

"They have the right to throw us out": Élisée Reclus' New Universal Geography

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"They have the right to throw us out": Élisée Reclus' *New Universal Geography*

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Introduction

In his mammoth *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle* (1876-1894), Élisée Reclus (1830-1905) tries for the first time, as a Western geographer, to 'provincialize' Europe within a global dynamics. Applying his anarchist ideas to his Geography, he represents the principle of unity for human kind, stating that all men should live on the Earth as 'brothers' and refusing the 'superiority' of one culture over the others. Nevertheless, his stance on the settling of European workers in North Africa, which he regarded with some sympathy, has been considered rather ambiguous by some French geographers. Other scholars, however, have stated recently that such a view is consistent with the anarchist and socialist thought of the time, which considered workers' emigration as a way of spreading 'social ideas' overseas, without encouraging political or military domination. New research on Reclus is largely based on the exploration of the 19 volumes of the *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle* (henceforth NGU), which was sometimes considered less interesting than his other works, such as *L'Homme et la Terre*, but now reveals its originality in resizing Europe within geographical thought

To avoid the perils of anachronism it is important to analyse what Reclus said within the political and cultural context of his time. What are the representations of Europe, Otherness and Colonialism of a very influential geographer, who was at the same time one of the founders of the international anarchist movement? What insights might it offer to contemporary studies on colonialism and post-colonialism? I try to clarify these issues by engaging with two emblematic cases – British rule over India and the French occupation of Algeria – as they are presented in the NGU.

I begin with an analysis of the existing literature, both on Reclus and on the relationship between European science and colonialism. Then, I consider Reclus' representation of the British Empire and, subsequently, the French Empire. Finally, I summarise his construction of a new

critique of colonial powers, including the minor ones.[1] My primary source is the NGU, which I integrate with an analysis of Reclus' articles for political journals and his correspondence.

Reclus, Europe and colonialism

After the rediscovery of Élisée Reclus by Francophone and Anglophone scholars during the 1970s and the 1980s (*Antipode* 1979; Dunbar 1978; *Hérodote* 1981), a debate arose among some French geographers. They questioned the sympathy expressed sometimes by Reclus and his entourage for the settlement of European workers in lands like the Maghreb, a view that apparently clashes with his political ideology, given that Reclus was an exile of the Paris Commune and one of the founders, along with Mikhail Bakunin, of the international anarchist movement within the International Workers Association.

Some authors have also put forward the hypothesis that Reclus was a 'colonialist' (Giblin 1981; Nicolaï 1986; Baudouin and Green 2004). In particular, the *Hérodote* group considered his positions "ambiguous" (Giblin 1981:58) and sometimes inconsistent with his anarchist thinking, arguing that he was apparently less critical of the French colonialism in Algeria than, for instance, of British colonialism in India. Nevertheless, these geographers analyzed only a small part of Reclus' corpus: more recently, after the international conferences held in Lyon, Montpellier and Milan in 2005 to mark the centenary of Reclus' death, other researchers (Bord et al. 2009; Pelletier 2009; Schmidt di Friedberg 2007) have started systematic work on his mammoth geographic production (30,000 pages, 17,000 of which belong to the NGU) and his business correspondence (more than 2000 published and unpublished letters). Like some classic works on French geography (for instance, Berdoulay 1981:70), this new research stresses the anti-colonial aspects of Reclus' geography, and his attempt to relativize concepts like 'Europe', 'East' and 'West' in a way that appears very original, particularly if we compare it to the prevailing European science at that time (Deprest 2005 and 2012; Ferretti 2010; Ferretti, Malburet and Pelletier 2011; Guarrasi 2007; Pelletier 2007). The new scholarship reveals the tight link between Reclus' geography and the anarchist thought of his time, similar to some classic Anglophone studies, which dealt with the anarchist Reclus, the geographer Reclus, or both, without noticing major contradictions between the two (Clark and Martin 2004; Dunbar 1978; Fleming 1988).

The new studies of Reclus inform a more general debate in the Francophone literature on the openings and limitations of postcolonial analyses associated with prominent theorists in the fields of subaltern studies and postcolonial critique (for example, Bhabha 1994; Chakrabarty 2000; Mbembe

[1] All texts quoted from French works have been translated by the author.

2000; Spivak 1999). In France, scholars like Jean-Loup Amselle and Jean-François Bayart (Amselle 2011; Bayart 2010) have criticized postcolonial studies for being Anglo-centric and overly general in their use of categories like 'European thinking' or 'French science'. Notably, Bayart defends the French intellectual tradition from the charge that it has neglected the postcolonial question, stating that several French authors contributed to anti-colonialist thought and issues of decolonization well before the 'postcolonial turn' (Bayart 2010:19-20). If the writings of scholars like Amselle and Bayart contain undoubtedly some interesting elements for debate, it is also clear that they are marked by lingering French nationalism, and are prone to neglect the richness and heterogeneity of contemporary postcolonial studies.

In contrast to Amselle and Bayart, Francophone scholars such as Nicolas Bancel and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch acknowledge "the marginalisation of colonial history and the quasi-absence of postcolonial history in France until a very recent date" noting that this "is a very serious handicap for the comprehension of the crisis which France knows at present" (Coquery-Vidrovitch 2011:47). In fact, political debates on the memories and significations of French colonial rule have been very intense in recent years, dealing notably with the problem of colonialism's afterlives in the French *banlieues*. Bancel (2011) characterizes as a "colonial maelstrom" recent tendencies among authors like Daniel Lefeuvre, Max Gallo and Pascal Bruckner, who claim to rediscover ostensibly 'positive' aspects of French colonialism. One of the urgent tasks for authors inspired by postcolonial scholarship is to challenge this upsurge in the "neoconservative intellectual line" (Bancel and Blancard 2007:46). The most recent scholarship on the history of French geography, based on original texts and archives, is generally attentive to these debates, willing to dialogue with postcolonial writing and careful to distinguish the "difference" of human actors and theoretical problems in space and time (Singaravélou 2009; *Journal of Historical Geography* 2011). Thus, writing on the history of French sciences in the colonial period, Pierre Singaravélou underscores that, "the history of its places of production allows us to situate and contextualise the colonial geographic knowledge" (Singaravélou 2011:240).

While I do not have the space to summarise all these rich debates, we can assume as a working hypothesis, as stated elsewhere (Ferretti 2011b), that Reclus' key distinction between *conquête* and *colonisation*, recalling approximately the present distinction between settled colonies and invaded colonies, misled some authors more familiar with the language of the Francophone anti-colonial movements of the second half of the 20th century. In fact, Reclus uses the word *colonisation* only in the sense of the overseas migration of European workers, and expresses some sympathy for this phenomenon in as far as it allows socialist ideas to be exported to other

continents. By contrast, Reclus denies the legitimacy of the word 'colonies' when applied to cases like British India or *Afrique Occidentale Française*.

The case of French Algeria, often quoted by Reclus scholars, deserves to be clarified from the outset, and we can do so by quoting a corpus of unpublished letters from Reclus to the French cartographer Paul Pelet. Here, Reclus reveals early radicalized thinking on colonization and on the principle of conquest, developed during his initial trips to Algeria, where one of his daughters, Magali, settled with her family. In 1884, after first-hand experience of the Algerian situation, Reclus resigns from the *Société Protectrice des Indigènes* founded by Victor Schœlcher and Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, considering it too paternalistic, stating that "what we call protection sometimes means assisting the work of oppression".[2] He writes: "I come back from Algeria horrified by the conquest [...] I want absolutely to cancel my name from the list of people who accept the principle of conquest".[3] Blaming the behaviour of some progressive friends who remained in the association, Reclus makes one of his clearer anti-colonial statements: "I would approve of this behaviour if the *indigénistes* granted the indigenous all their rights, including that of getting rid of us".[4]

If the text of the NGU, published by the large Parisian publisher Hachette in the years when Reclus was exiled in Switzerland, is more restrained than his unpublished correspondence, we find nonetheless many passages where Reclus, sometimes implicitly, condemns colonial crimes, and where we encounter some of the main aspects of his originality compared to other geographic and scientific writings of his time. For instance, if the starting point of the NGU is Europe, which implies some suspicion of Eurocentrism (a concept unknown at that time, however), it is interesting to compare Reclus' definition of Europe to the definition given by the earlier francophone Universal Geography, the *Précis de Géographie Universelle* by the Danish geographer, Conrad Malte-Brun, who writes:

> [Europe is] the home country of humankind and the legislator of the Universe. Europe is in all parts of the world; a full continent is populated only by our colonies; barbarism, deserts, sun, fire will no longer shield Africa from our active endeavours; Oceania seems to call for our knowledge and our laws; the gigantic mass of Asia is almost completely crossed by our conquests; soon, British India and Asian Russia will touch each other, and the immense, but weak, Chinese Empire, will not resist our influences, if even it escapes from our armies (Malte-Brun 1845:2).

[2] Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises (henceforth: BNF, NAF), 16798, f. 74, *Lettre d'É. Reclus à P. Pelet, 28 mai 1884.*
[3] BNF, NAF, 16798, f. 77, *Lettre d'É. Reclus à P. Pelet, 21 juin1884.*
[4] BNF, NAF, 16798, f. 80, *Lettre d'É. Reclus à P. Pelet, 7 décembre 1884.*

In stark contrast, Reclus begins his work with very different arguments. He describes Europe as: "The smallest tribe, the smallest group of men in the natural state, claims to be the true centre of the universe, imagines itself to be the most perfect representative of humankind" (Reclus 1876:5). The geographer explains that he chose Europe as the starting point "not based on such prejudice [but because] the European continent is the only one whose surface is already covered and explored scientifically, the only one whose map is almost complete" (Reclus 1876:6).

The distance between this position and the dominant European chauvinism is confirmed by the reviews that the anarchist press dedicated in 1875 to the first instalments of the big encyclopaedia containing Reclus' definitions of Europe and the Mediterranean world. The important communist-anarchist journal of the Internationalists settled in Switzerland, the *Bulletin de la Fédération Jurassienne*, stated that the NGU was the work which best expressed "our feeling of internationality, of cosmopolitanism, which was known, in the past centuries, only by the highest intelligences, and which is now dominant among the proletariat of the two worlds, fortified by the study of this well-intended geography. [This is] a book of scientific popularization which will make a great contribution to popular education. All workers' societies which have a library should impose on themselves the small sacrifice of spending 50 centimes each week to obtain this work" (*Bulletin de la Fédération Jurassienne*, 13 June 1875:4). So significant was Reclus' position that even the conservative geographer Marcel Dubois recognized that "in the Universal Geography by Élisée Reclus, one can find the best criticism of European chauvinism" (Dubois 1891:133).

The British Empire

In Reclus' time, the British Empire was paradigmatic of European domination: Great Britain was both the cradle of the Industrial Revolution and the country whose small geographic dimensions stood in sharp contrast with the enormous extent of its Empire. Reclus knew the British world very well and greatly loved the flourishing of science, technology and industry that he was able to observe during his frequent trips to London. Yet, writing in the socialist journal *La Société Nouvelle* he stresses unambiguously the faults of the British Empire: "We know what the destiny of Ireland was, what the conquest of India was, what the extermination of the Australians and Maoris was yesterday, and what the massacre of the Matabelé is today; we know the workhouses and the slums of Whitechapel" (Reclus 1894:438). However, according to Reclus, this kind of colonial domination carried in itself the germs of its future defeat, because the colonised peoples were learning the sciences, the technologies and the critical thought that would allow them to drive out the invaders: "European civilization comes to deny its starting point. It targeted power, domination,

but it is building equality by its same conquests" (Reclus 1894:438). Reclus elaborates on this in *L'Homme et la Terre* when he writes about the aspirations of Indian people for independence from British rule: "it's important that their imagination is already concerned by the dream of 'India to Hindus'" (Reclus 1908:52). It is rare to find comparable statements in the European human sciences of that time.

Reclus' understanding of difference is broadly based on the concept of *mélang*e, supported both by his scientific work and his antiracist activism (Alavoine 2007), and is akin to the concept of "hybridity" in contemporary postcolonial studies (Hall 1996:259; see also Gilroy 1993). Reclus' approach to "making sense of global differences" (Kearns 2005) is also evident in his criticism of atlases and world maps, where Reclus anticipates the insights of authors present day scholars such as Arno Peters or Brian Harley. According to Reclus, "maps are the most false, the most large is the portion of the terrestrial surface they represent; they always mislead their reader on the relative dimension of different lands" (Reclus 1895:3-4). The radical attitude expressed in *La Société Nouvelle* is on display in several pages of the NGU as well:

> Unfortunately, in many countries Englishmen were just able to destroy, to empty. In Tasmania, they exterminated the indigenous to the last man. In the Australian continent, some natural tribes escape still from them like groups of kangaroos; but this kind of human game is threatened with swift extinction. In Oceania, how many islands were depopulated by them; and in their American colonies, now the United States, how many Indian nations did they odiously massacre, not to mention of the ones they killed with alcohol and European vices! (Reclus 1879:359).

In the NGU, the clash between the dimensions of the mother country and the colonies is emphasized by the use of maps which today are called 'thematic', generally referring to the small size of Europe compared to the rest of the globe it dominated (Fig. 1). In the British case, the distinction between *colonies* and *conquêtes* is very clearly presented. "Among British possessions, some countries like Canada, Australia and New Zealand have a truly independent existence and develop themselves rather freely […] This is not the case of India: here, Englishmen are not at home, because they merely settled a few thousand dominators" (Reclus 1894:434).

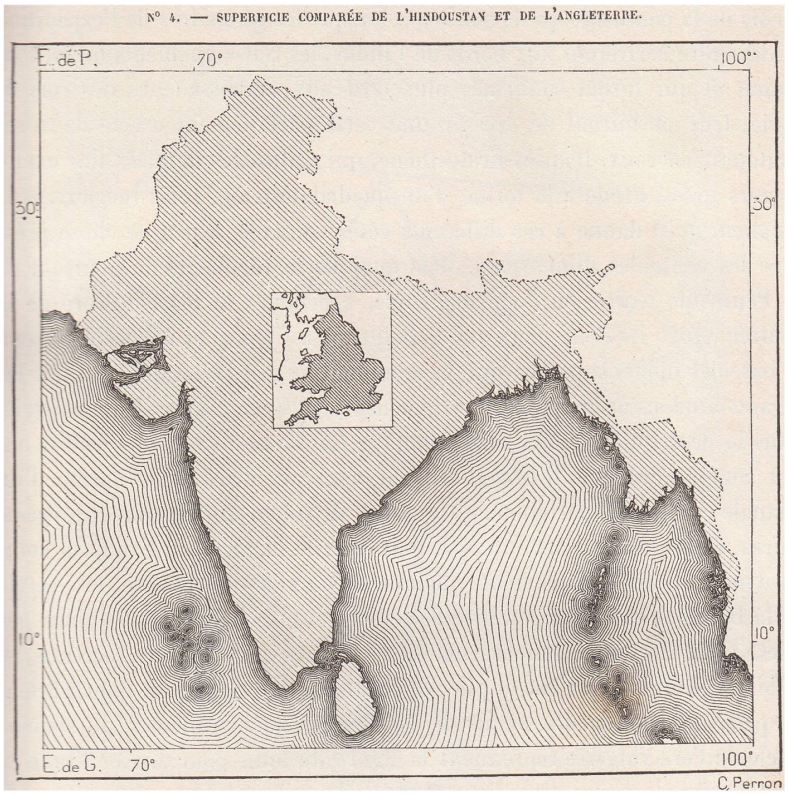


Fig. 1. ***Comparative surface area of Hindustan and England*** **(Reclus 1883:21)**

Reclus stresses many times that this terminological distinction is a substantial one. If the number of European settlers in India is demographically inconsistent, because they are just soldiers and administrators, one cannot call this country a European colony. "People often call India 'a British colony' and […] quote it as an extraordinary example of the 'coloniser attitude' of the Anglo-Saxons. But the Cis-gangetic peninsula is an example of the contrary" (Reclus 1883:629). Reclus notices that there were more White farmers in Guadalupe than in all of India, and concludes by arguing that the White people settled in this peninsula consider themselves as a special caste. They "would not accept that some compatriots compromise the prestige of their authority by doing manual work. India is a land of conquest, not a colony" (Reclus 1883:629). Moreover, we must consider that at this time, in the socialist and anarchist milieus, the idea of colony was envisaged independently from a state or a bureaucratic apparatus. Some anarchist groups tried to found what they called 'social colonies' in tropical countries, such as the Cecilia Commune built in Brazil in the last decade of the 19th century by a group of Italian anarchists inspired by Reclusian ideas (Rossi 1993). Reclus himself, during his youth, imagined building such a colony on the *Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta*, in Colombia (Reclus 1861), to shelter fellow exiles of the Second Empire, following

the 'tropical utopia' inspired in the 19th century by the voyages of Alexander von Humboldt (Safier 2011). In the years to follow, Reclus was to become more sceptical about these possibilities. In 1900, he criticized the 'fashion' of anarchist colonies, stating that their frequent failure demonstrated the necessity of acting in the society to change it: "Shall anarchists create their Icaria out of the bourgeois world? I do not think so, nor do I desire it" (Reclus 1900b:1).

The idea of social colonies had evident links with Saint-Simonianism, which influenced Reclus during his youth. But later in life Reclus became sharply critical of the Saint-Simonians, characterizing them as "powerful men in the world of industry" (Reclus 1885:531), who undertook projects like the Suez channel no more for their ideals but "for the profit of speculators and financiers" (Reclus 1905:323). In general though it is important to note that in the 19th century it was not surprising to hear the words 'colonies' or 'colonization' employed in a different way than today, and that a certain advocacy of them was not a priori in contradiction with socialist and anarchist ideas of the time.

Concerning the Reclusian vision of history and historicism, Vincenzo Guarrasi has recently tried to analyse it by taking inspiration from Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*. Like Chakrabarty, Reclus stresses the contradictions of Europe, which produced the 1789 *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme*, and contradicted it systematically through its behaviour in the colonized countries. If Reclus, who considered himself to be inspired by the *Lumières*, was influenced by the historicist tradition criticised by Chakrabarty, Guarrasi still recognizes his 'titanic' effort to share universalistic values and try nevertheless to understand and locate cultural differences. According to Guarrasi, Reclus' task was to "not let history push him into a corner. Sharing an intellectual tradition and at the same time contesting the political practices inspired by it, is the titanic effort to which he devoted his life" (Guarrasi 2007:94). Accordingly, Reclus' notion of humankind is a universal one, congruent with arguments made by scholars of the Haitian revolution, like C.L.R. James (1938) or Susan Buck-Morss (2009), that the *Déclaration* was a far more radical document in its liberatory potential than in the actions of its European authors. Buck-Morss states that the abolition of slavery and the national independence, in Haiti, were not given by the French First Republic, but were taken by the Haitian slaves themselves, "unfolding the logic of freedom in the colonies […] and yet only the logic of freedom gave legitimacy to their revolution in the universal terms in which the French saw themselves" (Buck-Morss 2009:39-40). This is a claim that Reclus would have likely endorsed.

Finally, Reclus deals with the rivalry in Asia between the maritime British Empire and the Russian terrestrial one, employing arguments that seem to anticipate the 'geopolitics' of the well-

known British geographer Halford Mackinder. Reclus regarded both these colonial powers as global ones, enveloping the earth and soon to meet one another, in spite of their different natures, in the Hindu Kush Mountains. According to Reclus "the English oceanic world, which extends over the entire circumference of the globe, contrasts with the Russian continental world, which covers half of Europe and half of Asia" (Reclus 1889:713). Reclus' forecast in the NGU was more favourable to Russia for a geographical reason: the Russian Empire had a true territorial and demographic strength in Asia, whereas the English one, he said prophetically, was destined to leave its foothold in the Indian peninsula. "In this empire, English power does not have a natural foothold: the normal growth of the Hindu population will push them to emancipate themselves from strangers' tutorship" (Reclus 1879:885). Is it not surprising that Mackinder's Heartland Theory was partially anticipated by Reclus, given the direct links between Mackinder and anarchist geographers like Reclus and Pëtr Kropotkin, who corresponded with him in spite of their opposite political visions (Kearns 2004 and 2009; Ferretti 2011a). Geopolitically, around questions of colonialism, the differences between Mackinder and Reclus could not be starker. As Gerry Kearns stresses, Reclus "rejected force as fiercely as Mackinder embraced it, because, for Reclus, it demeaned the perpetrator and degraded its victims, producing further violence in its turn. Whereas Mackinder presented a vision of the world divided between civilized and barbaric people and argued that the British were exceptional, Reclus emphasized instead the intermingling of peoples [...] For Reclus, cultural diversity rather than racial purity drove human creativity" (Kearns 2009:187).

The French Empire

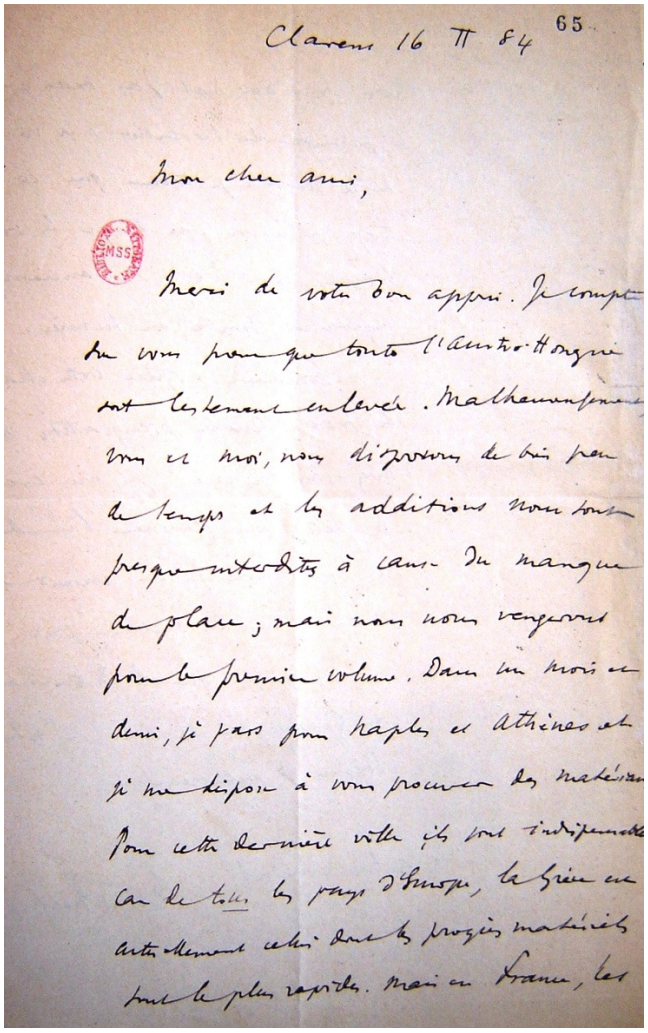
In France, following its defeat in the 1870 war, when Reclus was an exile in Switzerland and writing the NGU, the debate on the usefulness of French colonial expansion was very animated. In the previous decades France had lost substantial territories in Canada, Louisiana and India, and in 1877, when Reclus published the second volume of the NGU, dedicated to France, the greatest part of its Empire was represented by Algeria: the possession of Senegal, Cambodia and of some islands in the Pacific or in the Caribbean Sea had no great importance from the political or economic points of view. Reclus was clearly aligned with sceptics, who claimed the "indifference or hostility of French people to colonization" (Berdoulay 1981:47). In fact, in his assessment the French colonies were a residual phenomenon: "[B]oth for population and commerce, the whole of these foreign dominions contributes very little to the growth of the nation.[…] Colonies are very expensive for the mother country, and their populations, kept in a condition of great dependence, cannot contribute to the development of France's strength. So, the power of France cannot be measured on the extension of such far lands where its flag flies" (Reclus 1877:913).

Concerning Algeria, recent studies by Florence Deprest suggest that the idea of exploiting the agricultural possibilities of North Africa by settling European workers there was neither inconsistent with socialist thought (at a time when concepts like 'anti-colonialism' or the 'theory of imperialism' were unknown), nor inconsistent with the Reclus' idea of the historical and cultural unity of the Mediterranean basin (Deprest 2005 and 2012). Indeed, in the eleventh volume of the NGU, dedicated to the Maghreb, Reclus often cites episodes of colonial crimes from 1830 to his own time, for instance the massacre of a whole tribe imprisoned and made to suffocate in a cave, where "according to the testimony of some survivors, there were 1150 people" (Reclus 1886:502). He observes ongoing abuses by colonizers and administrators: "many injustices are still committed, and winners always abuse of their force against the weaker people" (Reclus 1886:630). Reclus also condemns colonial laws that allowed the requisition of indigenous properties, considering them "cruel […] barbaric […] and useless" (Reclus 1886:603). In short, there is ample evidence to reveal the anachronism of the scholars who have stated that Reclus' geography contradicts his anarchism.
According to Deprest, a distinctive aspect of Reclus' originality is the representation of the indigenous as autonomous individuals with their own right to emancipation. "Saying that indigenous peoples, Arabians and Berbers, are capable of a political consciousness, explaining how the colonial regime supplants their voices, means that we recognize that they must have their political rights, not in a vague future but now, and that we realize that they are being deprived of their rights. These statements open a crack in the principle of colonial domination, which can lead to the collapse of the entire colonial edifice" (Deprest 2012:120).

In Reclus' letters to the cartographer Paul Pelet we find admiration for Algerian peoples like the Kabyles, whom he calls *admirables citoyens.* "I am completely filled with wonder at the Kabyle mythology. I will be very happy to come back here and study these admirable citizens," he writes.[5] Reclus was very taken by the communitarian customs of the Kabyles, which reminded him of the direct democracy he admired in the Greek polis. He conceived of the Kabyle village assembly (*djemâa*) as a survival of an ancient tradition of freedom preceding the Arabic invasion, remarking: "I hope that the Kabyles can civilise their civilizers"[6]. Correspondingly, Reclus makes frequent reference in his letters to a circle of local friends, French anarchists settled in Algeria, who aimed to spread social ideas among the local populations and were opposed to soldiers, missionaries and 'protectors'. "I was shocked by their unanimous judgement of the *Société Protectrice* [from which Reclus resigned in 1884]. Everybody accuses it of doing the opposite of what it says; everybody

[5] BNF, NAF, 16798, f. 74, *Lettre d'É. Reclus à P. Pelet, 28 mai 1884.*
[6] BNF, NAF, 16798, f. 77, *Lettre d'É. Reclus à P. Pelet, 21 juin1884.*

sees in it the hand of the Empire; everybody blames it for choosing as its local agents the worst oppressors; they all have three main enemies: the soldier, the priest and the 'protector'. Good gracious! Wasn't I in a good company!"[7].


Clarens 16 II 84 65

Mon cher ami,

Merci de votre bon appui. Je compte
bien vous prouver que toute l'Austro-Hongrie
est les tenants enlevés. Malheureusement
vous et moi, nous disposons de bien peu
de temps et les additions nous sont
presque interdites à cause du manque
de place ; mais nous nous rattraperons
pour le premier volume. Dans un mois ou
demi, je pars pour Naples et Athènes et
je me dispose à vous procurer des matériaux
pour cette dernière ville qui sont indispensables
car de tous les pays d'Europe, la Grèce est
actuellement celui dans les progrès matériels
sont le plus rapides. Mais en France, les

Fig. 2. ***One of the Reclus' unpublished letters to Paul Pelet*****, BNF, NAF, 16798, f. 65.**

We can infer from another corpus of Reclus' unpublished letters addressed to the Geneva anarchist Jacques Gross that the geographer participated personally in attempts to build a local anarchist movement in Algeria. As he wrote to his friend: "When I left Algiers last year there were two or three of us. Now there are more than fifty of us and a recent conference [that we organized]

[7] BNF, NAF, 16798, f. 77, *Lettre d'É. Reclus à P. Pelet, 21 juin1884.*

was attended by almost five hundred people"[8]. Significantly, in one of Reclus' dedications for Jules Perrier, another French communard exile in Switzerland, we find the expression "coming back from Algeria, the land of the swordsmen" (Vuilleumer 1972:13), where the word *sabreurs* could be translated as 'murderers', a clear reference to the French militaries settled in North Africa, who were responsible for the bloody repression of the Paris Commune. In short, there is ample evidence that Reclus, in settled colonies like Algeria, draws a radical distinction between European workers and European exploiters (masters, administrators, missionaries, soldiers, and so on).

It is important to clarify that from an anarchist point of view the social problem was always seen as more important (or not less important) than the colonial one: according to anarchists, a proletarian of Algeria (or of any other country) had to first struggle against his master. If the latter happened to be French, Berber or Arabic, that was not the first problem. The need for solidarity between proletarians of different countries is expressed by Reclus, some years later, in an article where he explains the international nature of repression, quoting the massacre of the Parisian Communards, executed by regiments which were previously established in Algeria. In Paris, they "swept up the popular neighbourhoods with their artillery, as they had swept the poor *brodji* of the Arabians. The French nation will pay the same price for Tonkin and Formosa. The historical recurrences will bring the punishment for the faults committed" (Reclus 1911:339). Workers' internationalism notwithstanding, the anarchists of that time were also attentive to the struggles for national liberation, both in Europe and in the colonies (Anderson 2007). Reclus' philosophical views, inspired by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, held the main opposition to be between authority and freedom. As in the case of India, he concluded his observations on Algeria by stressing the principle of the 'willingness of peoples': one day, the Algerians "will feel themselves Algerians and not Frenchmen, and they will necessarily oppose to the metropolis an ideal of emancipation, or free federation" (Reclus 1905:427).

It is important to note that Reclus is one of the first European authors to underscore the existence of an original 'African civilisation', which had a role in the formation of ancient Egypt, and so in the foundation of the Mediterranean civilisation. Reclus denies the existence of several civilisations clashing with each other, because he posits a unique human civilisation with different characteristics for every people or region. In his view, "racial pride, which historians do not mistrust enough, has generated very widespread prejudice, claiming that Africans have had no part in the general work of civilisation [...] On the contrary, the history of our progress brings us necessarily

[8] Centre international de recherches sur l'Anarchisme (CIRA), Jacques Gross Papers*, lettre d'E. Reclus à J. Gross, 7 avril 1887.*

towards the Nile basin, onto African land" (Reclus 1885:32). Contrast this to his condemnation of the damage caused in Africa by White slave drivers: "It's the influence of European 'civilisation' which has seriously worsened the condition of the African slave" (Reclus 1885:41).

In the years when Reclus writes the volumes of the NGU dedicated to Africa, following the 1885 Berlin Congress, the European Empires had just started to carve up the vast continent and occupied little more than the coastal regions. Reclus observes that in the Ivory Coast, "French trading posts are not numerous" (Reclus 1887:416); on the Slave Coast, although four European nations are contending with each other for regional influence, "on the northern side, in the hinterland, their properties have still no precise boundaries. The European travellers who have visited these countries are not numerous" (Reclus 1887:462). This situation also characterizes one of the oldest European maritime ports, Senegal: "the French possessions of Senegambia have still no other town worthy of this name than the capital" (Reclus 1887:248). Reclus' statements are confirmed by contemporary historians like Jacques Frémeaux, who writes that in the zone known at that time as the 'Sudan' (corresponding approximately to present-day 'Sahel'), the French administration controlled a military territory limited to "a narrow strip of land on each side of the constructed road" (Frémeux 1993:43). With regard to Senegal and, more generally, French colonies in West Africa, Reclus again makes a distinction between colonies and conquests, declaring that "this group of French people cannot even be considered as a reduction of the European societies, because it is not composed of all the organic elements of a nation: there are just merchants and functionaries. Although Senegal is the most ancient of French 'colonies', it is the one which is most improperly called a colony" (Reclus 1887:230).

As many authors have stated, the Third Republic applied to West Africa the principle of the so-called *mise en valeur* of its resources, supposed to be considerable, investing for the construction of railroads and modern infrastructures (Conklin 1997; Puyo 2001; Surun 2011). Reclus is not aprioristically opposed to this principle; for instance, he is rather favourable towards the project of a trans-Saharan railroad. What he contests is the principle that the profits of these works are reserved for the conquerors. On the other hand, Reclus finds in the state of Liberia an example of what he considers a true colony, the homeland of freed slaves, at a time when European authors were still sceptical about the capacity of Black people to self-govern. Reclus writes: "Is it not a capital event the constitution of a society composed entirely by slaves' children, who have taken possession of a territory where slave drivers came to make their cargoes of prisoners? In spite of what is said, Liberia is not weaker or less orderly than the European 'colonies' which surround it; moreover, its advantage is in being a true colony" (Reclus 1887:369). Reclus stresses the political importance of

this experience, which today could be ironically compared to 'decolonization', comparing it to the great European revolutions of 1848: "the great year of the revolutions in Europe and in Asia saw the birth, on African soil, of the new Black Republic" (Reclus 1887:370).

Towards a new ethnography and a new critique of colonialism

In his geographical works, Reclus dedicates considerable space to indigenous peoples, their histories, their cultures and their ethnicity, sharing this interest with his brother Elie Reclus (1827-1904), an ethnographer who was also one of his main collaborators on the NGU. Elie, the eldest Reclus brother, was also one of the first authors to criticize the sources on which scientists, at that time, based their knowledge of so-called 'savages'. At the beginning of his book *Les Primitifs*, Elie Reclus states that: "We do not hesitate to affirm that in several so-called savage tribes, the average individual is not morally, nor intellectually, inferior to the individual of our so-called civilized states […] These peoples were described only by their invaders, those who could understand them the least" (Elie Reclus 1885:XIII-XIV).

A great part of 'these peoples', at that time, lived in the tropical zone. According to Pierre Singaravélou, European geographers saw in the tropics "the perfect expression of their analysis scheme based on the influence of the environment on men" (Singaravélou 2009:49). While the Reclus brothers were not exceptions in this regard, their emphasis was on the different adaptation strategies which every people develops. This discourse was very useful for their egalitarian politics, because the relativity of material conditions, in their view, made it possible to appreciate the intelligence and cleverness of peoples in relation to their environment, without any further reason to talk about the 'superiority' or the 'inferiority' of a culture. Indeed, Élisée Reclus is ironic about certain platitudes concerning the inhabitants of the tropics: in the volume of the NGU dedicated to West Africa he argues that "the Krous contradict crushingly the preconceived idea that men of Tropical lands are incurably lazy; they work with energy and perseverance; they are very vigorous" (Reclus 1887: 387).

Reclus also contends with the political arrangements of different tribes and ethnic groups in the tropics. Thus, he analyses the tribal organization of the Bambouk region employing terminology that recalls contemporary political debates in Europe. "The Bambouk region is the part of the Senegal basin where the villages, almost all inhabited by Pagan Mandingos, best preserved their republican independence and their federative organization" (Reclus 1887:264). The idea of 'republicanism' is quoted many times in this volume of the NGU, for instance when the author deals with the "republican communities" (Reclus 1887:469) of the Minas in the Slave Coast. This

indicates Reclus' view of African people not as subjects, but as citizens with the same rights as Europeans. In the French colonialist milieu of that time it was rare and difficult to hear anyone call the indigenous *Républicains*, because this word, in French, implies full right to citizenship and full commitment to the history and tradition of the French nation after the 1789 Revolution. Reclus is also interested in class differences within the African societies. Concerning the Ashanti, he notes that "class separation and privileges of powerful people are more important and respected here than in all other countries" (Reclus 1887:430). Finally Reclus, who had spent a part of his youth sustaining the abolitionists during the American War of Secession (Alavoine-Muller 2007), praises the pride of the Black peoples who resisted the most against slavery on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, namely the Minas. "The Minas are those who struggled the most frequently to recover their freedom, and constituted in the interior of Brazil the most flourishing and best defended communities of fugitives" (Reclus 1887: 470).

In 1899, having finished compiling the NGU, Reclus launched another series of remarkable works on the whole of the colonial question, starting with book reviews published in the journal *Humanité Nouvelle* (new name of the former *Société Nouvelle*). Reviewing *Jours de Guinée* by Pierre d'Espagnat, Reclus declared himself disgusted by colonial society and lucky to live in a country where "the outrages against Black people are not a part of good manners. These pages teach us a lot about the 'civilization' that our compatriots bring to the African continent. They describe the little seven or eight-year-old prisoners, whose parents have been killed, and who are brought to the slavers' village to be sold to some Black kinglet or to some European merchant who will complete their education with his cudgel" (Reclus 1899a).

Reclus is biting in his review of *La colonia Eritrea* by the Italian R. Meldi, relating the grotesque colonial efforts of Italy under Francesco Crispi. "We do not need to say that according to the author, full of patriotic faith, Italians have all rights, in this enterprise, both against indigenous and against their European competitors" (Reclus, 1900a). A book on the French colonies in Indochina is occasion to notice that slavery exists even under direct French administration. Reclus fumes at the "businessmen and gold-hungry speculators who settled in the country to exploit fully twenty million Annameses and Tonkineses […] Under the administration of the radical republican Doumier, the trade of Annameses slaves is instituted for the benefit of some profiteers recommended by the Paris bankers. To buy a man, it's enough to make him sign a paper in French" (Reclus, 1899c). Here we witness the full force of Reclus' outrage: to export French civilization means to become a slave by signing papers in the language of the 1789 *Déclaration*!

But the book which most angers the anarchist geographer is an overtly racist work, *Psychologie de la colonisation française* by Léopold de Saussure, where, according to Reclus, "the fanatics of the colonial Empire can find several examples of the faults committed in the 'education of our inferior brothers'" (Reclus 1899b). Irony is followed by invective against all the Europeans who go to foreign lands and feel infinitely superior to the natives. Nothing surprising, according to Reclus, if the little European instruction they receive sharpens their spirit of rebellion: "How could it be otherwise? This hatred of the slave who revolts against us is right, and proves at least that there is still hope of emancipation. It is natural that the Hindus, Egyptians, Kaffirs and Irishmen hate Englishmen; it is natural that Arabians execrate Europeans. That's justice!" (Reclus 1899b).

In his last work, *L'Homme et la Terre* (1905-08), Reclus redeploys this mode of analysis in the context of colonial Empires. In a passage concerning the colonization of Africa we find an early occurrence of the term 'imperialism', and a clear repudiation of the thesis of direct climatic influence on individual behaviour:

> Concerning the crimes which were committed in several circumstances by colonial armies, and which aroused a universal feeling of indignation, some theorized that the influence of the tropical sun can be the cause of a special illness, called 'sudanite', which especially affects the superior officers, making them commit crimes without any apparent reason. This invention of an illness for superior officers, which has the great advantage of making them not guilty in the military tribunals, resembles the brainwave made for theft in the shops, when it is committed by rich ladies who do not absolutely need what they steal: it is a simple case of kleptomania, affecting medicine and not tribunals. Nevertheless, concerning the officers left in an immense colonial dominion, their criminal madness could be easily explained without the 'sudanite': it is absolute power, exercised over people who are considered something less than men, and without the risk of a peer's judgment; this power soon becomes a Roman-style imperialism or simple villainy (Reclus 1908: 206-208).

Both in the NGU and *L'Homme et la Terre*, Reclus does not draw exceptions for the smaller imperial powers. Concerning America, he writes that everywhere in this continent, from the Vikings in the 11th century to the Conquistadores in the 16th century, "the massacre began with the arrival of White people" (Reclus 1890:13). Holland is defined simply as a "parasite of Java" (Reclus 1879:336). The Kingdom of Belgium is sharply upbraided for its crimes in Congo, which are characterized as part of a general European trend: "among all the crimes committed in Africa by White people, those made in the 'Independent state of Congo' are maybe the worst: they are the most recent, the most scientifically organized. But who is the Englishman, the German, the Frenchman whose hands are clean enough to protest without suspicion of partiality?" (Reclus 1905:447)

Conclusion

In the 1980s some authors (see *Hérodote* 1981) stated that among the geographical writings of Reclus, the more radical and "interesting" is the last, *L'Homme et la Terre*, considering the NGU as a more conventional work. Now, new research on his gigantic corpus has shown that the NGU, although it was never intended to be an instrument of propaganda, has an important place in the construction of a critical discourse on Europe, otherness and colonialism.

Firstly, this work was a bestseller in its time: nearly 20,000 copies of the first edition were printed, and it was translated into all the major European languages. We can infer therefore that it played a formative role in the shaping of progressive public opinion, all the more so considering the celebrity of Reclus as an anarchist and a survivor of the Paris Commune.

Secondly, it contributed to the diminution of Europe's primacy in geographical works (less than a third of the NGU is dedicated to Europe) and tried to represent all the peoples of the globe according to the principles of human unity and brotherhood (Reclus 1876:IV). In doing so, it encouraged its readers to place themselves in a relative position to understand Others without judgments of superiority or inferiority, claiming that progressive globalization (a word which did not exist at the time but whose concept was already clear) would bring Europe and its Others increasingly closer to each other materially and culturally. In the words of a present-day French postcolonial scholar: "Elsewhere is constitutive of Here and vice versa; there are no more Ins and Outs" (Bancel et al. 2010:21); according to Reclus, the world is a globe "which has its centre everywhere, and its circumference nowhere" (Reclus 1876:7).

Thirdly, Reclus' condemnations of colonial crimes are sharp and frequent in his geographic writings. They anticipate the critique of colonialism and imperialism, which the European socialist movement was to adopt in the first decades of the 20th century, and which remains an open problem. Reclus' work carries the potential to make stimulating contributions to contemporary subaltern and postcolonial studies, particularly in how they provincialize 'Europe' and theorize geographical difference. If, as Stuart Hall contends, the 'post' in postcolonial criticism means "not only 'after' but 'going beyond'" (Stuart Hall 1996:53), then Reclus' attempts to overcome the Eurocentrism of his times, flawed or not, merits further engagement in current scholarship. Reclus, it should be noted, was uncomfortable with Hegel, whose philosophy can be read as a "founding text of Europe's colonial mastery" (Gidwani 2008:2583); it's not by chance that Frantz Fanon, in the twentieth century, could find the "subaltern moment" in Hegelian dialectics only by inverting creatively its legacy through an "insurrectionary fidelity" (Ibid:2585). Reclus, Kropotkin and the

other anarchists criticised both the Hegelian and Marxist dialectics as too metaphysical, even when applied to Materialism (Kropotkin 1908). Instead, their main philosophical references were the French *Encyclopédie*, the German *Naturphilosophie* and the 'binary' or 'serial' dialectic of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (Pelletier 2009), who inspired also, along with Bakunin, their federalist views. According to Kropotkin, Anarchism comes to the social sciences in an empirical and pragmatic manner, a method that makes Reclus' geography deeply engaged with complexity and difference. As such, "Reclus never withdraw himself into a rigid theory where Geography is 'this and not that'; in his willingness to show and explain, he prefers to say 'this and that'" (Raffestin 2008:165). We find a similar diagnosis in the classic biography of Reclus by Max Nettlau, who compares the geographical method of the NGU to the non-dogmatic and non-metaphysical approach of the Anarchists, an approach that recalls the critical epistemologies of Karl Popper or Paul Feyerabend. As Nettlau puts it: "only an anarchist could achieve this work, where millions of particulars appear in an harmonic order, because he has the large and flexible spirit necessary to give to every problem its right, without forcing it to enter in a preconceived theoretical system" (Nettlau 1930:30).

Similarly, Reclus' discussions of migration and *mélange* as the most important factors in world history anticipate contemporary notions of an entangled world system, echoing the claims of scholars like Eric Wolf who, in *Europe and the People Without History* argues that "the search for a world of distinctness is illusory" (Wolf 1982:17). This is not to deny that Reclus shared – unavoidably – the limits of a nineteenth century European thinker, that his prognostications on social progress and 'universal brotherhood' are surely too optimistic if we consider the history of the following century. But Reclus' universalism, as I have tried to demonstrate, is not the affirmation of a necessary assimilation or a fixed evolutionary process: it is more an affirmation of his hope in the planetary diffusion of the principles of 'cooperation' and 'free federation'. Surely, a leading postcolonial intellectual like Achilles Mbembe is not far afield of Reclus when he states that "postcolonial thinking stresses humanity-in-the-making, the humanity that will emerge once the colonial figures of the inhuman and of racial difference have been swept away [by] the advent of a universal brotherly community" (Mbembe 2008). So, critical universalisms are possible. And it's to better understand them for our own troubled times that transgressive thinkers like Reclus could inform the projects of radical geography and postcolonial studies. Indeed, Élisée Reclus, his brother Elie and some other collaborators on the NGU, like the Russian anarchist geographers Pëtr Kropotkin and Lev Mečnikov (see Ferretti 2011a), demonstrate the existence of heterodox thinkers in 19th century European science who were not aligned with colonialist and racist dominant

discourses. It is now important to study their works, avoiding anachronism, to preserve, and consider critically, the traces of another European way of viewing the world, differently.

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