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## **Elisée Reclus visited and revisited**

(Elisée Reclus : visites, revisites et contre-visites)

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*This paper has been prepared in 2006 for an Axel Baudouin's Homage in Trondheim (Norwegian University of Science and Technology).*

*Due to the international revival in Elisée Reclus's studies, which was already stated in this article, most references have not been updated, only a few of them (specially those issued from the conferences held in 2005).*

*One of the recent seminar on Elisée Reclus in France is : « Elisée Reclus, l'Orient et l'Occident à l'âge des empires », Journée d'étude, Paris, 30 mai 2012 (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales – GGH-TERRES - Groupe de géographie et d'histoire des territoires, de l'environnement, des ressources et des sociétés et UMR 8504 Géographie cités, équipe EHGO – Épistémologie et histoire de la géographie), org. : Federico Ferretti.*

See [raforum./info/reclus](http://raforum./info/reclus)

Elisée Reclus has received particular attention in France on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of his death. Two university congresses devoted to him were held, one in Montpellier (4-6<sup>th</sup> July 2005), and the other in Lyon (7-9<sup>th</sup> September 2005). The first proposed the theme “The Geographer, the City and the World: yesterday and today. Around 1905: Elisée Reclus, Vidal de la Blache”, while the second offered “Elisée Reclus and our geographies: texts and pretexts”. Beyond the mere commemoration, the number and the variety of participants, the presence of historians of anarchy alongside geographers, the international outreach of the conferences, and indeed the passionate turn of debate, all show that Reclus has become a major public figure in France when approaching present-day geography. The interest roused by Reclus among French geographers is however neither recent nor serene. It can be said that he has never ceased to be a reference, for some, since the 1970s. But he has been a reference that, far from signalling a community of viewpoint, highlights internal rivalries, at a time when the discipline is being reassessed. Thus, after a period of oblivion linked to a certain hegemony of the French school of geography, massed behind its “founder” Paul Vidal de la Blache, the anarchist geographer Elisée Reclus became the standard-bearer of competing groups, the common denominator of which was a rejection of the inherited geographical tradition: the “classical” or even “traditional” geography attributed to Vidal. Thirty years after this break with tradition, and the development of various innovating trends, how can this new curiosity, or even enthusiasm, about Reclus at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century be interpreted? What is the meaning of the association, if there is one, with the other tutelary figure, Vidal de la Blache? It is by way of the analysis of the reception given to Reclus today, and then by repositioning him in his time, that we will endeavour to add to the visits and re-visits of which he has been the object. We will attempt to contextualise, to study the reception given him through time, and to obtain a clear in-depth image of his relative position in relation to the three emerging geographical issues of that period (nature, the city, and the finite world), so as to conduct a form of “follow-up” visit (to retain the metaphor) in historical perspective, in the light of the institutionalisation of geography at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

## **1. Contemporary reception**

### **1.1. Geographical hero or Romantic geographer?**

Richard Lafaille, writing in 1989, underlined that the geography of Reclus, “buried then exhumed, propelled to the forefront by some, categorised as outdated by others [...] now enjoys an enthusiasm that is as suspect today as was its rejection earlier” (p.443). This moment of recognition in the 1970s and 1980s was sustained by radical readings that “made politics the key to the interpretation of his work” (p.443). According to Lafaille, who reviewed some fifteen geographical authors who had studied Reclus between 1969 and 1986 (when a special issue of the *Revue belge de géographie* was published), these interpretations of “reclusian” geography as being “revolutionary geopolitics” are an oversimplification. They arise from a dual historiographic filter (the preconceptions of readers, and the fascination for the man himself, a sort of “Romantic hero [who] epitomises the heroic geographer” (p.447)), operating at the expense of the analysis of the texts themselves. This reading of Reclus, according to Lafaille, is selective and partisan: it overlooks the literary dimension of his work (which was criticised at a time when geography was being promoted as a positivist science) while this is where his Romantic dimension finds its expression. He thus underlines the strictly literary importance of *reclusian* geography, which “comes out as landscape poetry [...] which includes scientific and didactic preoccupations and numerous themes cherished by the Romantics” (p.458).

### **1.2. Non-conformism, progressivism**

The political interpretation of Reclus in the early 1970s in France reflected a political radicalisation under the impulse of the May 1968 events, which shook the universities. The commemoration of the Paris *Commune* gave the libertarian movement considerable news coverage. These events shed light on the way in which Reclus was “appropriated” by the journal *Hérodote*, established in 1976 and directed by Yves Lacoste in the experimental university of Vincennes. After the spread of the libertarian theme “Elisée Reclus, geography, anarchism” for which Béatrice Giblin (1976) was responsible at the time, very soon the ecological theme was added, a theme that was emerging in the public field. Here again it was diffused by B. Giblin (and Gary Dunbar’s *Elisée Reclus, Historian of Nature*, 1978). But the discovery in France of the “new geography” of the English-speaking world in the early 1970s, the diffusion of the polymorphous French “*nouvelle géographie*”, and the questioning of the old French school of geography associated with the name of Vidal de la Blache, all gave other innovators the occasion to use the name of Elisée Reclus as a banner. Thus for instance from 1981 around Roger Brunet, who succeeded in grouping a number of the advocates of the renovation of geography in a spatial perspective, an official scientific organisation developed, the GIP Reclus. This denomination (in fact representing the *Réseau d’Etude du Changement des Localisations et des Unités Spatiales*) providing the acronym Reclus was intentionally indexed on the figure of a non-conformist and politically progressivist geographer: a “pilgrim for humanity”, as he was presented in the new *Universal Geography* published from 1990.

### **1.3. Homage, revision, trivialisation and the time for stocktaking**

The contemporary reception given to Reclus has initiated a more composite movement. Passions are still present – people fly to the defence of Reclus, or object to the attenuation of his heroic image; and others knowingly remove him from the pedestal, in particular by

stigmatising his views on ethnic or colonial issues, a particularly sensitive question today. It should however be underlined that these encounters around Reclus have contributed several new dimensions.

Firstly these conferences convene geographers, militant anarchists and historians of anarchism. This interaction has enabled the first to gain a better understanding of the complicity between the geographical analyses conducted by Reclus and certain anarchist themes. For instance, Florence Deprest (2006) interprets Reclus' *France* as a libertarian geography of the nation, in the light of the analysis of Proudhon and Deleuze writings that Daniel Colson (2001) provided in *Petit lexique philosophique de l'anarchisme*. Geographers should also put the position of Reclus within the anarchist movement into perspective. The analyses Gaetano Manfredonia (2005/2009) offers of the positions adopted by Reclus towards the social movement, and of his personal itinerary (in which the Commune episode and exile play a major part) are particularly compelling; they give him a real consistency within the three ideal-typical attitudes of the anarchists: insurrectionism, unionism, educationism. This interaction should also enable the second group to introduce into their analyses the spatial and territorial perspectives used by Reclus to conceive collective organisation and outcomes.

Secondly, these new readings of the writings of Reclus have constituted an opportunity for critical review, in particular on the theme of his objectivity, or his sensitivity to "otherness". Alongside many colourless works on "Elisée Reclus in such and such a country", certain authors have speculated on the way in which he dealt with a given ethnic or religious community. These are frequently polemic readings, basically for the purpose of re-evaluation – and tarnishing – of his image, by showing him bogged down in the stereotypes of his day, in particular colonialism and orientalism. Other authors examine how he represented the colonial encounter (Baudouin, 2003, Giblin, 2005, Deprest 2005) and debate on the "ambiguous" positions adopted by Reclus on colonisation. But, as Florence Deprest puts it, these must be contextualised and compared to the whole range of political postures of the time, when anti-colonialism (expressed in particular in relation to military conquest by a state) was rare.

Thirdly, several analyses have tried to revise the historiographic vulgate, and in particular the figure of him as the outlaw, "the outcast, rejected both by political powers and by university institutions" (Lafaille, 1989, p.444) created by B. Giblin and Y. Lacoste in particular. Here there have often been genuine explorations to determine what audience Reclus really had, and to study what this geographer's relationship was with university teaching. Thus, counter-current to the theme of "rejection" that, according to some, Reclus underwent at the hands of the French school of geography, Jean-Baptiste Arrault (2005) explores the "Reclus reference" in and around the *Annales de Géographie* from 1890 to 1920, to conclude that in fact "the outcast was integrated early on into the history of geography, and given a specific place (the only great geographer before Vidal?) by the "vidalians" among whom no homogenous group can be identified". Maria Teresa Vicente Mosquette (2005) and Henri Nicolai (2005) analyse his place as university professor in Brussels. For Nicolai, "the last avatar of Elisée Reclus" in Belgium was not a late achievement in a turbulent career, but rather a form of instrumentalisation within a conflict inside the Free University of Brussels, amounting, in all, to a solely political consecration: "in the events that shook the Brussels university institution, it is the political symbol that Reclus represented that was essential, and not the geographer or his geography". Likewise, Axel Baudouin (2005) shows the ambiguous relationship "between attraction and rejection" that Reclus entertained with the university, as with any institution.

#### **1.4. Geographer, writer, anarchist – a literary "worker" in the *Maison Hachette***

These deeper analyses, based on archive studies or contextual research, have revised the rose-coloured vulgate (the progressivist hero rejected by the conservative or reactionary institution), or the darker counter-legend (a man who, *in fine*, was a conformist, or at any rate less “politically incorrect” than has been claimed) in relation to particular issues. However, a study aiming to retrieve the meaning of a work by integrating it at once into a personal trajectory and into the material configurations that shaped it historically, is on a quite different scale. The various studies conducted by Soizic Alavoine adopt this global dimension that aims, in this instance, to characterise a deliberate purpose to educate humanity in its scope for emancipation through geography. Within this educational and political (in the strong sense) perspective is found the Grand Globe project on the 1/100 000 scale that Reclus designed for the Universal Exhibition of 1900 (Alavoine, 2003; Besse, 2003). The writings of Reclus also entertain this concern, but within various constraints, in particular those of the popular press in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As S. Alavoine puts it, Reclus was a “literary (employed) worker” for the *Maison Hachette* (the publisher) (Alavoine-Muller, 2005), in a long-term state of financial dependency, as were many authors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century studied by Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Les Règles de l’Art*. Reclus had to submit to editorial demand from the powerful publisher. The commission restricted him first of all to an agenda of picturesque popularisation, while Reclus would have preferred, more than anything, to engage in scientific geography. “To please, to captivate, to move, in order to be read and to instruct” was the brief for the drafting of the *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle*, at the expense of “didacticism” which the owner of Hachette outlawed (in the name of the market), when he saw the first drafts from Reclus in 1872 (Alavoine-Muller, 2005; Lafaille, 1989, p.451-452). His commission also involved political censoring: no “propaganda”, no militancy, specified the editor, or in the words of Elisée’s brother Onésime Reclus: “Your descriptive geography must never be politico-religio-sociologico-militant!” (Alavoine-Muller, 2005/2009). There was censure, therefore, and self-censure by Reclus in his universal geography, involving a degree of ethical rectitude with respect to the contract to which he had agreed, without renouncing his strongest convictions.

## **2. Elisée Reclus and the era of geography and geographers**

### **2.1. Three processes contributing to the triumph of geography**

Because they concentrate on the 1870 turning-point – which opened up an era of promotion of school geography designed to erase the humiliation of France’s heavy defeat in the Franco-Prussian war – histories of French geography have tended to over-emphasise the ideological and nationalistic dimension alone. The Third Republic, in some ways, also prolonged the modernising policy of the Second Empire, by diffusing geographical teaching with a utilitarian slant, aiming to provide knowledge of the contemporary world in order to facilitate military conquests and trading activities. It also associated all teaching disciplines with the common task of national reconciliation, following the terrible political threat seen in the Paris *Commune*. Nationalism, political integration to offset the class struggle, colonialism, popular education: the institutionalisation of the geographical discipline in schools, and following that in universities, was a fundamental trend which has been shown (in particular by Horacio Capel, 1982) to be everywhere correlated with the spread of secondary education.

Beyond this basic trend, there was also widespread polymorphous enthusiasm for knowledge of the world and nature that also included geography, from the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Robic, 2003a). The taste for travel, the attraction of the exotic, the success of the universal

exhibitions, the spread of tourism, excursionism, and Alpinism, the beginnings of landscape conservationism, all give ample evidence of this trend. Today the historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, previously reluctant to enter into cultural history, give a much fuller picture of this, as is the case for Alain Corbin for instance.

Finally, there was an awareness that the world was being progressively circumscribed by way of its gradual conquest by the Europeans and the shortening of distances obtained through new communication technologies, and this awareness fed a new geographical imagination. As early as the 1830-40s, the French Saint Simon school became the proponents of this trend (Bretagnolle, Robic, 2005a). A collective imagination in relation to the removal of distance, the disappearance of blank zones on maps, and universal means of communication was propagated in the wake of transport revolutions, to finally reach, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the conclusion of a “finite world”, in the views of Reclus, Frederick J. Turner (the end of the Frontier) or Mackinder (the “globe-wide world”) (Bretagnolle, Robic, 2005b; Kearns, 1984).

## **2.2. Several generations of “geophiles” in France**

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French school of geography assembled around Paul Vidal de la Blache in an university setting was beginning to obtain renown in the intellectual field, both in France and abroad. Thus, at this time, four generations co-existed: pioneers of popularisation and three generations of teaching geographers.

Several pioneers in geography were reaching the end of their life. Elisée Reclus (1830-1905), then professor in the New University in Brussels, was completing his main work *L’Homme et la Terre*. Among his contemporaries taking an interest in geography two other people spring to mind: the writer Jules Verne (1828-1905) who published his *Voyages extraordinaires* in the 1890s, and in particular the *Tour du monde en 80 jours*; and the geographer, historian and statistician Emile Levasseur (1823-1911), who wrote the school curricula for geography between 1871 and 1872 and developed a new field he called « economic geography ». All three belong to a generation of intellectuals who were still mainly unspecialised and who were strongly implicated in scientific popularisation. They were contemporaries of the first universal exhibitions.

Three other generations of geographers follow on. They were teaching geographers and followed the academic type of career generated by the promotion of the university under the Third Republic. A first subgroup is comprised of initiators such as Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845-1918) who entered the university at a time (1872) when geography teaching was considered to be a national issue. In this nationalistic and world competition setting, Vidal de la Blache had a correspondent in Germany, Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), and, in Britain, Halford John Mackinder (1861-1947). Vidal de la Blache progressively developed the tools of a geographical science, half way between esoteric science and communicable knowledge. Two following generations of university scholars were composed of Vidal de la Blache’s pupils, who learnt geography during their educational curriculum in the Ecole Normale Supérieure. But the first scholars (like Lucien Gallois, 1857-1941 and Marcel Dubois, 1856-1916) had to devote their theses to history or historical geography whether the youngest choose modern field geography, as did Jean Brunhes (1869-1930), Camille Vallaux (1870-1945), Albert Demangeon (1872-1940), Emmanuel de Martonne (1873-1955) and others. This is the 1870s generation, born at the time of the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune. They knew only the republican regime and its positivist university. Vidal de la Blache appeared to them as the main reformer of French geography. They considered Elisée Reclus, who died

just at the time when they defended their doctoral dissertation, as a great geographer, but who had been overtaken by the progress of geographical science.

### **2.3. Reclus as seen by his contemporaries: “the” great French geographer in the face of the German challenge, but over-descriptive**

It thus clearly appears that establishing a parallel between the itineraries and the scientific and political positionings of Reclus and Vidal de la Blache, as has frequently been the case, is not relevant. Despite their small difference in age (eighteen years), they did not belong to the same institutional world. The difference is complete if we consider the hiatus between Reclus and the “disciples” of Vidal de la Blache who made up the French school of geography. It is nevertheless interesting to explore the reception given to Reclus from the 1870s, when he was writing his *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle*, alongside contemporary efforts to institutionalise scientific geography, supported by the governing bodies of the university, as well as a professionalisation of scientific disciplines generally.

It would seem that, far from being ignored, his publications were received with a degree of enthusiasm in intellectual journals, including geographical journals, or those devoted to teaching and education. Ludovic Drapeyron, the founder of the *Revue de Géographie* created in 1877, claimed that he had been “touched by the grace” of geography when he read *La Terre* in 1870. Indeed Reclus was awarded the gold medal of the Société de géographie de Paris in 1892. Critics were nevertheless also present. Criticism predominantly concerned lack of style, or more strictly lack of scientific style. This is what motivated a critique by M.H. Gaidoz in the *Revue Politique et Littéraire* in 1875 in which, while he gave Reclus considerable praise for his feeling for nature, for his profound knowledge of the physical world, and for choosing to explore the Earth and the men living on it, he considers that the place given by Reclus to statistical erudition was too small, and that the “literary bent” of the author was at the expense of the necessary inclusion of a display of notes and bibliography. The same is true of a critique by Jean-Baptiste Pasquier, one of the protagonists of the educational reform, who gives an overview of the progress accomplished by geography in the *Revue Pédagogique*. He found the ninth volume of the *Géographie Universelle* (25000 copies issued) well written, easy to read, and well-served by its literary style, but excessively descriptive, and possessing faults in its design.

It does seem that in either case the issue is the critical encounter between the scientific requirements imposed by the positivist ideology favoured by the Third Republic, and the commercial censure of the editor requiring Reclus to adopt a descriptive style that was readily popular. Political criticism, on the other hand, as Lafaille has also shown, is absent from these critiques. The same explanation fits, since editorial censorship also comprised a requirement of political correctness. But it can be added that the reception given to the works of Elisée Reclus was also a response linked to the widespread complex entertained in France that saw the “German challenge” as a challenge to be met. And indeed who, other than Reclus, was in the position to personify, in geography, the figure of the French intellectual? This is probably the reason for the enthusiasm he inspired. Thus, for instance, in 1874, we find the following lines in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (with which Reclus had disagreed on a feminist issue) written by Ernest Desjardins, professor of geography in the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*: “Who else in Europe, since Humboldt and Karl Ritter, has approached the physical geography of the globe with more skill, or studied it with more passion? [...] Whatever may be his egalitarian and socialist ideas, Mr. Elisée Reclus has more merit as a geographer than merely that of having written a good book: he has made disciples, and, what is extremely rare, he has made

disciples within his own house [...]” (p. 178-179). Paquier also cites the names of the two German geographers with the intention of placing Reclus on a par with them. Conversely, Marcel Dubois (1888), who was then a young university intellectual engaged in introducing geography in the University, with Sorbonne personalities such as Ernest Lavisse, barely mentions Reclus in his analyses of the evolution of geography. He more readily mentions the academic trend to which the Sorbonne professor in historical geography whom he was assisting (Louis-Auguste Himly) belonged, and that of Vidal de la Blache in the *Ecole Normale*. He sets a parallel between Himly and Ritter (he and Reclus had both been auditors), and shows the merits of Vidal de la Blache in forming a new school of geography. If Dubois is one of the people to give Reclus some credit among authors published in and around the *Annales de géographie*, as has been demonstrated by J.-B. Arrault, this attitude is subsequent to the emergence of the “Vidalian” school, and the clash that finally led Dubois to break away from that journal in 1894-5.

In fact, in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before the emergence of the French school of geography in the Sorbonne, Reclus was seen as the French representative of modern geography, despite faults consisting in his over-literary style (at a time when a new style in scientific writing was becoming the norm), and his over-descriptive style (at a time when the fashion was more in favour of a sound naturalistic base and the exploration of natural causalities). This can be seen as a schizophrenic situation. Probably with some reluctance, he was caught up in a nationalistic appreciation of science. And indeed the requirements of his “salaried” status with the publisher Hachette (which he found difficult to endure) were in contradiction with the scientist ideal of the intellectuals of the day, as encouraged by the political regime.

### **3. Sensitivity towards the emerging geographical objects**

We shall now see whether, beyond the differences relating to their scientific, professional and institutional generations, Reclus and his challenger Vidal de la Blache are complete strangers one to another when they confront issues in relation to which any geographer of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was likely to have to position himself. Only three will be discussed here, since they have been the object of particular study (Robic, 1992 and 2003; Bretagnolle, Robic, 2005b): ecological sensitivity; the question of the large metropolitan areas, the experience of the finite nature of the world and in effect globalisation that was appearing at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Reclus was one of those who, very early on, noted the risks of damage to the natural environment by human influences. Although he used the rather alarmist views of George P. Marsh, Reclus was overall more optimistic, confident in the ability of mankind to re-establish the physical balance it has upset. This ecological sensitivity appearing before its time can be found in several academics towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Raumolin, 1984). For instance, like Reclus, J. Brunhes did not view this ecological risk as irreversible, nor did he see its global dimension (these were only perceived towards the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century). This awareness of the risk went hand in hand with a holistic view of man and the earth, developed throughout Reclus’ work, in a Romantic brand of science, impregnated with ideas of solidarity and harmony between man and nature. In relation to geographers of his time, the influence of Karl Ritter is evident, as for Vidal de la Blache. This influence contributed in both Reclus and Vidal an aspiration towards a unitary science, mere “geography”, with no qualifier. But when they did qualify it, one with the epithet “social”, the other with the epithet “human”, their difference in viewpoint emerges. Likewise, in relation to a master of “colonial



geography”, M. Dubois, the difference is also evident, since Reclus sought harmony and beauty, the reconciliation of the beautiful with the useful in nature, while for Dubois nature was first a resource to be exploited, and geography the study of “the relationship of the master to his estate”.

In another field, that of urbanism, Reclus also appears aware of what was at stake in issues of urban growth. Here he was in disagreement with many of his anarchist friends who supported the ruralist community models (for instance Kropotkine); he supported the virtues of democratic urbanism constructed at once on the conservative organicist model (Ruskin) and on that of civic rehabilitation experiments conducted by Patrick Geddes in Edinburgh. The interest he took in cities makes him in fact an active town-geographer, although more from the political “*polis*” angle than the “*urbs*” angle. In the same way, Vidal de la Blache, despite strong representations to the contrary, was also a geographer with an interest in the modern city. But through his arguments for regional cities capable of mobilising their surroundings, it is an economist’s position that Vidal adopted, with little sensitivity to democratic virtues or the scope for personal fulfilment that Reclus saw in the large contemporary metropolis. Both however based their analyses on what they saw as the major technological revolution of the time, the contraction of time-space as a result of the revolution in transport. For Vidal, the change in scale brought about by this revolution also required a change in the dimensions of regional patterns, in favour of the large city. Reclus, for his part, argued that the shrinking of time-distance was the material scope allowing the organisation of a center-periphery pattern in metropolitan areas so as to offer, in one and the same day, access to the collective and to individual pleasures: “Man must have the double advantage of access to the delights of the town, with its solidarity of thought and interest, its opportunities of study and the pursuit of art, and, with this, the liberty that lives in the liberty of nature and finds scope in the range of her ample horizon” (Reclus, 1895, p.264).

Finally, Reclus was particularly sensitive to the ongoing process of the unification of the planet. If he did not yet consider the whole world to be known in the 1870s, he was witnessing European colonisation and the irresistible extension of communication networks across the globe. The mobility and the speed of exchanges were synonymous with ubiquity: “The populations of towns – not those of the countryside for whom distances have decreased to a lesser degree – have become closer one to another, they live a common life, through constant exchanges of books, newspapers, letters and telegrams; they acquire a form of ubiquity” (Reclus, 1877, p.894). Vidal de la Blache reached the same conclusions, and also saw that time-distance was becoming the real spatial measure, and that the world was being miniaturised. Once again, however, their respective projects were different. Reclus wondered particularly about the ill effects of progress in communications, about the degree of emancipation of individuals and peoples that such progress could make possible, and conversely about the reinforcement of the power of the state that might result from it. Vidal de la Blache, for his part, was more interested in the economic consequences that would result.

Overall, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, geographers from different generations were for the most part sensitive to the shrinking of time-space, and a certain form of emerging globalisation. However each applied this to his own project. Urbanisation and the large city alarmed many; but a few saw cities as the ideal place for exchange and circulation, favouring the development of civilisation. As for the vulnerability of the environment, if certain geographers and naturalists were aware of it at the time, the main community of geographers and common opinion were far from having the lucidity of Reclus and a few others. The colonisation of the earth and the exploitation of resources remained the priority. It is not

surprising that the ideological and political commitments of these geographers differed, according to which issues they placed uppermost. Considering solely the cases of Reclus and Vidal de la Blache, it is obvious that for Elisée Reclus the issues were mainly political and social, whilst for Vidal de la Blache they were economic; as an anarchist Elisée Reclus gave primary importance to individualism and cosmopolitanism, whereas Vidal de la Blache tried to reconcile patriotism with cosmopolitanism (see Robic, 2011).

Ranging among the issues that he himself constructed and tackled on the one hand, and on the other the issues viewed as important by those readers he has fascinated, sometimes in spite of themselves, “visiting and revisiting” Elisée Reclus also enables us to gain perspective on our own times and the challenges before geographers today.

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