Conference report

Elisée Reclus et nos géographies: an international conference at Lyon, 7–9 September 2005

Elisée Reclus, anarchist, geographer and polymath, died at the age of seventy-five in a village near Ostend on 4 July 1905. Author of the nineteen-volume Géographie Universelle (1876–1894), of L’Homme et la Terre (six volumes, published posthumously from 1905 to 1908), and numerous other publications across the interface of geography and political activism, Reclus was a widely read and much-travelled authority. He suffered for his unconventional beliefs, led a life that was far from financially comfortable, and never generated a scholarly entourage since he did not hold an official university post. Disciples of Paul Vidal de la Blache paid relatively little attention to their controversial predecessor and, for various reasons, the name of Elisée Reclus fell from the public gaze. Nonetheless, Gary Dunbar, Béatrice Giblin and Hélène Sarrazin, have written important biographies in recent decades. Members of the geopolitical school headed by Yves Lacoste devoted two issues of their journal Hérodote (22, 1981; 117, 2005) to Reclus, and the group of geographers articulated by Roger Brunet fashioned the acronym RECLUS (Réseau d’Etudes des Changements dans les Localisations et les Unités Spatiales) to label their activities.

In 2005, three international colloquia were organised to commemorate the centenary of the death of Reclus. The first of these, held at Montpellier and Pézenas in early July, also paid attention to the life and work of Vidal de la Blache, arguably the most famous son of Pézenas, whilst the third, at Milan in October, highlighted the place of nature in the educational writings of Reclus. The second colloquium, entitled ‘Elisée Reclus et nos géographies’, was held in Lyon in early September, hosted by two of the city’s universities and by the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and followed by two days of fieldwork that traced the footsteps of Reclus in the Alps.

Although David Harvey was given star billing with a public lecture advertised for 7 September, the hundred or so members of the audience were disappointed, since Harvey was unable to attend. Only one person walked out, with the remainder enjoying a refreshingly critical lecture by Jacques Bethemont (Saint-Etienne) and a more enigmatic presentation by Massimo Quaini (Genoa). For one reason or another, other star speakers absented themselves: nonetheless the show had to go on and the organizers are to be congratulated for rearranging what proved to be an intriguing and very full programme, with dual concurrent sessions operating throughout 8 and 9 September. These were devoted to: making geography, geography and anarchism, regional depiction, the production and diffusion of geographical knowledge, representations in the work of Reclus, nature and ethnicity, and finally geography and politics. In all, three dozen papers were delivered by scholars ranging in age from young doctoral students to emeriti in their seventies or eighties.

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Inevitably, the quality of presentations was uneven and the power-point ‘problems’ were irritating. I found that old-style, stand-up talks, where the speakers really had a message to put across (notably Jacques Bethemont, Paul Claval, Gerry Kearns), were far more convincing than technically complicated screen shows. However, Yves-François Le Lay’s nineteenth-century maps of the Mississippi and especially of New Orleans were well worth waiting for. Most of the papers tended to offer uncritical celebrations of the life and work of Reclus, of his literary skills, and his cartographic ability. Speaker after speaker examined detailed aspects of representation and praised minute subtleties of depiction. But, of course, Reclus was not a free agent; he had to write incessantly to support his wife and children each week. Many of his ‘volumes’ in fact appeared in weekly, monthly or quarterly instalments. He needed to satisfy the stylistic requirements of his publishers (Hachette), upon whom his family depended for survival. Successive owners and editors of this publishing house were hard taskmasters, spelling out what the acceptable level of sophistication, appropriate ordering of information, and suitable quantity of maps and engravings should be. Non-compliance meant no cheque. As an author, anarchist Reclus was not his own man; he depended on the working of bourgeois capitalist publishers.

This fundamental point was discussed very convincingly by Soizic Alavoine-Muller (Paris I) but seemed to have eluded most other speakers. I enjoyed the detailed discussion by Henri Nicolaï (Brussels) of the impact of anarchist Reclus on the subsequent organization of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, even though the lectures he delivered in an institute of that university were not part of official programmes leading to formal degrees. I would like to have learned more about the geographical and anarchist networks of informants who supplied information to Reclus about parts of the world he never managed to visit. Jean-Baptiste Arrault (Paris) provided an intriguing dissection of the early writings of the Vidalians to reveal that the supposed break between the work of anarchist Reclus and the manifestations of the republican ‘new geography’ of Vidal and his contemporaries and disciples was not as sharp as is widely believed.

Without doubt, the geographical texts of Reclus still have much to commend them for their qualities of synthesis and prescience. This fascinating colloquium was crowned by the unveiling of a small travelling exhibition about Elisée Reclus in the presence of members of the intertwined Reclus and Geddes families. Indeed, it was through the work of Patrick Geddes that many of the ideas of Reclus were brought to English and American readers. The organizers of ‘Elisée Reclus et nos géographies’ are to be congratulated for hosting a most enjoyable and stimulating conference, and for successfully weathering the nightmare scenario of ‘star’ speakers not showing up. The proceedings of the event will be published and will provide excellent reading.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to signal the appearance of a new edition of *Elisée Reclus ou la passion du monde* by Hélène Sarrazin (Editions du Sextant, Paris, 2004) that offers a sympathetic biography. Finally, a theme issue of *Hérodote* (117, 2005) contains a dozen essays on aspects of the work of Reclus. Béatrice Giblin praises his ‘exceptional’ geographical qualities, and Yves Lacoste highlights the broad conception of geography and geopolitics held by Reclus, returning to the thorny issue of his problematic and atypical approval of the French colonization of Algeria. (This issue is also discussed by Giblin in an article reprinted from the 1981 volume of *Hérodote*.) The remaining essays are of variable interest: some simply comprise lengthy quotations plus short contextual commentaries (for example, those dealing with Reclus in America, in London, and in Spain). On the other hand, Claude Bataillon, Michel Sivignon, and Philippe Pelletier offer genuinely scholarly reflections on the contribution of Elisée Reclus to geographical understanding of
Mexico, the Balkans, and Japan, respectively. The thoughts and words of Elisée Reclus, global geographer before the age of globalization, still have life and meaning.

Notes


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