

# Elisée Reclus

Jacques Elisée Reclus (1830-1905), always called Elisée, was born on March 15th 1830 in Sainte-Foy-la-Grande, Gironde, in south-west France, and died in Thourout, near Ghent, in Belgium in the night of the 3rd to the 4th July 1905. He was a geographer, fought for the Commune in Paris, was a member of the Bakunin International and a militant anarchist.

He was one of a family of thirteen children. His father, Jacques Reclus (1796-1882) was a clergyman in a strict, independent evangelical group. His mother, Zéline, nee Trigant (1805-1887), was a primary school teacher, mainly in Orthez (Pyrénées Atlantiques). After studies in Protestant theology (in Neuwied and Montauban), Elisée broke away from religion.

In early 1851 he left for Berlin where he attended lectures by the geographer «Karl Ritter » (1779-1859). Once back in Orthez, along with his older brother Elie (1827-1904) he discovered different thinkers (Saint-Simon, Comte, Proudhon among others). Following the coup of December 2nd 1851 the two brothers exiled themselves to London and later to Ireland. At the end of 1852 Elisée went to Louisiana, where, after working as a dock hand, he became tutor to the children of a plantation family. Disturbed by the issue of slavery, and fleeing the eventuality of marriage with his eldest pupil, he reached New Grenada, present-day Columbia, in August 1855, where he made unsuccessful attempts to found an agricultural colony.

He returned to France in 1857, staying with Elie in Paris. He made a name for himself among geographers and the wider public, in particular via his writings in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and by his lectures to the Paris Geographical Society, of which he became a member in July 1858. From 1860 the publisher Hachette recruited him to travel different regions and countries for the purpose of developing the Guides Joanne (later to become the Guides Bleus).

In September 1864 the two brothers became members of the Batignolles division of the International Workingmen's Association (or First International) which had just formed in London, and later of the Bakuninist faction (Bakunin 1814-1876), which joined up with the International Workingmen's Association in July 1869.

In 1868-9 Hachette published his two volumes of *La Terre*, which was a success, with some ten editions.

He took part in the Paris Commune, and was captured in April 4th 1871. He was condemned to deportation by a war tribunal, but the sentence was altered to ten years' banishment following international petitions by academics (February 3rd 1872). He always refused to sign a reprieve appeal.

Elisée went into exile in Switzerland with his two daughters and his new wife. In July 1874 he paid his yearly subscription to the federalist and anarchist Jura Federation, and later became secretary to its Vevey division.

In the course of these years, the International Socialist movement re-structured. After the failure of communal insurrection in France and the exclusion of Bakunin from the International Workingmen's Association in September 1872, anarchism developed within the anti-authority current. It was theorised by Reclus, by other exiles and then by the Jura Federation which adopted it in its congress of 1880. Reclus participated in the anarchist movement until his death.

From 1876 to 1894, with a contract from Hachette, he wrote the *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle*, comprising nineteen volumes, with the help of several people including other anarchist geographers such as Kropotkin, Metchnikoff, Dragomanov and Perron.

He was pardoned on March 17th 1879, and settled in the Paris area in 1890, and then in Belgium from 1894. He lectured in the New University of Brussels, a breakaway from the Free University which finally refused to take him on following the anarchist violence in France (1892-1893).

His project to construct a giant terrestrial globe for the 1900 Universal Exhibition failed. Just before his death he completed *L'Homme et la Terre*, the last six volumes of which were delivered thanks to his nephew, Paul Reclus (1858-1941), his brother Elie's son.

A product of the Enlightenment, the naturalistic school and Comte mesology, Reclusian geography offers an approach that we would

describe today as cross-sectional and pluri-disciplinary. The epigraph of *L'Homme et la Terre* sums this up very aptly: "*Geography is nothing other than history in space, and history is geography over time*".

Reclus established cautious explicative and prospective laws: "*The class struggle, the quest for equilibrium and the sovereign decision of the individual, these are the three orders of fact that can be derived from the study of social geography, and that, in the general chaos of things, show themselves to be sufficiently constant to be termed laws*" (*L'Homme et la Terre*, Preface). For Reclus, the human being is inseparable from nature, since humans originate in nature - "*nature becoming aware of herself*". A man worthy of his mission therefore takes on a share of responsibility in the harmony and beauty of surrounding nature" (*De l'Action Humaine*, 1864). His social geography nevertheless escapes any sort of mysticism by stressing "the works of man" and of "peoples" which, as they "*developed in intelligence and freedom*" became, by dint of frequentation, "*genuine geological agents [that] in various ways have transformed the surface of the continents, changed the patterns of water courses, and even modified climates*" (ibid).

Reclus denounced environmental damage because it ruins the habitats of human beings, affects their sensitivity and attacks their sense of ethics. Humans are for ever altering their environment, and that altered environment in turn affects humans. The space-environment (a synchronous approach to a system of complex interactions) combined in a time-environment (diachronic approach) evolves by progression and regression.

The action of humans is not harmful in itself, and its logic is not only moral but also social and aesthetic. "*[Action by man] can embellish the Earth, but it can also spoil it; depending on the social situation and the customs of each people, in some cases it will deface nature, in others it will transform it*" (*La Terre*, vol II, 1869, p.748). Reclus makes reference to "mesology", or the science of living environments, but never to "ecology", a science created in 1866 by the academic Ernst Haeckel (1834-19109), whom he criticised for his social Darwinism.

When he states that "*man is Nature becoming aware of herself*", Reclus considers that this does not relate merely to nature as such, but also to something else. It can be seen as a process of civilising, or more precisely of "half-civilising", since it does not benefit all (*L'Homme et la Terre*, vol VI, p.533).

Elisée Reclus advocated a rational, fair, progressive economy. "*In essence, human progress consists in finding the set of interests and purposes common to all peoples; it is very close to solidarity. First of all it should aim for economy, hence making it very different from primitive nature, which produces the seeds of life in such astonishing abundance*". (*L'Homme et la Terre*, vol VI, p.531). At odds with Malthusianism, Reclus considered that there were sufficient potential resources and room for all. The reasoning of conscious science, in combination with aesthetics and ethics, should enable the successful development of the earth. Reclus was one of the first geographers to present the indigeneous peoples, "our primitive brothers", in an equalitarian light. His reflections on civilisations show the power of European modernity, notwithstanding his criticisms of European imperialism. He denounced the pogroms against the Jews and the Armenian massacres, which he mapped. He laid the foundations for reflection on the geographical distribution of cities, prefiguring central place theory.

His geography, speaking to the heart and to the reason, to the poetic and the rational, to emotion and commitment, appears as innovating, both for his time, with the introduction of modern themes and methods, and for our own time.

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