



Reading Reclus between Italy and South America: translations of geography and anarchism in the work of Luce and Luigi Fabbri



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 September 2015

Received in revised form

8 May 2016

Accepted 10 May 2016

Keywords:

Circulation of geographical knowledge

Historical geographies of science

Transnational anarchism

Anarchist geographies

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses how Élisée Reclus's geographical work was read and circulated by two important activists, intellectuals and exponents of 'transnational anarchism' in the twentieth century, the father and daughter Luigi and Luce Fabbri. Using both their published work and unpublished archival sources, the paper analyses the various translations, multilingual studies and interpretations of Reclus that the Fabbri undertook in Italy and later Latin America, and the role they played in the international circulation and reinterpretation of Reclus's ideas. This paper contributes to current studies of the circulation of geographical knowledge and historical geographies of science, as well as to the transnational turn in the social sciences and, in particular, its application to 'anarchist studies'. It draws on the recent international literature devoted to the historical and epistemological relations between geography and anarchism, stressing the intimate relationship between intellectual and political work among anarchist geographers.

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The Italian-Uruguayan intellectual Luce Fabbri (1908–2000), the daughter of the celebrated Italian intellectual and anarchist Luigi Fabbri (1877–1935), was a sophisticated and important interpreter of the French anarchist geographer Élisée Reclus (1830–1905).¹ Her father, who took refuge with his family in Montevideo after the establishment of the fascist dictatorship in Italy, was the editor of the journal *Il Pensiero* and was among the first to translate the writings of Reclus into Italian, principally articles and pamphlets on social geography and the relationship between science and anarchism.

Inspired by Luigi, Luce was drawn to Reclus's work as a child. In 1928, in the middle of the fascist dictatorship, when she was only twenty years old, she defended her dissertation at the University of Bologna on Reclus's conception of geography.² She had been supervised by the philosopher Rodolfo Mondolfo, and her defence earned her the highest mark as well as the nickname '*signorina comunista*' (Miss Communist) from the dean, because Luce was the

only candidate who refused to make the fascist salute before the examining committee. It is likely that she was also the only person in Italy at that time with the courage to speak openly about anarchism in the academy.

The original copy of Luce's dissertation can be found in the archives of the International Institute of Social History [IISH] in Amsterdam, where a large part of Luce and Luigi Fabbri's papers are held. The unpublished thesis, a typed text of 132 pages, is titled *L'opera geografica di Eliseo Reclus* [The geographical work of Élisée Reclus]. This text, along with the Fabbri's correspondence and publications, is my principal source. The argument I present here is that Luigi and Luce were well placed to interpret the geographical and political thought of Reclus because of their participation in international and multilingual anarchist networks, giving them direct access to Reclus's texts and to the best informed debates and secondary literature of the time, such as the works of Max Nettlau and Joseph Ishill, who were friends and correspondents of the Fabbri. Furthermore, on this basis the father and daughter offered an original reading of Reclus which contributed in a decisive way to the international circulation of his ideas. By tracing their influence over Reclus's reception in those contexts this case confirms the centrality of biography to understanding the history and geography of ideas. As Charles Withers observes, the biographical turn in the history and philosophy of geography allows us to follow scientific and personal trajectories outside institutional contexts, where 'individual achievements were often made in opposition to prevailing

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¹ On Reclus, see J. Clark and C. Martin, *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: Selected Writings of Élisée Reclus*, Oakland, 2013; G. Dunbar, *Élisée Reclus Historian of Nature*, Hamden, 1978; M. Fleming, *The Geography of Freedom: The Odyssey by Élisée Reclus*, Montreal, 1988.

² It is important to point out that in Italy the doctoral degree was instituted only in 1984, and that in the period discussed here a dissertation titled *Tesi di Laurea* conferred the highest academic degree possible, carrying the right to the title *Dottore* [Doctor].

disciplinary trends'.³ Understanding the Fabbris involves what David Livingstone has called a located hermeneutics, 'the fundamental importance of the spaces where reading literally takes place'.⁴

Using these ideas this paper seeks to understand, in James Secord's words, 'how and why ... knowledge circulate[s]', and what Simon Naylor calls the 'travels and travails' of texts, as they produce 'knowledge on the move'.⁵ Since the case studied here is strongly based on translation, I also draw on recent studies in the history of literature that regard 'every translation [as] a cultural activity, a performative negotiation of cultural differences'.⁶ More specifically, I use this historical example to consider the rich debate on the problems of translation and multilingualism in geographical academia as addressed by authors who argue that a multilingual and cosmopolitan sphere in international geography is far from being realized.⁷

Thus, my main argument is that the work of the Fabbris shows that cultural and textual translations are more likely to occur, often necessarily so, in non-institutional contexts like the transnational anarchist networks they frequented, than in the national schools of geography established in the same period.⁸ The unpublished correspondence I draw on shows how international militant networks were committed to the multilingual circulation of knowledge, allowing an assessment of the importance of non-institutional networks for the internationalisation of knowledge in the context of the first Italian readings of Reclus's work.

This paper is also part of a reconsideration of anarchism as a transnational and cosmopolitan movement.⁹ Among the concepts highlighted by those engaged in this 'transnational turn', the most important here is that of transnational anarchist networks. According to Davide Turcato this represents a fundamental intellectual tool for replacing old commonplaces in the history of anarchism such as a historiography which depends on a 'cyclical pattern of advances and retreats'. Thinking through networks makes it possible to bypass what Turcato considers as false 'millenaristic' readings of anarchism that impede a clear understanding of how this movement really worked.¹⁰ According to Matthew Adams, 'the rhizomatic metaphor beloved by political theorists when discussing anarchism's ability to grow unperceived beneath the soil and then burst forth in unexpected ways, finds an echo in the inky tendrils that spread radical ideas around the globe'.¹¹ For Turcato, militants of Italian origin played a particularly important

role in the formation of transnational anarchist networks since they, more than any others, circulated throughout the world as political exiles, economic migrants, or committed international propagandists. While the classic works by Pietro Di Paola focus on the exile networks of Italian anarchists in London, Kirwin Shaffer argues for the importance and complexity of Italian anarchist networks throughout the Americas, stressing an intense circulation of journals and militants between Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹² Nevertheless, I have taken to heart Adams's methodological warning not 'to fetishise the network as a means of analysis' by tracing every context and connection through the analysis of primary sources.¹³

In order to pursue this argument, in the first part of this article I analyse the spread of Reclus's ideas and writings in Italy thanks to Luigi Fabbri and his journal *Il Pensiero* and situate the Fabbris' readings of Reclus's work in their political and cultural context. In the second part, I examine Luce Fabbri's unpublished dissertation, focusing on its construction through Luce and Luigi's correspondence network, and discussing the originality of her research on Reclus. In the third part, I address Luce and Luigi's anarchist cultural production in Montevideo, stressing the importance of this city as a 'safe place' which allowed political exiles like the Fabbris to keep alive and spread their specific readings of Reclus and anarchist geographies.¹⁴

Luigi Fabbri: translating Reclus and networking

Within the history of anarchism, the constructive and social direction of the most famous Italian anarchist, Errico Malatesta (1853–1932), stands out for its voluntarism. This was often considered to be a strategy adopted in contrast to the more traditional anarchist communism of Pëtr Kropotkin and Élisée Reclus who acted especially in the fields of popular education and evolutionary science.¹⁵ Malatesta did not deny the importance of education, nor did he reject the evolutionary principle, yet he strongly defended the need for anarchist organising in order to construct liberating social relations and actively pave the way for revolution, rather than relying on humankind's evolution.¹⁶ Luigi Fabbri met the great revolutionary in 1897 when the latter, clandestinely back in Italy, was hiding in the house of Cesare Agostinelli in Ancona, near Luigi's hometown of Fabriano. Luigi was then twenty years old and was so thoroughly versed in Reclus's and Kropotkin's texts that Malatesta affectionately called him 'our educationist'.¹⁷ Fabbri, the eminent protagonist of the twentieth-century Italian anarchist movement, is considered in some ways Malatesta's spiritual heir, and he always strove for a synthesis between Kropotkin's and Reclus's thought and the path Malatesta followed. This is evidenced in the pages of the journal *Il Pensiero*, produced by Fabbri (and Pietro Gori) in Rome between 1903 and 1911, and considered by historians 'the greatest and most prestigious Italian anarchist

³ C.W.J. Withers, History and philosophy of geography 2004–2005: biographies, practices, sites, *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (2007) 67.

⁴ D.N. Livingstone, Science, text and space: thoughts on the geography of reading, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (2005) 392.

⁵ J. Secord, Knowledge in transit, *Isis* 95 (2004) 655; S. Naylor, Historical geography: knowledge, in place and on the move, *Progress in Human Geography* 29 (2005) 626.

⁶ F. Italiano, Translating geographies: The *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* and its Venetian translation, *Translation Studies* 5 (2012) 4.

⁷ C. Desbiens, Speaking in tongues, making geographies, *Society and Space* 20 (2002) 1–3; C. Desbiens and S. Ruddick, Speaking of geography: language, power, and the spaces of Anglo-Saxon 'hegemony', *Society and Space* 24 (2006) 1–8; J. Fall and C. Minca, Not a geography of what doesn't exist, but a counter-geography of what does: rereading Giuseppe Dematteis' *Le Metafore della Terra*, *Progress in Human Geography* 37 (2012) 542–563.

⁸ H. Capel, *Filosofia y Ciencia en la Geografía Contemporánea*, Barcelona, 1981.

⁹ C. Bantman and B. Altena (Eds), *Reassessing the Transnational Turn: Scales of Analysis in Anarchist and Syndicalist Studies*, London, 2015; S. Hirsch and L. Van der Walt (Eds), *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution*, Leiden/Boston, 2007.

¹⁰ D. Turcato, Italian anarchism as a transnational movement, 1885–1915, *International Review of Social History* 52 (2007) 408.

¹¹ M. Adams, Memory, history, and homesteading: George Woodcock, Herbert Read, and intellectual networks, *Anarchist Studies* 23 (2015) 86.

¹² P. Di Paola, *The Knights Errant of Anarchy, London and the Italian Anarchist Diaspora (1880–1917)*, Liverpool, 2013; K. Shaffer, Latin lines and dots: transnational anarchism, regional networks, and Italian libertarians in Latin America, *Zapruder World* 1 (2014) available at <http://www.zapruderworld.org/content/~r-shaffer-latin-lines-and-dots-transnational-anarchism-regional-networksand-italian>.

¹³ Adams, Memory, history, and homesteading, 86.

¹⁴ S. Springer, A. Barker, G. Brown, A. Ince, J. Pickerill, Reanimating anarchist geographies: a new burst of colour, *Antipode* 44 (2012) 1591–1604.

¹⁵ G. Kearns, The political pivot of geography, *The Geographical Journal* 170 (2004) 337–346; E. Reclus, *Évolution, Révolution et l'Idéal Anarchique*, Paris, 1891.

¹⁶ G. Berti, *Errico Malatesta e il Movimento Anarchico Italiano e Internazionale*, Milan, 2003.

¹⁷ Luce Fabbri, *Luigi Fabbri, Storia di un Uomo Libero*, Pisa, 1996, 37. All texts quoted from Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and French sources have been translated by the author.

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