

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

John Clark and Camille Martin (eds), *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: Selected Writings of Elisée Reclus*, Oakland: PM Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-60486-429-8 (paper)

This is a new edition of an important selection of writings by the anarchist geographer Elisée Reclus (1830-1905), translated from French by the editors John Clark and Camille Martin. The editors note that, with conferences held in 2005 in Lyon, Milan, New Orleans, Montpellier, Mexico and Barcelona to mark the 100th anniversary of Reclus' death, "in recent years, the rate of publication of works on or by Reclus has grown exponentially" (p. ix); this is certainly true for our own discipline, which has seen increasing interest in 'anarchist geographies'¹.

Clark and Martin translated 11 pamphlets, articles or book chapters by Reclus, four of which come from his last work *L'Homme et la Terre* [1905], which several authors consider to be the anarchist geographer's most complete expression of his political and social thought. The first paper, 'The feeling for Nature in modern society' [1866], was published by Reclus in the French journal *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, and belonged to a series in which he dealt with the relationship between humankind and nature, anticipating several themes of the more recent debates on the environment. I notice that, among these writings for *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, there was also a review of *Man and Nature* [1864] by the American geographer George Perkins-Marsh (1801-1882), Reclus' friend and correspondent, which is not included in this edition (see Reclus 1864). In it Reclus criticized Perkins-Marsh's idea of Man as a 'disturber', because his humanist approach didn't envisage a pure, untouched nature, or the myth of wilderness. For Reclus, the main aim was to create a harmonic equilibrium between humankind and the environment, considered not as separable terms of a dialectical relationship.

1 See for instance the *Antipode* special issue '[Reanimating Anarchist Geographies](#)' (volume 44, number 5, 2012) and the *ACME* special issue '[Anarchist and Autonomous Marxist Geographies](#)' (volume 11, number 3, 2012).

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The second and third texts, ‘To my brother the peasant’ [1893] and ‘Anarchy’ [1894] - sharing the same titles as the contemporary pamphlets *L’anarchia* and *Fra contadini* by the celebrated Italian Anarchist Errico Malatesta (1853-1932), are classical texts, short and simple, written as anarchist propaganda for popular classes. One characteristic of the anarchist movement was the refusal to recognize the existence of a privileged revolutionary class, as Marxists did with the modern industrial proletariat. Anarchist propaganda spoke equally to rural workers, considering important the spreading of consciousness of different kinds of oppression and the affirmation of universal and international brotherhood among rural and urban workers. Reclus stated that the division of the oppressed favored only oppressors, who hoped that hungry people “just eat one another” (p.119).

‘The extended family’ [1896] is a text where Reclus expressed his sympathy for the animal world, and for a respectful association of humans and non-human animals, already practiced in several so-called ‘primitive’ communities. I think that it is rather unfair to, as Clark does, try to evaluate how far Reclus was “anthropocentric” (p.21): the concept clearly didn’t exist at the time he was writing. But I also think that it is relevant to notice, as Clark does, that Reclus, vegetarian and supporter of mutual aid among different species, was one of the first European authors to put the question of enlarging the circle of solidarity beyond the frontiers of humankind, stating “for my part, I also include animals in my feeling of socialist solidarity” (p.32).

‘Evolution, revolution, and the anarchist ideal’ [1898] is a synthesis of perhaps the most famous of Reclus’ anarchist propaganda - *Evolution, revolution, et l’idéal anarchique*. In this text the anarchist geographer exposed one of his pivotal political principles: evolution and revolution are not irreconcilable alternatives, but phases of the same historical process leading humankind progressively to higher levels of equality and freedom. This was criticized, even among some anarchists, for its optimism, yet it nevertheless has the advantage, in comparison with other contemporary conceptions, of avoiding both the messianism of revolution and the

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idea of a linear history; Reclus' concept of historical development, some aspects of which were inspired by the philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), considered both progressions and regressions in the ongoing struggle between authority and freedom. In this dialectic, revolutions are moments of necessary rupture inserted in the frame of a slower evolutionary process.

'On vegetarianism' [1901] is a pamphlet affirming the ethics, and health benefits, of vegetarianism, starting with a very touching personal experience and expressing full compassion for all the victims of butchers. However, as Reclus was moved by principles of humanism and tolerance, we don't find an explicit condemnation of people making different choices.

The following four chapters are taken from the volumes five and six of *L'Homme et la Terre*. 'The history of cities' expresses the urban thinking of Reclus, who shared the criticism of the insalubrity of cities with the hygienists of his time, but considered it in the frame of class contradictions and the general necessity to reform society. At the same time, he refused the 'urbaphobie' of several hygienists, stating that sociability and encounter is necessary for human beings. To meet these needs, Reclus was a supporter, together with Pëtr Kropotkin (1842-1921), of a decentralised model aiming to overcome the traditional limits between town and countryside, which inspired the thinking of Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928) and Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) on the 'Garden City' and 'Regional Planning' respectively (see Dunbar 1978; Raffestin 2007; Ferretti 2012).

'The modern state' is a critique of the state apparatus starting from its historical development and ending with the statement that globalization will render the peoples progressively closer to each other, so a common future stands in international solidarity, refusal of nationalism and wars, and cosmopolitanism. In this, argued Reclus, geography could play an important role, teaching respect and mutual knowledge between different peoples and representing the world according to the principle of human unity.

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‘Culture and property’ analyses the historical origins of property. Reclus proposed a classic appreciation of the ancient commons and traditional cooperative work, and was an acute critic of the concentration of modern capital, observing the efficiency, in some cases, of production’s decentralization and small-scale economy. That said, he was aware of the transnational nature of capital fluxes, and, as astutely noted by Clark, “he observes that the ability of capital to transgress all boundaries of state and nationality gives it a great advantage over political power” (p.83).

‘Progress’ is the last chapter of *L’Homme et la Terre*, resuming Reclus’ thinking on several topics, like the definition of progress, which according to Reclus is not a linear process. “The missionaries who encounter magnificent savages moving about freely in their nakedness believe that they will bring them ‘progress’ by giving them dresses and shirts, shoes and hats, catechisms and Bibles, and by teaching them to chant psalms in English or Latin” (p.209-210). Inspired by Vico’s discourse on *corsi e ricorsi* (ebb and flow) of historical evolution, Reclus rejected the presumption that ‘civilization’ had accomplished real progress from supposedly barbarous times. Real progress, according to Reclus, means “the conquest of bread” (p.224); he fumed at “our much-acclaimed half-civilization (it is only half-civilized because it is far from benefiting everyone)” (p.227). He noted that nobody among the so-called savages, would accept to live in some of the industrial slums of the ‘civilized’ world. According to him, it is not by the pretension of superiority, but by the “complete union of the civilized with the savage and with nature” (p.231) that society could reach equality, that is, true progress. This conclusion is consistent with Reclus’ early radical opposition to racism, colonialism and imperialism², recognized by Clark, who argues that Reclus “vehemently opposes the spread of imperial state power” (p.80).

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² On which see Ferretti (2013).

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In his long introductory essay (p.3-100), Clark explores the wide range of social and scientific topics mobilized by Reclus. In Clark's thinking on Elisée Reclus, there are some controversial points, particularly his statement that Reclus was a forerunner of Social Ecology, which engendered in 1997 a public debate between Clark and the French geographer Philippe Pelletier³. The latter stated that Reclus is not identifiable as an 'ecologist', as he chose deliberately to not use the label 'ecology' because this term was utilized by Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) - a social Darwinist opposed to socialism, who was well-known and explicitly criticized by Reclus, who preferred the definition 'mesology', proposed by his friend Adolphe Bertillon (1821-1883). According to Pelletier (2013) - and I agree with him - Reclus' definition of 'Social Geography', which at that time was synonymous with 'Socialist Geography', clearly represented an alternative to contemporary ecology and ecological thought, sketching out a program which was primarily anarcho-socialist.

I don't enter into the details of this discussion, which is available online, but as a historian of geography I'd note the clear influence on Reclus of German *Naturphilosophie* ('Philosophy of Nature'), through authors like Lorenz Oken (1779-1851) and Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), whose writings played an important part in his early intellectual development (see Reclus 1911). The same philosophers inspired widely the geographers who shaped Reclus' scientific conceptions, like Carl Ritter (1779-1859) and Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) (see le Scuff 2001; Tang 2008). In a nutshell, I can affirm that Reclus, like the *Naturphilosophers*, considered humankind and nature as consubstantial and in constant relation. This perspective is neither 'monism' nor 'dualism', and it renders impossible both the Biblical idea of man's domination of nature and Perkins-Marsh's nostalgic dream of a wild nature (which today could be compared, with some prudence, to some expressions of the so-called 'deep ecology').

³ See Clark (1997) and Pelletier (1997).

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On the one side, it is clear that there is a high risk of anachronism in associating, like Clark and Martin do, an author who lived between 1830 and 1905 to very present concepts and problems like ‘ecofeminism’ (p.vii), ‘resilience’ (p.viii) or ‘climate change’ (p.viii): problems, categories and concepts simply did not exist, or conceived in a radically different way, in Reclus’ time. Nevertheless, considering the wide circulation of Reclus’ ideas, during his lifetime as well as more recently, beyond both the disciplinary borders of geography and the political borders of anarchism, I agree with the picture Clark paints of him as “a significant figure in modern European social and political theory in general” (p.73), whose ideas are still useful (and, indeed, used) in several urgent debates on present problems. Clark and Martin’s collection deserves praise, to my mind, for making available in the Anglophone world important texts by Elisée Reclus.

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