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## Anarchism, geohistory, and the *Annales*: rethinking Elisée Reclus's influence on Lucien Febvre

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**Abstract.** It has been hypothesized that the celebrated geographer and anarchist Elisée Reclus was a decisive influence on several concepts that are characteristic of the *Annales* School, the historical French school of the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, such as *longue durée*, material history, space-movement, and geohistory. Yet no systematic research exists on the topic. In this paper, on the basis of textual analysis and new archival materials recently published in France, I argue that Reclus's influence particularly affected the *Annales*'s founder Lucien Febvre, and that it springs from not only Febvre's scholarly interest in Reclus, but also his early engagement in socialist milieus and sympathies for both anarchism and figures like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Finally, I show how these topics could be useful for present debates on critical social theory and radical geographies.

**Keywords:** Elisée Reclus, Lucien Febvre, anarchism, socialism, geohistory, critical theory

### Introduction

Elisée Reclus (1830–1905), the well-known French geographer and anarchist, was concerned with a historical perspective for which he has sometimes been defined as the forerunner of several historiographical schools of the 20th century, particularly the *Annales* School, the French school of thought that took shape around the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, a journal founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch (1882–1944) and Lucien Febvre (1878–1957). It was the journal's 'Great Man', Fernand Braudel (1902–85), who in 1949 launched the concept of 'geohistory' in his masterpiece *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*.

Several historians of geography have noticed a correspondence between some of Reclus's ideas and the concepts developed later by the *Annales* School, namely, material history, world system, social history, *longue durée*, persistence, space-movement, and rural landscape (Deprest, 2002; Errani, 1984; Lacoste, 1990; Pelletier, 2013), but we have no systematic research either comparing Reclus's corpus with that of the *Annales*, or exploring the scholarly and political networks that could have allowed the transfer of knowledge between the cited authors.

The present paper is a first attempt to fill this lacuna. My hypothesis is that Reclus's ideas did indeed have both a direct and indirect influence on the thinking that went into the *Annales*, mainly as a result of the admiration that Febvre felt for Reclus as both a geographer and an anarchist, which in turn was probably the result of Febvre's little-known but well-documented sympathies for Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, revolutionary syndicalism, and left-libertarian thinking. I try to elucidate this problem by analyzing the texts and archives of both authors.

The importance of this work lies in the recent rediscovery of both Febvre and Reclus in different fields of international research, involving central points in current debates on geography, history, and critical social theory. Recent research on Reclus has stressed the links between geographical thinking and anarchism. Here, I quote as examples the special issues

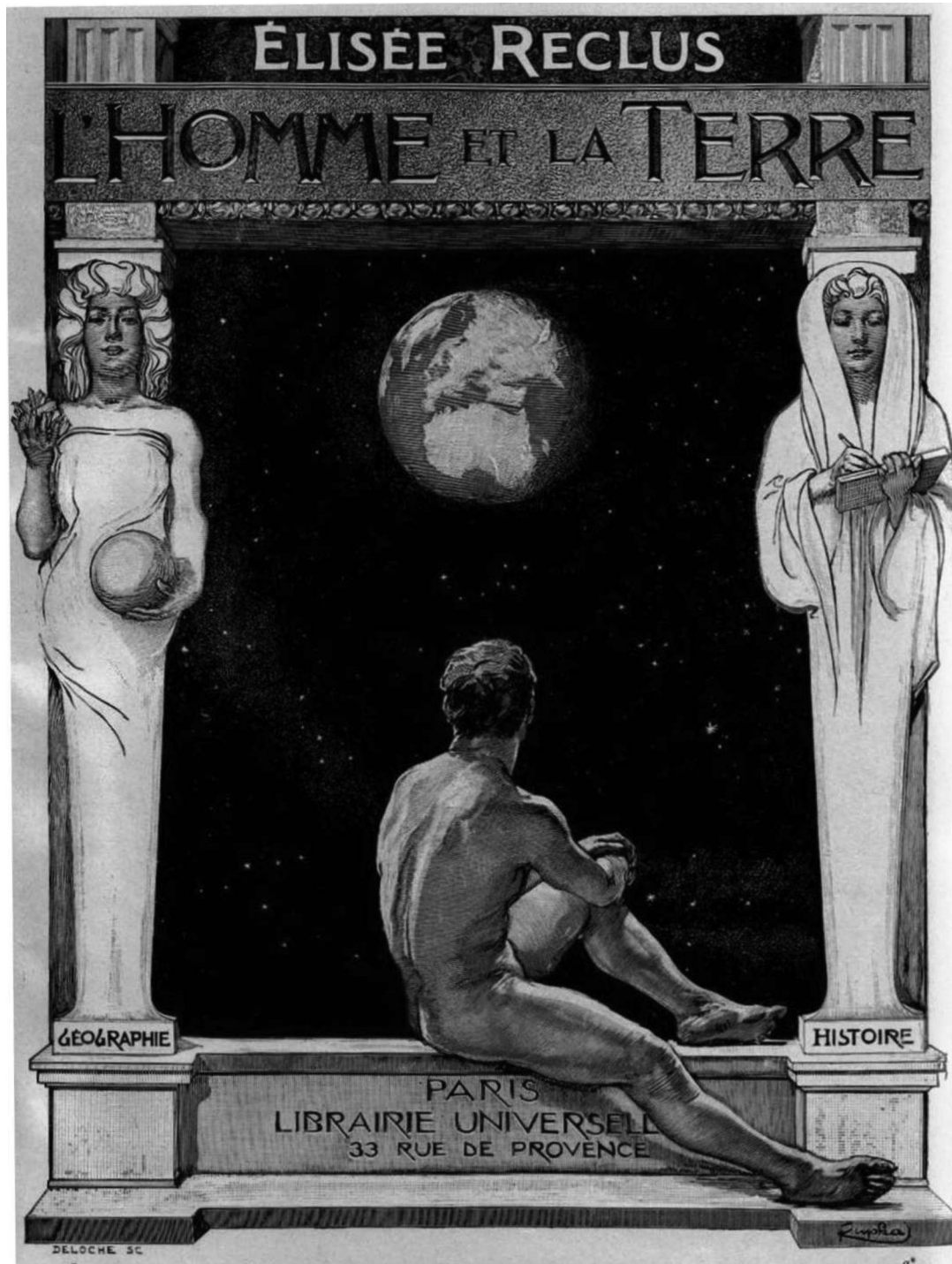


Figure 1. Cover image of *L'Homme et la Terre* (Reclus, 1905a; 1905b).

India, and China. In his periodization, Metchnikoff first considered an ancient ‘fluvial period’, which ran approximately until the Bronze Age, when the different civilizations were not in regular communication with each other; he then imagined a ‘Mediterranean period’, when the two ‘Western’ civilizations were structurally connected via the Mediterranean Sea, whereas the Indian and Chinese civilizations remained relatively unconnected, as travel and