Hermano Ribeiro da Silva, which proved a great publishing success and had a considerable impact on lettered society in Brazil. The analysis focuses on his ideas about the relationship between the environment in Central Brazil and the man who inhabited it, the potential economic exploitation of the region, and the role of the State in orchestrating initiatives capable of promoting its effective incorporation into the nationhood. It also seeks to understand how he grounded his discourse on generic scientific concepts and schemas endowed with rhetorical and argumentative power.

Keywords: travel narratives; Central West; Vargas Era; Hermano Ribeiro da Silva (1902-1937); sertão.



In 1935, the journalist Hermano Ribeiro da Silva published the book *Nos sertões do Araguaia: narrativa da expedição às glebas bárbaras do Brasil Central* (In the Backlands of Araguaia: narrative of the expedition to the barbarous glebes of Central Brazil). The book recorded the events and impressions of a trip Silva made in 1932 to the northwest of the state of Goiás and on towards the lands along the banks of the Mortes river, a tributary of the Araguaia. In response to the book's favorable reception, the following year Silva published accounts and a diary of an earlier journey, *Garimpos de Mato Grosso: viagens ao sul do estado e ao lendário rio das Garças* (Mines of Mato Grosso: travels to the south of the state and to the legendary Garças river). These expeditions, which earned him the status of a specialist in the sertão – as the Brazilian backlands are known – were part of a wave of caravans of diverse origins that converged on Central Brazil at that time for all manner of purposes.

This article analyzes the conceptions underpinning the representation of the sertão environment in the author's narratives, starting with a study of the ideological bedrock of his discourse as he set about establishing his credentials as a legitimate narrator with an elevated social purpose. The perspective I adopt to define his approach is a territorial view of space that is positively demarcated and considered an object of political State control. This is used to shed light on his intellectual positions regarding the exercise of legal and institutional power over the physical basis of nationality, encompassing the defense of sovereignty and the study of its potential for economic exploitation, as assured in the authority exercised by right by the Brazilian State. Another issue is the population, also an object of its authority and a resource to be harnessed for the objective appropriation of the environment (Haesbaert, 2009, p.62-63). Indeed, what makes the sertão space unique is its territory and its population, which are, as we shall see, interrelated in the author's overall approach.

Having delineated Silva's social and intellectual foundations, I investigate his works as a record of a praxis of knowledge production and exploitation of nature. I begin with a study of the internal logic that governs the assimilation and propagation of an image of the physical space of Central Brazil¹ for the lettered population, promoting a critical reading that illuminates not only the works, but also the aspects that disturb and exceed the bounds of their instrumental and programmatic discourse. To this end, the sources will be studied as mental constructs in which the account of lived experience is shaped by political and ideological values and figurative schemas enshrined by the collective imagination and the historical and scientific culture of his day. This gives us an understanding of the cognitive categories for apprehending and interpreting lived experience, and the interactive dynamics that lend the nature of the sertão a certain intelligibility and meaning. These narratives will therefore be understood as a quest to bring the reader closer to a different reality than their organized, institutionalized world, offering an image and a meaning for that region that had until then been opaque and unintelligible in the rest of the country, generically known, at the time, as the sertões.

Although today they have fallen into oblivion, Silva's travel narratives made waves in his day and were widely reviewed in newspapers across the country. Indeed, copies of them were acquired for secondary school libraries, along with textbooks, classic works of literature, and regionalist works (Edital, 1935). At the end of *Garimpos de Mato Grosso* there

appears a collection of excerpts from flattering reviews of *Nos sertões do Araguaia* published in newspapers from Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Ceará, Pernambuco, Paraná, and Minas Gerais (Silva, 1936, p.315-320). Hermano Ribeiro da Silva's first book was even reproduced in chapters at the bottom of the pages of the Florianópolis-based newspaper *República*, which is indicative of how widespread and well received it was beyond the borders of São Paulo state (Nos sertões..., 17 maio 1935).

This success could be attributed to its convergence with themes of great impact at the time: the spread of nationalist ideologies, which sparked interest in the most varied of Brazilian themes; belief in virtual threats to the nation's sovereignty linked to the instability of the international scenario; the promotion of economic development by the Vargas regime; the heightened awareness of the diversity of the Brazilian population and territory; curiosity about the most untouched regions of the country; the potential prosperity represented by the natural resources within the territory; a widespread statist mentality, which endowed the central power with the task of leading Brazil towards redemption from its social malaises. These strongly interconnected themes were discussed in Hermano Ribeiro da Silva's travel accounts, garnering praise for their patriotism, their informative nature, and their power to hold readers' attention through the emotion conveyed in the narratives of the adventures.

The author of these books is far from being considered an intellectual in the strict sense of the word: he did not have any particularly exceptional technical, scientific, academic, or cultural knowledge. In fact, what makes the books interesting is that they did not belong to the most profound or relevant body of work being produced at the time in the form of systematic and methodologically grounded studies; rather, they recorded the personal interpretations of the experiences of a man who was merely literate, an average person with a generic capacity to absorb knowledge, whose gaze roved "from rocky peaks to the depths of valley; from more or less immortal works to a motley assortment," as defined by Michel Winock (1996, p.289). In this article we analyze how his works were instrumental in spreading a particular representation of Central Brazil, exploring his interpretation of the reality in the sertão from the testimonial gaze and incessant search for the meaning of the lived experience.

Sertanista and bandeirante

In a lecture given at the Historical and Geographical Institute of São Paulo (Instituto Histórico e Geográfico de São Paulo) on November 6, 1960, Tito Lívio Ferreira mentioned the recently published *Outras memórias* (Other memories), by Luís Tenório de Brito, in which the former assistant orderly of Washington Luís recalled the "epoch-marking balls" that the president of São Paulo state promoted to "encourage the bandeirante² society" in the mid-1920s. In one of these festive episodes, Brito had been called to attend to a "young and friendly Hermano Ribeiro da Silva (later the famous sertanista)" at the entrance to the ballroom, who, keen to join his fiancée, who had already entered the ball, "despite the smart tailcoat he sported, was barred from entry because he had no invitation." Decades later, Brito recalled the happy outcome of his intervention: "moments later, you could see

the elegant silhouette of Hermano Ribeiro da Silva dancing with his sweetheart to the energetic rhythms of the band” (cited in Ferreira, 15 jan. 1961).

The reference to Hermano Ribeiro da Silva seems curious as it associates the explorer of the sertões, celebrated for his travel narratives to the geographic center of Brazil, with the opulence of São Paulo’s high society. Yet back in the 1920s and 1930s, these were not mutually exclusive aspects of the city’s cultural and ideological milieu. Indeed, this was a time when the “bandeirante society” was all about celebrating its origins. We cannot know how much the conversion of the son of one of São Paulo’s oldest bloodlines to the study of the sertão may have been motivated or stimulated by this worship of forefathers; but the basis of Silva’s discourse as an explorer appealed to a historical culture that presupposed the leadership of a traditional elite, transferring to the present a distilled heroism of the past and lending it a nationalist purpose.

Silva explains his ancestry in the first pages of *Nos sertões do Araguaia*, defining himself as a “Paulista, descendant of the Portuguese of the discovery and branded with the seal of Tupi blood” (Silva, 1935, p.17). In the following book, he attributes the motivation for his travels to a certain “atavistic unconscious coming from the distant generations of bandeirantes” (Silva, 1936, p.21). The myth of the bandeirante culture, which began to be cultivated in São Paulo in the late nineteenth century, gained ground as of the 1910s as the region’s ruling class sought to lay claim to an elite bloodline by drawing links to an ennobling past, thereby counteracting the threat to tradition posed by the rise of new elites, particularly immigrants (Ferreira, 2002; Sevcenko, 1992; Oliveira, 2006). Silva’s interpretation of Central Brazil was based on this identification with the bandeirante, a historical figure attributed with what are clearly the anachronistic endowments of idealism and altruism.³

The 1930s were certainly a time of heightened interest in national themes, as witnessed by the vitality and dynamism of the country’s intellectual production, where, in addition to the social novel – typical of the literary output of the day – there was a proliferation of publications on “Brazilian studies” in areas such as anthropology, linguistics, history, and geography (Martins, s.d.). All these elements and more are present in Silva’s narratives, corralled in a discourse that ranged from supposed objectivity towards the outside world to ideological endeavors to legitimize his travels as deeds of significance in the national realm, which could connect present experience to a patriotic mission endowed with historical roots.

Besides a symbolic return to his bandeirantes origins, Silva gives different reasons to explain his conversion to the sertão cause. As interest in the nation’s circumstances were widespread in the country at the time, he felt it was up to journalists and intellectuals to address this demand, since “the indigenous bibliography lacks, rather, a significant contribution of purely objective works, of a descriptive and tempered nature, that may be accessible to our general public, whose preferences have not yet been captivated by wholly scientific studies, which require groups of specialized culture [that are] only spoken of in the country” (Silva, 1936, p.8-10). It is clear from this that Silva was steering away from consistent scientific study and the systematic production of knowledge, associating the “tempering” of his narratives to an intention to popularize information about the

reality in the country. As Paula Montero (2012, p.110) reminds us, “the delegations of all kinds that crossed the hinterlands in the [republican] period, had the strategic function of making known and sensitizing the urban elites to the existence of this clandestine nation, consolidating the internal connectedness and military defense of the territory, and homogenizing the differences between urban and rural life.”

The historical analogy of Silva’s expeditions with the bandeirantes was therefore consistent with the expectations of São Paulo’s cultural milieu at the time, and was not only something he repeated, but was also mirrored in the reception of his books inside and outside São Paulo. The writer had not found the sertão to be an “empty” terrain where the white man faced “untouched” nature and “isolated” tribes. On the contrary, at a certain point in his trip to Goiás, he even wryly defined this inland part of Brazil as a “stupendous cosmopolitan city,” given the influx of visitors from various parts of the world to the region, be they scientists, explorers, sportsmen, journalists, Protestant and Catholic missionaries (usually foreign), and wayfarers in search of gold and diamonds (Silva, 1935, p.253).

Several factors explain the popularization of interest in the central region of Brazil. One of them was an international media event, the search for Percy Fawcett, an English colonel who, obsessed with discovering an imaginary ancient civilization, had disappeared in Central Brazil in 1925, prompting several expeditionary groups to set off in search of his whereabouts, from official missions to bounty hunters and fame-seekers.⁴ The first appendix of *Nos sertões do Araguaia* is dedicated to a denouncement of “all manner of absurd mystifications and even assaults on unguarded coffers” caused by the Fawcett phenomenon, which it was felt was greatly damaging to science (Silva, 1935, p.297). Silva had already spoken on the subject in 1934, when the Italian adventurer Miguel Trucchi granted an interview in which he stated that he had found the English colonel living among natives, cured of leprosy by indigenous remedies (O homem..., 17 out. 1934; A expedição..., 19 out. 1934). One of these groups of “explorers” in search of Fawcett, composed of English sportsmen and adventurers, crossed Silva’s path in the Araguaia Valley, which yielded references to him (as “Herman”) in Peter Fleming’s well-known book *Brazilian adventure*, originally published in 1933 (Fleming, 1940, p.290-295).

Scientists and investors also turned up with an eye to exploiting economic opportunities, such as the private transportation and navigation initiatives that operated there. Another attraction was the opening of mining hubs in the south of Mato Grosso and in the region of the Garças river – artisanal mines where the members of his own expedition joined foreigners and Brazilians from different parts in search of fortunes, while also seeking out new deposits. Garças river had indeed become legendary in the national imagination, as witnessed by Monteiro Lobato’s 1924 children’s book *O garimpeiro do rio das Garças* (The Heron river treasure-hunter). The story follows the fate of a heroic character who fights against the wilderness of the sertão and the violence of bandits, finally to be rewarded with wealth and nobility: “he returned to the city, built the palace, got married, and died a count – Count of Heron river” (Lobato, 2012, p.62)

We should add that we believe Silva’s first trips were actually motivated by a search for wealth, and only then did he take on the posture of a sertão expert, devoting himself the exploration and production of knowledge about the Brazilian West.⁵ The appeal of mass

culture and the reading public's proven fascination for travel narratives thus converged in the work of this adventurer from São Paulo and other explorers and adventurers who rushed to the region.⁶ As one of the reviewers of *Nos sertões do Araguaia* wrote,

many discoverers have narrated dramatic crossings. Countless sertanistas have recounted the highpoints of ventures in the jungle. Many heroes have told of their exploits, of intrepid adventures. But there is still more to be said... Ever since General Couto de Magalhães, inquisitive folk have traveled up the Araguaia to report their astounding news from there. The indigenous tribes, the wild beasts, the mysterious forest, everything there inspires fantasy. Among the country's books, the ones that narrate legends, describe aspects of and encapsulate perspectives on the wild places in our land, are those that awaken most interest (Pontes, 12 ago. 1935).

It is clear that any documentary component of tales of travels to the heart of the country did not dispel the mystique of the wilderness from readers' expectations, which Silva himself nourished when he referred to his book as the account of the "exploits" of "carefree adventurers" weary of civilized life, seduced by the literature about the sertão, and keen to experience powerful emotions (Silva, 1936, p.108). Yet despite this rhetorical modesty that identified travelers with the public's thirst for adventure in exotic lands, their purposes were elevated, since they were defined as part of a patriotic mission dedicated not only to revealing Brazil to the average readership, but also to making a symbolic territorial conquest, similar to that achieved by the mythological bandeirantes when they virtually expanded the limits of Portuguese America. "In the confines of the soul of inhabitants of all states there resides latently the splendid sheltering flame of Brazilianness, which inspired our forefathers," an idea that demonstrates equally the public's widespread interest in major national questions and the quest for a historical legitimacy to underpin the symbolic "return" of the group from São Paulo to the sertão lands (Silva, 1936, p.8).

Between questing for adventure, trying his luck in the mines, and a desire to explore, one of Silva's stated goals on his travels was to "find out something of the interior of the land, or a little more than the nothing that is known," working to communicate to the reading public the existence of a "forgotten" Brazil, "ignored" and "neglected" by a coast-bound, outward-looking nationhood that was mindless and ignorant of the nation's problems, using the lexical repertoire enshrined in patriotic expressions on sertão affairs (Silva, 1936, p.8). The argument is clearly inspired by Euclides da Cunha – not surprisingly, the author chosen for the epigraph of *Nos sertões do Araguaia* – the leading ideologue of these incursions into "barbarous" lands in the name of a national "civilizing" endeavor. Silva's journey to the hinterland of Central Brazil shares with Cunha the rhetoric of a demand and/or call for a nationalist awareness and a state that would fulfill its "debt" to the inland territories and their populations, a process that can also be read as a rallying cry for its conquest by the bearers of "civilization."⁷

The discourse on the Brazilian sertão also reiterated the trope of a threat to sovereignty, given the absence of any clear signs of territorial control and surveillance that might withstand potential attacks from outside. In fact, the movement of groups of outsiders within the country had already attracted the attention of the national legal and political

system, which was keen to exert some control over exploratory expeditions to the inland parts of the country, whether they were organized by Brazilians or by foreigners. In 1933, with the passing of decree no. 22698, the Council for the Inspection of Artistic and Scientific Expeditions was set up under the General Directorate of Scientific Research of the Ministry of Agriculture.⁸ The ministry was thereby responsible for overseeing private Brazilian expeditions and all foreign expeditions to the country, which had to receive its authorization. Authorization of groups from abroad was predicated on their including Brazilians appointed by the government in their number, whose participation it would fund if the purpose was deemed to be of national interest. There were also restrictions on the export of specimens of any kind and rules for sharing whatever materials were collected, depending on whether they were already held at the country's scientific institutions and the National Museum (Estados..., 11 maio 1933).

In view of this regulatory effort, Silva's criticism of State inertia might seem unfounded. Yet while he felt it may be well-intentioned and driven by a desire to defend national interests, the surveillance of inland expeditions was, he believed, fruitless when it came to the protection of the Brazilian sertões, since even if the legal provisions were observed, they would not be able to prevent "possible ideas of economic or territorial expansionism by foreign nations" (Silva, 1935, p.26). The initiative was obsolete, he argued, since such an unproductive and sparsely populated region could not be "cloistered," but should be converted into an object of study and propaganda for its settlement by Brazilians and foreigners. He assigned himself a mission that could be defined as the "territorialization of space," drawing attention to the need for the State to appropriate the sertão in the form of specific programs and projects for the region. Ultimately, he wanted to convert the sertão space into Brazilian territory, since the latter was, he felt, the product of the programmatic action of objective or representative appropriation of the former (Raffestin, 1993).

This thinking was combined with a defense-oriented discourse, in view of the "formidable tenacity of the imperialisms of the economic wars of conquest," a context in which the isolation of the sertão was part of in "an incalculable series of factors that exacerbated the retardation of national sovereignty, from the perspective of its full and tangible emancipation" (Silva, 1936, p.8). In this civilizing effort associated with the exploration of Central Brazil, nothing could speak more eloquently of the country's situation than the "enormity" uttered by an old resident of Cuiabá, whom Hermano Ribeiro da Silva recorded as a demonstration of the contradictions of sertão life in the country: "But he says that the new law (the revolution) will force everyone to join the nation of Brazil" (Silva, 1936, p.118-119). What Silva classified, in shock, as an example of the widespread ignorance of the *sertanejos*, or sertão dwellers, was a sign of the absence of the kind of connection between a state and its people that might be expected.

Nonetheless, we should not fail to note that the spirit of Silva's narratives was consistent with his status as a São Paulo gentleman and an heir of the bandeirantes. As a narrator, he granted himself a role similar to that of the "capitalist vanguard" Mary-Louise Pratt (1999) identified in the European travelers who went to America from the 1820s on. What was at stake was a quest for raw materials and potential fortunes. The unknown territories were repositories to be conquered, provided the obstacles to the progress of civilization were

overcome. Curiously, despite his taking a stance as an agent of rationality, Silva delved into the bandeirante past to find directions for the discovery of treasures, which, despite his stance as an agent of reason, appealed to an undeniably mythical component and led him to be carried away by legendary accounts, which he attempted to substantiate by looking for historical evidence, such as the ones about the Araés and Martírios mines:

the two mines of precious metal which in old times were coveted by miners from São Paulo. ... Martírios, according to the accounts of opportunist explorers, must contain an extraordinary fortune, and except for the expeditions led by Manoel de Campos and Bartholomeu Bueno, over two centuries ago, no other Christian has succeeded in attaining it, whether because of attacks by savages or because of the contradictions in the directions existing in archives. For five years have I investigated the likely site of the treasure, seeking to locate it through the documents which I manage to acquire. And I conclude here something of worth, discovering directions I judge to be persuasive concerning the celebrated mine (Silva, 1935, p.95).

This avarice-inspiring vision of natural wealth just waiting to be extracted from the earth is indicative of what role those central regions were to play in Brazilian space. In the case of the narratives in question, the states from the country's geographic center were granted an ancillary role in the nation's economy, assuming the inherent economic superiority of the author's home state, since "the lands of the sertão do not have as high a level of fertility as we have in São Paulo. Our state is the one most blessed by nature, which has given us the widest expanse of forestland in the country, irrigated perennially by countless watercourses, together with a healthy climate appropriate for countless crops" (Silva, 1936, p.24). The place of that state in the Brazilian context was equivalent, in the books of the explorer, to that of Europe in relation to its imperial domains, with its temperate nature devoid of extreme manifestations, marked by balance, amenity, and the constancy and predictability of its cycles. While the lands of São Paulo were destined to produce wealth, modifying the natural environment through agriculture, Central Brazil – dramatic, unpredictable, and "inferior" by nature – should devote itself to an activity of an equally inferior status, extractivism. In fact, in the era of colonialism, travel literature was responsible for representing unfamiliar forms of nature:

Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment adventurers and explorers may no longer have feared remote regions and many-headed monsters, but their scientific journals and travel writings conveyed to an enthralled public a vivid sense of the *excesses* of other natures – wild, luxuriant, and tangled; harsh, empty, and barren – and hence produced other natures *as* other. Through the emerging partitions and divisions of global space European nature was constructed as 'normal' nature, while other, nontemperate natures were diagnosed as abnormal, pathological, and even 'unnatural' natures (Gregory, 2001, p.89; emphasis in the original).

"Unnatural" natures, like that of Central Brazil, less endowed than São Paulo, were seen as bizarre and hostile and also viewed as lacking in resources compatible with economic growth derived from wealth creation and organized labor. Even if they could count on mining and ranching or the exploitation of vegetable oils, fibers, fruits, this would depend on investments and resources from elsewhere, in view of the habitual state of inertia of the

sertão. The recognition of the economic potential of Central Brazil was inevitably associated with taking a rational, instrumental approach to its nature, but the way its nature was represented as actively shaping its social life never lost its dramatic overtone – something that also permeated Silva’s positions on the formation of the *sertanejo* as a racial type.

The “drama we propose to represent”

The context of the “imperialist era of territorialization,” as Doreen Massey (2009) puts it, allows us to understand the construction of the traveler’s arguments, diagnoses, and propositions. It was a typically modern conception that was responsible for the assumption that cultures, societies, and nations must have some relationship with certain delimited, cohesive, and clearly differentiated spaces. Each place contained within its bounds an identity that could be contrasted with differences displaced to outside its borders, which sustained a geographical imagination that was part of a broader project of spatial organization in which nation-states established themselves as the very expression of progress and acquired a “natural” appearance. Hence the epistemological difficulty in translating the sertão space, which can be seen in the constant expressions of confusion in Silva’s narratives, also because the overlapping of identities and trajectories throughout the journey compromised the association expected between spatial difference and temporal sequence, in which progress was defined as a universal rationale.

The international political circumstances and the march of capitalism at the time conspired to drive to the sertão some of those who were disillusioned with Northern Hemisphere societies and were seeking some form of redemption in South America through a search for riches in the gold mines, engagement in economic activities, or exile pure and simple. Notwithstanding the grievances of these wanderers who had strayed from industrial societies, Silva’s narrative was permeated by expressions of the redeeming power of technology and State action, proposed unquestioningly as the ultimate tools for effecting the much-needed integration of the sertão into the space of Brazil and, by extension, Western civilization.

Hermano Ribeiro da Silva’s books analyzed here can therefore be seen as part of an appropriation by representation, by which the space in which he moved reinforced its condition as an integral part of Brazilian territory, despite the appearance of cosmopolitanism, abandonment and disorder attributed to the sertão. Silva felt his role was to awaken in the new generations interest “in the mysteries of this territorial desert, where we remain in the inertia of thoughtless wastrels” (Silva, 1936, p.8-9). This salvationist rhetoric legitimizes his efforts as actions in favor of the national cause, carried out through the observation of nature and of local populations, both sertanejos and indigenous, both defined by their interaction with each other and the environment. These groups thus became objects of ethnographic interest, addressed with questions about their potential to be converted to the purposes of nationhood, that is, for incorporation into the economic and social life of the country as settled workers.

In the travel narratives written by Silva, the sertanejo is observed in his routine in a bid to analyze the peculiar aspects of his mindset, practices, customs, and social life,

viewing him as a mestizo representative of the Brazilian history of dispersed settlement of the hinterlands. The native element is treated together with the problem of national sovereignty, since the indigenous people and the territory constitute the same issue in Silva's discourse. The mere existence of isolated tribes was seen as a failure on the part of the national State in its duty to integrate "all" its citizens, based on a formula that combined population, territory, and authority (Raffestin, 1993, p.23). A comment made by David Day (2013, p.222) about the United States applies perfectly to Silva's narrative in this respect: "In most cases, though, even when supplanting societies have succeeded in peopling the lands they have conquered, the continuing existence of indigenous people provides a discomfiting reminder that their own links to the land are necessarily weaker than those of the pre-existent peoples." If the territorial conquest was incomplete, so, too, was the "incorporation" of the indigenous people. Hence Silva's constant reaffirmation of the objective of making contact with populations uncontaminated by the white man, as a corollary of the acquisition of power over the entire national space.

However, the *cerrado*⁹ and forest environment was still sparsely populated. Not even the main geographical features of the terrain had been mapped out, chief of which was Roncador mountain range, near the villages of the Xavante Indians, until then leery of contact with the white man. Isolated as they were, the lands where they lived are seen in *Os sertões do Araguaia* as a symbolic frontier of civilization, a kind of treasure to be conquered by the explorers, who were also challenged by the difficulty of access to the region, endowed with the same ferocity and power to resist as the Xavante.

Without doubt, the presence of the "menacing" indigenous peoples in the works of Silva was behind the adventure-filled, fearful component of the journey, and is presented as a disturbing symptom of the voids of nationhood within the national frontiers, where wild tribes roamed quite unaware of the country to which they belonged and immune to its actions: "a great many indigenous tribes, primitive in their crude customs, still camp in virgin glebes, where civilized man has not gone to change them with wisdom or conquest" (Silva, 1935, p.223). Recording the genocide of indigenous peoples, he nonetheless acknowledges that the results yielded by the "conquest" were negligible and were anything but "wise." In his interpretation, the struggle between natives and colonizers was still going on throughout the sertão, where hostilities between "invaders" and "invaded" continued, "which ended with the inevitable victory of the bullets of the semi-civilized man" (Silva, 1936, p.69). He certainly did not see himself as an "invader," even though his own journey was part of a concrete and symbolic struggle to conquer the sertão.¹⁰

From the heights of his status as representative of the historical vanguard of the march of "European" progress over untamed nature, Silva transferred to his voyage to Central Brazil the same logic that governed colonialism, whose discourse constructed imaginary geographies aimed at defining the essential differences between territories and populations, transformed into objects of his practice of representing otherness. One of the principles of the imposition of European domination was the belief in its capacity to guarantee the victory of the "human" over the "natural," a conceptual construct elaborated by the modern imaginary, in which detachment from the irrationality of nature was imposed as a measure of cultural progress. It was therefore a question of dominating and taming

the environment – not to mention the animal dimension of human beings – as a means of release from the constraints and oppression of nature, a feminine element, in two versions: European – maternal, nourishing, beneficial – and extra-European – seductive, destructive, wild – both to succumb to the masculine power of physical force and reason (Gregory, 2001, p.84-90).

In such a context, the exploitation of “our rich and endless heritage” directed Silva’s attentions to a diagnosis of the potential production capacity of the sertão as collateral for its occupation, thus guaranteeing complete dominion over the territory. A clear manifestation of this quest to affirm national sovereignty was the power to (re)name geographical features as a mark of authority over the territory: water courses were indicated by numbers (e.g., river 23, stream 24), which coexisted with the indigenous names, “a random motley of baptisms,” as Silva put it. Others were indicated by interrogation marks on cartographic representations, which were prepared because of the sketchy nature of the map used to guide the writer’s entourage, on which he marked any inconsistencies between the representation and the reality.

Silva nonetheless has quite an ambivalent stance to knowledge. Throughout his narratives, he demonstrates he has read some works of sociology and the natural sciences,¹¹ and he claims such erudition to justify the toilsome task of transporting three crates of books on his travel to Mato Grosso. Although he was a publicist at heart, he was given to scientific whims: he promised to publish a book about the Krenak people and took responsibility for the ethnographic research on his second trip to Roncador mountain range in 1937.¹² His discourse was molded by an underlying social Darwinian worldview, which started from the image of the struggle against the cruelty of nature and the pressure exerted by it – an image that extended to the organization of society and the distribution of its resources, incorporating the human element as a result and sometimes a victim of this latent violence. In this respect, his work may be read as a continuation of the paradigm that prevailed in Brazilian intellectual circles as of the final decades of the nineteenth century, when the relationship between man and nature in Brazil came to be represented by the perspectives of conflict and insoluble contradiction (Murari, 2009). As Sandro Dutra e Silva (2019) demonstrates, the discourse around the confrontation with nature continued in later years with the expansion of colonization launched by Getúlio Vargas in 1938, known as the “March to the West.”

However, what Silva wrote about the social formation of the sertão, with regard to the relationship between the ethnic formation of the population and the region’s physical environment, are theoretically eclectic. At the core of his formulations is a diffuse evolutionism, which allows him to observe the natives as elements of humanity’s past, “to re-edit here a caravan from times past,” as he puts it when writing of a group of Javaé youth (Silva, 1936, p.68). Similarly, it is difficult for him to accept the idea that the habits he observed in the natives during a group meal had once been those of the whites: “It seems inadmissible that the forebears of all cultured humanity should also have partaken of such improprieties” (Silva, 1935, p.278).

Darwinist tropes thus inform the conclusions he draws about the formation of the sertanejo. Incorporated into received wisdom as a scientific sheen applied to a mundane

argument, the doctrine possessed a rhetorical efficacy that resided precisely in its imprecision, the familiarity of its generic slogans, and the imperative nature of its mechanics of action and reaction, which were sufficient to convey a habitual interpretation of the historical process. As Mike Hawkins (1997, p.32) explains, social Darwinism is a worldview, and its discursive role should be emphasized: “Social Darwinism is not, in itself, a social or political theory. Rather it consists of a series of connected assumptions and propositions about nature, time and how humanity is situated within both.” This does not mean that the many theoretical indeterminations of the model make it so unspecific that it could be applied in any situation. It is, after all, sustained by a core of central assumptions: scientific materialism, a rejection of the explanatory power of any supernatural force, the defense of the capacity for transformation of life forms, and the idea of the evolution of man from other species. Social Darwinism is very adaptive and there are limits to its use, but this model can only be understood from discursive practice itself (Hawkins, 1997, p.34-35).

Thus, despite the denial of Darwinism by scientists linked to the expansion of the teaching and research of biology in the country (Garfield, 2013; Duarte, 2010), among the general public, including average “intellectuals” with a general education like the author in question, the logic of the battle of survival persisted, supported by a dramatic representation of tropical nature as a threatening, hostile, implacable force. As fertile ground for the production of analogies and metaphors, social Darwinism lent itself to broad uses of the idea of the struggle of species. In the Brazilian intellectual milieu, there was a widespread belief that in certain circumstances, human beings should confront the hostile forces of the environment in order to survive, should they so have the means; otherwise, they would be wiped out by competition from groups who were more physically and mentally equipped. Silva drew on this belief to explain the genocide of indigenous peoples during the gold rush, when “they disappeared, succumbing to the fatal law to which backward races have been subjected. All that remains of them is the suggested name: Goiás” (Silva, 1935, p.37). While these ideas may sound anachronistic for the 1930s, as Shawn Miller (2007, p.11-12) notes, “few of those in power in Latin America wanted to entertain the possibility that nondeterministic cultural, political, and economic factors might explain the region’s relatively slow development. It was easier to believe in determinism and fatalism than it was to struggle to change, at great social risk, what, in fact, could be changed. As a result, determinism’s popularity and academic credentials were ascendant right into the 1940s.”

Meanwhile, the sertanejo was defined as the Brazilian mestizo par excellence in *Nos sertões do Araguaia*: “Nature shaped those cross-breeds for the massive struggle against the barbarity of the land. And only they, as was previously the case of the admirable bandeirantes, are able to withstand the hardships of the oppression of the environment. Nameless and hardy, they gradually penetrate the virgin glebes, while malaria, intestinal worms, Chagas disease, and dysentery assault us, slaying existences, destroying health” (Silva, 1935, p.18). Underlying this position is an idea of the struggle for survival not only between species, but of species in general against the hostile physical environment, in which chronic diseases, climatic variations, storms, wild beasts, and even disturbing insects prevailed. However, “nature undertakes to repair, thus, the same scourges it sows,” he postulates, supposing the existence of a self-adjusting system between man and

environment, a “eugenics of natural selection,” understood as a process of eliminating those who proved incapable of withstanding the aggressions of the environment. The outcome of this process was believed to be positive, because while some individuals may succumb, “civilization” would surely advance into hostile territory (Silva, 1935, p.18).

Into this Darwin-inspired notion of a fight against the environment, Silva incorporated a neo-Lamarckian conception, of French tradition, characterized by the assumption that the results of the interaction of organisms with their environment could be incorporated, transmitted, and inherited by their offspring, assuring increasing mastery of the environment by human effort. In his words, “the land, and especially the tropical land of America, receiving the wayfarer who comes to work it in order to reap its fruits for his material happiness, forces him, in return, to partake of its strange emotions. And to assimilate it by that unbridled force of raw nature, which is and will undoubtedly be the most imponderable part of the formation of our race” (Silva, 1936, p.30). In his view, the *bandeirantes*’ very enterprise stemmed from the power of adaptation guaranteed to the *mamelucos* by the mixing of Portuguese and indigenous blood, since the latter was better able to cope in tropical environments. Therefore, if it were possible to cure the sertanejo, “supreme in the strange and barbaric habitat,” “we would have in them an intrepid race of victors” (Silva, 1935, p.241). It should be noted that the (pseudo-)scientific discourse here draws on the mythical image of a grandiose nature that awakens “strange emotions” with its “unbridled force,” whose result was “imponderable.” The actual physiological processes by which this intervention of the environment shaped the sertanejo ethnic group are not explained beyond this dramatic use of language.

It was concluded that the active component of the formation of the national identity was not primarily race, but environment, which shaped its transformation. Underplaying the impact of natural selection and denying the struggle for survival, in neo-Lamarckism the main evolutionary force was attributed to the capacity for physiological change to be shaped by environmental stimuli. It was assumed that organisms incorporated acquired characteristics into their genetic heritage, and so were able to transmit them to their descendants. Peter J. Bowler (2003, p.137) clarifies:

When the organism changed its habits and used its body in different ways, the effect of use and disuse would be obvious – this is how the weightlifter acquires stronger muscles. If the new habit were kept up over many generations, and if the effect were transmitted, however slightly, from parent to offspring, then the modification would build up over time and eventually produce a permanent change. If the new habit were a useful one taken up by the whole population, then by definition the change would be adaptative or purposeful, as in the case of the giraffes which stretched their necks to reach a new source of food in the trees. Variation within the species was directed, not random, so there were no unfit individuals to be eliminated by struggle.

Consistent with neo-Lamarckism, in the books discussed here Hermano Ribeiro da Silva saw adaptation to the environment as an evolutionary mechanism, such that the greater the hardships faced, the more intense the molding power of nature. Natural selection, not altogether absent in neo-Lamarckian theory, appears in his argument as a derivative of adaptability:

Both on the coast and in the sertão, whose populations have melded sociologically in different ways, natural selection has constituted generations that have increasingly and successfully integrated into the substrate of our discordant geographic environment. But if the aphorism extends to the ethnography of the whole country, in the immense inland zone the level of adaptation is greatly advanced by the power of the barbarism of the land, an overwhelming and intemperate factor in the assimilation of any being (Silva, 1936, p.137).

Silva elaborates his vision of sertanejo society in interaction with the environment from this representation of nature as a despotic power, in contrast to the mild social and human development that is its consequence. His reasoning at this point is not very coherent. On the one hand, the narratives construct a negative view of the population due to their supposed apathy and sloth. Some of the expressions he uses to define the mestizos demonstrate this: still on the train to Goiás, he refers to a group of second-class passengers as a “walking anthropological museum;” he defines a family of *caboclos*¹³ as “pigs” who lie on the splattered ground and “shout over the others; the chief of a small village is an “anthropoid [who is] merely quick-witted”; and one of the author’s interlocutors is a “man fresh out of the cave” (Silva, 1935, p.31, 54; 1936, p.200). Yet alongside such expressions, he also expresses some anti-racist views, mostly presented as objections to positions held by foreigners. The rhetorical affirmation of the advanced state of adaptation of the population to the geographical medium continues to be central to his argument, which, despite identifying the weakness of the *sertanejo*, reaffirms his capacity to lay the foundations for the occupation of the territory: “although the caboclos are plagued by disease and misery, they are the only rational beings capable of withstanding the tremendous oppression of the forces of nature. As if galvanized by misfortune, they slowly go about pushing forward” (Silva, 1935, p.29).

With these words he restates that the sertanejo is the perfect example of the acclimatization of a mestizo type to an inhospitable environment, even if its diseases may destroy his capacity to intervene and make him unfit for productive work. One example of this is a passage in which Silva states that in the context of the intense competition of the mining enterprises, the weakened sertanejos could not hold their own against the healthy types, especially the Brazilian mestizos from elsewhere and the foreigners, “all of them brave specimens and resilient to whatever obstacles may arise” Silva (1936, p.31). In this case, as an advocate of European and Asian immigration as an alternative for the settlement of inland Brazil,¹⁴ Silva (1936, p.31) opines that these foreigners “are molding a new sertanejo type, whose vigor and initiative logically constitute a highly favorable trait for our advancing progress.” Contradicting Silva’s evolutionist theorizings, the sertanejo, a product of nature, would not thus be able to survive the competition in his own environment.

In this sense, Hermano Ribeiro da Silva postulates that ethnic mixing could be a guarantee of a degree of homogeneity for the population, serving for the incorporation of the foreigner, favored by the submission of all types to the same environmental conditions. The introduction of outsiders and their mixing with the natives, as initially observed in the agricultural colonies of São Paulo, pointed to a redemptive horizon. A radical dividing line was drawn between the traditional sertanejo societies and the new groupings formed

around the mining activities, for example, which made the miners “people alien to the standard model of caboclos, who while away their days to the monotonous, peaceful rhythm of grazing and farming” (Silva, 1936, p.138-139). These were already more educated types, he explains, gifted with greater initiative and less set in their ways, which explained the dynamics of the mines as the result of a kind of selection that did not favor the region’s mestizos in general. This is an example of an overwhelmingly rhetorical use of scientific terms, since the idea of selection refers to factors prior to the arrival of these men in the mining areas – and determinants of it.

Nonetheless, Silva also resorts to the evocative power of parallelism between man and nature, affirming in another passage that the alternation in sertanejo music between plaintive melodies and bold assertions “seem to symbolize the same turbulent transformation of nature that surrounds them, in the paradox of the gentle calms and agitations aroused by the brutality of the latent forces” (Silva, 1936, p.160). The scientific discourse generally incorporated in Silva’s writings is shaped by free interpretations of terms that appeal to the very same analogical meaning. The dramatic nature of the terms he chooses refers to the image of an all-powerful nature that effects changes in the human element, which itself is virtually fixed upon mixing with foreigners.

Thus, although Silva describes mechanisms of selection and adaptation that supposedly had the effect of adjusting living organisms to their environment, the action of nature on the sertanejo did not, he felt, actually yield the best outcome. Reflecting on the productive potential of the region, he concludes that “the development and social utility of sertão production remain entirely dependent on our leaders when it comes to their progressive action. Because if the local inhabitants are left to their own devices, the job will be done only under some blue moon” (Silva, 1936, p.25). It followed that state intervention must be the only way of overcoming the region’s backwardness, its people being deprived of any possibility of progress by their own means, even considering the entrance of galvanizing elements from outside this society, such as around the mines, since there was no indication of a future incorporation of these elements in permanent settlements.

Hermano Ribeiro da Silva shows no perception of the incoherence of using scientific principles that designed natural mechanisms to account for man’s adjustment to the environment – which therefore indicated an individualistic and liberal political stance – alongside a defense of state intervention. He demonstrates support the adoption of economic initiatives by a strong and centralized executive power that would act as a driver of history and an agent for the protection of national interests in relation to private and regional entities by imposing a single authority over the agitated and isolated realm of the sertão. In fact, the idea of the need for the rational management of nature by the authorities through structures of technological and administrative control for the benefit of the civilizing process was neither new nor alien in the scientific panorama, having been defended by authors such as the American sociologist Lester Ward, in his *Psychic factors of civilization*, as early as 1893 (Worster, 1994). In his narratives, Silva observed specific situations in which the “absolute interference of the State” was necessary, “since it alone will impose the necessary unity of action for the development of the civilized plane,” by executing initiatives for the economic occupation of the land.

One such situation was the promotion of enterprises like Fordlândia (“Fordland”),¹⁵ run by Henry Ford in the municipality of Aveiro, Pará state, on land assigned by the state government, with the objective of supplying Ford’s automobile factories with latex from the rubber plantation. According to Silva’s proposal, it was up to the state to adopt an identical strategy of organization and rationalization of productive efforts to promote the country’s prosperity. Another intervention considered necessary was the limitation of the arbitrary and violent power of the heads of the Mate Laranjeira Company, which had ample concessions for the exploitation of yerba mate in Mato Grosso in land contiguous to its plantations in Paraguay.¹⁶ Similarly, it was up to state forces to suppress the manifestations of tyrannical and absolutist behavior by the local chiefs over the sertão population in line with the assumption of the centralization of power so that competing forces would submit to state order (Silva, 1935, p.23-24, 1936, p.90-91, 190-191).

Final considerations

As an agent for the promotion of capital, technology, and institutionalization, the State was granted the capacity to break the logic of submission to the natural barbarism that had prevailed until then in the Brazilian sertão. With an overtly political discourse, Hermano Ribeiro da Silva urgently called for State presence in the lands he had travelled through, which converged with plans already underway to centralize power and increase State intervention over society, as aptly demonstrated by the decree about the inspection of exploratory expeditions he cited. These calls for political centralization and enhanced State authority were clearly precursors of the Vargas dictatorship. Silva’s opposition on the occasion of the 1934 Constitutionalist Revolution, when he was “lost” in Central Brazil and incapable of participating in the São Paulo resistance, calls into question the hub from which this power was to radiate, not its nature. The paths he points to are the same as those that were being adopted by the Vargas regime and strengthened with the decree that created the Estado Novo regime in 1937.

The sertão was the most dramatic dimension of the Brazilian national problem, which the travel narratives of this explorer show in his accounts of mishaps, dangers, and ordeals, told to demonstrate the resolute strength of these adventurers in overcoming obstacles that stood in the way of the conquest of these inland parts untamed by the power of reason. The theoretical eclecticism and the difficulty of reconciling a determinist view with modernizing optimism give an idea of the trouble Silva had in finding a place for this unfamiliar space in the modernity yet to be built by the all-powerful hand of the State. We cannot deny Silva’s commitment to playing his part in the transformation of the nation’s reality by producing knowledge about it, particularly by opening up routes to lands hitherto inaccessible. Nonetheless, his narratives convey contradictory and confusing impressions when it comes to the people of the sertão, despite recognizing their virtues of honesty and honor, being sensitive to their plight, and condemning violence against the helpless. Taken as a whole, Hermano Ribeiro da Silva’s narratives paint a picture of a sertão that seems to simultaneously nourish, strengthen, warp, and debilitate the sertanejo, a character astonishingly absent from the future he imagines for Central Brazil.

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NOTES

¹ “Central West” (Centro-Oeste) was the term officially adopted in 1942 to refer to the states of Goiás and Mato Grosso, when a new regional division of Brazil was introduced by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, IBGE). IBGE had been founded in 1938 by merging the former National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estatística) and the Brazilian Council of Geography (Conselho Brasileiro de Geografia) (Contel, 2014).

² [Translator's note] The bandeirantes were members of expeditions that penetrated the hinterlands of Brazil to make their fortune in the mines or capturing indigenous people to deliver for enslavement.

³ In the years following the launch of Hermano Ribeiro da Silva's books, works were published that assimilated the expansion of the frontier during the colonial period into the Estado Novo's colonizing project, including Cassiano Ricardo's classic synthesis *Marcha para Oeste: a influência da bandeira na formação social e política do Brasil* (1940). Other authors have sought to identify analogies between Brazil's territorial expansion and the westward march of the US frontier, a topic covered by Frederick Jackson Turner in the final years of the nineteenth century, even if this author is not clearly referenced. Such is the case of *Bandeirantes e pioneiros* (1955), by Clodomir Vianna Moog, *Monções* (1945) and *Caminhos e fronteiras* (1957), by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, *Pioneiros e Fazendeiros de São Paulo*, by Pierre Monbeig (original edition in French, *Pionniers et planteurs de São Paulo*, 1952). For more on this topic, see Oliveira (2000) and Wegner (2000). Recent studies written from the theoretical and methodological perspective of environmental history have revisited this now classic historiography, including Evans and Silva (2017), Silva (2017), and Silva (2018).

⁴ The most comprehensive reference to the Fawcett case is the book by David Grann (2009).

⁵ The term “West” is used here as a synonym for Central Brazil. In Hermano Ribeiro da Silva's works, he only designates the orientation of the geographical location. Meanwhile, the mythical and symbolic connotation of the West has been identified in studies such as those by Silva (2017) and Wegner (2000).

⁶ Several other accounts of travels to Central Brazil were published between the 1920s and the end of the first Vargas government. These include: *A mais linda viagem: um “raid” de vinte mil quilômetros pelo interior brasileiro* (1927), by Luis C. Gurgel do Amaral; *Horrores e mistérios dos sertões desconhecidos: fatos tenebrosos, vividos pelo autor, numa expedição em procura do explorador inglês Cel. Fawcett, nos sertões amazônicos de Mato Grosso* (apocryphal account from 1934), by João de Minas; *Feras do pantanal* (1935), by Alberto Vinhaes; *Pelo Brasil Central* (1938), by Frederico Augusto Rondon; *Roncador* (1939) and *Sertões bravios* (1940), by Willy Aureli; *Do Brasil ao Paraguai: impressões de viagem e de costumes* (1940), by Mário Leite; *Roteiro dos Tocantins* (1943) and *O rio dos Tocantins* (1945), by Lysias Augusto Rodrigues; *Expedição ao rio Romuro* (1945), by Vicente de Paulo Teixeira da Fonseca Vasconcelos; *Encantos do Oeste: um pedaço do Brasil onde o homem se identifica com a natureza* (1945), by Agenor Couto de Magalhães.

⁷ For more on Euclides da Cunha's interpretation of the Brazilian national problem, see Murari (2007).

⁸ For more on the actual work of the council concerning ethnographic research initiatives conducted in the period, see Grupioni (1998).

⁹ Hermano Ribeiro da Silva did not speculate about the specific nature of the *cerrado*, a term he uses to refer to the stretches of woodland he encountered on his travels to the region. Recent works inspired by environmental history have devoted extensive study to this physical and social reality, in particular Giustina (2013), Funes (2013), and Silva et al. (2017).

¹⁰ For more on the issue of the natives in Silva's work, see Rodrigues, Murari (in press).

¹¹ The works he mention are: Durkheim; *Sociologia*, by Letourneau; *Leçons de sociologie* (1922), by the Durkheimian sociologist Célestin Bouglé; *L'homme, cet inconnu*, by the physiologist Alexis Carrell (cited in Silva, 1936, p.157; 1935, p.228, p.12-13). Silva (1936, p.71) also demonstrates some knowledge of the specialized literature in biology, two examples being *Monografia brasileira de peixes fluviais* and *Animais venenosos do Brasil*.

¹² This expedition, known as “Bandeira Anhanguera,” was the largest and most organized of all the expeditions Silva took part in. He did not leave an account of it because he died of malaria before it ended, in November 1937.

¹³ [Translator’s note] *Caboclo* is a synonym of *mameluco* and refers to a person with mixed white and indigenous parentage or heritage.

¹⁴ The debate over policies to promote immigration became particularly complex in a context marked by continued racist beliefs, incorporated by the increasing prevalence of the precepts of eugenics and defensive nationalism. In the 1934 Federal Constitution, quotas were set for the immigration of foreigners to the country, with more restrictive laws being passed during the Estado Novo regime. For more on the topic, see Koifman (2015). On Central Brazil in particular, Sandro Dutra and Silva (2017) speak of the privilege granted to internal migration for the population of the Goiás agricultural colony as of 1941.

¹⁵ The process extended from the assignment of the lands, in 1927, to its unsuccessful conclusion in 1945. For a history of Fordlândia, see Grandin (2010).

¹⁶ For more on this, see Arruda (1997).

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