There is an extremely revealing passage in the famous story *A Hora e a Vez de Augusto Matraga* (*The Hour and the Time of Augusto Matraga*), by the writer Guimarães Rosa. In it the title character, after a long period spent working voluntarily for a black peasant couple who had saved his life, suddenly decides to abandon the precarious small farm in which they live. Without any justification for his decision, he announces to his companions: ‘Farewell, my friends, I can remain here no longer, as my time will soon come, and I must meet it elsewhere! ... When the heart commands, we must obey! ... And if I never return, everything that was mine will be yours.’ He accepts a donkey which his hosts offer him, seats himself on the saddle and allows the animal to take whatever direction it wants, heading aimlessly into the backlands. To sing, alone, was not a sin. The roads sang ... He wandered in the region of the rubber tappers, who gave him a place to sleep in their huts with roofs and walls of munitary palm. He returned to the riverbank where the riverbank dwellers fed him manioc mush with pepper and fish. Then, he went off again.

At a certain moment in this aimless wandering, in the middle of the scrub-land of the backlands, Augusto Matraga comes across a blind man who has adopted the same practice. In search of his birthplace, he had roped himself to an old goat and allowed the animal to drift at random along the pathways, following it wherever it chose to roam. When the donkey sets off again, separating the two wanderers, Matraga just ha:
time to shout in the direction of the blind man and the goat: 'I’m game for anything... How good it is to wander at will, bound to no one and at peace with God!...'

What the extract above reveals is the itinerant, unstable and fluid order which characterises the most extensive and profound dimensions of Brazilian society. One of the first authors to perceive and study this systematically was Euclides da Cunha. In his attempt to understand the peculiar nature of backlands society, by means of research into the tragedy of the peasant rebellion in Canudos, he realised how superficial were the analyses which conflated the history of Brazil with that of the narrow coastal strips where the Portuguese colonists had settled with their sugar-cane plantations, their entrepôts cities, their military forts and fleets guaranteeing permanent contact with Europe, their true sense of identity. His master work is not called Os Sertões (Rebellion in the Backlands) by accident. He insisted that a fundamentally different approach was necessary in order to understand the specific social formation of Brazil. In an article published in the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo in March 1902, he revealed his central concern, aimed as much at rethinking the practice of historiography as at a definition of the country’s future direction: ‘(I had in mind) the political idea of the defense of the territory and the aim of incorporating the vigorous core of the backlands into our fragile lives, lacking autonomy and focused on the Atlantic... Let us look to the backlands.’

It was the historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, however, who took the intellectual agenda of Euclides da Cunha furthest. In his first book, the classic Raízes do Brasil of 1936, he takes up the same theme of the need for a change in perspective to correct the distorted view of history created by a colonial perspective. ‘Bringing from distant countries our ways of life, our institutions, our ideas, taking pride in maintaining them all in often unfavourable and hostile environments, we are still today strangers in our own land.’ In his later studies, Mongões (Monsoons) of 1945 and Caminhos e Fronteiras (Paths and Borders) of 1957, he describes in rich and minute detail the lack of fixity and itinerant quality of backlands societies, their obstinate resistance to attempts by landowners and their representatives to impose (either formally via the colonial authorities or via threats and chicanery) a sedentary and subordinate way of life.

These works clashed with the dominant interpretations, which insisted on reducing Brazilian society to the simplistic polarity of landowners of European origin on the one hand and slaves, indigenous peoples and (especially) blacks, on the other. They demonstrate the existence of a whole gamut of free people: acculturated Indians, poor whites and emancipated slaves, but, particularly, different ethnic combinations involving people from each one of these three groups. Living on the edges of the large landholdings, these men and women formed a free peasantry, each in a minimal unit of production, the small farm, around which they maintained a small clearing for planting corn, manioc and other foodstuffs, and reared small animals. Their specific skills and the assistance they could provide with tasks involving movement over wide areas, like woodcutting, canoeing, muleteering, and cattle droving, turned them into a workforce much sought after by the landowners, who were unable to rely on their own slaves for such tasks.

This situation created a very tense relationship between the peasant and landowners, who were interested in securing the labour of the free peasants at the lowest possible cost, if necessary by using their personal militias, or troops under the colonial authorities’ control. This situation provoked a distinct, standard response from these free men and women. It was evident to them that their powers of negotiation were proportional to their exposure and vulnerability to the pressure exerted by the landholders and officials. However, the greater their capacity for movement, to search out the most distant, virgin territories, the better their ability to negotiate favourably with the landowners who threatened to leave the fixed orbit of their authority.

The basic strategy which enabled this freedom of movement was the capacity to live with a minimum of material resources, all derived from nature: mud huts with palm-leaf roofs, straw mats, fibre nets, clay pots, objects made of wood, bone, leather and stone – objects and practices absorbed from the nomadic cultures of indigenous and African peoples. In addition, they relied on rigorous routines of hospitality, charity and mutual help which strengthened community ties, deeply embedded in the mystical beliefs typical of popular Brazilian Catholicism. Faced with the threat of any kind, all they had to do was go away or bury everything and leave. There was nothing to lose, nothing important left behind and there were always extensive areas of untouched fertile land available elsewhere. Additionally, they could always count on fraternal support of other small farmers or communities that they encountered. Mobility was the most direct expression of sense autonomy. In Augusto Matraga’s words: ‘It’s all the same to me. Wherever the donkey takes me, we’ll go, because we’re going with God!...’

In addition to the routes of the mule caravans or the gullies a
trails of the extensive backlands of the interior, there was always the alternative of the network of rivers which cut across the whole Brazilian territory, crossing the most dense and impenetrable areas of the tropical forest, 'the vast fluvial route which, with brief intervals, embraces almost all of Brazil, from the Tietê to Amazônia...' The country's climate is distinguished by two basic periods, the rainy season, when the rains are intense around summer, followed by the dry season around winter. This created a constant pattern, with the population of the backlands tending to move on in simple boats, modelled on indigenous canoes, taking advantage of the quickening of the currents during the rainy season – the so-called monsoons – settling afterwards on virgin land to begin their planting, when the waters receded in the dry period. In this situation, the boat itself became a home for long periods of people’s lives, when they became an integral part of the continuously oscillating flux of the rivers, the swamps and marshes, surrounded by an intensely green landscape completely invaded by water.

The highest institutional authority, the Portuguese Crown, legitimated this errant activity. In its attempt to maintain control over this territory of continental dimensions, and taking into account its small population, the Portuguese government encouraged from the outset any practice which entailed the effective occupation of the colony. For this reason the royal government reserved the right, from the start, to revoke concessions if, within a determined period, there was no occupation of land through settlement.

The land itself, abundant as it was, was worth nothing – value was conferred on it by labour, earning the Crown dividends and guaranteeing the protection of territory. Thus, wherever someone, even without a document or previous title, resolved to settle and work, either on their own account or using slave labour, the authorities recognised this as legitimate possession. Accordingly, the small lots occupied by the farmers constituted, ipso facto, a spontaneous form of settlement recognised and guaranteed by Portuguese law. If they tended to move, in order to escape exploitation by landowners or because they were attracted by virgin land, this did not alter the fact that wherever they settled and worked, they created a situation of indisputable juridical legitimacy.

This situation changed abruptly from the middle of the nineteenth century. Faced with pressures to abolish slavery, domestically and from Britain, Brazilian landowners, through their representatives in the Imperial Parliament, established a new law in 1850 linking ownership of land to a formal written title dependent on juridical recognition. The main underlying idea was to create a rural proletariat, expelling the farmers from their lands and so forcing them to offer themselves as cheap, abundant waged labour. This new situation increased social tensions, which were already intense, to explosive levels; but this was not an isolated event. In fact, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards a new and complex constellation emerged, shaking the very foundations of Brazilian social and economic life, bringing into conflict complex technical–scientific transformations and archaic manifestations of the sacred – a bloody duel between technology and the epiphanic. On different levels, this confrontation remained central in the history of contemporary Brazil and even today it manifests itself in the most unexpected forms and representations.

This new constellation began to take shape around 1870, when the Scientific–Technological Revolution, a phenomenon of global significance representing a major quantitative and qualitative leap in comparison to the first phase of industrialisation almost a century earlier, was being consolidated. This first moment in the rise of an industrialised economy, centred on Britain and focused on the production of manufactured fabrics, was based on three basic factors: iron, coal and steam engines, leading to the emergence of the first productive units factories.

However, the scale and nature of the Scientific–Technological Revolution, sometimes defined as a second 'industrial revolution' of industrialisation, was incomparably greater. It was based on the use of new scientific discoveries in the process of industrial production. They enabled the production of steel and gave rise to chemical industrial power stations and techniques for the extraction and refinement of petroleum, creating productive units and industrial complexes, involving hundreds, or even thousands of workers, technicians and engineers. The new sources of energy, derived from petroleum and electricity, promoted the development of new kinds of equipment, machines and means of transport and communication, which rapidly and extensively transformed the whole landscape, apparatus and practices of production on a global scale.

These transformations occurred in a concentrated fashion in the countries of Northern Europe, then spread to the United States soon after to Japan and Russia, unleashing among them an aggressive competition to guarantee consumer markets for their products, as well as suppliers of raw materials for their factories. It was this expansionist stimulus which led these nations to appropriate and carve up betw
themselves wide areas of the African and Asian continents, or to struggle for control of areas of Latin America. Moreover, in order to instil in them the way of life, practices of production and patterns of consumption appropriate to the new scientific-technological economy, it was necessary to go beyond mere territorial occupation or control and transform the way of life of traditional, local societies.

It was these attempts to change societies, their cultures and secular practices, which unleashed a series of revolts, uprisings and regional wars against the European, American, Russian and Japanese invaders between the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. These insurrections proliferated all over the world and were usually suppressed by means of widespread massacres, guaranteed by the inconquerable technical superiority of European armaments – in particular the new repeating firearms, artillery and howitzers, chemical explosives and incendiary weapons. These conflagrations formed a continuous sequence, including: the Indian Insurrection (1857–58), the Tai-Ping Rebellion in China (1850–66), the American Civil War (1861–65), the Meiji Restoration in Japan (1868), the Algerian Insurrection (1871), the Religious Reform of Al Afgahani in Afghanistan (1871–79), the Egyptian National Movement (1879–1882). In Latin America, this process was concentrated in particular around the economic and strategic axis represented by the River Plate and its network of rivers. Britain supported the military alliance between the Brazilian empire, Uruguay and Argentina against Paraguayan–Guaraní resistance, under the leadership of Solano López (1864–70).9

The Paraguayan War created a debt crisis which destabilised the Brazilian Empire. It was in the context of this process of institutional destabilisation that the Republican Party was founded (1870), proposing the abolition of the monarchy, and that a new elite of young intellectuals, artists, politicians and members of the military emerged – the so-called ‘generation of ’70’ – committed to a programme of modernisation of the ‘ossified’ structures of Empire, in accordance with the scientific and technical guidelines emanating from Europe. Their sources of inspiration were the current scientific modes of thought: Spencer's social Darwinism, German monism and Auguste Comte's positivism. Their main source of economic and political support was derived from the recent wealth generated by the expansion of coffee cultivation in the south-east of the country, as a result of the growing demand for stimulants in societies where the pace of life and rhythm of work were growing increasingly fast and intense. The wealthy São Paulo coffee growers aimed to have a federalist system established within the Republic, assuring them control not just over their own profits, but also over the conditions for using their economic power to decide the country's destiny.

With the benefit of heavy British investment, the São Paulo coffee growers could increase their production by multiplying their plantations, modernise their agricultural techniques and improve the quality of coffee, in addition to constructing the most extensive and intricate railway network on Brazilian territory. Thanks to these circumstances, they had no difficulty establishing alliances with the political leaders and intellectuals committed to the federalist ideal, and through them organised a coup against the monarchy. On 15 November 1889 the head of the Brazilian Army, General Deodoro da Fonseca, proclaimed the Federal Republic of Brazil, declared the monarchy extinct and installed himself as first President of the new Federal District of Rio de Janeiro. Shortly afterwards he would be replaced by Marechal Floriano Peixoto, the leader of the more radical young positivists, seeking to promote the modernisation of the country 'at any cost'.

The rise of this technocratic and scientifically oriented elite would define the path taken by Brazilian society in the 20th century. Eager to initiate the process of industrialisation without further delay, they eliminated the barriers to the free penetration of European and American capital, introduced a stock exchange and multiplied office for the issue of currency, resulting in a speculative race for shares in the most extraordinary and insecure investment projects. This rapid degenerated into the most scandalous process of financial corruption in the history of the country. The immediate effect of this process was to ruin the most prominent capitalists – the economic elite during the period of the monarchy – facilitating the rise of a new group of arrivistes, made wealthy by the speculative dealings of the first years of the new régime. Paradoxically this class of wealthy people of dubious morality would become, together with the coffee growers of the south east, the principal source of economic support of the scientific and technocratic elite schooled in a rigid positivist rationalism.10

The effects of this new political articulation on Brazilian society as a whole is illustrated by the most traumatic episode of all during the Republican period: the Canudos Revolt (1898–97). The Republican authorities only heard of the existence of the settlement Canudos in the backlands of the state of Bahia in 1898, till the first year of the revolt, for until then it had not appeared on any official map. The officials in Rio de Janeiro received complaints about a group of religious fanatics from the Bahian authorities. The group was led
stronghold, financed from abroad and determined to overthrow the Republican government; it was only on arriving there that he discovered to his surprise that the rebels were only poor rural workers, with no formal education and profoundly religious, trying to defend themselves against the abuses of the authorities and local bosses with weapons they had seized from their own persecutors.

Drawn from rural migrant populations from different parts of the north-eastern backlands, expelled from the small areas of land they had settled due to the intensification of commercial farming and the increasing demand for labour, these workers had settled in Canudos under the charismatic influence of the mystical figure Maciel, whom they called the Counsellor. From the remains of an abandoned and deserted farm on the margins of the Vaza-Barris river, in less than a decade, Canudos became the second city of Bahia in terms of population, and stood as a model of social organisation, hard work, community collaboration and prosperity. The feeling of spiritual elevation, collective solidarity and capacity for achievement of its inhabitants, under the religious inspiration of the Counsellor, was so strong that it gave them the strength and courage to react against all the traditional forms of exploitation to which people of humble origin were subjected in the Brazilian backlands. This was their crime and for this they were condemned.

Euclides also explained how they were able to defeat a military force in every way far outmatching their meagre resources. The problem lay in the characteristics of the Brazilian Army itself. Its officials were trained in French, by Belgian instructors, using Belgian manuals and tactics appropriate to the territories of the Netherlands. None of them had the slightest notion of typical conditions in the Brazilian backlands. Their red uniforms offered easy targets for the backlanders, their cannons sank in the sandy soil, and their woollen clothes were a recipe for certain dehydration under the desert sun. Euclides demonstrated that successive expeditions were defeated above all by their total ignorance of the land, people, customs and Brazilian popular culture. The officials were consummate representatives of the social, political and economic elite of the coastal cities: forever turned towards and identifying with the Old Continent, on the other side of the Atlantic.

Because of all this the writer considered the Canudos War a crime against the Brazilian people and made his book an indictment, appealing to the new generation of intellectuals and artists to turn from the coast to the backlands, from identification with European culture to discovery of Brazilian culture. But he was himself unable to evalua
just how much his training as an engineer, steeped in the rigour of new scientific beliefs, made it difficult for him to understand this culture. Euclides tended to consider the Counsellor, if not a charlatan, at least as a being whose confused mind remained imprisoned within a medieval obscurity of superstition and credulity; a creature whose archaic thinking interrupted the linear and inexorable flow of 'order and progress', the positivist maxim which the young soldiers had emblazoned on the national flag itself. Instead of cannons and soldiers, it was books and school-teachers that the government should have sent to the backlands.

Considered more closely, the case of the Counsellor contains surprising revelations. In the first place, there is the fact that Brazilian popular catholicism is a religion of visions. The devout bring with them the conviction that at special moments, or in special circumstances, they live epiphanic experiences, establishing direct and sensory contact with manifestations of the sacred. The origin of this tradition goes back to quite specific historical roots. Influenced by the teachings of the Cistercian monks and the Knights Templar (later banned by the papacy), the royal house of Portugal created a ceremony at the end of the sixteenth century which would be popularised to promote the dissemination of their ideas – the Feast of the Divine Holy Spirit. This feast rationalised the advent of a new time, in which all people would be equal, goods redistributed and prisoners freed. Under strong pressure from the pope, the Feast was prohibited in Portugal, but its practitioners took it to the islands of the Atlantic and, in a more direct and exalted form, to the remote territory of Brazil. From colonial times, therefore, the symbols of the Divine Holy Spirit became the mainstay of Brazilian popular catholicism, which retained a latent millenarianism. Thus, the belief in social redemption through epiphany became one of the main axes of the history of Brazil.

From this perspective, what is striking is the paradoxical similarity between the liberal belief of the intellectual Euclides da Cunha in the democratic redemption of Brazilian society through the imminent and inevitable advent of the Positivist State, and the conviction of the people of Canudos that they were living through the eve of the kingdom of peace and fraternal justice, guaranteed by the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is obviously not accidental that both the positivist intellectual and the devout of the Holy Spirit shared the same epiphanic expectations, if we take into account that both were anchored in the same deep cultural sub-stratum. More surprising, in fact, was the attitude of the political and economic elites who, opposed to the writer's dream as well as to the hopes of the backlanders, saw both as obstacles to the modernisation of the country via the authoritarian implantation of European or North American models.

Other similar situations followed, confirming the constancy of this impasse and exemplified in the transformations experienced by the capital of the Republic. At the beginning of the twentieth century Rio de Janeiro had a population of a little less than a million inhabitants. Of these the majority were former slaves, freedmen of the city or recent arrivals from other areas following the abolition of slavery (1888) and in search of opportunities to earn a living linked to activities of the capital's port. This extremely poor population was concentrated in large, run-down old houses dating from the beginning of the nineteenth century, located around the port in the city centre. Whole families lived in rented, overcrowded cubicles, with no infrastructure and in the most precarious and degrading conditions. For the authorities they represented a permanent threat to order and public health.

These large black and mestizo (mixed) populations preserved, as was to be expected, elements of their original religion and culture, such as links of a communal nature, survival strategies, and connections to their symbolic roots, as well as many other distinctive characteristics of their groups of origin. Despite the different areas and communities from which they had been kidnapped in Africa, their religious beliefs had elements in common, including traditions of enchantment, possession and direct contact with the sacred. Hence the different ways in which they were amalgamated with elements of Brazilian popular catholicism, giving rise to derivative forms such as umbanda and candomblé. One of this community's most distinctive characteristics, however, was the central role attributed to drums and percussion instruments and to exuberant and intricately choreographed dances as means of access to the epiphanic experience. Viewed as attacks on order and morality – in fact as witchcraft – such instruments, music, dances and rituals were prohibited, their practitioners imprisoned, and all of the instruments and ritual objects seized by the police.

Another practice peculiar to the black community in Rio de Janeiro was capoeira, a form of martial art transmitted through the generation and taught to mestizos, whites and anyone who cared to learn. Although it involved rhythmical and gestural elements of African origin, capoeira's complex technique of personal defence was develop entirely in Brazil. As with everything involving rhythm for the black population, their sources of inspiration were sacred. Rhythm is the central principle of this practice, refined to the level of artistic exi
lence by its masters. As a form of fighting it is paradoxical: the objective is not to attack one's adversary, but on the contrary, never to allow oneself to be struck. The secret of the art is rhythmic control of the combatant's *ginga* (swing) — the ability to sway with the body and to jump, always in an unpredictable way, so that the opponent — firmly placed in a position of attack and looking for a fixed target, a vulnerable point to attack — succeeds only in striking empty space. The *capoeirista* thus defeats his enemy by humiliation. Hence the public nature of this art in which the *capoeirista* transforms his performance into a spectacle for the general delight of the audience. There were innumerable schools of this art in Rio de Janeiro, all with their famous masters and hierarchy of disciples. It was Marechal Floriano Peixoto himself, seeking to impose a monopoly on the use of force as an exclusive privilege of public authority, who declared the end of these institutions and the categorical prohibition of the practice of *capoeira*, even sanctioning the physical removal of those who dared to resist the measure.¹⁵

But the restriction or rigid control of the beliefs, rituals and practices of the black community and their allies was not enough for the authorities. Equally serious from their point of view were the threats to public health posed by the dense co-habitation of these people, in precarious sanitary conditions in the central areas of the city. Rio de Janeiro was the principal commercial port of the country and the third most important on the American continent, after New York and Buenos Aires. More than this, as capital of the Republic it was the showcase of the country. With its pressing needs for capital, technicians and immigrant labour, the city itself was supposed to be an attraction to foreigners. However, it was subject to a series of epidemics (the most serious threats were smallpox and yellow fever) which devastated its population and were even more destructive of foreigners who did not possess the antibodies developed over a long period of time by the local population. Because of this the city had, since the nineteenth century, the undesirable reputation as a 'foreigners' graveyard', a notoriety completely incompatible with its imperative need to act as a pole of attraction.

Apart from this problem, there was the question of the port. The port installations of Rio de Janeiro were obsolete, making the growing volume of commercial transactions impossible. The old quays were not very deep and did not allow large and modern transatlantic vessels to reach it directly, making it necessary to transport goods by a lengthy and laborious system of transfer in smaller vessels. In addition, even once they had arrived on terra firma the goods still had to cross the city, destined for railway lines which sent them to other points of the country. This was not a little complicated in a city whose transport infrastructure was still largely colonial, made up of narrow, tortuous lanes, where the trucks would inevitably carry out complex manoeuvres of retreat every time they encountered vehicles drawn by animals, as there was not enough room for both in the narrow spaces of the many alleyways.

The authorities conceived a three-pronged plan to confront all of these problems, comprising the simultaneous modernisation of the port, the sanitation of the city and urban reform. A team of technicians was nominated by President Rodrigues Alves: the engineer Lauro Müller for the reform of the port; the sanitation doctor Oswaldo Cruz for sanitation; and the engineer and urban planner Pereira Passos, who had worked on the reform of Paris under Baron Haussmann, for the remodelling of the city. The three were given unlimited powers to execute their tasks, making them immune to any judicial action, creating a situation of triple dictatorship in the city of Rio de Janeiro. As was expected, they all turned on the rambling old houses of the centre in which the majority of the poor lived, because they restricted access to the port, created an unhygienic environment and impeded the free flow of goods and people essential in a modern city. The demolition of the residences of the central area was initiated, to the approval of the quality press, who dubbed it the 'Regeneration'. For those affected by this intervention it was out-and-out tyranny, as no plans for compensation or re-housing of its victims were made. All they could do was gather their families and the scarce goods they possessed and disappear. With no other alternative, the evicted masses collected the wood from discarded boxes at the port and used it to begin constructing crude shack on the steep sides of the hills which surrounded the city, covering them with tin plate from folded kerosene tins. This was the origin of the *favelas*.¹⁶

In addition to the *favelas* the crowds of homeless accumulated in slum tenements and cheap hotels, the *freges*, in which families rent mats on the ground, lined up one alongside the other in sub-human conditions. As these alternatives still carried sanitation risks, the Health Ministry turned against them. Unleashing a massive campaign to eradicate smallpox, battalions of health visitors were employed who, accompanied by police forces, invaded houses on the pretext of vaccinating the residents. But if signs of health risks were detected, which were inevitably in those conditions, they were authorised to order the hou tenement, *freges* or shack to be evacuated, eventually condemning it compulsory demolition with no right to compensation. This was the l
straw for the poor, homeless and humiliated population. In a spontaneous surge, masses of hitherto cowed citizens turned against the squadrons of health visitors and the police force, heading for the centre of the city where the urban reform work was being carried out. On arriving there they entrenched themselves in the open ditches and, appropriating all the tools and construction materials as weapons, set about confronting the reinforcements sent by the police. The rebellion became known as the 1904 Revolt of the Vaccine, and is one of the least understood episodes of Brazil’s recent history. From the authorities’ point of view, people revolted because in their ignorance they were afraid of and were unable to understand the process of vaccination against disease. From this perspective, it was an irrational uprising of simple people with backward minds, incapable of comprehending the course of progress. Because of this it was treated as a kind of Canudos in the heart of the capital, which it was necessary to eliminate to save the Republic.

As the police were unable to subdue the rebels, whose ranks were increasingly swelled by the rest of the population terrorised by the draconian system of the triple reform, the National Guard was called in. It was useless; the resistance only increased. Firemen were then called into action, but the situation remained uncontrollable. The President personally assumed control of suppressing the rebels, summoning army troops into action. The insurrection continued. The navy was then deployed, equally unsuccessfully, and auxiliary troops were summoned from the bordering states of Minas Gerais and São Paulo. Only then, with all of these concentrated forces and after ten days, was the movement defeated. Then the repression began. Orders were given by the chief of police that anyone found in the city who could give no proof of address or fixed employment should be detained. As the reform had created an immense housing deficit and as the population lived on odd jobs in an unstable labour market, this decree affected almost all of the poor. Those detained were taken to the Ilha das Cobras, where, after being brutally beaten, they were put in the holds of steamers, which left immediately for Amazônia. There they were released in the middle of the forest, without any guidance, resources or medical help and left to disappear into the jungle.

The Regeneration was completed at the end of 1904. It was marked by the inauguration of the Avenida Central, the axis of the new urbanisation project, conceived as a concourse of façades surrounding the city with an architectural art-nouveau décor, in ivory and crystal, combined with the elegant lamps of modern electric illumination and the lights from the windows of the fine shops filled with imported goods. Lifestyle magazines and the society pages of the quality press incited the affluent members of the population to parade their fashions on the great catwalk of the Avenida, the young men in the smart rigour of English suits and the women showing off the latest extravagances in fabrics, cuts and French hats. The cosmopolitan atmosphere which descended on the renovated city was such that, on the eve of the First World War, people whose paths crossed on the great boulevard no longer greeted each other in the Brazilian way, but repeated to each other ‘Vive la France’. Correspondingly, people who were unable to dress decently – which is to say, formally – had their access to the central area of the city prohibited. In addition to this, the traditional popular feasts and customs in the vicinity, attracting people from the outskirts of the city, were repressed and even carnival was no longer celebrated with mritudos, blocos, masks, sambas and popular maxixes, but with carriage processions, flower battles and well-behaved pierrots and columbies, typical of the Venetian carnival.

The elites’ indifference to the cultural traditions of the country and its peoples was noted and criticised by the great writers of the period: Euclides da Cunha, as we have seen, a mestizo of indigenous descent; Machado de Assis and Lima Barreto, both mulattos; and Cruz de Souza, who was black. Machado de Assis, one of the best Brazilian writers of all time, attacked with refined irony the gap which the institution of slavery had created between the owning classes and the immense population of the destitute, composed predominantly of blacks, mestizos and poor immigrants. Lima Barreto was a master of social criticism and denounced the brutal and arbitrary manner in which the dominant classes maintained the hierarchy and the system of discrimination which marginalised the majority of the Brazilian population. Cruz de Souza, a poet of sublime and inspired lyricism, sought to put into words in his verses the depth of pain, suffering and humiliation which constituted the daily life of the popular classes.

Changes to this tide of cosmopolitanism would come only after the Great War. It happened in various ways. One of the most interesting was the visit to Brazil of the acclaimed French poet Paul Claudel and the young composer Darius Milhaud, who fell in love with Rio (or Janeiro) – not with the scenery of the Avenida Central and the boulevards of the modernised city, which resembled an urban Europe or setting, but with the popular culture of the outskirts and the favelas of the hillsides. Milhaud made contact with several popular musicians, and through them developed his research on the rhythmic languages of t