



ANARCHY, GEOGRAPHY, MODERNITY

SELECTED WRITINGS OF
ELISÉE RECLUS

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
JOHN CLARK AND CAMILLE MARTIN

Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: Selected Writings of Elisée Reclus

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With an Introductory Essay by John Clark

PM

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John Clark and Camille Martin, with an introductory essay by John Clark

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*For all who are able to envision
a free, just, and compassionate world,
and who, like Reclus,
dedicate their lives
to creating such a world*

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L'HOMME EST LA NATURE
PRENANT CONSCIENCE D'ELLE-MÊME

Preface to the PM Press Edition

One of the best-known images from Reclus' works originally appeared above the preface of his magnum opus, *L'Homme et la Terre*, and is reproduced here. It depicts two hands holding the earth, coupled with the statement in French that "Humanity is nature becoming self-conscious." It is clear that the image indicates not only that the fate of the earth is now in the hands of humanity, but also that humanity can only fulfill its weighty responsibility by acting with an awareness that we are an integral part of nature rather than continuing under the illusion that we are a power over and above the natural world. Reclus' message is that the "hands" in the image are those of nature acting through humanity, though it is up to the viewer whether to read the image with more emphasis on humanity or more on nature.

Another famous Reclusian image, the one reproduced on the cover of this book, contains no such ambiguity. In this image, we see Nature herself contemplating or watching over the earth, which the time is clearly held in her hands.¹ The contemplating and holding seem to be inseparable parts of one process. The image evokes aspects of the contemporary ethics of care, an important dimension of ecofeminism, in which "holding" is a key concept. Feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick introduced this idea to describe the maternal attitude of preserving, conserving, and maintaining what is needed in a child's life. Quoting Adrienne Rich, she adds that it is an attitude essential to "world-protection, world-preservation, world-repair."² The question posed by this Reclusian image is very much in this spirit: whether we can fulfill our historical destiny as an integral part of nature, awakened to the earth by allowing it to reveal itself to us, and playing our role in holding and caring for it.

It has been almost a decade since the first edition of this work appeared. Since then, the crucial significance of Reclus' vision of humanity as the developing self-consciousness of the earth has become increasingly clear, as the costs of the continued operation of the system of economic, political, and technological domination become more and more evident. The magnitude of these costs is most striking in regard to global ecological crisis. Researchers at the Stockholm Resilience Centre have formulated a conception of "planetary boundaries" within which human activity could continue without precipitating a global ecological collapse, and concluded that "transgressing one or more planetary boundaries may be deleterious or even catastrophic due to the risk of crossing thresholds that will trigger non-linear, abrupt environmental change within continental- to planetary-scale systems."³ They have defined nine such boundaries: climate change, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion, biogeochemical nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, global freshwater use, rate of biodiversity loss, land-system change, chemical pollution, and atmospheric aerosol loading. They suggest that three boundaries have already been passed and that most others are rapidly being approached.⁴ Knowledge of such threats has expanded greatly over the past decade. This is exemplified by the successive United Nations Climate Change Conferences that focus the world's attention on global climate crisis, while the negotiations fail ever more miserably.

Global social crisis has followed a similarly tragic trajectory. The consumptionist culture of nihilism and the productionist system of technological domination have continued to colonize all areas of global society, while the nationalist, ethnic identitarian, and religious fundamentalist reactions to these processes continue to accelerate. Integral to these developments (both those internal to the dominant system and those generated in reaction to it) is the continual expansion by capitalism and the state of mechanisms of surveillance, control and annihilation. In view of the inability of the dominant system to significantly reform, much less radically transform itself in the face of global social and ecological crisis

Reclus' call for a many-sided social ecological revolution to replace the system of domination with engaged and compassionate communities in solidarity with humanity and nature seems increasingly prophetic.

The year after this book originally appeared, 2005, marked the 100th anniversary of the death of Elisée Reclus and the 175th anniversary of his birth. It also signaled the beginning of a surge of interest in his thought. A number of international conferences brought together researchers and activists to discuss Reclus' work and its relevance today. These included conferences on "The Geographer, the Citizen, and the World" at the University of Montpellier, France (dedicated to Reclus and French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache); "Elisée Reclus and Our Geographies: Texts and Pretexts" at the University of Lyon, France; "Elisée Reclus, Nature and Education" at the University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy; and "Humanity and the Earth / L'Homme et la Terre: The Legacy of Elisée Reclus" at Loyola University in New Orleans. Such international events have continued to take place as interest in Reclus expands. The most important of these, "Elisée Reclus and the Geography of the New World," took place in 2011 at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, which has become a global center of Reclus research.

In recent years, the rate of publication of works on or by Reclus has grown exponentially. In the wake of the centennial, two new books on Reclus and two collections of Reclus conference proceedings appeared.⁵ In the succeeding years, a new biography, a work on Reclus and colonialism, another on Reclus and the United States, and a brief introductory text have appeared.⁶ In addition, anarchist geographer Philippe Pelletier recently published a massive volume on Reclus, Kropotkin, and Metchnikoff to follow up his earlier book on Reclus and anarchy.⁷ In addition to the new French publications, Federico Ferretti, who is responsible for some of the most important research and writing on Reclus, has published two works in Italian.⁸ New editions of Reclus' own works have included two collections of his writings on the Americas, a volume of his letters from prison and exile, a reprint of his "Great Globe" project, and a new edition of his anarchist political writings.⁹ While translation of Reclus' writings into major languages has proceeded slowly, twelve volumes of Reclus' works have recently been published in Portuguese, and a collection in Spanish is forthcoming.¹⁰ A documentary film on Reclus has also appeared recently.¹¹ In view of the rapidly growing interest in Reclus, this is an auspicious time for the new edition of the present work to appear.

We would like to reiterate our gratitude to the many who contributed to the project, and who were mentioned in the preface to the first edition. Prof. Ronald Creagh deserves further thanks for his contributions to this revised edition. In addition, we would like to thank Ramsey Kanaan and Craige O'Hara of PM Press for their encouragement and assistance, and John Yates for his skill and imagination in designing the cover of this edition. We are extremely grateful to PM Press for making it possible for this work to become readily available to its intended audience for the first time. With the publication of the first accessible edition of this work and the first comprehensive collection of writings by Gustav Landauer in English, PM Press has been instrumental in bringing to an English-speaking audience the work of the two greatest classical communitarian anarchist philosophers. Paraphrasing Hegel's famous statement about philosophy, "the Owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk," we might say that for anarchist philosophy today the Owl of Minerva increasingly takes flight at PM.

Preface to the First Edition

Elisée Reclus' life and ideas have been an inspiration to both of us ever since we first discovered his fascinating account of his voyage to New Orleans. We both have a strong interest in French culture and ideas and in the history of the French in America—an interest that was influenced by our Louisiana and French family backgrounds. One of us has long been interested in anarchist theory and social ecology and has written several books on these subjects. For these reasons, we were intrigued by this French anarchist geographer and his acute observations on the land of our ancestors, *la Louisiane*. We went on to translate the text of Reclus' voyage, which was published as *A Voyage to New Orleans: Anarchist Impressions of the Old South*.¹

As we continued to study Reclus over most of the past decade, we found his writings not only interesting historically but also pertinent to today's world. We have both been active in the Green movement and in various ecological projects, and for a number of years we edited a magazine concerned with (among other things) bioregional culture and ecological politics. We were struck by the degree to which Reclus' ideas concerning the relationship between humanity and the earth, his view of history and the struggle for liberation, and his critique of various forms of oppression and domination were relevant to the theory and practice of political ecology. Reclus' efforts to put his inspiring ideals into practice in his personal life also impressed us greatly. We concluded that despite serious limitations in some areas, he has an important message of freedom, human love and solidarity, and reconciliation with nature that is as meaningful today as ever before. In fact, it takes on even more significance in an increasingly cynical age that is sorely in need of a vision of hope, social creativity, and the universal good. This book is the result of our desire to share Reclus' vision with others.



The project of selecting excerpts from Reclus' voluminous writings was rather daunting. His two most important works alone run to twenty-five volumes and more than twenty thousand pages, and he also wrote other important multivolume works. Furthermore, he contributed many articles to geographic journals, intellectual reviews, and popular political magazines, in addition to writing a number of widely circulated political pamphlets. The translated selections and introductory essays draw on many of these works, but most particularly Reclus' magnum opus of social geography and social theory, *Man and the Earth*. This 3,500-page book, which was the culmination of his life's work, has been almost unknown to the English-speaking world. Our translation makes key sections of this work available to English language readers for the first time. We are also presenting the first English translation of a large section of Reclus' only full-length political work, *Evolution, Revolution and the Anarchist Ideal*, and several other important short works written over a period of a half-century. In addition, the introductory essays offer the first extensive analysis of Reclus' social thought ever to appear in English. Our goal is to offer the reader a brief but comprehensive view of Reclus' life and work, and an appreciation of his importance in philosophy, social theory, and political thought.

The translation of diverse works published between 1866 and 1905 presented certain difficulties. The most demanding of our challenges was to produce a translation that would be readable for a contemporary audience but still capture the flavor of Reclus' nineteenth-century prose. His final work, *Man and the Earth*, presented the most formidable difficulties. According to his nephew Paul, Reclus completed the manuscript in 1903, and they worked together on editorial revisions of this vast si

volume work “between October 1903 and Reclus’ death in July 1905.”² Certain important discussions, while quite coherent and sometimes reaching the level of eloquence, never received the thorough editing they deserved. We have attempted to remain faithful to Reclus’ meaning while achieving as much clarity as the texts allow.

We have consistently employed English cognates in certain cases in which Reclus’ French usage strongly reflects his culture and historical epoch. We felt that it was important to use the generic “man” not only because it was the contemporary English equivalent of Reclus’ “*l’homme*” but also because it expresses very well the tension, and indeed the conflict, between his anarchistic, liberatory aspirations and the conventional, and even conservative, conceptual framework he inherited. The same point applies to such terminology as the “conquest” of various goals as opposed to their “achievement”; the “discovery” of regions by Europeans rather than their “exploration”; and the description of certain cultures as “primitive,” “savage,” and “barbarian” rather than “tribal,” “hunting and gathering,” or “planting.” At times, Reclus explicitly recognized the problematical nature of some of these terms, but he continued to use them, and they certainly express the classic modernist political sensibility that constitutes an important dimension of his outlook.

Language typical of the classical workers’ movement and nineteenth-century radicalism has also been retained. For example, the term *maître* has usually been translated as “master,” a term that frequently appeared in English-language anarchist prose of his time, in preference to “ruler” or other more contemporary terms. Reclus uses two terms, *camarade* and *compagnon*, for his fellow members of the revolutionary movement. We have translated these terms as “comrade” and “companion,” for even though only the former is common in such a context in English, various cognates of the latter term have been very widely used in the international anarchist movement. Reclus’ *pain* has consistently been translated as “bread,” even when the terms “food” or “necessities of life” would seem more natural today. It was Reclus who gave Kropotkin the title for his famous work *The Conquest of Bread*. Although the phrase may now strike one as rather strange, it reflects very well the social imagination of European revolutionaries of the nineteenth century. Finally, it will be noted that in a few cases we have included the original French in brackets when the word is unusual, or when the original might usefully convey certain connotations to readers with some knowledge of French.

We would like to express our deepest thanks to our close friend and colleague Prof. Ronald Creagh of the Université Paul Valéry in Montpellier, France, for many hours of discussion of numerous points of translation, for his highly perceptive comments on the introductory essays, and for his assistance in locating important texts. We also wish to express our deep gratitude to M. Pierre Bravo-Gala for his generosity and enthusiasm in discussing our translation, for his friendship and hospitality, and for his many astute suggestions on the interpretation of some of Reclus’ most perplexing passages. We would like to thank Prof. Gary Dunbar for his very helpful comments on the text and for his generous gift of invaluable research materials. We are grateful to Prof. Kent Mathewson for his encouragement and support, and to Mr. Pavlos Stavropoulos for encouraging us to expand our project to its present scope. We would also like to recognize Ms. Deborah F. Justice for outstanding editorial work on the text.

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An Introduction to Reclus' Social Thought

The Earth Story, the Human Story

Elisée Reclus begins his magnum opus of social theory, *Man and the Earth*, with the words “L’Homme est la nature prenant conscience d’elle-même”—“Humanity is nature becoming self-conscious.”¹ Above this statement is an image of the earth, held in two upward-stretching hands. In an important sense, the purpose of that work, and indeed, of Reclus’ entire life’s work, is to draw out the implications of these words and this image. He wishes to trace the course of human history, showing the unity and development underlying the diversity of cultures and epochs, and then to situate the history of our species within the larger history of the planet. In doing so, he hopes to contribute significantly to the very process of the development of self-consciousness that he describes.

Reclus wishes in this way to help humanity discover its meaning as a historical being and as an aspect of the earth’s larger processes of self-realization. It is his further hope that the discovery of these truths about ourselves can also help us to act consciously and responsibly as part of a developing human community and a developing earth community. In short, Reclus retells the story of humanity in the context of the story of the earth. He thus places his work firmly in the tradition of the great historical narratives.

This is a tradition that might seem outmoded today. The revolutionary “grand narratives” of socialism and communism have been widely discredited, and even the dominant “grand narratives” of capitalism, technological progress, and nationalism appear in an increasingly demythologized form. The power of brute facts (or certain social conditions that are ideologically mystified as “brute facts”) seemingly banishes the great myths of progress and social transformation. Ironically, mystification displaces mythology.

We (or at least the “we” of the West and its dependencies) seem now to be living through a period between narratives, between myths, if indeed we have not reached the end of the history of myth. It is a time of nihilism, in which the quest for being and meaning is replaced by the struggle for power. Without a Golden Age to emulate or a utopia to create, we find ourselves seemingly trapped in a rather uninspiring if overawing present. Banality is raised to the level of the sublime. We retain bits and pieces of the fragmented myths of the past and increasingly find ourselves left with disconnected bits and pieces of self. At worst, we merely accumulate and discard; at best, we recycle.

Reclus lived in a strikingly different age, in the heyday of the Myth of Progress. Partisans of the system of domination exuded optimism, if not smug complacency. Its opponents bristled with righteous indignation and glowed with idealistic hope for revolutionary change. Today, such hope has largely been replaced by the spirit of resignation. Conservatism declines into hardened cynicism, while radicalism is reduced to resentful marginalization. Between the two reigns confusion.

In an age of resignation, any narrative of universal self-realization seems suspect—as evidenced by recent postmodernist critiques of the very idea of the “grand narrative.” Critics allege that any attempt to discover a transhistorical universality, or even any unifying thread running through the fabric of history betrays an intellectual will to power, cultural imperialism, or a disguised apology for the forces of domination. It is indeed true that such narratives are usually guilty of one or more of these charges. And granted, it is the function of critical thought to subject all interpretation to the most ruthless questioning.

Yet Reclus' anarchist "grand narrative"—for the very reason that it is self-consciously anarchistic and aims at the destruction of the system of domination—presents a challenge to such sweeping dismissals of the quest for a more comprehensive, holistic view of history. Although it is true (and not very surprising) that Reclus does not entirely escape the biases that plague the creators of universal narratives, there are fundamental differences between his project and almost all the others. One of these concerns the identification of the historical protagonist (the "subject" or agent of history). Reclus' universal subject is not, as one finds in the stereotypical "grand narrative," Western or "civilized" humanity engaged in a process of triumphant world domination. Rather, it is a global humanity, embedded in nature, yet undertaking an open-ended and creative project of liberatory self-realization.

Thus, Reclus can be looked upon as an early prophet of globalization. His significance today comes in large part from his presentation of an egalitarian, libertarian vision of globalization—a globalization "from below"—that offers a theoretical alternative to the dominant corporate and statist versions that now prevail. Writing in the 1870s, he foresees a future in which "equality will obtain in the end, not only between America and Europe, but also between these two and the other quarters of the world." In place of a world divided into a powerful, wealthy, and hegemonic core and a weak, poor, and dominated periphery, the world will have "its center everywhere, its periphery nowhere."²

Reclus' project in fact points beyond even the globalization of humanity, for he understood the globe as the whole earth, of which we are an integral part. We develop within and in relation to that whole in all its complexity. He takes a dialectical approach in which every phenomenon, including the phenomenon of humanity, is inseparable from other phenomena (geographical features of the land, other living beings, natural regions) to which it is related. An understanding of the world thus requires a simultaneous understanding of all the interconnected and interpenetrating factors. For as Reclus states, though we must always seek to understand the significance of each determining factor, "it is only through an act of pure abstraction that one can contrive to present a particular aspect of the environment as if it had a distinct existence, and strive to isolate it from all the others, in order to study its essential influence."³

Thus, from his dialectical perspective the unity of history must be discovered through a deep understanding of the diversity of phenomena, both natural and social. Accordingly, his account of the human story recognizes the integrity and specificity of the other—whether this other be a cultural or a natural one. He recognizes various past cultures and many existing non-Western ones for their unique and enduring contributions to progress, and he rejects the reduction of these cultures to mere obsolete stages of development toward the higher social, political, economic, and intellectual achievements of the modern West. Nor does he depict the natural world as a mere backdrop for human history. Rather, nature is for him always an active presence, both encompassing humanity and remaining in intimate dialectical interaction with humanity throughout history.

Furthermore, Reclus' account of human history and earth history avoids the imposition of closure, and it always retains a moment of creativity, novelty, and openness. In the preface to *Man and the Earth* he summarizes what he sees as "the three orders of facts that are revealed to us through the study of social geography, and which remain so constant amidst the chaos of things that one might well label them 'laws.'" These are "the class struggle, the quest for equilibrium and the sovereign decision of the individual."⁴ In each case, the sweeping historical "law" is far from being a narrowly deterministic one. The class struggle for Reclus is a realm of creative, self-expressive activity on the part of the dominated and oppressed, not a result of their mere reactivity to social conditions. Moreover, the quest for equilibrium is a creative project of humanity in which human beings have over the course of history

invented diverse modes of cooperation, mutual aid, and cultural self-expression. For Reclus, social disequilibrium arises from the lack of freedom and from the attempt to impose a static order on a dynamic social milieu.⁵ He agrees with Proudhon that freedom is “the mother, not the daughter, of order,” and he adds that domination necessarily engenders disorder. Finally, despite the strong communitarian dimension of Reclus’ anarchism, it is “the human person, the primary element of society,” that is the source of “the creative will that constructs and reconstructs the world.”⁶ It is his hope that this creative freedom will lead humanity to a future society based on free association, which will synthesize social harmony and equilibrium with social diversity and spontaneity.

Reclus was a pioneer in the project of writing the story of the earth and of humanity.⁷ His anarchic grand narrative is a sweeping account of the planet from its beginnings, through the course of evolution over the ages, and finally through the manifold episodes of the human story within the story. It depicts the intersection of natural history and human history— or as he terms it, the story of “nature becoming self-conscious.” Integral to this history is an account of the forces of domination that emerge in human history, only to restrict the future self-realization of both humanity and nature. So needless to say another central theme of his story is the long quest to overcome these forces of domination.

In exploring such themes, Reclus anticipates later critiques of the domination of humanity and nature, developed from the Frankfurt School through contemporary poststructuralist and radical ecological thought. We are now entering an era in which concepts of global social and ecological crisis become more familiar; ideas that were once limited primarily to the arcane realm of abstract social theory begin to pervade the larger culture. Consequently, the world-historical narrative that Reclus recounts may have even greater resonance today than it did in his own time.

As will be shown in the discussion that follows, Reclus’ emancipatory vision of history is a sweeping one with universalistic dimensions, but it encompasses a social and ecological ethic that is based on concern for the self-realization of all beings in their uniqueness and particularity, and a practice of love and care for those beings.⁸ This ethic is perhaps summarized best (at least in regard to humanity) in a letter that Reclus wrote near the end of his life to a Protestant minister in Orthez, his hometown. He asserts that his own ethic embodies the highest ideals of Christianity, ideals that had, perhaps ironically, been betrayed by institutionalized religion but carried on by anarchism:

It seems to me that as a libertarian socialist or, to be more precise, a communist anarchist, I am in many ways close to the Christian of the Gospels. Thus, I must neither call anyone “master” nor call myself “master” of anyone else. I must seek to live in a condition of equality with everyone, Jew or Greek, owner or slave, millionaire or beggar, without accepting any kind of supposed superiority or inferiority. I must adopt the old Christian maxim not to do anything to others that I would not want done to myself, and to do to others only what I would wish them to do to me. If I claim the right of personal or collective self-defense, nevertheless I will forbid myself any idea of vengeance, which is a primitive practice, and no hatred will arise in my heart, since it would be aimed at unfortunates who are already victims of atavism or a bad environment. Finally, and again like the Christian who is faithful to his name, I would love first of all the brother whom I see “before cherishing or adoring the unknown beings that I do not see.”⁹

Reclus’ life work was to prepare the way for a world in which all forms of domination—all “mastery”—would be abolished, so that humanity could live in a free community of equals founded on such practice of active, engaged love and compassion.

The Anarchist Geographer

Elisée Reclus was born on March 15, 1830, in Sainte-Foy-la-Grande, a small town on the Dordogne River in southwestern France. His father, Jacques Reclus, was a minister in Sainte-Foy and a professor at the nearby Protestant college. He was, in effect, a Protestant among Protestants, deciding to leave the French Reformed Church to become the pastor of a “Free Church” in the town of Orthez. By leaving an established church, Jacques Reclus rejected, for the sake of his beliefs, the possibilities of personal advancement and greater material security for himself and his large family. According to Elisée’s nephew and biographer, Paul Reclus, Jacques powerfully influenced his children by his dedication to his principles, by “putting communism into practice” in his daily life, and by showing himself, through his independence from official religion, to be a “precursor of anarchism.”¹ Elisée echoes these sentiments when he says that his father “was not an ordinary man who is content to live in accord with the world; he had the strange fantasy of wishing to live according to his conscience.”² Elsewhere, he notes that when Jacques at first dominated the Reclus children through his powerful personality, his lasting influence took the form of creating in them “the ideal of the unyielding conscience.”³ Elisée’s own independence of thought and his quest for a just community were thus conditioned by his paternal heritage of religious dissent. Indeed, his anarchism can be seen as the ultimate Protestant revolt against two of the most dominant religions of the modern age: the deification of capital and the worship of the state. Moreover, his later ideal of a universal community of love is clearly a transformation of the concept of Christian love that he encountered in his early life.

Other familial influences on Elisée were also very important. His sense of dedication to the general good was fostered by the example of his mother, Marguerite Trigant, who inspired admiration within the family and the community for her tireless efforts in conducting a school for girls, while conscientiously raising thirteen children, eleven of whom reached adulthood. Marguerite also influenced her children through her knowledge of literature, her encouragement of good writing,⁴ and her “deep love” for the family.⁵ While Reclus later broke with his parents over their conservative religious views, both left enduring marks on his character and ideals. Moreover, his ties with the rest of the family remained unusually strong throughout his life. This was true above all in the case of his older brother, Elie, with whom he maintained a deep personal, political, and intellectual relationship throughout the course of their long lives. While Reclus later launched a fierce attack on the patriarchal authoritarian family, the family as a loving community of mutual aid and solidarity had a strong influence on his vision of the good society.

Reclus was educated primarily in Protestant institutions. At the age of twelve he was sent to the Moravian School in Neuwied, Germany, where he learned German, Latin, English, and Dutch. His budding cosmopolitanism was encouraged not only by his exposure to another culture and to diverse languages but also by his personal experience of nationalistic animosity and prejudice against foreigners on the part of many of his fellow students. These experiences contributed to his growing concern for universal justice and belief in human solidarity. He returned to France, attended the Protestant College of Sainte-Foy, from which he received the baccalaureate, and then went to the Protestant University of Montauban. By this time, the seventeen-year-old Reclus had already developed an interest in radical

political ideas and was becoming increasingly disillusioned with his conservative Calvinist environment. Looking back on this period, he remarks that he, his brother Elie, and their schoolmates began to broaden their horizons as they heard news from Paris “of political struggles” and “then, all at once, of the Revolution itself.”⁶ The growing rebelliousness of the Reclus brothers is evidenced by the fact that the next year they were both expelled from the university for leaving school without permission to travel to the Mediterranean. For Elisée, this event perhaps signaled both his growing rejection of established institutions and his budding passion for exploring the larger world. Elie later described Elisée’s reaction to his first view of the great sea as ecstatic. Despite his restlessness, Reclus managed to return to the school at Neuwied, where he taught briefly. He then completed his formal education with six months of study at the University of Berlin. This stay, though relatively brief, was crucial in his development, for it was in Berlin that he attended lectures by the famous geographer Carl Ritter, who greatly stimulated his interest in his future field of specialization.

Already during his student years, Reclus’ political ideas were quite radical. In a manuscript dating from this period, the twenty-one-year-old expresses views that already quite clearly defined the course of his future anarchism and its underlying basis. He judges the goal of history to be “complete and absolute liberty,” adding that such liberty will amount to nothing more than “colossal egoism” if it is not united with love.⁷ “For each individual man,” he asserts, “liberty is an end,” but in a larger sense “it is only a means toward love and universal brotherhood.”⁸ Reclus’ lifelong concern with a synthesis of the ideals of freedom and solidarity are thus already quite evident. Even at this early date the implications of his views were clear enough for him to state, in terms reminiscent of Proudhon, that “our destiny is to reach the state of ideal perfection in which nations will no longer need to be under the tutelage of a government of another nation; it is the absence of government, it is anarchy, the highest expression of order.”⁹

Reclus’ conception of freedom had by this time already extended beyond the political into other realms, including the economic. He asserts that “political liberty is nothing without other liberties” and that freedom is meaningless “for those who despite their sweat cannot buy bread for their families, and for those workers who only incur new sufferings through the revolutions they themselves make.”¹⁰ He also anticipates his later critique of authoritarian socialism in noting that “some communist varieties [of socialism], in reaction against the present-day society, seem to believe that men ought to dissolve themselves into the mass and become nothing more than the innumerable arms of an octopus” or “drop of water lost in the sea.”¹¹ Reclus holds, to the contrary, that community and solidarity can never be separated from liberty and individuality. In this his ideas are reminiscent of those of William Godwin, his great predecessor in the tradition of philosophical anarchism. Godwin also emerged from the tradition of Protestant dissent and like Reclus was heir to a legacy of deep concern for the inviolability of individual conscience and respect for personal autonomy.¹²

After leaving Berlin, Elisée joined Elie in a walk across France, from Strasbourg on the Rhine in the northeast, to Orthez in the extreme southwest corner of the hexagon. By this time, both brothers had developed a passion not only for advanced political ideas but also for radical political action. They were enraged by Louis Napoléon’s coup d’état of December 2, 1851, and met to plan a march to the *mairie* in Orthez to organize resistance. Only a small group of would-be insurrectionists actually set out the next morning for the *mairie*, and even these few, one by one, abandoned their plan. By the time the dwindling revolutionary mob reached its destination, it consisted of only two participants, Elisée and Elie.¹³ Although their rebellion had turned into a fiasco, the authorities seemed to take the matter seriously, and the Reclus brothers found it necessary to leave France and take refuge in England. For Elisée, this flight began over five years of foreign travel, and it profoundly affected his future vocation

a geographer.

Reclus spent most of a year in England and Ireland, working first as a tutor in London and then as a farm worker near Dublin. During this period, he developed the idea of exploring the Americas with the intention of eventually establishing an agricultural community in cooperation with Elie and other friends. By early 1853, he had crossed the Atlantic and was living in Louisiana.¹⁴ His *Voyage to New Orleans* recounts his passage through the Antilles, his trip up the Mississippi Delta, and his striking impressions of the city of New Orleans. It also chronicles an important stage in the development of his social and political ideas. After working briefly as a dockworker in New Orleans, he found a position as a tutor for the children of the Fortier family of Félicité Plantation. He spent most of his two and one-half years in Louisiana on this plantation, fifty miles up-river from New Orleans on the west bank of the Mississippi. His experience with the much-romanticized plantation society of the Old South produced in him above all a visceral reaction to the cruel inhumanity of slavery.¹⁵ His revulsion toward the slave system was largely responsible for his decision to leave Louisiana. He wrote that he could not continue to earn money by tutoring the children of slaveholders and thus “steal from the Negroes who by their sweat and blood have earned the money that I put in my pocket.”¹⁶ His strong sense of personal moral responsibility is evident in his judgment concerning his relationship to the system of slavery. He concluded that by remaining in the plantation house even in the seemingly innocuous role of tutor and participating in such an institution, “it is indeed I who hold the whip.”¹⁷

In addition to intensifying his hatred of racism, Reclus' visit to Louisiana also strengthened his belief in the inhumanity of capitalism. While his experiences in Europe had already led him to abhor the evils of economic inequality and exploitation, he discovered in America an economic mentality that far surpassed anything he had experienced in more traditionalist European societies. He concluded that the spirit of commerce and material gain had deeply infected American culture and poisoned it. As he wrote to his brother Elie, he believed the country to be a “great auction house in which everything is for sale: the slaves and the owner into the bargain, votes and honor, the Bible and consciences. Everything goes for the highest bidder.”¹⁸ His loathing for the virtues of free enterprise continued throughout his lifetime.

After leaving Louisiana, Reclus spent eighteen months in New Granada (now Colombia), where he attempted unsuccessfully to realize his dream of a cooperative agricultural community. His efforts were doomed by yellow fever, inadequate planning, and his partnership with an elderly Frenchman who turned out to be untrustworthy. Reclus was reduced to penury by this disastrous undertaking and ended up “without the means even to buy a pair of shoes.”¹⁹ Despite the setbacks that Reclus experienced in the Americas, his travels on both continents contributed greatly to his development as a geographer. During his stay in Louisiana, he traveled up the Mississippi and into Canada, making observations that would be invaluable for his later writings on North America.²⁰ In addition, his visit to New Granada formed the basis for his book *Voyage to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta*.²¹

After six years of travel, Reclus decided to return to his home and family and to seek new opportunities in France. He returned with his idealism and creative energy seemingly unaffected by his adversities and with a wealth of experience that would be invaluable in his future vocation. His strong beliefs concerning the desirability of blending races and cultures were put into practice in his personal life when he married, in December 1858, Clarisse Brian, the daughter of a French father and a Senegalese mother. According to Paul Reclus, “there is not the slightest doubt that Elisée's stay in Louisiana formed in him the idea of marrying a daughter of the despised race.”²² To whatever degree this may have been his motive, the marriage was also based on personal affinity and was a happy one. Tragically, it ended

after ten years with Clarisse's death, shortly after the birth of their third child, who also died soon thereafter. A year later, Reclus married an old friend, Fanny L'Herminez, according to anarchist principles—that is, without the intrusion of either church or state. This alliance proved to be his closest and most cherished relationship with any woman in his life since the two shared many common values, intellectual interests, and political commitments. There was a deep spiritual affinity between them comparable only to that which Reclus had with his brother Elie. Although Fanny died less than forty years after the marriage, he was profoundly affected by her for the rest of his life and for many years included her name or initials as part of his signature. He later entered into another “free union” with his third wife, Ermance Beaumont-Trigant. This relationship was also a personally fulfilling one for Reclus, though it lacked the spiritual depth he had found in his relationship with Fanny.

The testimony of Reclus' friends and colleagues indicates that his egalitarian and cooperative ideas were practiced admirably in his personal life. His fundamental principles of solidarity and mutual aid were much more than political slogans. According to his friend and fellow anarchist geographer Peter Kropotkin, “the idea of dominating anyone at all seems never to have crossed his mind; he hated down to the smallest signs a dominating spirit.”²³ This was true of his relationships not only with his wives but also with other members of his family and his broad circle of friends. He was widely praised for his great humility and his reluctance to present himself as a “leader” or “expert.” While he became well known as both a scientist and a political writer and activist, he vehemently rejected the idea of having followers or of placing himself in a position of superiority. As he once wrote to a young woman who was a would-be disciple: “For shame.... Is it right for some to be subordinated to others? I do not call myself ‘your disciple.’”²⁴ There are numerous stories of his interactions with others on terms of complete equality and of his unassuming participation in the more menial aspects of political work. Jean Grave notes that Reclus “was able to listen to objections from whatever source they came, and to answer them without any pride and without the sharp tone of one who issues decrees, and admits of no discussion.”²⁵ His spirit of nondomination extended beyond human beings to all other creatures and, indeed, to nature as a whole. He could not bear the idea of mistreating any sentient being, and he practiced vegetarianism for most of his life, on ethical grounds.

During the 1860s, Reclus published many geographical essays in the *Revue des deux mondes* and other journals, and he completed the first of his three great geographical projects. *The Earth* is an extensive fifteen-hundred-page work in two volumes, published in 1868 and 1869.²⁶ This impressive study of the physical geography of the earth established Reclus rather early in his lifetime as an important figure in his field. In 1869, he published *The Story of a Brook*, a popular work that became a classic of nature writing for young people.²⁷ It was later followed by a companion work, *The Story of a Mountain*.²⁸ Another of Reclus' activities in this period was his work in the cooperative movement, largely in support of Elie's initiatives. The two brothers were responsible for the publication of the cooperativist journal *L'Association* and the creation of a mutual bank, La Société du Crédit au Travail. The journal's difficulty in finding a public and the collapse of the bank contributed to Reclus' increasing disillusionment with the cooperative movement.

For Reclus and his circle, the early 1870s were dominated by the events of the Paris Commune and its aftermath. Since he was over forty years of age at the time, he was exempt from military service during the Franco-Prussian War. Nevertheless, he volunteered for the National Guard, believing that it was necessary to defend the Republic against reactionary enemies. He served in the balloonist company of his friend Félix Nadar, but he did not see military action until after the Commune was declared. During the brief life of the revolutionary regime, he actively participated in both its politics and the defense of the

city. As Paris fell, his column of the National Guard was captured by the Versailles troops. During the next eleven months, he spent time in fourteen different prisons and was tried and sentenced to deportation to New Caledonia.

Despite his refusal to submit to the new regime, and largely because of his prestige as a scientist and intellectual, his friends and supporters succeeded in having his sentence reduced to ten years in exile. As a result, he was allowed to immigrate to Switzerland. Ironically, this exile at the hands of a reactionary regime contributed powerfully to his development as a radical political theorist and a force within the European anarchist movement, for in Switzerland he began his association with the anarchists of the Jura Federation and developed close ties with the major anarchist theorists Bakunin and Kropotkin. After some initial differences in outlook, Bakunin and Reclus became close collaborators in the First International and in the anarchist movement (including Bakunin's International Brotherhood). Bakunin once said of the Reclus brothers that he had never known any persons more "modest, noble, disinterested, pure, and religiously devoted to their principles."²⁹ These principles were close enough to Bakunin's own that the three remained strong political allies until Bakunin's death. Elisée delivered an eulogy to the great revolutionary at his funeral in Berne in 1876.

It was also in Switzerland that Reclus began his greatest geographical work, the *New Universal Geography*.³⁰ This monumental achievement appeared in nineteen large volumes between 1876 and 1894. The reader is struck not only by the quality of the writing, which, according to Patrick Geddes, "raised anew geography into literature,"³¹ but also by the expansive scope of this seventeen-thousand-page work, the exhaustiveness of its details, and the magnificence of its illustrations. Geographer G. H. Dunbar, in his biography of Reclus, concludes that "for a generation" this work "was to serve as the ultimate geographical authority" and that it constituted "probably the greatest individual writing feat in the history of geography."³² Reclus remained in Switzerland until 1890, heavily occupied with his extensive scholarship and political activities, and then finally returned to France after almost two decades of exile.

In 1894, he began a new phase of his career when he accepted an invitation to become a professor at the New University in Brussels. Reclus had originally been invited to teach at the Free University of Brussels, but because of increasing public reaction against anarchist "propaganda by the deed," he was judged too controversial, and the invitation was withdrawn. This chain of events produced considerable dissension within the Free University and contributed to the decision to found the New University. Despite the rather dissident character of this institution, Reclus had some reservations about entering even the remotest corner of the academic world, having remained an independent scholar, following his own political and intellectual path, until quite late in life. He wrote that although the "noble war cry" of the New University was "Let Us Make Men!" he feared that "to a certain degree it would also contribute to making exploiters."³⁴ Despite these misgivings, he finally accepted the challenge with enthusiasm and it was a great success, achieving renown as a teacher and winning the enduring admiration of many students.

At the conclusion of the *New Universal Geography*, Reclus comments that from "the myriad facts" of that vast work he would like to "extract a general idea, and thus, in a small volume written at leisure, justify the long series of books now ended without apparent conclusion."³⁵ The "small volume" turned out to be Reclus' final major work, the six-volume, thirty-five-hundred-page *Man and the Earth*.³⁶ This impressive undertaking constitutes a grand synthesis of Reclus' ideas on geography, history, philosophy, science, politics, religion, anthropology, and many other fields. While the work reinforced his reputation as a major figure in the history of geography, it also expanded social geography beyond the conventional

limits of the geographical into a comprehensive worldview. Since his publisher had compelled Reclus to avoid in the *New Universal Geography* any lengthy “digressions” on social and political topics, he reserved many of his most important theoretical reflections for this final work.³⁷ It is thus both the culmination of his life’s work as a social geographer and the most developed expression of his anarchist social philosophy.

Reclus was admirably consistent in integrating his libertarian and communitarian ideals into his personal life, his political activism, and his scholarly work. His enduring love of life, of other human beings, and of truth is expressed eloquently in a letter written March 25, 1905, only a few months before his death. At the age of seventy-five, though ill and growing increasingly weaker, he could still write of “two powerful attractions” that gave him the will to live. The first consisted of “affection, tenderness, the joy of loving, the happiness of having friends and of making them feel that one loves them, that one asks nothing of them but to let themselves be loved, and that every token of affection is a delight freely given.” The second, he says, is “the study of history, the joy of seeing the interconnection of things. There is doubtless a strong element of imagination in this study, and deceptive Maya also leads us down many false paths. But it is another great joy to recognize one’s errors.”³⁸

Reclus died in the countryside at Thourout near Brussels on July 4, 1905. It is reported that his last days were made particularly happy by news of the popular revolution in Russia. He expired shortly after hearing of the revolt of the sailors on the battleship *Potemkin*.

The Dialectic of Nature and Culture

It is likely that Reclus' most enduring intellectual legacy will be his contribution to the development of the modern ecological worldview and his role in the creation of radical ecological social thought.¹ More specifically, he is important for introducing a strongly ecological dimension into the tradition of anarchist and libertarian social theory. This tradition, like Western thought in general, has been marked by humanity's alienation from the natural world and its quest to dominate nature. Yet it has been, on the whole, more successful than most others in uncovering the roots of this alienation, looking beyond the project of planetary domination, and attempting to restore humanity to its rightful place within rather than above, nature. Reclus made a powerful contribution to introducing this more ecological perspective into anarchist thought.

It is noteworthy that social geography had an impact on anarchist theory at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, just as social ecology has had a certain influence on anarchist thought in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.² While this historical parallel is occasionally noted, the connection is usually made through reference to Kropotkin as a forerunner of ecological anarchism. Few commentators have understood that Reclus, much more than Kropotkin, introduced into anarchist theory themes that were later developed in social ecology and eco-anarchism. Indeed, Reclus explored these social ecological issues with considerable theoretical sophistication—more than a century ago.³

Béatrice Giblin, in her article “Reclus: An Ecologist ahead of His Time?” contends that Reclus “had a global ecological sensibility that died with him for almost a full half-century.”⁴ This sweeping generalization is in some ways even an understatement of the case. The kind of ecological perspective that Reclus developed, especially in his great culminating work, *Man and the Earth*, effectively disappeared from mainstream social thought early in the century and did not reemerge significantly until well into the 1970s, in response to growing public awareness of the ecological crisis. In the meantime, ecological thinking remained an undercurrent of anarchist and utopian thought and practice, as, for example, in the work of such communitarian groups as the School of Living of Ralph Borsodi and Mildred Loomis.⁵ However, it did not become a central theme in anarchist and utopian theoretical discussion until the ideas of Paul Goodman and Murray Bookchin began to have a noticeable influence in the late 1960s.⁶

It has been noted that Reclus begins the first volume of his magnum opus of social theory with the epigraph “Man is nature becoming self-conscious.”⁷ This concept—literally, that humanity is “nature taking consciousness of itself”—captures the essence of Reclus' message: that humanity must come to understand its identity as the self-consciousness of the earth and that it must complete the process of developing this consciousness in history. In effect, he proposes a theoretical project of understanding more fully our place in nature and of unmasking the ideologies that distort it, and a corresponding ethical project of assuming, through a transformed social practice, the far-reaching moral responsibility implied by that crucial position. On the basis of this approach, he seeks to explain the development of human society in dialectical interaction with the rest of the natural world, and he expounds a theory of social progress in which human self-realization and the flourishing of the planet as a whole can finally

reconciled with one another.

Reclus always had a strong sense of humanity's intimate connectedness to the natural world. Even in his early work, he eloquently describes humanity's character as an expression of the earth's creativity and our kinship with all of life. "We are," he says, "the children of the 'beneficent mother,' like the trees of the forest and the reeds of the rivers. She it is from whom we derive our substance; she nourishes us with her mother's milk, she furnishes air to our lungs, and, in fact, supplies us with that wherein we live and move and have our being."⁸ Throughout his works, he remains true to this integral, holistic vision of humanity-in-nature. While his studies became increasingly scientific, technical, and minutely detailed, he never abandoned the aesthetic, poetic, and even spiritual aspects of his attitude toward nature but rather synthesized these dimensions in his far-ranging, integrative perspective. Such a fusion of forms of rationality and imagination that have so often been opposed to one another in Western thinking is one of the most noteworthy dimensions of Reclus' thought.⁹

Similarly, Reclus seeks to integrate a theoretical and scientific understanding of nature with an awareness of the practical implications of such an understanding. His social geography is a thorough political geography, constantly exploring the question of what one might call "the politics of self-conscious nature." Yves Lacoste, the contemporary French geographer who has perhaps done most to revive interest in Reclus, contends that while Reclus was "the greatest French geographer," he has been "completely misunderstood" because of the "central epistemological problem of academic geography: the exclusion of the political."¹⁰ Lacoste finds it ironic that recent discussions of social geography systematically "forget" Reclus' massive six-volume work in which social geography is the "main thread." The situation parallels in some ways the reception of social ecology and radical political ecology today. Such perspectives are sometimes granted validity to the extent that they point out that "all things are connected," including ecological and social realities, but they often lose credibility when they begin to explore the nature of that connection—and dare to find the roots of ecological crisis in the existence of the centralized nation-state and the corporate capitalist economy.

Such parallels should not be surprising, for the connections between Reclus' social geography and social ecology in particular are in many ways quite striking. To the extent that social ecology remains radically dialectical, one of its fundamental interpretive principles is the concept that every phenomenon incorporates within itself the history of that phenomenon. Reclus uses much the same concept to guide his social geography when he observes that "present-day society contains within itself all past societies." He also applies it to human nature, expressing a variation on the idea that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. In his formulation, "man recollects in his structure everything that his ancestors lived through during the vast expanse of ages. He indeed epitomizes in himself all that preceded him in existence, just as, in his embryonic life, he presents successively various forms of organization that are more simple than his own."¹³

There is thus for Reclus a continuity of development in both natural and social phenomena, in which the earlier stages are preserved in the later ones. This does not, however, imply any sort of strict deterministic outlook. Rather, our knowledge of continuities and determinants is seen as contributing to the increased freedom that results from an accurate understanding of the nature of things. Interestingly, Reclus does not hesitate to recognize similarities between "monarchy" in human society and "monarchy" within animal species, as in the case of some primates species with groups having dominant individuals or, as he depicts them, "recognized chiefs."¹⁴ Bookchin, on the other hand, completely rejects any such attributions on the ground that many essential features of human hierarchies do not exist in the animal communities that are described as hierarchical. He seems to fear that the use of such terminology might

imply that human institutions are biologically based and therefore not subject to social transformation. Reclus would certainly recognize the significant differences between human and primate hierarchies, yet he sees the use of such terminology as no threat to his anarchist principles or his hopes for humanity. In his analysis, such language draws attention to a certain continuity between phenomena in the human and natural worlds. Yet from the history of humanity one can learn that social hierarchies are contingent, historically developed institutions that may be rejected if human beings choose to organize their communities in other ways.

Although Reclus believes we can learn much about existing social phenomena through the study of the evolution of all forms of life, his primary focus is on discovering the nature of these phenomena through the examination of their evolution over the history of human society in particular. Such an analysis will guide us in understanding both the structure of and the contradictions within present-day societies. In his analysis of these societies, he discovers that each of them “is composed of superimposed classes, representing in this century all successive previous centuries with their corresponding intellectual and moral cultures,” and that when they are “seen in close juxtaposition, their vastly differing conditions of life present a striking contrast.”¹⁵ Through the investigation of these classes, Reclus seeks to uncover certain fissures in the social structure that are usually concealed by the dominant integrative ideologies. It can thus be shown how the hidden legacy of social domination reveals itself in contemporary social conflicts.

For Reclus, it is necessary to develop a critical consciousness of past historical development if we are ever to transcend the legacy of domination. Such an awareness is a precondition for the conscious creation of a future collective history, a process conceptualized by Reclus as humanity’s attempt “to realize itself through one form that encompasses all ages.”¹⁶ As the species comes to see itself as part of a historical and geographical whole, it attains both self-consciousness and a corresponding freedom. We gain the ability “to free ourselves from the strict line of development determined by the environment that we inhabit and by the specific lineage of our race. Before us lies the infinite network of parallel, diverging, and intersecting roads that other segments of humanity have followed.”¹⁷ It is thus by comprehending the great diversity of human experience that humanity can achieve a unifying vision of its own history.

Just as in society unity is achieved through a recognition of diversity, in nature a unifying harmony is attained through diverse and often discordant elements. Although the ecological perspective has often been identified with a rather one-sided emphasis on harmony, balance, and order, recent discussions in ecological theory have challenged the dominant (ecosystemic, “balance of nature”) model. Indeed, some theorists, inspired by postmodernist thought, have embraced the opposite extreme, seeing only disorder and chaos in nature. Reclus long ago supported a more judicious and theoretically balanced dialectical view that avoids the extremes of overemphasizing either order or chaos.¹⁸ There is indeed, according to Reclus, a harmony and balance in nature, but it is one that operates through a tendency toward disorder and imbalance. He notes that “as plants or animals, including humans, leave their native habitat and intrude on another environment, the harmony of nature is temporarily disturbed”; however, the introduced types either die out or adapt to the new conditions, making a contribution to nature as they “add to the wonderful harmony of the earth, and of all that springs up and grows upon its surface.” Thus, to the extent that there is a “balance of nature” it is not a simple balance of elements but rather a complex balance of order and disorder.

Reclus’ deeply holistic account of natural processes often prefigures contemporary ecological analysis. An example is his discussion of the function of forests in global ecological health. He laments the reckless

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