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Elisée Reclus  
Culture and Property  
1905

*Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: Selected Writings of Elisée Reclus.* Some of Reclus' most extensive comments on historical forms of property are found in "Culture and Property," which is in volume 6 of *L'Homme et la Terre* (Paris: Librairie Universelle, 1905–8), 225–311. There he discusses the differences between large and small property holdings, individual and communal property, and cooperative and competitive practices. The following selections are taken from that chapter (268–71, 280–85). The text includes some of Reclus' most eloquent encomiums to cooperation and stinging criticisms of concentrated economic power.

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# Culture and Property

Elisée Reclus

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There is not a single European country in which the traditions of the old communal property have entirely disappeared. In certain areas, notably in the Ardennes and in the steep mountainous regions of Switzerland, where the peasants did not have to submit to the kind of oppression to which the German villagers were subjected after the wars of the Reformation, communal property is still widespread enough to constitute a considerable part of the territory.

In the Belgian Ardennes, the collective lands are composed of three parts: the woods, the freshly cleared ground [*sart*], and the pastures. They also often include arable land and quarries. The woods, which form the largest part of the property, are divided into a certain number of sections, generally twenty to twenty-two. Each year, one section is divided by drawing lots among the various households of the commune, the bark of the oaks having been previously stripped for the benefit of the communal coffers. For the work with heavy wood, the families divide into groups of five, whose members rotate the responsibility of cutting down the trees, squaring the timber, and transporting it. After the cutting, each person proceeds to clear the portion of the land that fell to

his lot and sows the rye that he will harvest the following year. Two and a half years after harvesting the rye, the inhabitants apportion the broom plants that have grown in the clearings, after which the section, in which new growth has already begun, is left to itself until the same operations recommence. The grazing is communal and without any special organization, and takes place on the uncultivated lands, in the mature woods, and in the brush six or seven years after a cutting. Stones may be quarried freely, barring any previous notice to the contrary.

These customs clearly influence the moral character of individuals and greatly develop their spirit of solidarity, mutual kindness, and heartfelt friendliness. Thus it is customary to form voluntary work crews for the benefit of those who need work done. The latter need only to state their request by proceeding noisily through the village, calling out, "So-and-so needs something done! Who wants to help out?" Immediately a group appears and its members put their heads together to figure out who can best undertake the job, and the service is rendered.<sup>1</sup> Such stories also come to us from the Queyras.<sup>2</sup>

In all of Switzerland, two-thirds of the alpine prairies and forests belong to the communes, which also own peat bogs, reed marshes, and quarries, as well as fields, orchards, and vineyards. On many occasions when the co-proprietors of the commune have to work together, they feel as though they are at a festival rather than at work. The young men and women climb to the high mountain pastures, driving their herds before them to the harmonious clinking of the bells. At other times, the work is more difficult. While the snow still covers the ground, the woodsmen, armed with axes, cut the high pines in the communal forest. They strip the sawlogs and slide them down the avalanche corridors to the torrent that will carry them away in its bends and rapids.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gille, *Société nouvelle*, March 1988. [Reclus' note]

<sup>2</sup> Briot, *Etudes sur l'économie alpestre*. [Reclus' note]

Then there are the evening gatherings on winter nights, in which all are summoned to the home of whoever has the most urgent work, whether it is to shell corn, hull nuts, or make wedding gifts for a woman engaged to be married. During these gatherings, the work is a pleasure. The children want to participate, for everything is new to them. Instead of going to bed, they stay up with the adults and are given the best of the chestnuts roasting under the hot embers. When dreamtime is near, they listen to songs and are told stories, adventures, and fables, which are transformed by their imaginations into marvelous apparitions. It is often during such nights of mutual good will that a child's being permanently takes shape. Here, one's loves in life are kindled, and life's bitterness is made sweeter.

Thus the spirit of full association has by no means disappeared in the communes, despite all the ill will of the rich and the state, who have every interest in breaking apart these tightly bound bundles of resistance to their greed or power and who attempt to reduce society to a collection of isolated individuals. Traditional mutual aid occurs even among people of different languages and nations. In Switzerland, it is customary to exchange children from family to family, between the German and the French cantons. Similarly, the country people of Béarn send their children to the Basque country, welcoming in turn young Basques as farm boys. In this way, they will all soon learn the two languages without the parents having to spend any money. Finally, all individuals with a similar trade and common interests—whether they be coal merchants, hunters, or sailors—have established virtual confraternities having neither written constitutions nor signatures, but nevertheless forming small, close-knit republics. Throughout the world, carnival performers who meet by chance on the road are allied in a sort of

freemasonry that is far more solemn than that of the “brothers” who gather in the temples of Hiram.<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that anyone who becomes master over his fellow man through war, conquest, usury, or any other means thereby establishes private property for his own advantage. For by appropriating the man, he also takes possession of another’s labor and of the product of that labor, and finally of that portion of the common soil on which his slave produces crops. No matter how tenaciously the people may have sought to maintain their ancient traditions, the power of kings has inevitably led these rulers to indulge their caprice. They take men and land, and dispense all according to their whims. The forms of gratitude, the homage of vassals, and the circumstances of tenure have varied according to the country and the age, but the essential fact is that ownership of the land was no longer secured for those who worked it but was instead granted to one who was incapable of handling a spade or driving a plow.

Just as common property and private property conflict, there is a constantly raging battle between large and small property. Not only does each create class groupings hostile to one another, but they also collide as two different and enemy systems. Although each arises from the appetites and passions of man, the two forms of property are presented by their advocates as systems that should be maintained permanently because of their essential virtues. First of all, small ownership, which seems closer to natural equity, is vaunted as the ideal state. It offers to the farming family a life of constant work and regular employment to fill its hours and days. Even when the fields are fallow, the members of the household must tend to the livestock and prepare their produce. They also decorate their homes, and in this way art plays a normal role in the life of the peasant. Novelists delight in the rustic cottage, which

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<sup>3</sup> Hiram was king of Tyre and a contemporary of David and Solomon. According to tradition, Hiram was “Grand Master of all Masons,” and participated in the construction of Solomon’s Temple. For this reason, he has been an important figure in the legendary history of Freemasonry.

Since 1884, the property owner who does not cultivate the land himself has been obliged to rent it to another.

to enter the underbrush or to pass through a fallow field! The last tollgates are now disappearing—as recently as 1893, 600,000 francs were paid for the removal of a turnpike that prevented livestock from having free access to Gower Street in London (the equivalent of Rue Bergère in Paris); however, numerous new prohibitive barriers have replaced these old tollgates. The usual excuse given by the landowners for closing the roads that cross their estate is the preservation of game, so poaching becomes an inevitable corollary of large landholdings. There is a stark contrast between the hunting trophies on which the legally authorized hunter prides himself and the slaughter committed by his nocturnal counterpart as well as the fishing by dynamite, which depopulates a river in a few hours. Moreover, the legal consequences are far from the same for these two sorts of hunters. Manhunting is permitted in practice to the property owner and his guards. On the other hand, one cannot begin to estimate how many during the nineteenth century have spent years in prison or at hard labor, or have even gone to the scaffold, as a result of hunting the rabbit and the “sacred bird.”

Statesmen and economists are often interested in encouraging small property ownership. In Denmark, notably, every opportunity is offered for the easy acquisition of property of less than four hectares. Another example that comes to mind is the homestead exemption found in the United States, in which a small area of land per family as well as the house that the family occupies are declared non-transferable and unseizable, with conditions that vary somewhat from state to state. But it is obvious that such a system must remain limited to a small segment of the population. Otherwise, if each producer had access to the soil, his independence would be assured, and the current conception of society would be shaken to its very foundation. Also, one can be sure that nothing like this will ever become law in France, unless restrictions are imposed to make the effects illusory. Among European peoples, the Icelanders are alone in taking precautions against the monopolization of land.

becomes the charming setting for the idyll of their dreams. But though the dream has been realized many times, it is much more likely that a wretched poverty will inhabit the hearth. And even if a humble family is lucky enough to enjoy modest comfort, what can they do to enlarge their horizons, to expand their ideas, to renew their intellectual resources, or even to increase their knowledge of their own industry? The routine that binds them to the hereditary soil also holds them tightly in the grip of the customs of the past. However free they may appear to be, they nevertheless possess the souls of slaves.

The owners of vast landholdings claim to be educators in the science of agriculture in order to justify the usurpation of communal and private lands due to their birth, hereditary wealth, or speculations. This claim is particularly inappropriate in the case of those powerful lords who are careful to live somewhere other than on their own lands, like most of the nobility of Irish estates, who are well aware of the hatred their tenant farmers feel for them. Is it not, then, simply ludicrous to speak of them as “educators” of any sort? And what about those who might otherwise be warmly received by serfs reconciled to the condition of non-ownership, but who, concerned only with receiving their income, hand over the entire burden of management to stewards, trustees, or lawyers, for whom the management of the estate is also far from being a selfless duty?

It is true that in certain countries renowned agronomists owning large estates have instituted excellent methods of cultivating the soil, managed their fields as scientifically as the chemical industries that utilize the most up-to-date processes, introduced new species of plants and animals, and adopted practices that were previously unknown. One must not forget, however, that the *latifundium*<sup>4</sup> in its essence inevitably requires that the vast majority be deprived of land. If a few have much, it is because the majority no longer have

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<sup>4</sup> Large estate.

any. Some large owners are seized with a hunger for land and also desire to be admired as local benefactors. But the devouring of the surrounding land by the large estates is hardly less disastrous than fire and other devastations. Moreover, it produces the same end result, which is the ruin not only of populations but also frequently of the land itself. Intelligent large landholders can no doubt train excellent farm hands, and they will certainly have domestics of impeccable correctness. But even assuming that the productive industry initiated by them provides more than enough labor for the entire local population, is it not inevitable that their authoritarian and absolutist manner of regimenting labor will create subjects rather than produce dignified equals? They make every effort to preserve the essentially monarchical character of society. Moreover, they try to return to the past by destroying all democratic elements in their milieu in order to reconstitute a feudal world where power belongs to those they deem to be the most deserving—that is to say, to themselves. And whether or not they are the most deserving, they remain the most privileged. One need only study a map of France to verify the influence exerted by large estates. Among the reasons that certain cantons automatically fall into the hands of reactionary representatives and masters, who are both clericalist and militarist, none is more crucial than the influence of the large landowners. They have no need to tell their flunkies and farm hands how to vote, for they easily lead them so far down the path of moral degradation that they willingly vote in favor of a regime of obedience to the traditional master. The same spirit determines the voting of lackeys and tradesmen in the elegant neighborhoods of the cities and in the resorts.

Furthermore, is it not possible that if all its effects are considered, large ownership actually produces less material improvement than does small property, as divided up as the latter may be? If, taking the economy of France as a whole, one were to make a detailed comparison of the net profit produced by large estates under individual management and the losses to the communes resulting from

the parks reserved for the privileged few, the hunting grounds, and the moors that displace small property, it is quite possible that, on balance, the losses would be greater. We would discover that large land ownership is for modern peoples what it was for ancient ones—a fatal plague. Furthermore, initiative has emerged not only among rich agronomists but also—though with less ostentation and acclaim—in small holdings among truck farmers, horticulturalists, and small farmers. The poor person is certainly a slave to routine and risks his few pennies, eaten away by taxes and usury, only with extreme prudence. But risk them he does. Some know how to observe, experiment, and learn, so that over many generations and centuries they carry out experiments of long-lasting value. The case is clear: the land of the austere peasant today yields twice as much as it did when Young traveled through the provinces of France and noted its disheartening poverty.<sup>5</sup> Only through private initiative can there be progress, but the union of forces that enjoys all the advantages of large and small ownership has hardly begun to appear. There are only signs of its coming.

In considering the consequences of large property ownership, we must not forget the obstacles that it places in the way of free movement when the surrounding populations do not know how to bypass restrictions. In Great Britain, the “right of way” issue excites local opinion in twenty different places at any given time. The inhabitants find themselves cut off from the old roads, one after the other. Pity the communities that appeal to a court of law if they lack indisputable titles! In many districts in Scotland, landlords have forbidden by law all access to the mountains, and pedestrians are reduced to using the same roadway at the bottom of the valley as do bicycles and automobiles. The maps of the Ordnance Survey even caution that “the existence of a road on a map does not imply the right to use it.” And woe to the traveler who takes it upon himself

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur Young, an English agronomist, traveled through France on the eve of the French Revolution.