

Freedom News Remembers Élisée Reclus

Élisée Reclus

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“Let us become beautiful ourselves”: Élisée Reclus on vegetarianism, anarchism, and colonial violence

Analysis, Jul 5th by Spencer Beswick

The great geographer and theorist of anarchist communism was part of a radical milieu that engaged a wide range of social issues, from capitalism and colonialism to free love and animal rights

In his classic essay “On Vegetarianism” (1901), Élisée Reclus wrote a stirring defense of it as an ethical and aesthetic necessity with the potential to end colonial violence by transforming humanity’s relationship with the world.

Reclus’s anarchism sought to “mak[e] our existence as beautiful as possible, and in harmony, so far as in us lies, with the aesthetic conditions of our surroundings.” This includes our relationship with animals. Reclus decried abattoirs as well as the display and consumption of dead animals as ugly and violent. These disquieting displays are interwoven into everyday life in a manner which cannot help but deaden our senses and diminish the beauty of our lives. Like the unsightly scar of a concrete dam blocking a river, the slaughter and consumption of animals dams the potential of a life well lived. Reclus called to end violence against animals and instead recognise them as “respected fellow-workers, or simply as companions in the joy of life and friendship.”

Violence against animals was intimately connected to the violence of colonialism. The slaughter of colonised people was justified by their dehumanising reduction to the level of animals. Reclus argued that brutal treatment of animals at home thus enabled colonial violence around the globe through “direct relation of cause and effect”, for “the slaughter of the first makes easy the murder of the second” and “harking on dogs to tear a fox to pieces teaches a gentleman how to make his men pursue the fugitive Chinese”. If Europeans could learn to relate ethically to animals at home, he maintained, it would destabilise the practice of colonial violence abroad. Vegetarianism would transform humanity’s relationship with the world in a way that precludes all violence and exploitation directed at both human and non-human animals.

While the argument may have appeal, it rings somewhat hollow to our ears today. The Israeli military, for example, uses its self-proclaimed label of “most vegan army in the world” as proof of its ostensible dedication to peace, wielding veganism as a shield to justify its violence against the supposedly “backwards” (in part because non-vegan) Palestinians. Some activists thus add veganwashing to greenwashing and pinkwashing as “progressive” justifications for colonialism. It seems clear from our vantage point in the twenty-first century that Reclus was overly optimistic in his belief that ending animal exploitation would end colonial violence.

Yet there is still power in Reclus’s call for an ethical and beautiful life free of exploitation of human and non-human animals alike. He reminds us of the importance of what some veganarchists call total liberation: dismantling all of the interconnected forms of oppression and domination that demean humans, animals, and the natural world. To end with Reclus’s words: “Ugliness in persons, in deeds, in life, in surrounding Nature — this is our worst foe. Let us become beautiful ourselves, and let our life be beautiful”!

Elisée Reclus: 5 levels of social-ecological practice

Analysis, Jul 5th by John P. Clark

His compelling and realistic revolutionary vision shows the preconditions for a liberated world

Elisée Reclus (1830-1905) was one of the foremost geographers of his age, a major figure in anarchist political thought, and a lifelong revolutionary who played an active role in the Paris Commune and the First International. He was extraordinary for a nineteenth-century political thinker in having a deep lifelong commitment not only to social revolution, but also to radical ecology, to anti-patriarchy and the equality of women, to anti-racism and anti-colonialism, and to anti-speciesism and animal welfare.

Reclus is most famous for his *New Universal Geography*, a massive twenty-volume, eighteen-thousand-page work that has been called the greatest individual achievement in the history of geography. Reclus is widely recognized as the founder of the field of social geography. His final work, *Humanity and the Earth*, was an expansive thirty-five-hundred-page synthesis of geography, history, anthropology, philosophy, and social theory, and is his most enduring contribution to modern thought. Opening with the statement that “Humanity is Nature becoming self-conscious,” it is a sweeping account of the entire history of both humanity and the Earth, and of a common planetary destiny that is revealed through a deep understanding of the great course of geo-history.

There are two dimensions to Reclus’ story of humanity and the Earth. One is his depiction of the process of human self-realisation in dialectical interaction with nature. He shows how the natural milieu shapes human development, as humanity simultaneously contributes to the unfolding and flourishing of the natural world. He shows the content of geo-history to be a dialectic between the creative forces of freedom and the constraining forces of domination. His idea that all phenomena of history contain both progressive and regressive aspects, and that each tendency must be analysed carefully, is one of his most influential concepts.

Reclus shows that historical progress has depended on the growth of mutual aid (*l’entr’aide*) and social cooperation—ideas that influenced his younger colleague Kropotkin greatly. Reclus contends that the full self-realisation of humanity-in-nature will depend on a social revolution that embodies mutualistic practices in a free, egalitarian, anarchist-communist society. Moreover, he holds that the fate of the Earth will hinge on humanity’s ability to establish social institutions and practices that express a deep concern for the natural world and for all living beings on the planet.

The other side of Reclus’ world-historical narrative focuses on the long history of domination. He engages in an extensive critique of the centralised bureaucratic state and industrial capitalism, but he does not see other forms of domination as subordinate spheres. He was a radical feminist and a vehement enemy of male dominance, and a fervent opponent of all forms of racism and of Eurocentric denigration of indigenous cultures. He was an early critic of the ecological devastation resulting from ruthless industrialisation and technological rationalisation, and he decried the destruction of ancient forests as early as the 1860’s. Furthermore, he was a tireless advocate of ethical vegetarianism and of the humane treatment of animals.

Reclus presents one of the most compelling, and arguably one of the most realistic, revolutionary visions of the preconditions for a liberated world of freedom and solidarity. Specifically, he discusses five levels of social ecological practice that must all be addressed by the revolutionary movement.

The first level is the primary community (perhaps a kind of affinity group) that is the focus of personal, moral, and psychological transformation. In an 1895 letter, he says that anarchists must “work to free themselves personally from all preconceived or imposed ideas, and gradually gather around themselves friends who live and act in the same way. It is step by step, through small, loving, and intelligent associations, that the great fraternal society will be formed.” All these qualities (small scale, a pervasive ethos of love, and the nurturing of active, engaged intelligence) are necessary for such associations to carry out their basic transformative role.

The second, and politically most crucial, level of social organisation for Reclus, was the autonomous commune, which he describes in an 1871 letter as “at once the triumph of the Workers’ Republic and the inauguration of the Communal Federation.” He was convinced that a radicalised version of the aspirations of the Paris Commune (a powerful reality in the radical imaginary of his age) should be the primary form of political organisation. The commune would practice radical direct democracy. The power of the people could be delegated, but never merely represented or alienated from the base. For larger purposes, the commune would act in solidarity with all other communes through free federation.

The third key level of social organisation for Reclus, inspired by his many years of engagement in the global labour struggle, is that of the Workers’ International, which would act democratically through its local sections. Reclus believed that to succeed, the revolution must bring together people not only as members of the local community, but also at the level of the whole of humanity, united and mobilised as workers and producers. The International was also a powerful force in the radical social imaginary of the time.

The fourth level of association is the Universal Republic, which will also be a global expression of the values of human community and solidarity. This great Republic (another idea that inspired revolutionaries of the age) was to be based on the free federation of autonomous communes across the planet, and on every level, from the local, to the regional, to the global.

Reclus acknowledged that our community is a more-than-human one. Thus, he recognised a fifth level of association, in which we express our unity and solidarity with the Earth, and our sense of responsibility for all of life on Earth. This is the level of the entire Earth Community. At this level, a global unity-in-diversity already exists implicitly, but we must be educated to realise the ways that we fit into the great interconnection of all beings, and to act accordingly.

Reclus was a dedicated and engaged revolutionary who worked tirelessly for revolutionary social transformation, for which he suffered imprisonment in at least fourteen different prisons and spent many years in forced exile. He was a person of extraordinary humility, great generosity, and love and compassion—not only for his fellow humans, but also for other sentient beings. He deserves recognition (which he would never have sought) as one of the foremost thinkers in the history of anarchism. His work in social geography and related subjects, running to over 25,000 pages of published works, is by far the greatest achievement in the history of social ecological thought.

Élisée Reclus on anarchy and nature

Analysis, Jul 4th by Fabio Carnevali

For the great anarchist geographer, anarchy was at play in every natural relationship grounded in solidarity

Reclus was the anarchist who “never commanded anyone, and never will”, as his younger friend Kropotkin said of him, as well as the geographer for whom many important scientists—including Charles Darwin—mobilised when he risked being deported to New Caledonia after the Paris Commune.

In Reclus’ works, anarchy and the study of nature were tied together in a strict bond. Both his political and geographical studies date back to his youth, and he soon came to connect the two. After Louis Buonaparte’s coup d’état in 1851, Élisée and his brother Élie both went into exile. In these years Élisée lived in Ireland at first, then in Louisiana, and lastly in Colombia. This allowed him to gather material for his first geographical works while developing his critique of slavery in the United States.

Reclus did not think of anarchy as a utopia for the future; instead, it is the form of all those relationships that put into practice mutual aid, the “illuminated factor of evolution”, showing his affinity with Peter Kropotkin. For both, an adequate understanding of nature and the relationship between human and nonhuman would foster solidarity and help demystify the ideologies that conceal the truth of humanity’s role in nature.

In a speech given to a masonic lodge in Brussels in 1894, Reclus defined the anarchist idea of freedom as a peaceful coexistence that does not stem from obedience to law and/or fear of punishments, but rather “from mutual respect for the interest of all, and from the scientific study of natural laws”. For him, anarchy was at play in every natural relationship grounded in solidarity. Promoting social change meant creating groups of people that practice solidarity and choose to live according to this principle. In this sense, ‘education’ means forming people and communities that are free and willing to fight for their freedom.

“Nature becoming self-conscious”

Reclus thought of anarchy as the most natural form of relationship, and certainly the only one that allows for real freedom. When back to France after his exile in the Americas, Reclus wrote a letter to the director of the *Revue Germanique* to propose a collaboration. In the letter he stated: “philosophically I attach myself to the school of Spinoza”. Indeed, this thinker’s ideas about nature, knowledge and liberation strongly echo in the background of Reclus’s thought.

One of his major writings, *L’Homme et la Terre*, opens with a picture of the Earth held up by human hands. Under the picture there is a sentence that reads: “Humanity is Nature becoming self-conscious”. For humanity, to understand its role in nature would imply rethinking the very basis of its ethics, taking into account the interconnectedness that binds it to the entire non-human world.

This ethical perspective led Reclus to embrace anti-speciesist positions, advocating for an ethical vegetarianism that refuses to see animals as mere food sources. He thought that humanity’s

moral growth depends on the growth of the understanding of our union with the whole of life and on the strengthening of this union.

On the 120th anniversary of Élisée Reclus's death, talking about his life and thought gives us the opportunity to think of his contribution and relevance both from a theoretical and a militant perspective. Many of his ideas are still relevant today, especially those concerning the relations between societies and nature. With regard to some ecological concepts that would later become central for other anarchists such as Murray Bookchin and John Clark, he was a pioneer and a source of inspiration for many.

Élisée Reclus—Communard, geographer, vegetarian

Features, Jul 4th by Maurice Schuhmann

On July 4, 1905, the French anarchist Élisée Reclus died in Torhout, near Bruges in Belgium

Reclus, after whom a street leading to the Eiffel Tower in Paris is named, was one of the most well-known anarchist propagandists in France—and at the same time one of the country's most important geographers. His *Geographie universelle*, written between 1876 and 1894, is considered a foundational classic in the field, alongside his posthumously published work *L'Homme et la Terre*.

Born on March 15, 1830, in Sainte-Foy-la-Grande, France, Jacques Élisée Reclus studied in various places, including Berlin in the early 1850s, where he encountered the work of Max Stirner and studied geology. It was also during this time that he first came into contact with anarchist ideas, which would deeply shape his thinking and to which he would significantly contribute. He later became a co-founder of the French section of the First International and maintained contact with figures such as Mikhail Bakunin.

When the Paris Commune broke out, he declined a political post that was offered to him and instead actively participated in the military defence of the social experiment. After the Commune was crushed, he was—like many of his comrades, including Louise Michel, with whom he would later give lectures—exiled to New Caledonia. The exile did not break him; quite the opposite.

Upon returning to Europe, he co-founded the anarchist newspaper *Le Révolté* (1879–1885) in Switzerland. Among his collaborators at the time were Peter Kropotkin, who wrote important articles in the publication, and Jean Grave. The paper was one of the most influential anarchist publications in Europe at the time.

It was also during this period that Reclus became a vegetarian for ethical reasons. He went on to advocate for this way of life—no easy task, especially in France, where vegetarian or vegan lifestyles have remained marginal, even in anarchist circles. Combined with his geographical observations and his affinity for naturism, he is sometimes regarded— alongside Kropotkin —as a forerunner of modern eco-anarchism.

Because of his research and his resolutely anti-nationalist stance, Spanish educator Francisco Ferrer reached out to him. Ferrer asked Reclus to write geography textbooks for his newly founded *Escuelas Modernas*. These were intended to be explicitly anti-nationalist textbooks, free of the chauvinistic poison that characterised most school books of the time.

Reclus ultimately settled in Belgium. In 1894, he was involved in the founding of a free university—the *Université Nouvelle*. He lived and worked in France's neighbouring country until his death.

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