

Élisée Reclus: A Philosophy of Nature

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ABSTRACT

This entry will study how the thought of the anarchist geographer Élisée Reclus (1830-1905) has contributed to current debates on the planet and the environment. Analyzing the intellectual roots of this original approach to the environment reveals the modernity of a vision refusing any artificial separation between “humanity” and “nature,” and serves as a powerful conceptual tool for questioning the supposed domination of the former over the latter.



Portrait of Élisée Reclus by Nadar, 1889. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Reclus, Mutual Aid, and the Environment

A number of recent works have examined the biography and work of Élisée Reclus, whose pioneering role in a geography sensitive to what is today referred to as “environmental concerns” has been highlighted on a number of occasions. The son of a Protestant pastor from Southwestern France, Reclus studied geography at the University of Berlin with Carl Ritter (1779-1859), and spent most of his career in exile due to political persecution during the early years of the French Second Empire (from 1852 to 1857) and the Paris Commune in 1871, when he was banished for participating in the communalist movement. He took refuge in Switzerland, where he was one of the founders of the anarchist international organized by the Internationale antiautoritaire (Anti-authoritarian International) and the Fédération jurassienne (Jura Federation). These disruptions did not prevent him from publishing monumental works such as *La Terre* (The Earth, 2 vol.), *Nouvelle Géographie universelle* (New Universal Geography, 19 vol.), and *L’Homme et la Terre* (The Earth and its Inhabitants, 6 vol.). Reclus’ travels fostered his attraction for nature and field activities (he also supported outdoor education for children), beginning with his 1856-1857 stay on the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia, which inspired his first writings on “tropical nature.”

The book already contains the notion of an intrinsic relation and harmony that Reclus saw between what is referred to as “humanity” or “culture,” and what is called “nature,” “milieu,” or “environment.” Reclus is often seen as a pioneer of “ecology.” If he never used the definition of “ecology” this was not because it did not yet exist (Pelletier 2013), but because, at that time, it characterized the thought of the German scientist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), whose explicitly anti-socialist positions were diametrically opposed to the ideas of anarchist geographers, especially Reclus and his collaborators Pyotr Kropotkin (1842-1921) and Léon Metchnikoff (1838-1888). Together they invented the theory of mutual aid, which is to say an interpretation of Darwinism based on solidarity that considered cooperation to be a fundamental factor in evolution, in opposition to so-called “social Darwinists,” who exclusively saw endless struggle and competition between species, which they believed also legitimized social inequalities.

Reclus had a personal passion for climbing and hiking, as he pointed out in his famous writings such as *Histoire d’une montagne* (History of a Mountain). A number of his contributions, such as the articles he published during the 1860s in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, anticipated what are today considered to be landscape preservation issues, for instance to protect the beauty of mountains from the construction of tourism sites. Reclus nevertheless distinguished himself from the concept of “wilderness” as it was expressed by George Perkins Marsh (1801-1882), as he did not conceive of a “pristine” nature, and believed it was the duty of the humankind to build respectful relations with the environment, of which he was a consubstantial part. The notion of mutual aid, which could be applied to plant, animal, and human communities, was precisely connected to this consubstantiality between human and non-human worlds. This anticipated contemporary approaches of hybridity and “more-than-human geographies” which have been highly debated in recent years. Exploring the intellectual origins of Reclus’ theory of consubstantiality between humanity and nature helps to grasp its deep intellectual roots, which can still contribute to contemporary environmental debates.

The Productive Return of “Old” Ideas

The philosophy of nature, more precisely *Naturphilosophie* in German, was one of the fundamental elements in Reclus’ intellectual education. Biographical sources indicate that the young Reclus and his older brother Élie (1827-1904) read the works of the German *Naturphilosophen* Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854) and Lorenz Oken (1779-1851), alongside those of the central figures of French socialism such as Pierre Leroux (1797-1871) and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1965). As demonstrated by their historical works, the philosophy of nature of Schelling, Oken, and others also had a strong influence on the work of geographers such as Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) and Ritter himself. During the ensuing years, it was as experts in German language and

culture that the Reclus brothers offered their services to the *Revue germanique* (Germanic Review), for which they proposed translating the works of the philosophers of nature, and declared their ideas in philosophical matters: “We belong to Spinoza’s school of thought” (Institut français d’histoire sociale (IFHS), 14 AS 232, dossier IX, *Letter from Élie and Élisée Reclus to A. Nefftzer, 6 Jan. 1858*).

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) was also an important inspiration for the *Naturphilosophen*, as his idea of a “self-productive nature” entailed that the human intellect could not be separated from the nature of which it was a product. For philosophers of nature, this was one of the foundations of their criticism of Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804), whose thought was still considered by constructivist criticism as the emblem of a modernity dissociating intellect and nature. Anarchist geographers also considered Spinoza’s thought as a reference for their ethic of liberty, in which the individual has the right to revolt against domination for moral reasons. This reference is present in the correspondence between Reclus and Kropotkin in their exchange on their respective memories of prison, especially their readings while in incarceration, which included Spinoza (Archives d’État de la Fédération russe (GARF), Fondy P-1129, op. 2 khr 2103, f 21, *Letter from É. Reclus to P. Kropotkin, 24 Jan. 1884*).

The famous aphorism from the epigraph to *L’Homme et la Terre*, “humanity is nature becoming aware of itself,” can be explained by this intellectual tradition and the original interpretation that anarchist geographers made of it, to which they added ideas of cooperation and social justice. A number of authors have recently focused on the return of “old” ideas in multiple fields of knowledge, which often occurs with progressive political connotations in the case of the theory of mutual aid, and often with conservative connotations in the case of environmental determinism, Malthusianism and creationism.

The return of subjects from the philosophy of nature through authors such as Reclus can contribute to the environmental sciences in multiple ways. These include the need for a hybrid vision of environments that does not separate what is “natural” from what is “human,” and that abandons environmental determinism by focusing on the complex interactions in which spatial frameworks are not simply a context, but fully-fledged actors in the history—one that is essentially an environmental history and cannot be separated, as Reclus would have said, from geography. With regard to ethics, the fact that human beings are part of nature also limits their pretensions to domination over it. This idea has recently appeared in different aspects of animal rights (veganism, vegetarianism, etc.), and can serve on a planetary level to revitalize geographical thought and criticism in the discussions taking place regarding crucial issues for the planet, such as the climate.

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