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Elisée Reclus
The Extended Family
1896

Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: Selected Writings of Elisée Reclus.

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Man likes to live in a dream world. The mental effort required to grasp reality seems too demanding, and he tries to avoid this struggle by resorting to ready-made opinions. If “doubt is the pillow of the wise,” then blissful faith is the pillow of the simpleminded. Once there was a supreme God who did our thinking for us, willed and acted from on high, and guided human destiny according to his whims. His power was all that we needed, and it caused us to accept our inevitable fate with resignation or even gratitude. This personal God, on whom the meek could depend, is now perishing in his own temples, and men have to find a substitute for him. No longer do they have the All-Powerful at their service. They have only a few words that they try to endow with mysterious force or magical power—for example, the word “progress.”

Without doubt, man has progressed in many ways. His sensations have become more refined, his thinking more acute and profound, and his humanity, embracing a much wider world, has expanded prodigiously. But no progress can occur without some degree of regression. The human being grows, but in the process he moves forward, thus losing part of the terrain that he formerly occupied. Ideally, civilized man should

have kept the savage's strength, dexterity, coordination, natural good health, tranquility, simplicity of life, closeness to the beasts of the field, and harmonious relationship to the earth and all beings that inhabit it. But what was once the rule is now the exception. Much evidence suggests that a man with determination and a favorable environment can equal the savage in all his basic qualities, while also adding to them by means of a consciousness strengthened by a higher soul. But how many have gained without losing, who are the equals of both the primitive of the forest or prairie, and the modern artist or scholar in the bustling city?

And if sometimes a man of exceptional willpower and exemplary deeds manages to equal his ancestors in native qualities and even surpass them in acquired traits, one must still conclude that humanity as a whole has lost some of its early achievements. Thus the animal world, in which we find our origins and which instructed us in the art of existence, teaching us hunting and fishing, techniques of healing and of building houses, methods of working together and providing for our needs—this world has become more foreign to us. Whereas today we speak of the training or domestication of animals in the sense of subjugation, the primitive thought of his association with animals in fraternal terms. He saw in these living creatures his companions rather than his servants. Indeed, during times of danger, especially storms and floods, animals—dogs, birds, and snakes—took refuge with him.

The Indian woman of Brazil happily surrounds herself with a whole menagerie, and tapirs, deer, opossums, and even tame jaguars can be seen in the clearing around her cabin. Monkeys gambol in the branches above the hut, peccaries root in the ground, and toucans, hoccos,¹ and parrots perch here and there on the swaying branches, protected by dogs and large

¹ Local name for several birds of the family *Cracidae*, found in Guiana. They are also called curassows.

trumpeter birds.² And this entire republic functions without the need for an ill-tempered mistress to deal out insults or blows. The Quechuan³ shepherd, crossing the plateau of the Andes with his llama and its packs, gains the cooperation of his beloved animal only through strokes and encouragement. If there were a single act of violence, the llama, his personal dignity offended, would lie down angrily and refuse to get up. He walks at his own pace, never accepts a burden that is too heavy, pauses for a long time at dawn to gaze upon the awakening sun, expects to be wreathed with flowers and ribbons or to have a banner waving above his head, and wants the women and children to pet and stroke him when he arrives at their huts. Isn't it also true that the horse of the Bedouin, another primitive, stays in the tent and the infants sleep between its legs?

The natural sympathy existing between all these beings brought them together in a pervasive atmosphere of peace and love. Birds perched on a man's hand, as they still do today on the horns of bulls, and squirrels frolicked within reach of the farmer or shepherd. Primitive people do not even exclude animals from their political communities. In Fazokl,⁴ when the subjects depose their king, they always address the following speech to him: "Since you are no longer acceptable to men, women, children, and donkeys, the best thing you can

² The Agami Heron, *Agamia agami*, is sometimes considered the most beautiful of all New World herons. Its range is in tropical lowlands from southeast Mexico south on the Pacific slope to Ecuador and on the Atlantic slope to northern Bolivia and Amazonian Brazil. It is noted for its reclusive nature and relatively inaccessible habitat. See Emmet Reid Blake, *Manual of Neotropical Birds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

³ Member of an Amerindian group of Quechua speakers, primarily in the Andean region of South America.

⁴ The Fazokl or Fazogli is a region in the eastern Sudan, near the border with Ethiopia. It is located in the foothills of the Abyssinian plateau and is crossed by the Blue Nile. The region was inhabited primarily by the Shangalla tribes, with later Funj and Arab immigration.

do is to die, and we will help you do so.”⁵ Long ago, men and animals kept no secrets from one another. “The beasts talked,” according to the fable, but more significantly, man understood. Are any stories more charming than those of southern India, which are perhaps the oldest traditional tales in the world, and which were passed on to the Dravidian invaders by the indigenous peoples? In these stories, elephants, jackals, tigers, lions, jerboas,⁶ snakes, crayfish, monkeys, and men converse freely, thus forming, so to speak, the great common school of the primitive world. And in this school, the real teacher is usually the animal.

In these early periods, alliances between men and animals included a much greater number of species than are found today in the domestic sphere. Geoffroy St. Hilaire mentioned forty-seven of them that formed, so to speak, the entourage of man. But how many species that he failed to mention also lived long ago in intimacy with their youngest brother! He included neither the many companions of the Guarani⁷ Indian woman, nor the snakes that the Dinka of the Nile⁸ call by name and share their cows’ milk with, nor the rhinoceroses that graze with the other livestock on the meadows of Assam,⁹ nor the crocodiles of the Sindh,¹⁰ which Hindu artists decorate with religious symbols. Archeologists have demonstrated

from the forest and, looking at us with its dark eyes, comes before us to be petted, and the bird, aware its own beauty, triumphantly perches on the shoulder of a beloved human companion, asking her for its share of love.

⁵ Reclus cites “Letters from Egypt.” He is referring to *Letters from Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Peninsula of Sinai*, trans. Lenora and Joanna B. Horner (London, 1853) by Karl Richard Lepsius (1810–84), a German philologist and Egyptologist.

⁶ Any of several jumping rodents of the family *Dipodidae*, with long hind legs and a large tail.

⁷ Tribal people of the Tupian family of Central South America, including Brazilian Amazonia.

⁸ A pastoral people of Sudan.

⁹ A state of northeast India.

¹⁰ The Sindh is a region in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent. It is now one of the four provinces of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

demonstrate that rats, mice, guinea pigs, and many other little creatures wish to attain, along with man, the great union of happiness and kindness? Every prison cell is soon transformed into a school for small animals—rats and mice, flies and fleas—provided the guards do not set things in order. The story of Pellisson’s spider is well known.¹⁵ The prisoner had regained his love of life, thanks to the little friend whose trainer he had become. But a guardian of order appeared, and with the avenging boot of official morality, crushed the creature that had come to console the poor wretch!

All of these facts demonstrate man’s enormous resources for exerting a positive influence over the entire living world, which he now leaves to the mercy of fate and fails to connect to his own life. Some day our civilization, which is so fiercely individualist and divides the world into as many little belligerent states as there are private properties and family households, will finally collapse, and it will be necessary to practice mutual aid to assure our common survival. Some day the quest for friendship will replace the quest for material well-being that sooner or later will have been adequately provided for. Some day dedicated naturalists will have disclosed to us all that is charming, appealing, human, and often more than human in the nature of animals. We will then reflect upon all the species left behind in the march of progress and seek to make of them neither our servants nor our machines, but rather our true companions. Just as the study of primitive people has made a noteworthy contribution to our understanding of the civilized¹⁶ man of our own time, so the study of the ways of animals will help us to delve more deeply into the life sciences, increase our knowledge of the nature of things, and expand our love. Let us look forward to the time when the deer emerges

¹⁵ Paul Pellisson-Fontanier (1624–93) was a French attorney and writer who was imprisoned in the Bastille.

¹⁶ Reclus says “*l’homme policé*.” The French thus has a connotation of being “policed” or supervised.

conclusively that the Egyptians of the Old Kingdom¹¹ had among their herds of domestic animals three or even four species of antelope, and one ibex. After having been incorporated into human communities, all of these animals have now become wild again. Even hyena-like dogs and cheetahs were transformed by hunters into loyal companions. The Rig-Veda extols carrier pigeons, “swifter than the clouds.” It sees in them gods and goddesses and directs that sacrifices be made and libations poured for them. And surely the mythical story of the Flood reminds us of our early ancestors’ skillful use of the swift homing pigeon. Noah sent forth from the Ark a dove that explored the expanse of waters and the emerging land, and brought the olive branch back to him in its beak.

Today’s domestication of animals exhibits in many ways moral regression since, far from improving animals, we have deformed and corrupted them. Although through selective breeding we have improved qualities such as strength, dexterity, scent, and speed in racing, as meat-eaters our major preoccupation has been to increase the bulk of meat and fat on four legs to provide walking storehouses of flesh that hobble from the manure pile to the slaughterhouse. Can we really say that the pig is superior to the wild boar or the timid sheep to the courageous mouflon?¹² The great art of breeders is to castrate their animals and create sterile hybrids. They train horses with the bit, whip, and spur, and then complain that the animals show no initiative. Even when they domesticate animals under the best possible conditions, they reduce their resistance to disease and ability to adapt to new environments, turning them into artificial beings incapable of living spontaneously in free nature.

Such degradation of species is itself a great evil, but civilized science goes even further and sets about exterminating

¹¹ 2575–2150 B.C.e.

¹² A wild sheep of the mountainous regions of Corsica and Sardinia.

them. We have seen how many birds have been wiped out by European hunters in New Zealand, Australia, Madagascar, and the polar archipelagos, and how many walruses and other cetaceans have already disappeared!¹³ The whale has fled the waters of the temperate zone, and soon will not even be found among the ice fields of the Arctic Ocean. All the large land animals are similarly threatened. We already know the fate of the aurochs¹⁴ and the bison, and we can foresee that of the rhinoceros, the hippopotamus, and the elephant. Statistical estimates place the annual production of elephant ivory at eight hundred tons, which means that hunters kill forty thousand elephants, without counting those that are wounded and go deep into the bush to die. How far we have come from the Singhalese of long ago, for whom “the eighteenth science of man was to win the friendship of an elephant!” How far from the Aryans of India, who assigned to the tamed colossus two Brahmins as companions so that it might be taught to practice the virtues worthy of its breed!

On a plantation in Brazil, I once had the opportunity to observe the great contrast between the two modes of civilization. The owner took pride in two bulls that he had purchased at great expense in the Old World. One of them, which had come from Jersey, was pulling at a chain that passed through his nostrils, bellowing, fuming, pawing the ground with his hoof, pointing his horns, and looking menacingly at his keeper. The other, a zebu imported from India, followed us like a dog and with a sweet look begged to be petted. We poor, ignorant, “civilized” people, cooped up in our houses, distant from a nature that we dread because the sun is too hot or the wind too cold—we have even completely forgotten the meaning of the holidays that we celebrate. Though Christianity ignores the fact,

¹³ Reclus says “other cetaceans”; however, the walrus is a pinniped, not a cetacean.

¹⁴ Extinct large, long-horned wild oxen of the German forests.

all of them—Christmas, Easter, Rogation Days, and All Saints’ Day—were originally nature festivals. Do we understand the meaning of the traditions that place the first man in a beautiful garden where he walked freely with all the animals, and that have the “Son of Man” born on a bed of straw, between the ass and the ox, the two companions of the plowman?

Although the distance that separates man from his animal brethren has widened, and though our direct interactions with species that remain free in the wilderness has diminished, it nevertheless seems clear that at least some progress has occurred, thanks to our closer relationship with domesticated animals not used for food. Without doubt, dogs have been to some degree corrupted. The majority are, like soldiers, accustomed to beatings and have become loathsome beings that tremble before the whip and cringe at the threatening words of the master. Others are trained to be vicious, like the bulldogs that bite the calves of poor people or go for the throats of slaves. Still others, those “greyhounds in jackets,” take on all the vices of their mistresses—greediness, vanity, lust, and haughtiness. And the dogs in China, which are bred to be eaten, are of unsurpassed stupidity. But if a dog is truly loved and raised with kindness, gentleness, and nobility of feeling, doesn’t it often realize a human or even superhuman level of devotion and moral goodness?

Cats have known much better than dogs how to maintain their personal independence and their distinctive character, so that we make alliances with them rather than taming them. Haven’t they made almost miraculous intellectual and moral progress since they emerged from their original wild state in the forests? There is no human sentiment that they do not from time to time understand or share, no idea that they do not intuit, no desire that they do not anticipate. Poets have imagined them as magicians. And indeed, they do seem at times to be more discerning than their human friends in their foresightedness. And don’t the “happy families” exhibited by showmen at fairs