

Reclus

An Egoist Green Anarchist Exploration

Fire

Spring/Summer 2007

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Elisée Reclus ...

Just as I begin my exploration, a huge periwinkle blue dragonfly enters my mid-autumn world. Hovering just above the pond a few feet away. I appreciate its lacy wings that seem so delicate yet are strong enough to carry the creature great distances. Strong enough to cause ripples across the water's surface. What is it doing? Is it looking for something to eat? What shall I do with it now that it has entered my world? An infinite number of possibilities exist for me and this unique creature. I could study the movement of its wings and their effects on other lives of the pond. I could capture and cage it for further examination (or to merely admire whenever I wished). Then again, I could kill it and dissect it to better understand the mechanics of flight. I wonder if it's edible? How would it taste? Would it nourish me? A thousand possibilities, a thousand thoughts flying around inside my head. Filling the spaces between us...I begin again.

Reclus is ...

Sharp and darting movements mark my dragonfly's maneuvers. Is it searching for something beneath the water? Is it dancing with its own reflection? Is it awakening to it's conscious? Is it... ARGH! I do love my curious nature, my inquisitive and contemplative mind. But these qualities keep getting in the way of simply enjoying the dragonfly's marvelous presence. Its gift to my day. Why can't I simply dwell in its freedom of movement and of time; far more expansive than mine. Or so it seems from the perspective of a one who is limited by boundaries far more insidious than of a perceived absence of a proper consciousness or shorter lifespan or...

Reclus is dead!

And here I am, spending my too-quickly-waning fall days aiding in his resurrection. Bringing back to life yet another long-departed, enlightened-European, male anarchist. Beyond the obvious academic credentialing that his revival has brought, why do we care about the words and activities of one dead for over a hundred-fifty years? Did he discover something profound in his world travels as a preeminent geographer? Can he further clarify our perspective on the current and potential future of our worlds? Is there anything in his ancient assessment that remains relevant today given the scale of unpredicted – and unpredictable – human-directed geographical and social changes (a.k.a Progress) scraped from our bones since his time?

Humanity is nature becoming self-conscious.

What is this great self-consciousness Reclus insists humankind must develop and spread? From *conscientia*, knowledge-with or shared knowledge, numerous systems of thought have evolved around the notion of consciousness. Commonalities include subjectivity, self-awareness, sentience, sapience, and the ability to perceive oneself in relationship to one's environment. It is often tied quite closely to conscience – a moral sensibility.¹ Is it an inherent aspect of higher life forms as most thinkers suggest? Or does it emerge from human intelligence and its constructs?

¹ The French word for conscience and conscious are one and the same – conscience.

Particularly ideology.² Over and over Reclus speaks of humans AND nature, maintaining the artificial separation that continues to pervade the modern world view where humans are invariably placed outside of – and most often above – all other life forms. Reclus does attempt to overcome this hierarchy and concomitant domination through rhetorical exercises that are wholly unconvincing despite any sincerity of attempt. What was the state of Reclus’ consciousness when he chose to explore and map the world and its human inhabitants? Did he, could he, with his great human intelligence and moral conscious KNOW that his works would be used by states and empires to conquer and destroy? By the industrialists he railed against to further exploit the co-existing land and life? By scientists and technologists to further the reach of human domination? Reclus suffered, as surely we all do, from a certain shortness of vision. Our eyes shaded by motivations imposed by society, by ideological preconceptions and presumptions left unquestioned.

One test for the existence of consciousness is based on the human observation of animals gazing into a mirror. If said authority deems the animal has recognized itself, the animal may be conscious. If he could look in the mirror today, what would Reclus see?

The dragonfly appears to be gazing at its own reflection. Am I witnessing – or am I influencing – a beginning of self-awareness? Is it situating a human morality in place of instinct, experience, and non-linear adaptation? Oh, but wait! Could my dragonfly be giving thanks and praise to the Buddha cemented into the artificial pond? Can it absorb Buddha consciousness through a concrete icon? Can you? So many possibilities. Far more than language, no matter how poetic, can describe.

Looking through the mirror of history, all sorts of justifications and rationalizations have been built into our consciousness. Reclus may have abandoned the official religion of his preacher father, but he held onto the notion that humanity would be saved by a higher purposed, globalized morality. A morality that has ALWAYS been used to bend all of life to others’ wills. That requires someone to determine and enforce it. What morality and unquestioned rules and judgments frame your reality? What ideologies underlie your perception of the world, thus consciously directing your actions? How many and which acts have become quite unconscious?

I don’t know if other creatures have this thing called consciousness, but I am disturbed by Reclus’ glorification of a human consciousness that no matter how one defines it, has brought with it a power so strong it has overridden all other possibilities of how humans might be truly of their world.

Is it my particular madness to think I’d be better off with the consciousness of a dragonfly than of domesticated human?

When the cities grow, humanity progresses and when they shrink the social body is threatened with regression into barbarism.

Reclus was a great fan of Progress so he did not sufficiently question the pervasive notion that humans have an innate mandate to advance their lot through the Sciences and particularly

² Thomas Aquinas describes the *conscientia* as the act by which we apply practical and moral knowledge to our own actions. Descartes described conscious experience as imaginings and perceptions laid out in space and time, as viewed from some point. Marx considered that social relations ontologically preceded individual consciousness, and criticized the conception of a conscious subject as an ideological conception on which liberal political thought was founded. Nietzsche was the first one to make the claim that the modern notion of consciousness required the modern penal system, which judged a man according to his “responsibility”. Perhaps the most accurate description of the modern conscious is W.E.B. Du Bois’ double-consciousness – the awareness of one’s self as well as how others perceive us, which has led to an unconscious conformance to their perception.

through its materialization in more and more advanced technology. His dialectical approach to the question of cities, culture, agriculture, institutions often seems more an apology than a means of questioning. Cities are an absurdly complex way of organizing human life. They require authorities and bureaucrats in institutional settings who know how to keep them going. Cities require the importation of even the most basic necessities: food and water. Importation that has always meant and will always mean, theft from other life outside the city. The city requires massive amounts of human and non-human energy just to maintain its fragile equilibrium. How can this mean anything other than a continued exploitive division of labor as glorified in Reclus' and others' worker? No one has yet described how cities can continue to exist without more and more advanced technology. Technology which first enlarges the human impact then spreads it farther and deeper than humans with only the energy of their bodies and simple tools in hand could ever accomplish. The polis exerts a pressure so great upon the land and air and water – on all life within and without – it has never failed to create an explosive discord.

If Rita had had a human conscious, would it have spared this city on the edge?

Suddenly, the dragonfly charged right at me, aiming at my head then quickly disappearing from my view. But, never again from my awareness. With that single startling act even more thoughts leap into my mind. Was it drawn to me because of my great human consciousness? Was it as curious and appreciative of me as I was of it? Could the dragonfly have known the thousand possibilities of its demise at my hands and so was warning me away? Or was I just another obstacle to be dodged on its afternoon free-flight?

Alas, the most horrific thought of all could not fail to enter into the realm of Fire and dragonfly possibilities: this beautiful creature could be – if not now, one day all too soon – a replicant, a robot, a spy, or worse.³ This thought wrenches me towards a paranoia only possible in a world where the architects of the future go unopposed as they design the next, new and improved version of surveillance and killing-technology to deal with those whose wings (however weakly) send disturbing ripples across the surface of their artificial landscape.

With this last raging thought, I am finally able to shrug away the intellectual games and feel the simple pleasure of sharing a warm, vibrant fall day filled with that moment of beauty, of the wild and expansive freedom of a dragon-fly dance.

Elisée Reclus is dead, but he is not alone.

In the years since he ceased breathing – and I think it's time I stopped breathing for him – countless billions have joined him. The massive human-caused extinctions that continue to escalate are a direct result of a refusal to recognize, contemplate, and challenge every new progressive incursion into our worlds. This is not because we do not question authority. It is because we do not reject it at base. We rely on the authority of official thinkers and big S scientists, politicians, professors, leaders, and thousands of other mediators to tell us what is right, what will work and what won't, what makes sense and what will bring our salvation. Layers of civilized logic have

³ DARPA is asking scientists to submit design proposals that would allow implantation of engineered material into insects, such as dragonflies and moths for surveillance and attack.

all but severed our connection to what it is we really need and might expansively desire; forcing us to see these two as separate far too often. We are even more removed from how to fulfill our wildest dreams without destroying the environment that contains it all.

All the world is ours, each one of ours. But we can only know it from our own center where all we need-want is within our grasp. And we must take it back from those who wrest it from us daily. Or to whom we give it up so willingly. To live our own lives as we choose, not in servitude to others and their ideas, but in impassioned explorations, experiments, and uncertainties. To take all we want, but with a wholism that includes a direct, sensual, intellectual, emotional consciousness ; what I have come to think *instinct* might actually be. To locate that place where we cannot fail to heed the warnings of others issued when we go too far; when we may cause irreparable harm to the world we love and wish to keep. Can we get back to our selves, those strong and free individuals who cavort with all the natural wonders that we choose and who choose us? How do we prepare ourselves to confront the consequences of those choices?

Reclus was “ahead of his time” and his life’s work added a depth and breadth in much of the early environmental movement. But we would be foolish to lay our faith at Reclus’ enlightened feet. Faith in scientific, technological – that is, Progressive – solutions has led us directly to the dire straits we find ourselves trying to navigate. Despite his atheism and break with “conservative” religion; despite his dedication to an anarchist ideal of liberation, Reclus’ view of the world was rooted in a belief that humans have a Special place in Nature. He – like so many – merely exchanged his patriarchal god above for the equivalent below, a universal morality that does not, cannot, and ought not exist. His much acclaimed statement, “Humanity is nature becoming self-conscious”, exemplifies my greatest concern with his legacy.

What need has the free-flying dragonfly for a human consciousness? Where would the wild river go, once so imbued, that it has otherwise avoided? The earth and all its inhabitants are reeling from the great human conscious!

Until each domesticated human grasps the fullness of life in her own eager hands; feels its possibilities coursing through his veins; screams their own warnings; and recognizes their individual connection to the wretched, beautiful whole that Reclus at times so eloquently described, the “environment” and “nature” will remain separated abstractions shaped by yet another external authority. An authority that delivers solutions through the stick of objective universal righteousness and the carrot of progress. Some, including Reclus, say that primitive humans understood this symbiotic relationship with life. Perhaps this is true, but we are here now. Can we create paths to our own liberation and release our choke hold on all the rest?

Reclus may inspire those who seek refuge in the past. I am most inspired by those I meet and play with today. Perhaps the whimsical words of one of my very much alive anarchist friends, Apio, will inspire you to explore some of the thousands of wild possibilities of being in your own world:

Sometimes, if I am out on a cloudless night when the moon is full, I will reach up and grasp the moon between a finger and my thumb. I close my eyes and pop the moon into my mouth. It leaves a taste on my tongue that is icy and sweet like wintergreen or mint. But that taste is really the taste of a star-filled, winter mountain-top sky glowing icily in an infinite brilliant dance of the darkest night with the exquisite light of countless stars. I open my eyes with joy at seeing the moon still dancing before me. It is wonderful

to be able to take something so completely into yourself without losing it, to experience it so completely.

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