

*A POINT IN THE INFINITY OF SPACE: DID ÉLISÉE RECLUS'S LIBERTARIAN GEOGRAPHY EMERGE AHEAD OF ITS TIME?*¹

UM PONTO NO INFINITO DO ESPAÇO: A GEOGRAFIA LIBERTÁRIA DE ÉLISÉE RECLUS SURTIU ANTES DA HORA?

UN POINT DANS L'INFINI DE L'ESPACE: LA GÉOGRAPHIE LIBERTAIRE DE ÉLISÉE RECLUS A SURGI AVANT L'HEURE?

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to address the context surrounding the emergence of Élisée Reclus's geographical thought and the role of his work in the history of geography. Spatial experience and revolutionary practice were elements that contributed to the French geographer's way of thinking. On the other hand, scientific research and involvement with the academic concepts of his time affected the organization of his work. The libertarian social nature of Reclus's geography ultimately influenced the way the dominant historiography viewed its more politicized content.

Keywords: Élisée Reclus, libertarian geography, geographical thought, dominant historiography.

Resumo

O objetivo principal deste trabalho é demonstrar o contexto de formação do pensamento geográfico de Élisée Reclus e o papel da sua obra na história da geografia. A experiência espacial e a prática revolucionária foram elementos que contribuíram com o modo de pensar desse geógrafo francês. Por outro lado, a pesquisa científica e o envolvimento com o pensamento acadêmico de sua época marcou a organização de sua obra. O caráter social libertário da geografia de Reclus influenciou decisivamente a forma como a historiografia dominante recebeu o seu conteúdo mais engajado.

Palavras-chave: Élisée Reclus, geografia libertária, pensamento geográfico, historiografia dominante.

Résumé

Le présent travail a pour principal objectif de démontrer le contexte de la formation de la pensée géographique de Élisée Reclus et le rôle de son oeuvre dans l'histoire de la géographie. L'expérience spatiale et la pratique révolutionnaire ont été éléments qui ont contribué à la pensée du géographe français. De l'autre côté, la recherche scientifique et l'engagement avec la pensée académique de son temps a marqué l'organisation de son oeuvre. Le caractère social libertaire de la géographie de Reclus a influencé de manière décisive la façon dont l'historiographie dominante a reçu son contenu le plus engagé.

Mots clés: Élisée Reclus, géographie libertaire, pensée géographique, historiographie dominante.

Introduction

Seeking to understand the way the geographical thought of Élisée Reclus (1830 –1905) was constructed may contribute to the debate on what was the ultimate factor in this geography's self-assertion and neglect

process. The construction of his geographical thought helps to shed light, in turn, on the outstanding features of this geographicity, such as its relationship with the dominant thought of Reclus's time, its direct or indirect contribution to the geography then being developed, as well as the complicating effects which ensued after Reclus's work faded into oblivion.

Geographical thought derived from spatial experience

Much in the way that Reclus's geography was immersed in a given period of time and therefore influenced by the constitutive effects of the then dominant geography, hence participating in the discursive regularity pervaded by the prism of Western thought, so did Reclus himself, as an individual born in France into a humble family, relate to this European world imbued by specific experiences. However, his personal choices, including the paths he decided to follow and certain convictions, ultimately influenced the development of his geography, partly marked by discursive discontinuities.

The debate concerning discursive regularities and discontinuities is addressed by Foucault (2013). Discontinuities constitute what he calls *archaeological territories*, given that they do not belong to a model domain of scientificity whose propositions conform to the same construction laws. Being derived from various epistemological matrices or from a single matrix which is not restricted to the theme or enunciative archive of a single discursive regularity, archeological territories promote discursive discontinuity, hence failing to achieve a hierarchically organized scientific status.

In Reclus's geography, such discursive discontinuity is grounded on two central factors: the discourse on freedoms, which aims at spatial organization, and the discourse on balance, related to territorial self-management. These discursive modalities were regarded as essentially incompatible with the dominant geographical project of the time, as well as with the model of society, market, and nation state to which geographical thought itself was bound.

Regarding the nature of the spatial experience which makes up the construction of Reclus's geography, his line of thinking has been widely interpreted in a depersonalized and detached manner so as to show that the information presented is so neutral that it is not contaminated by the experiences of its writer.

Such a form of narrative that establishes a split between author, work, and context attempts to show that the originality of words and the power of discourse are severed from their addresser, banished from the locations where they were constructed and produced, as well as atemporal.

Reclus's geographical thought, viewed as *a point in the infinity of space*², raises questions: what is there in his political trajectory that derives from geographical experience? On the other hand, what is there in his geographical writings that derives from political experience?

In Reclus's oeuvre, there is neither evident schism between his geography and his life, or between the way he experimented diversified geographies and the way he reported these narratives, nor between the way he reacted to certain social and political issues and the extent of his involvement with the evident problematics of his time. He faced life and politics in a way similar to what Onfray (2001, p. 14, my translation) calls as *existential biography*, in which "hedonism is to morality as anarchism is to politics: a vital option, demanded by a body that remembers [...]"; Onfray "cannot imagine a philosophy without the autobiographical novel that renders it possible".

This way, Onfray (2010) shows that the history of philosophy has long sought to separate an author's life from his/her work, and such an example also applies to certain cases in the history of geography. There is a need to put the author back in the material world, because such a split has led to the mythicization of the individual and to a generic or superficial interpretation of his/her work.

Hence the need for an intimate relationship between theory and practice, reflection and life, thought and action. The biography of a philosopher cannot be reduced to a simple commentary on his/her published works, for it also covers the nature of the connection between his/her writings and forms of behaviour. Only the whole can be called a body of work. More than anyone else, a philosopher must keep these two times connected, which have often been set in opposition. Life nurtures a given work, which in turn nurtures life. [...]

Theory proposes practice, aims at practice. Apart from this, there is no need for it to exist. Under a nominalist logic, words serve a utilitarian purpose and are nothing more than practical instruments. There is no religion of the verb. (Onfray, 2010, p. 25, my translation).

What Reclus pursued most during his lifetime was to produce an oeuvre nurtured by his existential project, by his geographical and historical experiences³; an oeuvre that could be reverted to spatial practice, not to a *religion of the verb*, giving nominalist and essentially utilitarian meanings, transforming reveries into practice, and providing feedback to his rebellious and restless life.

Reclus's interest did not lie in turning his geography into the centre's stately voice, in the service of transcendental verbalization or of the coercive evolution of the geographical knowledge guided by the dominant academia. Hence his geography is pluridiscursive because it was made from life, sweat, joy, and pleasure, from blood, struggle and freedom, to be useful to the same life of sweat, blood, struggle, joy, pleasure, and freedom in which it had been gestated. It was not meant to be a cabinet geography, restricted to constructing the orthodox academic edifice and the oppressive practices of capital and the State. From the onset it was meant to be a dissident geography, in accordance with the radicality of the time, present in the geographicity of social struggles for the transformation of space.

The most heterodox of historiographic criticism has brought forth progressive debates since the 1970s, each in its own terms, regarding the negative impact of the neglect of Reclus's libertarian geography for the history of geographical thought; major debates include those by Giblin (1976), Boino (1999, 2010), Lacoste (2005), Mosquete (2007), Alavoine-Muller (2009), Sanguin (2009), Roques (2011), Creagh (2011a), Pelletier (2011), and Ferretti (2012), among others. This issue has grown in intensity not only as a result of academic impermeability, but also as a result of the impossibility of critics acknowledging the scientific and social praxis of Reclus's oeuvre as a whole, together with its libertarian nature.

In general, the permanence of two forms of producing knowledge takes place: "a theoretical cabinet-based practice and an existential commitment to daily life" (Onfray, 2010, p. 22). This is very common in the geography experimented by Reclus. But he chose to develop a geography that, despite being scientific and grounded on models that explain reality, on data collection, on the treatment, discussion, and presentation of summaries, as well as on description, comparison, experimentation, quantification and analysis, among other methods, was in turn essentially heralded by the perspective of *existential commitment* – spaces and their dialectical class manifestations, as well as his own plunge into this

complex social ocean, formed the substrate for its constitution and that of its geographicity.

These two types of researchers (the cabinet geographer and the existentially committed geographer) – whose greatest impact is felt in human and social sciences, and particularly so in geography, whose object of study is the very spatial reality surrounding them – also conform the personal spectrum of the travelling researcher, a cosmopolitan nomad who crosses safe national borders, becoming involved with diverse cultures and distant places; and of the sedentary researcher, involved with consolidating knowledge, establishing refined summaries, and promoting results – a lover of national or regional identity, of local customs, involved as he/she is with a nationalist, patriotic perspective.

As far as Reclus is concerned, he was guided by the spectrum of the nomad traveller but also partly by that of the sedentary researcher, committed to carrying out theoretical projects and aims to the much-needed effort of summarizing and presenting results. Until his death he set out to do both: in the last ten years of his life he became a university professor and concluded his oeuvre, yet he did not stop travelling; so much so that he did not die at home, but in Thourout, near Brussels (Reclus, 1911).

As Onfray (2007, p. 10, my translation) states: “Later on, much later on, a person eventually sees him/herself as a nomad or a sedentary, a lover of flux, transports, and dislocations or of motionlessness, immobility, and roots.” Reclus was more a lover of flux than of roots. However, one does not cancel out the other; he was both from the beginning, and his geography is made up by these two foundations, that of the traveller and the agent involved with local daily issues – for instance, his strong role in the Jura Confederation and the Paris Commune, a role which led to his analyses of communes in general.

It is important to show, above all, that Reclus's geography was gradually constructed over the course of his existential experiences, radical clashes, and class struggles, having come forward in favour of workers and hand to hand with libertarian socialism. Researchers have often examined in greater detail Reclus's political life, his involvement with the militancy, and participation in historical clashes that were emblematic of the 19th century, e.g. his role in the revolutionary circles of the First International, the ideological and strategic confrontation between

Marxism and anarchism, the armed struggle, etc. These studies operate a radical separation between the ideological context and that of geographical production, hence undermining the importance of the fact that ideological thought and its political commitment, as well as geographical thought and its scientific commitment are one and the same thing in Reclus's case, for both were formed amidst the same forms of unrest.

Obviously it is not as easy to find such explicit ideological notions in Reclus's geographical discourse as it is in his political texts, for instance in his 1897 work *L'évolution, la révolution et l'idéal anarchique* (Reclus, 2002). But his geography is essentially political, not State-based, as Raffestin (1993) masterfully defines it; it is attentive to the historical materiality of social relations and, at the same time, essentially committed to environmental issues which are put in perspective by the debate on how people relate to the geographical environment. A libertarian political geography, as opposed to the conventional and authoritarian political and geopolitical geography proposed by the State and by capital, in the service of modern imperialism. In the words of Pierre George (1984), a geopolitics for minorities.

Reclus's geographical thought was fundamentally gestated on spatial experience. As he interacted with his object of study, he began shaping his understanding of the geographical element. The latter, in turn, is not sufficiently captured by empirical experience alone; that is why Reclus engaged himself with the theoretical bases of the most important academic centre for those who wished to study the foundations of geography during the first half of the 19th century: the University of Berlin, with Carl Ritter as its major figure.

From this perspective, Reclus viewed geography through these inseparable conditions: empirical experience and theoretical experience. He sought to live, experiment, establish contact with, interact in order to feel, as well as investigate, analyse, and understand the geographical element, not restricted to empiricalness or to theory. When one condition overtakes the other, understanding of the geographical element as a whole becomes jeopardized. Hence theoretical and practical exercise should be the central axis of the contribution of Reclusian thought to geography.

The notion of spatial experience relates not only to the researcher's empirical ambience with the object, but also to what it means for him/her to be in the world, not to disengage from the spatial reality he/she

is immersed in because his/her existence is intrinsically connected to the conditionalities and intentionalities of the environment; this existence in turn shapes and reshapes this same environment, producing conditionalities and intentionalities, and in this continuous process transforms itself and its status as a social being through the necessary relations constructed by the environment, as Massey (2009, p. 26, my translation) states below:

The imagination of space as a surface on which we are placed, the transformation of space into time, the sharp separation of local place from the external space are all ways of controlling the challenge that the inherent spatiality of the world presents. [...] However, the constant associations leave a residue of effects. We develop ways of incorporating a spatiality into our ways of being in the world, modes of coping with the challenge that the enormous reality of space projects. Produced through and embedded in practices, from daily negotiations to global strategies, these implicit engagements of space feed back into and sustain broader understandings of the world.

Spatial experience is also a condition of praxis, given that every individual, by viewing him/herself as part of the environment, by identifying his/her intrinsic attribute of intentionality, understands that living is basically creating and transforming. Through the ability to understand the world and its dynamic phenomena – which stems from the scientific knowledge bequeathed by geography –, through human labour as an endless transformer of space, he/she projects him/herself onto the world via the sign of the polis, via his/her quality as a transforming agent. Therefore, the individual receives the world's stimuli while living in it, in order to see him/herself in it, and in turn encourages the world to change him/her.

Through spatial experience, Reclus projects his oeuvre – which operates as a theory for this spatial practice –, producing narratives of a world through which he seeks to reconcile humans with humanity and with the Earth, in the wake of universal fraternalist humanism. Spatial experience in his work is empirical, theoretical, and political, hence it is also a social dimension; as a result, Reclusian space is intrinsically social.

Souza (2000, p. 114, my translation) states: “from a broader angle, social space may be seen as the product of *social relations*, including material transformation via labour, territorialization through projections of power, and the assignment of cultural meanings.” The spatial experience

that Reclus projects into his works, by originating from his existential experiences, possesses social meaning and its multiple attributions.

Soja (1993, p. 100, my translation) steers his discussion towards the importance of “the distinction between space *per se*, space as contextual data, and socially-based spatiality, the created space of social organization and production.” In this sense, Reclus’s spatial experience is imbued with the notion of space as a contextual given, but one which projects itself into his works as a result of the social struggles he took part in as well as his political and social experience.

Socially-produced space is a created structure comparable to other social constructions which stem from the transformation of certain conditions inherent to being alive, in much the same way that human history represents a social transformation of time. (SOJA, 1993, p. 102, my translation).

In order to understand the way Reclus’s geographical thought was conceived within spatial experience, it should be pointed out that it germinated from his experience with nature and with class struggles, hence laying the foundations for his libertarian socio-environmental geographicity. The latter is the expression of knowledge as a social practice and, as an individual’s movement towards autonomy, integrates and no longer separates subject-object relations through environmental intentionality.

Santos (2004, p. 90, my translation) highlights the important role of intentionality as a reviewing factor of the means of producing such knowledge; such a notion “is equally effective for observing the process of producing and reproducing things, regarded as a result of the relation between man and the world, between man and his surroundings”, and so “intentionality would be a kind of corridor between subject and object” (p. 91). It is here that lies the reason for not separating Reclus’s life from his work, that exposes the way he reacted and acted as a promoter of intentionalities in the construction of a geography that is essentially life, theory, and practice.

A libertarian geography ahead of its time?

Reclus’s geographical thought was constructed until the last few days of his life, not even interrupted by the signs of exhaustion of his vital

strengths, and was made up of a wide range of approaches, concepts, and methods of examining and explaining the geographical nature of human actions on Earth.

With the death of this eccentric personality from the world of geography and anarchism, a huge gap opened up with regard to the continuity of the works he had been painstakingly carrying out over the years, amidst arrests, periods of exile, and revolutionary activism, as well as his intense dedication to scientific work. He was involved with specialized geography journals of the time and with major anarchist publications, while earning the respect of various geographical societies all over Europe and establishing a circle of anarchist geographers (Ferretti; Pelletier, 2013). The latter helped disseminate research to far-reaching places through courses and lectures and also carried out geographical investigations all over the world, hence establishing relations with peers from various regions (Alavoine-Muller, 2003).

All this activity came to an abrupt silence and Reclus's last great work, *L'Homme et la Terre*, did not warrant any reception from the scientific and academic world. The main reason for this is its compelling and explicit libertarian content, as well as the intense approximation it put into effect between geography, sociology, and history. Such an approximation was made possible because Reclus's text offers a historical and geographical analysis of the actions of man/woman on Earth and promotes the space-time category as a methodological key for understanding the relation between society and nature.

It is important to point out that *L'Homme et la Terre* brought Reclus's intellectual trajectory to a close, having been posthumously published by his nephew Paul Reclus from 1905 onwards. The publication strengthened, therefore, the bases of the heterodox discourse within the discipline of geography from the end of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, a discourse also publicized by Piotr Kropotkin, Charles Perron, Léon Metchnikoff, and Patrick Geddes.

In opposition to traditional historiography, these libertarian activists introduced, in the 19th century, the anarchist debate within geographical studies. To academic orthodoxy, libertarian geography was born ahead of its time. Even late 20th-century Marxist historiography only partially acknowledged the heritage of acrary within geographical thought. Such a heritage springs up from the underground of present-day geography.

The boundaries of libertarian geographical thought are set by two main approaches: “an interest without apriorism in different social formations, and a study of the conditions of a harmonious relationship of these populations in their reciprocal link with their ecological environment” (Creagh, 2011b, p. 28, my translation). Set on such directions, Reclus, Kropotkin, and Metchnikoff built up a legacy that, though not evident to the dominant academia but explicitly alive in spatial struggles and practices, echoed fruitfully over the heterodox tradition of urban thought. According to Ronald Creagh (2011b, p. 29, my translation): “We can trace back a network that spans from Patrick Geddes to American scholars Lewis Mumford, Paul Goodman, Ebenezer Howard – the inventor of the garden-city –, and Jane Jacobs or, even today, to James C. Scott, from Yale University”.

Meanwhile, outside the field of urban studies, the influence of classical libertarian geographical thought echoed significantly within two other movements: the Situationist International, introduced by Guy Debord, and the libertarian social ecology devised by Gary Snyder and other thinkers.

Paradoxically, Reclus’s thought has received, within both geography and anarchism, recognition regarding the intellectual context and social struggles he was involved in, but such recognition turned out to be of a fleeting nature and faded into deep oblivion. The greatest impact of such neglect was felt by his most paradigmatic work, social geography treaty *L’Homme et la Terre*, which opened up new directions for geography towards making it a science committed to spatial praxis and the transformation of an unequal society.

Reclus envisioned a geography that stemmed from an environmental perspective – not a naturalist or strictly physical geography, as Peschel had done, but a socio-environmental geography, linked to the awareness of the balance between human action and the environment, as is expressed by *L’Homme et la Terre*. Later on, in *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle*, Reclus incorporated the political notion into the spatial discourse, but unlike the State’s traditional political geography and its ties to imperialism and colonialism, he announced new paths for libertarian federalism, i.e. class struggle in favour of the autonomist freedom of lower social groups. *L’Homme et la Terre* defends internationalism and universal fraternalism while confronting nationalist feelings and territorial

wars, as well as chooses to value regional identities, the dissolution of borders, sociocultural integration, and the implementation of alternative forms of economic and financial relations including communalism, self-management, and cooperativism, among others. In short, *L'Homme et la Terre* gathers all these alternative surpluses or, rather, heterodox conjectures concerning geographical knowledge, thus introducing the libertarian social paradigm to geography and establishing space–time analysis as a means of understanding human-induced processes of the transformation of Earth, i.e. how it is converted into space and how the dispute for space exposes the need for an equitable organization of space by society on the path towards self-management.

This line of reasoning concerning the organization of Reclusian thought is similar to the way Creagh (2011a, p. 4, my translation) outlines this anarchist geography:

Because he [Reclus] refuses borders and nations, believes in the unity of humankind, and prefers to feel the solidity of social relations and human interactions with Earth rather than reduce life to a skeleton of abstract maps and statistical charts. Reclusian geography will by no means aim to provide maps to military staff for future wars or spread patriotism.

This itinerary that conforms Reclus's geographical thought, concluded only with his death, paved the way for the establishment of what nowadays is defined as libertarian geography or geography of liberties, which makes up the large group of dissident or marginal geographies.⁴

Reclus's oeuvre constitutes, therefore, a great explanatory narrative of the world and its history, divided into narratives of varying temporal sequences. Nevertheless, it does not fail to put forward certain issues regarding the function of this kind of epic poem in our postmodern societies and, more specifically, in the heart of protest movements in general and of anarchism in particular. [...]

Reclus's intellectual adventure is launched onto a twofold path: anarchism and geography. In the first case, he contributes to the emergence of the movement by conferring a positive content to anarchy, a collective anarchism grounded on mutual support. In the second case, [...] we are facing a dialectical relationship between four elements: space, time, society, the individual. (Creagh, 2011b, p. 14, my translation).

Reclus's heterodox geography is the practical example of a body of knowledge constructed over the course of a lifetime, tributary to his spatial experiences, germinated in the fertile soil of the German academia during the first half of the 19th century, gestated in nature's fruitful and enigmatic birthplace through existential experiences accumulated over wanderings and landings. In turn, Reclusian geography was, from beginning to end, the subterfuge for aspiring to class struggles, the transformation of society, and the equitable organization of space. Therefore, as well as having been gestated in the academia and germinated in nature, it was educated within social movements and the fight for freedom.

It is not a geography that, at a certain point in Reclus's life, with his accumulated experience and honour medals that allowed him a comfortable position, simply came to an end, monological and monolithic, complacent to a homogenizing scientific discourse. On the contrary, it is a pluridiscursive geography, multifaceted and attentive to the complex movements of society and space, hence its profound expression is that of a nagging voice that disturbs the silences established by academic tradition, a tradition that mutes the wishes of defiant cries.

Given the intellectual context in which Reclus introduced his geography, the latter was in tune with research topics and standards of the time. To a certain extent, Reclus followed the path trod by the dominant academia, thus greatly contributing with geographical societies, working in line with them, taking a stand on challenges posed by research – hence also producing orthodox geography. Obviously recognition of his work in the way of gold medals came much later, a result of a misled understanding that the anarchist geographer's free and insurgent spirit had been domesticated.

Within the orthodox milieu in which Reclus partly operated, he gave an immense contribution to geographical knowledge, having been one of the leading figures responsible for ensuring the continuity and development of research and for advancing geography as a science after Ritter and Humboldt faded into oblivion. For this he established a connection, according to Tatham (1959), between the classical founders of the discipline and groundbreaking studies by Ratzel and La Blache (Robic, 2009).

Despite being a crucial player in this delicate period of research lag that geography endured and having displaced a great part of this tradition

to the new revival cycle located right within his reach, Reclus failed to be acknowledged as an agent in this process of passage and transposition of the deserts of geographical knowledge. Hettner, Ratzel, and La Blache disregarded Reclusian geography as a whole, even while supporting their work with several concepts and lines of thinking it had introduced (Lacoste, 1988); nevertheless, they flagrantly assisted in Reclus's name fading into oblivion because his geography was essentially incompatible with the political and ideological orientation that the academia had established as acceptable. The academia's new representatives, empowered with the right of inventorying the historiographic flux and comfortably seated in their chairs of intellectual selectivity, had to ensure that no *impurities* penetrated the arduous task of filtering and decanting the institutionalization and scientificization of geographical knowledge.

The *big geographies*, which announced themselves as the *chosen ones*, responsible for opening up new and effective paths for the discipline and for retaining a leading role, had as their mission or *manifest aim* to know how to best include, rule out, set on track or derail those *small geographies* that posed incongruence to the orthodox intellectual model.

But Reclus's geography was in line with the *big geographies*, i.e. was always connected to what was viewed as the best goals for this field of knowledge, hence contributing to the project of consolidating geography's scientific and academic status. In ideological terms, Reclusian libertarian geography intuited a *short circuit* (borrowing Kuhn's 1971 expression) to geography's dominant ideological paradigm from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Such a paradigm, though apparently lacking political attachments, was adept of liberal schools of thought, with some geographers backing Darwinian evolutionism, others supporting neo-Kantism, while others aligned themselves to regionalism and nationalism. All were aware of the importance of the State and capital as inducers of interests underlying the production of geographical knowledge. The conflicting issue between Reclus's geography and that of his contemporaries was precisely its ideological character: in ethical terms it was a geography of liberties, anchored on the theoretical school of anarchism.

Reclus constructed a geography that was connected to the movement of production of knowledge then under way, completely in line with the challenges and needs of research. Nevertheless, as a result

of being committed to anarchism, given that all geographies are directly or indirectly committed to certain interests, it was set apart from the academic and scientific context.

The dominant historiography argues that, in view of Reclus's profound commitment, an attitude deemed unacceptable at the time, his geography was not essentially scientific. Therefore it did not warrant attention because its ultimate goals were liberties, instead of a pure and neutral production of knowledge.

Other more recent historiographies have claimed that the libertarian geography forged by Reclus and other members of the communist anarchist circle emerged ahead of its time, bearing a discourse that proved far too heterodox for that context. Such a claim builds up profound misunderstandings in the study and teaching of the history of geography, given that it attempts to impose the view that certain doctrines and methodological applications must emerge during given periods in history. A body of knowledge never comes into existence out of its own time; it is the conditions of definition and categorization applied by the historiography of science that make it become known, be ruled out or even developed in the first place. This process is dependent on how reigning interests wish to welcome such knowledge by assigning it with the best possible features available in a given period of time, features which do not lead to eschatologies.

Therefore, it was more than necessary and coherent for a libertarian geography to exist in the 19th century, an effervescent period during which liberalism, with its imperialisms and industrialism, caused grave surplus of poverty and triggered bloody conflicts and territorial disputes, hence redefining borders, forging some and eliminating others, as well as consuming lives, resources, workforce, and liberties in order to boost agents in the service of the power of capital and of the imperial State. All this fell heavily on the shoulders of ordinary workers.

The same period saw the rise of various forms of socialism, Marx's impressive scientific theories that are greatly reinterpreted to this day, several repressed anarchisms, forms of culturalism, and extremist nihilisms. Issues linked to territory, region, places, identities, exploration of woman and man, and their predatory action towards nature were very much in evidence for geography to be heedless, silent, and neutral concerning the hardships being thrown in the faces of the experts in

geographical space. If on the one hand they developed geographies that justified such encroachments by capital and the State, on the other it comes as no surprise that they also developed geographies which challenged power on behalf of freedom at any cost.

In short, Reclus's libertarian geography emerged at the right time, not before, in that it found a fruitful field on which to advance and develop – and it did just that through the materialization of a large written production which spanned eleven intense years of teaching and research (Giblin, 1986).

As an existential geography diluted in the revolutionary struggle, its weak public acknowledgement and misreadings which have brought it to the present through history of geography manuals, as well as the lagging explanatory ability of its teaching approach, nauseated by the atmosphere of the dominant historiography, lead us to conclude that the field of geographical knowledge as a whole has lost a great deal with such historiographical flaws from the past.

Conclusion

The analysis of Reclus's role in the history of geographical thought and of anarchism's epistemological scope, which he publicized in connection with spatial thinking, leads us to underscore the fact that his work was gestated through spatial experiences, marked by the confrontation between the understanding of nature and class struggles. Reclus conformed, therefore, his geographicity of dissidence, which sought to resonate the discourse of liberties, spatial organization, and territorial balance and self-management within a committed spatial praxis.

The elements that define the origins of such an insubordinate thought are, first of all, the environment, combined with a lifetime of experiences, investigations, and the search for revelations, demystification, and explanations; and second of all, a committed and revolutionary class struggle, the source of contestation of power and oppression, which finds in liberties the founding reference of a rebellious thought. These two elements come together to constitute the summary of Reclus's socio-environmental and libertarian geographical thought, which may be viewed, in broad terms, as a libertarian geographicity.

Notes

1 This article is an excerpt from the doctorate thesis entitled *Geograficidade libertária em Élisée Reclus: contribuição heterodoxa à história da geografia* [Libertarian Geographicity in Élisée Reclus: A Heterodox Contribution to the History of Geography], supervised by professor Eliseu Savério Sposito, PhD, at the School of Sciences and Technology of Universidade Estadual Paulista “Júlio de Mesquita Filho” (Unesp), Presidente Prudente, São Paulo state, Brazil.

2 The expression at hand was extracted from the preface of *L’Homme et la Terre*, in which he states (Reclus, 1905, p. I-II, my translation): “Having come into existence as a point in the infinity of space, without any knowledge of our origins or our destinies, [...] it would be impossible for us to formulate rules of evolution towards the unknown, to overcome the fog in the hope of giving it an accurate and definitive form.”

3 For a detailed account of Reclus’s life and works in association with his geographical and historical experiences, refer to Nettlau (1928), Sarrazin (1985), and Giblin (1986).

4 Libertarian geography, according to Creagh (2011b, p. 25, my translation), “is situated within the great tradition of dissidence, which questions powers or, to be more precise, the various forms of domination and exploitation.” As the American anarchist geographer goes on to state, “Such a geography is also a weapon against imperialist ideologies”, and Reclus was the leading figure of this heterodox way of making geography; he shed subterranean light on his ideas regarding various radical ways of thinking about the geographical dimension, conforming what geographers Blunt and Wills (2000) call dissident geographies.

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