

## Élisée Reclus and the Jews

Permanent link: <https://monde-libertaire.net/index.php?articlen=8507>

### Reaction to the broadcast of 'Avoir raison avec Élisée Reclus' (Being right with Élisée Reclus) on 5 August 2025 on France Culture

Readers of *Le Monde Libertaire* will no doubt have learned that France Culture broadcast an ambitious five-part series entitled '*Avoir raison avec...*' (Being Right with...) dedicated to the geographer and anarchist Élisée Reclus from 4 to 8 August, from 1pm to 1.30pm, with an evening repeat. Two of our fellow geographers, Federico Ferretti and Philippe Pelletier (1), were invited to participate in this programme, and their contributions were broadcast on Monday 4 and Wednesday 6 August.

Listeners wishing to hear the entire programme were able to hear the contribution of Béatrice Giblin, geographer and editor of the journal *Hérodote*, on Tuesday 5 August. This contribution, which was also fascinating when it came to discussing Reclus' contribution to the geography of his time, and particularly to geopolitics, suddenly took a turn when the producer, Marie-Lys de Saint Salvy, asked (around 25 minutes into the podcast): 'His work is colossal, so we can expect contradictions...?'

Béatrice Giblin replied with the answer she was probably expecting: 'Yes, yes, particularly the Jewish question, and that is a real contradiction. But he was a man of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the left, anarchist or not, Marxist, has always been a little anti-Semitic, seeing Jews as bankers, and therefore as capitalists..'

Béatrice Giblin goes on to say that there are anti-Semitic passages in Élisée Reclus's work, without citing any examples, of course.

Everyone can form their own opinion by listening to the rest of the interview via the following link:

<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/avoir-raison-avec/geographe-du-peuple-quand-la-geographie-devient-politique-8479043>

### Is Élisée Reclus anti-Semitic, according to Béatrice Giblin?

This is not the first time Giblin has made such comments about Élisée Reclus, as she already made similar remarks in 2023 on the programme '*Concordance des temps*', where she was a guest of Jean Noël Jeanneney.

Listen here:

<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/concordance-des-temps/elisee-reclus-la-terre-et-les-hommes-2520189>

Béatrice Giblin devoted her doctoral thesis in geography to Élisée Reclus in 1971. Surprisingly, it was not until 2005 that Élisée Reclus's alleged anti-Semitism appeared in her writings. Following these allegations, which were never documented, but because they cast suspicion on an important figure in our movement and our thinking, Federico Ferretti, Philippe Pelletier and Philippe Malburet undertook, with their usual rigorous method of going to the sources, both published texts and correspondence, the publication of two documents.

- An article published in 2011 in one of the most prestigious French-language geography journals, available online and free of charge.

<https://journals.openedition.org/cybergeo/23467>

- And in 2017, a book, *Élisée Reclus et les juifs* (Élisée Reclus and the Jews), still available from L'Harmattan publishers.

### **A three-point refutation**

Here are at least three arguments that refute this false and scandalous accusation, but there are others in the two publications cited above.

1) Regarding the Crémieux Decree of 24 October 1870, which declared the ‘indigenous Israelites’ of Algeria to be French citizens, Élisée Reclus writes that this ‘*testifies to a considerable evolution, and it is not entirely wrong that the civil registry confuses the children of French citizens with those of Israelites*’ (Volume XI of *L’Afrique septentrionale de la Nouvelle géographie universelle*, 1886, p. 596).

2) ‘*Anti-Semitism is above all a vile rivalry, and it is morally reprehensible from the outset, since it does not appeal to any principle of justice*’: letter from Élisée Reclus dated 22 April 1898, published by the journal *Les Droits de l’Homme* and republished in *extenso* in 1899 by Henri Dagan in his *Enquête sur l’antisémitisme* (1899).

3) This letter by Élisée Reclus was written in response to a question from the journal about his position on the Dreyfus Affair,<sup>1</sup> which, it should be remembered, was launched by an anarchist, Bernard Lazare (himself associated with Élisée Reclus), who defended the captain even before Emile Zola.

The refutation is therefore complete and well documented, and the three authors conclude with the following sentence: ‘*Faced with this avalanche of evidence, we can therefore affirm that the label ‘anti-Semitic’ cannot in any way be applied to either the character of Élisée Reclus or his work.*’ We can only hope that Béatrice Giblin, as a rigorous academic, will take the time to read one or both of these texts.

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1 For details on the Dreyfus affair and the anarchists' position on the issue, see: Maurice Laizant, “Les anarchistes dans l’affaire Dreyfus”, *La Rue* n°3, 1er trimestre 1969.  
[https://www.antimythos.fr/publications/lr/lr\\_3/lm\\_lr\\_3.pdf](https://www.antimythos.fr/publications/lr/lr_3/lm_lr_3.pdf)

## Unfounded accusations that raise questions

Another question remains, beyond the specific case of Élisée Reclus, which is that of the highly unscientific conflation that allows the geographer invited by France Culture to assert that ‘(...) *the left, anarchist or not anarchist, Marxist, has always been a little anti-Semitic(...)*’. Such a lack of rigour is enough to provoke outrage and raise questions about who is being targeted. Could this vague ‘left’ of the 19th century still be the same one, in its 21st-century form, that is conveniently discredited whenever it utters the slightest criticism (and sometimes very timidly) of the policies and crimes perpetrated by the Israeli state?

As anarchists, we care little about being on the left or on any parliamentary side. However, for the public and non-specialists, Béatrice Giblin's slanderous statements resonate very aggressively in the current political and media context. There is a prevailing mood that allows for all kinds of conflation and easily presents the labour movement and the left as definitively anti-Semitic. While we must respect the work of historians on certain disturbing traces, we must not allow statements without precise references to pass unchallenged. Especially when political opinions take on the guise of knowledge to legitimise themselves in a terribly divisive context...

Today, as always, the first duty of revolutionaries is to inform themselves and to inform others... and there is work to be done!

The friends of Élisée Reclus

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(1) Both coordinators, with Pauline Couteau and Nicolas Eprendre, of the *Élisée Reclus, les 101 mots* (Élisée Reclus, 101 words) primer published by Les Presses du Réel in September 2024.