

**Royal
Geographical
Society**
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning

Kropotkin, Reclus, and 'Relevant' Geography

Author(s): D. R. Stoddart

Source: *Area*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1975), pp. 188-190

Published by: [The Royal Geographical Society \(with the Institute of British Geographers\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20001005>

Accessed: 27/09/2014 21:15

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Area*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

3. Citation source publications were as follows: M. A. Carson and M. J. Kirkby, *Hillslope: form and process* (1972); R. J. Chorley, *Spatial analysis in geomorphology* (1972); R. J. Chorley and B. A. Kennedy, *Physical geography: a systems approach* (1971); R. U. Cooke and A. Warren, *Geomorphology in deserts* (1973); A. Goudie, *Duricrusts in tropical and subtropical landscapes* (1973); K. J. Gregory and D. A. Walling, *Drainage basin: form and process* (1973); C. Mitchell, *Terrain evaluation* (1973); A. F. Pitty, *Introduction to geomorphology* (1971); R. Small, *The study of landforms* (1970); B. Sparks, *Rocks and relief* (1971); M. M. Sweeting, *Karst landforms* (1972); *Geomorphology Texts* 3–4; *Progress in Geography* 3–4
4. A publication was included in the ‘international’ class (a) if the word ‘international’ was included in its title or subtitle, (b) if it is edited in three or more different nations, (c) if at least half of its content is attributable to individuals who have no affiliation with the nation of publication.
5. Sample size: British Literature: 7037, World Literature: 6519. Excluding British citations: British Literature, 5407, World Literature: 5994.

Kropotkin, Reclus, and ‘relevant’ geography

D. R. Stoddart, University of Cambridge

The discussion on relevance in geography which has taken place in *Area* since 1971 gives the impression that this is a movement of recent development, replacing the ‘New Geography’ of the 1960s as a focus of activity. Just as there were earlier New Geographies, however, so a tradition of social relevance can be traced back to the beginnings of academic geography in this country. Dickenson and Clarke (1972, 25) find its origins in a concern for social problems in tropical colonies during the 1930s, a view shared by Steel (1974). The purpose of this note is to draw attention to the work of two geographers, working a century ago, who can fairly be claimed to have pioneered such a concern in modern geography.

The work of Reclus is the better known (Geddes, 1905; Mikesell, 1959). Expelled from France as an anarchist in 1851, permitted to return in 1856, he took to the barricades in support of the Paris Commune in 1871, was captured, and sentenced to life imprisonment in New Caledonia. The sentence was commuted to banishment from France; in exile, mainly in Switzerland, he wrote his *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle*, a work distinguished by its broad humanity as well as by its comprehensiveness. ‘Not only’, wrote Kropotkin (1905, 341), ‘is his work free from absurd national conceit, or of national or racial prejudice; he has succeeded in indicating . . . what all men have in common—what unites, not what divides them’. Before Haddon’s expeditions and the development of anthropology from the old ethnology, this was no small achievement, as even a casual inspection of textbooks of the period shows.

During his exile Reclus continued his anarchist activities. Some indication of their extent and of his social concern is given by his published *Correspondance* (1911–25) and by Max Nettlau's biography (1928). He met Geddes on several occasions and greatly influenced him. Without question, if one is to seek the first French *géographe engagé*, it is not Brunhes, as Buttimer (1971, 61, 127) curiously claims, but Elisée Reclus. 'He knew how to die poor', wrote Kropotkin, 'after having written wonderful books'.

Kropotkin, friend of both Reclus and Geddes, began his own political involvement at about the time of the Commune, following his travels in Siberia. In 1874, when a Secretary of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society in St. Petersburg and shortly after giving a paper, he was denounced and arrested for his membership of a clandestine anarchist group. He was imprisoned, but escaped and fled to England in 1876. Here he met Keltie, then with *Nature*, while seeking journalistic work (Kropotkin was living under an assumed name and Keltie unknowingly gave him some of his own books to review). Keltie became his closest friend, and he wrote (1921) the only obituary of Kropotkin to appear in any of the main geographical journals. Kropotkin's substantive work on the physical geography of Russia is now only of historical interest, and the only paper of his ever cited is that 'On the teaching of physiography' in 1893. But during his years in England he continued his anarchist connections, and in 1883, while in France, he was arrested at a time of bomb outrages and accused of complicity in attempting to establish the International in France. In January 1884 he was imprisoned for five years. At this time he was on close terms with Reclus, and his wife stayed with Reclus's brother during part of the sentence.

While Kropotkin was in prison at Clairvaux, Keltie wrote and published his report on geographical education which led directly to the establishment of Royal Geographical Society lectureships at Oxford and Cambridge, and to the recognition of geography as an academic discipline in Britain. The report provoked much discussion, mostly of a technical character on the nature of geography and how it should be taught. One paper stands out in this discussion, though now it is completely overlooked. Written in prison, Kropotkin's 'What Geography ought to be' appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* for December 1885. It is a passionate and deeply humane statement of the social significance of a geographical education. Geography should have three main aims: 'to interest the child in the great phenomena of nature'; to 'teach us, from our earliest childhood, that we are all brethren'; and, 'still greater', to dissipate 'the prejudices on which we are reared with regard to the so-called "lower races".' (Kropotkin, 1885, 942–3.) Geography must be a means for developing humanitarianism as well as the discipline of thought. This was a justification, both liberal and scientific, quite different from any other made at the time. After his release, Kropotkin lectured on the same theme to the Manchester Geographical Society (1889), but then his contribution was forgotten.

The expansion of geographical education in the later years of the last century was, in itself, part of a social revolution. Sir Charles Warren, speaking as President of Section E at the British Association in Manchester in 1887, argued that the children of wealthy parents would be at a disadvantage as geographical teaching spread, because of their remoteness from the business of making a living, and he warned that they would 'in a few years be distanced by the sons of the labourers, artisans and shopkeepers' (1888, 793). Mackinder himself agreed that a knowledge of present-day geography was essential if the 'educated

classes' were not 'to lose their grip and their influence over the half-educated proletariat' (1921, 383). Through the extension lectures pioneered at Cambridge in 1873, and made possible by the railway, the social revolution in education and Mackinder's New Geography spread together.

If we apply the criteria of relevance discussed by Chisholm (1971) or Smith (1971), it is clear that these two gentle anarchists, Kropotkin and Reclus, whose own lives and those of their families were disrupted as a result of their beliefs, participated as geographers in a revolution as profound as any discussed in recent issues of *Area*. The history of this period in the development has yet to be written; no history of geographical thought deals with it satisfactorily. Kropotkin wrote a partial autobiography (*Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 1906) and much work of geographical significance (*La conquête du pain*, 1892; *Fields, factories and workshops*, 1899; *Mutal aid*, 1902); some general assessments have been made (Planche and Delphy, 1948; Woodcock and Avakumović, 1950). There is much of relevance in Nettlau's histories of anarchism (1927) and of the First International (1969). Nettlau also wrote on Elisée Reclus (1928) and Geddes (1905) refers to a massive *Géographie sociale* almost completed when Reclus died. The raw data alone both delineate a field of enquiry in the history of geography and demonstrate quite clearly that the origins of a socially relevant geography lie here and not, as some appear to think, at a meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Boston in April 1971.

References

- Buttimer, A. (1971) *Society and milieu in the French geographic tradition* (Washington: Association of American Geographers)
- Chisholm, M. (1971) 'Geography and the question of relevance', *Area* 3, 65–9
- Dickenson, J. P. and Clarke, C. G. (1972) 'Relevance and the "newest geography"', *Area* 4, 25–7
- Geddes, P. (1905) 'A great geographer: Elisée Reclus, 1830–1905' *Scott. geog. Mag.* 21, 490–6; 548–55
- Keltie, J. S. (1886) 'Geographical education: report to the Council of the Royal Geographical Society', *Suppl. Pap. Roy. geog. Soc.*, 1, 439–594
- Keltie, J. S. (1921) 'Prince Kropotkin', *Geogr J.* 57, 316–19
- Kropotkin, P. (1885) 'What geography ought to be', *Nineteenth Century* 18, 940–56
- Krapotkin [sic], P. (1889) 'What geography ought to be', *J. Manchester geog. Soc.* 5, 356–7; discussion. 357–8
- Krapotkin [sic], P. (1893) 'On the teaching of physiography', *Geogr J.* 2, 350–9.
- Kropotkin, P. (1905) 'Elisée Reclus', *Geogr J.* 26, 337–43
- Mackinder, H. J. (1921) 'Geography as a pivotal subject in education', *Geogr J.* 57, 376–84
- Mikesell, M. W. (1959) 'Observations on the writings of Elisée Reclus', *Geography* 34, 221–6
- Nettlau, M. (1927) *Der Anarchismus von Proudhon zu Kropotkin: seine historische Entwicklung in den Jahren 1859–1905* (Berlin)
- Nettlau, M. (1928) *Elisée Reclus, Anarchist und Gelehrter, 1830–1905* (Berlin)
- Nettlau, M. (1969) *La première Internationale en Espagne, 1868–88* (Dordrecht, 2 vols)
- Planche, F. and Delphy, J. (1948) *Kropotkine, descendant des Grands Princes de Smolensk, Page de l'Empereur, Savant illustre, Revolutionnaire international, Vulgarisateur de la Pensée anarchiste* (Paris)
- Reclus, E. (1911–1925) *Correspondance* (Paris, 3 vols; I–II (1911); III (1925))
- Sellers, E. (1894) 'Our most distinguished refugee', *Contemporary Review* 66, 537–49
- Smith, D. M. (1971) 'Radical geography—the next revolution?' *Area* 3, 153–7
- Steel, R. W. (1974) 'The Third World: geography in practice', *Geography* 59, 189–207
- Warren, C. (1888) Address (Presidential address to Section E), *Rept 57th Mtg Br. Assoc. Adv. Sci.* (1887) 785–98
- Woodcock, G. and Avakumović, I. (1950) *The anarchist prince: a biographical study of Peter Kropotkin*