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The Mediterranean metaphor and Léon Metchnikoff's *Great Historical Rivers*: anarchist geographies of water-land hybridity

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Abstract: *This paper discusses ideas of anarchist (historical) geographies of rivers and seas. It does so by addressing works of early anarchist geographer Lev Ilich Mechnikov (mentioned here with the more known French spelling Léon Metchnikoff) (1838-1888), which lie at the origin of broader 'Mediterranean metaphors' comparing the globalising role of oceanic navigation to early Mediterranean connectedness, mainly discussed by Metchnikoff in his key book La civilisation et les grands fleuves historiques [Civilisation and Great Historical Rivers]. A close collaborator of Elisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin and a multifarious scholarly talent, Metchnikoff provided contributions that still need to be fully rediscovered. Based on a systematic reading of Metchnikoff's archives and works, I argue that, starting from historical rivers and the early Mediterranean, his ideas on the historical roles that can be possibly (and relationally) played by water-land assemblages can nourish current notions of more-than-wet ontologies and critical geopolitics. Eventually, these ideas provide models for understanding spatialities that are alternative to those of state borders, bounded land and terracentric territorialities, contributing to shape the open and boundless world that is currently conceived by scholarship informed to pluriversal notions of critical Mediterraneanism.*

Keywords: Mediterranean Metaphor; Historical Rivers; Coastal Indentation; Hybrid Geographies; Anarchism.

This paper discusses works by early anarchist geographer Lev Ilich Mechnikov (transcribed here following the French spelling Léon Metchnikoff with which he signed his main works) (1838-1888), starting from his contribution to build the so-called Mediterranean metaphor, which was

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then popularized by geographers such as his friend and colleague Elisée Reclus.¹ On the one hand, this metaphor was mobilised by much of late nineteenth-century European geography as a way to seize ideas of globalization by progressively defining the oceans as larger Mediterraneans.² On the other, the interpretation that early anarchist geographers gave to this theory included the concept of coastal indentation as a way to question notions of racial or cultural purity.³ Stressing the complexity of early historical migrations in the Mediterranean, early anarchist geographers argued that, favoured by this geographical situation, ancient Mediterranean connectivity generated a sort of melting-pot that undermined any essentialisation of European identities. In this sense, they anticipated some of the most current themes of critical and pluriversal Mediterraneanism.⁴

The idea of *anticipating* as expressed in this paper is never a concession to positivistic notions of linear time or cumulative developments of knowledge, but rather an acknowledgement that, in the history of geography, *old* theories can periodically resurface in always changing forms.⁵ This is key to avoid the well-known scholarly pitfalls of pretending to have invented everything, neglecting the genealogies of the concepts that we handle. Anarchist precedents of critical Mediterraneanism such as Reclus's Mediterranean metaphor are quoted by recent scholarship on the *American Mediterraneans* arguing for a 'transnational and translational approach' to a plurality of Mediterraneans, toward a 'speculative oceanic history' engaging with matters of slavery, racism and exploitation that inform scholarship on maritime insurgence.⁶ Thus, anticolonial

¹ Federico Ferretti, *Elisée Reclus, pour une géographie nouvelle* (Paris: CTHS, 2014).

² Jean-Baptiste Arrault, 'A propos du concept de méditerranée. Expérience géographique du monde et mondialisation', *Cybergeog* (2006) <http://journals.openedition.org/cybergeog/13093>

³ Isabelle Lefort, 'L'articulation littorale: un principe ritterien relu par Elisée Reclus', *Études Rurales* 133 (1994) 45-58.

⁴ Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Federico Ferretti, 'Geography, Pluriverse and "Southern Thought": Engaging with Decoloniality from the Mediterranean', *Political Geography*, 107 (2023) 102990; Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca, 'The Mediterranean Alternative', *Progress in Human Geography* 35 (2011) 345-365; Onofrio Romano, 'Mediterraneanism', in *Pluriverse, a Post-development Dictionary*, ed. by Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria and Alberto Acosta (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019), pp. 237-240.

⁵ David N. Livingstone, 'Changing Climate, Human Evolution, and the Revival of Environmental Determinism', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 86 (2012) 564-595.

⁶ Susan Gillman, *American Mediterraneans. A Study in Geography, History and Race* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), pp. xv, 5; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-headed Hydra: Sailors,*

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Mediterranean metaphors can challenge notions of European exceptionalism. Mediterranean studies have been recently deemed an antidote to ‘civilisational, national and disciplinary divisions [and] to orientalism [serving as] a positive constructive critique to eurocentrism’.⁷ Recently, Sharad Chari has launched a sort of radical Mediterranean metaphor in proposing an oceanic interpretation of works by Antonio Gramsci starting from Gramsci’s early experience of the Mediterranean in his native Sardinia, where anticolonialism was declined through land/sea dialectics arguing for: ‘Throwing the mainlanders into the sea’.⁸

The impact of Metchnikoff’s works on the circuit of early anarchist geographers, including Reclus, Kropotkin and others, has been mostly discussed by French-speaking scholarship hitherto.⁹ This paper especially addresses Metchnikoff’s most theoretically dense work *La civilisation et les grands fleuves historiques* [Civilisation and Great Historical Rivers—hereafter *Grands Fleuves*] published posthumously under Reclus’s supervision, which was expected to be the first piece of a bigger work that Metchnikoff did not finish due to his premature death.¹⁰ Starting from an analysis of the ancient ‘fluvial’ civilisations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China, all developing around river basins, Metchnikoff proposed a periodisation of human (global) history in phases that were associated with geographical objects characterised by the presence of a liquid element. That is, a fluvial, a Mediterranean and an Oceanic (or global) period.

Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic (London/New York, Verso, 2000); David Featherstone, ‘Maritime labour, circulations of struggle, and constructions of transnational subaltern agency: the spatial politics of the 1939 Indian seafarers’ strikes’, *Antipode* 55(2023) 1411-1432.

⁷ Brian A. Catloss, Cecily J. Hilsdale, Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita, ‘Reflections: Talking Mediterranean’, in *Can We talk Mediterranean? Conversations on an Emerging Field in Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, ed. by Brian A. Catloss and S. Kinoshita (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 103-124 (p. 105).

⁸ Sharad Chari, *Gramsci at Sea* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023), p. 1.

⁹ Ferretti, *Elisée Reclus*; Federico Ferretti, ‘De l’empathie en géographie: la Chine vue par Léon Metchnikoff, Elisée Reclus et François Turrettini’, *Cybergeo* (2013) <http://cybergeo.revues.org/26127>; Philippe Pelletier, *Géographie et anarchie: Elisée Reclus, Pierre Kropotkine, Léon Metchnikoff et d'autres* (Paris: Editions du monde libertaire, 2013); Philippe Pelletier, *Une merveille de l'histoire: le Japon vu par Elisée Reclus et Léon Metchnikoff* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2021).

¹⁰ Léon Metchnikoff, *La civilisation et les grands fleuves historiques* (Paris: Hachette, 1889); Charles Knapp, ‘Nécrologie: Léon Metchnikoff’, *Bulletin de la Société Neuchâteloise de géographie* 4 (1888) 272-276.

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Grands Fleuves was not directly dedicated to the Mediterranean (although the Nilotic and Mesopotamian areas are full parts of what scholars would have called the ‘Mediterranean World’). However, a reading of this work through Mediterranean lenses is authorised by its author, as the aforementioned multivolume work of which *Grands Fleuves* had to be the introduction was mainly centred on the Mediterranean, as I further discuss below. Furthermore, at that time, Mediterranean traditions had a special appeal for anarchists and free-thinkers as (highly idealised) models of pre-Christian secular and democratic societies.¹¹ It is not coincidence that one of the rare circumstances that earned Metchnikoff some mentions in English-speaking scholarship has been the interest that James Joyce paid to *Grands Fleuves*, to which he dedicated extensive comments in his notebooks. As Joyce scholarship discuss, the Irish writer well grasped some key features of Metchnikoff’s book such as his anti-racism and his advocacy for a dialectic of so-called nature and humankind.¹² Moreover, Reclus and Metchnikoff anticipated some ideas of Mediterranean unity by historians such as Fernand Braudel, as well as broader notions of connectedness in global intellectual history.¹³ As a specialist in Eastern Asia, Metchnikoff also claimed that there was no European monopoly of notions such as civilisation, freedom or even socialism. These are elements of scholarship on the *Theft of History* by authors such as Jack Goody, who criticised Braudel, alongside Joseph Needham, for maintaining their discussions on the origins of concepts such as capitalism in a European framework.¹⁴ Recent scholarship in critical Mediterranean studies likewise criticises Braudel for neglecting matters of colonial/racial oppression in Mediterranean histories and failing to take clear distances from French imperial visions.¹⁵

Extending current scholarship in the field of historical geographies of anarchism, this paper argues that Metchnikoff’s contribution can nourish current geopolitical approaches to land/sea

¹¹ Robyn Roslak, *Neo-impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-siècle France: Painting, Politics and Landscape*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

¹² Alison Lacivita, *The Ecology of Finnegans Wake* (Gainesville: The University of Florida Press, 2015); Len Platt, *Joyce, Race and ‘Finnegans Wake’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹³ Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds.) *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006).

¹⁵ Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2008).

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assemblages such as more-than-wet ontology, as well as ideas of Mediterraneity understood as connectivity between different shores.¹⁶ It does so by questioning terracentric understandings of bounded or essentialised territory, refusing to see lands, seas and peoples as fixed or static entities and challenging cartographic reason.¹⁷ I mean by this notion the idea that mapping was the principal instrument of representational/positivistic geography that came under early anarchist geographers' scrutiny, through their critique of bidimensional maps as political and educational tools of state and colonialism.¹⁸

Inspired by German *Naturphilosophie*, early anarchist geographers addressed regions and similar geographical objects through dynamic and ceaseless interactions of human and non-human actants. While today these notions are especially discussed by more-than-human and hybrid geographies, Reclus famously launched his Ritterian (and Spinozean) metaphor of 'humankind [as] self-conscious nature' to stress the consubstantiality of what is commonly called humankind and nature and the complementarity of historical and geographical approaches, including ideas of non-linear time inspired by G.B Vico's theory of the ebbs and flows of history.¹⁹ More recently, scholarship informed to relational ontologies has suggested that new geographical understandings of seas 'destabilize notions of bounded space and linear time'.²⁰ These notions are defined as an artificial

¹⁶ Simon Springer, *The Anarchist Roots of Geography* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016); Federico Ferretti, Gerónimo Barrera de la Torre, Anthony Ince and Francisco Toro (eds.) *Historical Geographies of Anarchism: early anarchist geographers and present-day scientific challenges* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Kimberley Peters and Philip Steinberg, 'The Ocean in Excess: Towards a More-than-wet Ontology', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 9 (2019) 293-307; Kimberley Peters, Philip Steinberg and Elaine Stratford (eds.) *Territory beyond Terra* (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018); Philip Steinberg, 'Blue Planet, Black Lives: Matter, Memory, and the Temporalities of Political Geography', *Political Geography* 96 (2022) 102524; Franco Cassano and Danilo Zolo (Eds.), *L'alternativa mediterranea* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2007); Predrag Matvejević, *Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Franco Farinelli, *Geografia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2007); Gunnar Olsson, *Abysmal: a Critique of Cartographic Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Federico Ferretti, 'Pioneers in the History of Cartography: the Geneva map collection of Élisée Reclus and Charles Perron', *Journal of Historical Geography* 43 (2014) 85-95.

¹⁹ Élisée Reclus, *L'Homme et la Terre*, vol. I (Paris: Librairie universelle, 1905), 1; Federico Ferretti, 'Evolution and Revolution: Anarchist Geographies, Modernity and Post-structuralism', *Environment and Planning D-Society and Space* 35 (2017) 893-912; Sarah Whatmore, 'Materialist Returns: Practicing Cultural Geography in and for a More-than-human World', *cultural geographies* 13 (2006) 600-609.

²⁰ Steinberg, 'Blue Planet', p. 12.

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division, based on Euclidean ideas of abstract and disembodied space and between space and the social/material processes that occur there. Scholars committed to more-than-wet ontology namely contend that oceanic geography cannot be reduced to the liquid dimensions of oceans, stressing instead the idea of ‘excess’, which considers the material relationality of seas and lands.²¹ In this scholarship, what especially resonates with Reclus’ and Metchnikoff’s works is the idea of a maritime relationality between what is liquid and what is solid, what belongs to the sea and what belongs to the shore, what is human and what is more-than-human.

Yet, this relationality has been often associated with oceanic places or with Caribbean literature, and only recently has scholarship started to apply such intellectual tools to the Mediterranean.²² Notwithstanding, several geographers address the Mediterranean as a place where politically engineered and racialised land and sea boundaries are producing death and sorrow, demonstrating the failure of the nation-state and its excluding spatialities based on linear boundaries and walls.²³ This suggests that new and different solutions are needed as for the political organization of space, which recall classical critical geopolitics stressing the violent nature of the very idea of territory.²⁴ Concurrently, ideas of Black Mediterranean are emerging as a new challenge to geographical readings only based on borders, whose racialised production and violent biopolitics are challenged

²¹ Peters and Steinberg, ‘The Ocean in Excess’.

²² Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990); Ferretti, ‘Geography’.

²³ Tim Raeymaekers, ‘Naturalising “Black Spaces” in the Mediterranean: Towards a Political Ecology of Bordering Infrastructures’ *Geopolitics* 29 (2024) 495-519; Claudio Minca, ‘Geografia e Rivoluzione’, *Rivista Geografica Italiana* 126 (2019) 7-20.

²⁴ Anna Casaglia, Raffaella Coletti, Christopher Lizotte, John Agnew, Virginie Mamadouh and Claudio Minca, ‘Interventions on European Nationalist Populism and Bordering in Time of Emergencies’, *Political Geography* 82 (2020) 1-9; Maribel Casas-Cortes, Sebastian Cobarrubias, Nicholas De Genova, Glenda Garelli, Giorgio Grappi, Charles Heller, Sabine Hess, Bernd Kasperek, Sandro Mezzadra, Brett Neilson, Irene Peano, Lorenzo Pezzani, John Pickles, Federico Rahola, Lisa Riedner, Stephan Scheel and Martina Tazzioli, ‘New Keywords: Migration and Borders’, *Cultural Studies* 29 (2015) 55-87; Martina Tazzioli, *Border Abolitionism. Migrants’ Containment and the Genealogies of Struggles and Rescue* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023); Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

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by recent scholarship.²⁵ Interdisciplinary Mediterranean scholarship is likewise rediscovering cultural connections associated with mixed cultures and histories of connectivity.²⁶

To understand the genealogies of these relational views of Mediterranean entanglements of lands and seas, I analyse Metchnikoff's geographical writings alongside the political contexts of his collaboration with early anarchist networks. I especially avail of primary sources such as Metchnikoff's biographies authored by direct witnesses such as Elisée Reclus and Neuchâtel geographer Charles Knapp, and of Metchnikoff's exceptional archives surviving at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). Still partially unexplored, this precious collection was preserved by Metchnikoff's stepdaughter Nadezhda Vladimirovna Konchevskaia (1856-19[30]), likewise Reclus' collaborator.²⁷ In 1931, arguably after Konchevskaia's death, these papers went to the Russian Historical Archive Abroad in Prague, to be then seized and repatriated by the Soviet regime after the Second World War.²⁸ From their consultation, it appears that there have not been significant interventions by the current archival institution in ordering folders that visibly reflect the messy organisation of the archive's creators, Metchnikoff and Konchevskaia. Yet, most correspondences are organised in thematic folders, of which I especially use here those that are dedicated to correspondence with French-speaking scholars and publishers.

In the first part, I analyse Metchnikoff's extraordinary biography, to contend that the mediterranean nature of his life trajectory definitively shaped his ideas on historical rivers, ancient cultures and coastal indentation. In the second part, I address Metchnikoff's notion of assemblages of lands, rivers, seas and oceans as it was expressed in his main works *L'Empire japonais* and more

²⁵ Gabriele Proglia, Camilla Hawthorne, Ida Danewid, Khalil Saucier, Giuseppe Grimaldi, Angelica Pesarini, Timothy Raeymaekers, Giulia Grechi and Vivian Gerrand, *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders and Citizenship* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

²⁶ Iain Chambers, *Mediterraneo Blues: musiche, malinconia postcoloniale, pensieri marittimi* (Napoli: Tamu, 2020).

²⁷ Sergei V. Mironenko, *Fondy Gosudarstvennogo Arkhiva Rossiiskoi Federatsii po Istorii Rossii, 19 - nachala 20 vv.* (Moscow: Blagovest, 1994).

²⁸ Tatiana F. Pavlova, *Fondy Russkogo Zagranichnogo Istoricheskogo Arkhiva v Prage: Mezkharkivnyi Putevoditel* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1999).

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specifically *Grands Fleuves*. In the third part, I discuss the antiracist and anticolonial aspects of Reclus's and Metchnikoff's notions of Mediterranean and liquid/hybrid worlds.

METCHNIKOFF: A MEDITERRANEAN BIOGRAPHY

Born in Saint-Petersburg in 1838 to a family originating from Kharkiv, with Jewish origins from the maternal side, Metchnikoff had an outstandingly international and multilingual life trajectory. It can be said that an important part of his novel-like biography took place in the Mediterranean, whose languages, histories and cultures decisively marked his mindset and experiences. Consistent with the current material, contextual and biographic turn in the history of geography, my notion of Mediterranean biography aims at tracing links between scholars' lives and ideas that may have been inspired by their experiences such as Gramsci's relations with the sea as discussed by Chari.²⁹ Expelled in 1856 from the University of Kharkiv for 'taking part in students' revolutionary movements', Metchnikoff went back to Saint-Petersburg to study a so wide array of disciplines such as Medicine, Mathematics and Philology, in which he demonstrated multiple talents, including: 'An exceptional memory, an outstanding intelligence and a prodigious facility for learning the most diverse languages'.³⁰ In 1858, 20-years old Metchnikoff was appointed as an interpreter for a Russian diplomatic mission in Palestine, which allowed him to visit Mount Athos, Constantinople and Jerusalem before being once more expelled due to insubordination, including: 'A duel, and a disrespectful behaviour towards the expedition leaders'.³¹

His youth unrest led Metchnikoff to wander around the Eastern Mediterranean, making different jobs in Mediterranean port-cities such as Beirut, Galati and finally Venice. There, this same unrest led the Russian exile to collaborate with Italian Risorgimento activists who were fighting for

²⁹ Elizabeth Baigent and André Reyes Novaes, 'Not Just Rounding up the Usual Suspects: Hugh Clout and Geography's Stories', in *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies* 39, ed. by André Reyes Novaes and Elizabeth Baigent (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) pp. 1-26; Chari, *Gramsci*.

³⁰ Knapp, 'Nécrologie', pp. 272-273. All textual citations from texts in languages other than English have been translated by the author.

³¹ Elisée Reclus, 'Préface', in *La civilisation et les grands fleuves historiques*, by L. Metchnikoff (Paris: Hachette, 1889), pp. v-xxviii.

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national liberation—for some of them, a cause that was coupled with early socialism and class consciousness.³² In September 1860, Metchnikoff joined Giuseppe Garibaldi's Expedition of the Thousand, boarding in Livorno with the battalion led by Tuscan republican Vincenzo Malenchini, which disembarked in Calabria and followed Garibaldi's march towards Naples. There, Metchnikoff served as an artillery officer and got acquainted with the Gotha of Italian revolutionary republicanism.³³ Very seriously wounded in the Voltorno battle, the Russian activist never completely healed from these wounds, which would be among the causes of his premature death in 1888, at the age of fifty.³⁴

After the 1860 expedition, Metchnikoff lived in Italy until the end of 1864. There, according to Reclus: 'In Naples, in Livorno, in Florence ... he became the intermediary among the eminent people of the revolutionary parties, such as Garibaldi, Herzen and Bakunin, accomplishing dangerous missions in Italy and Spain'.³⁵ In his autobiographic recollections Metchnikoff, who was not devoid of irony, provided some less heroic anecdotes of his collaboration with famous Russian revolutionary Mikhail Bakunin, whom Metchnikoff welcomed in Florence in 1864 at the beginning of a sojourn that inspired the shift of radical Risorgimento from republican to socialistic positions.³⁶ Metchnikoff likewise contributed to this shift collaborating with federalist journal *La Nuova Europa* in Florence.³⁷ Yet, the beginnings of Bakunin's Italian endeavours were not so full of action. Florentine police sources account for the local policemen's efforts to meticulously tail these Russian refugees, fearing that they organised some terrible conspiracy. Yet, they could only observe them walking in the spring evenings with Florence republican leader Beppe Dolfi to stop in places such as 'the wineshop of the well-known [Vincenzo] Conti, nicknamed Barrel', a popular

³² Federico Ferretti, *Geographies of Federalism during the Italian Risorgimento, 1796-1900* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

³³ Alexander Herzen, *Il passato e i pensieri, vol. II* (Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1996); Lev Ilich Mechnikov, *Sull'Italia risorgimentale* (Moncalieri: CIRVI, 2011); Martin Miller, *The Russian Revolutionary Émigrés, 1825-1870* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

³⁴ Reclus, 'Préface'.

³⁵ Reclus, 'Préface', p. viii.

³⁶ Gino Cerrito and Pier Carlo Masini, 'Quattro lettere di M. Bakunin a G. Mazzoni', *Movimento Operaio* 17-18 (1950) 617-623; Elio Conti, *Le origini del socialismo a Firenze (1860-1880)* (Rome: Rinascita, 1950).

³⁷ Ferretti, *Geographies of Federalism*.

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local where, especially in the night, the most subversive activities that needed the intervention of the public force were some discussions among customers who had arguably availed of too many glasses.³⁸

Metchnikoff told humorously another story in which he was sailing in the Western Mediterranean to reach the island of Caprera for seeing Garibaldi and talking with him about a delivery of weapons for the Polish insurrection against the Czar, then strongly supported by revolutionaries in Western Europe. Instructed by Bakunin on the fact that the mission was top secret and nobody else knew anything, once in the ship Metchnikoff was approached by an unknown man. Speaking ‘with the strong accent of the Livorno neighbourhood which is called Venezia [*provided with canals like Venice*], inhabited by sailors and dockers’, this individual told to an astonished Metchnikoff that he was likewise going to see Garibaldi and that he knew better than the Russian émigré the details of that *secret* mission.³⁹ This man was one of the three brothers Andrea (1819-1887), Jacopo (1823-1879) and Pasquale Sgarallino (1834-1912), probably Jacopo. A family of sailors from the proletarian city-port of Livorno, the Sgarallinos were Garibaldian men of action who participated in the popular turmoil that preceded the constitution of the First International in Italy.⁴⁰ In the 1860s, they served the clandestine endeavours of republican conspirers in early unified (monarchist) Italy shipping mails and materials, such as military support for insurgent Poland, thanks to their all-Mediterranean networks. Indeed, several Mediterranean ports served as refuges for Italian exiles of Risorgimento such as Jacopo Sgarallino who lived in Constantinople for some years, and Mazzinian activist Nicola Fabrizi who was temporarily based in Malta.⁴¹

³⁸ Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Prefettura del Dipartimento Fiorentino (Archivio Segreto 1857-1864), filza, 23, Report of 7 March 1864.

³⁹ Léon Metchnikoff, ‘Bakounine en Italie en 1864’, *Revue Socialiste*, 27 (1898) 175-181, 595-603 (p. 599).

⁴⁰ Giuseppe Gregori and Giorgio Sacchetti (Eds) *Elementi libertari nel Risorgimento livornese e toscano: atti del Convegno di studi di Livorno, 26 marzo 2010 in memoria di Luigi Di Lembo* (Prato: Pentalinea, 2012).

⁴¹ Alessio Petrizzo, ‘Andrea e Jacopo Sgarallino’, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Treccani, 2018) [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/andrea-e-jacopo-sgarallino_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/andrea-e-jacopo-sgarallino_(Dizionario-Biografico)); Ferretti, *Geographies of Federalism*.

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Especially after the failed revolts of 1848-49, Italian republicans and proto-socialists organized exile networks that included Mediterranean routes allowing refugees and deserters from Restoration armies to seek sanctuary in some mediterranean hubs, boarding from Genoa towards: ‘Algiers, Smirne, Constantinople, Alexandria, Cagliari, Corsica, Barcelona, etc’.⁴² As the national cause was progressively supplanted by class struggle, Metchnikoff had several occasions to avail of the maritime branches of these transnational subversive networks. It was the case with his journey to Spain, officially to document the 1868 Revolution which inaugurated the so-called *Sexenio Democrático* for the Russian journals with which he collaborated. Indeed, it was also to collaborate with the missions that Bakunin was organising to connect the Spanish movement with the incipient socialist internationalism that was establishing its networks around the International Workingmen Association (IWA).⁴³

Alongside French activists such as Aristide Rey and Elie Reclus (Elisée’s brother), the most famous participant to these missions was Italian Garibaldian and future internationalist Giuseppe Fanelli, whose early contact with Spanish working-class activists is considered as the foundational act of the Spanish workers’ movement and the reason for its prevailing anarchist inspiration until the 1930s.⁴⁴ Recently translated by Renato Risaliti, Metchnikoff’s reports on his travel to Spain, although subject to Russian censorship, accounted implicitly for the political networks in which his travels took place.⁴⁵ Provided with a letter of recommendation from the Mazzinian *Alliance républicaine universelle* signed by Polish Louis Bulewski and surviving at GARF archives, Metchnikoff travelled autonomously from the other Internationalists.⁴⁶ Yet, he alluded to his meeting with the French delegation once in Catalonia, and his later presence in Madrid was implicitly evoked in Elie Reclus’ chronicle.⁴⁷ In Spain, Metchnikoff could note the artificiality of

⁴² Carlo Cattaneo, *Epistolario di Carlo Cattaneo 1: 1820-1849* (Firenze: Barbera, 1949).

⁴³ Max Nettlau, *La Première Internationale en Espagne (1868-1888)* (Dordrecht: Redider, 1969).

⁴⁴ Anselmo Lorenzo, *El proletariado militante: memorias de un internacional* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1974).

⁴⁵ Lev Ilich Mechnikov, *Viaggio in Spagna* (Florence: Centro Stampa Toscana Nuova, 2018).

⁴⁶ Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter GARF), fondy 6753, op. 1, khr 38, f 34.

⁴⁷ Mechnikov, *Viaggio in Spagna*; Elie Reclus, *Impresiones de un viaje por España en tiempos de Revolución* (Logroño: Pepitas de Calabaza, 2007); Max Nettlau, *Bakunin e l’Internazionale in Italia dal 1864 al 1872* (Geneva: Edizioni del Risveglio, 1928).

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political boundaries separating peoples with languages and cultures that were quite close and marked by similar Mediterranean histories of connection, such as the Catalans and the inhabitants of French Roussillon, or ‘Provençal France’ in general.⁴⁸

In those years, Metchnikoff moved to Switzerland, where he remained until the end of his life—except for his stay in Japan as I discuss in the next section, maintaining his interest in neo-Latin languages and classics from Mediterranean traditions.⁴⁹ So strong was Metchnikoff’s reputation as a specialist in Mediterranean environments and classical cultures that at GARF, among the posters of the public conferences that he gave in Switzerland in his late years, one finds the traces of a 1886 speech at the Lausanne theatre in which Metchnikoff reconstructed ‘A walk in Pompei’, which included: ‘Volcanoes and geysers of different countries. Phlegrean Fields. Aspects of Vesuvio at the time of Strabo and Plinius. The last day of Pompei. The ruins of Pompei’.⁵⁰

Thus, since his youth, Metchnikoff experienced Mediterranean connectivity.⁵¹ This first occurred through his knowledge of the most ancient Mediterranean cultures and civilisations, from the monuments of Jerusalem to the ruins of the Roman theatre of Capua, whose presence on the frontline of the 1860 last Garibaldian battle was even discussed by Metchnikoff in his chronicle of the Thousand expedition.⁵² Second, Metchnikoff was inserted in the Mediterranean connections of the transnational networks of Risorgimento and IWA activists, moving ideas and people across the Eastern, Western and Southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. This arguably contributed to inspire Metchnikoff’s ideas of maritime connections, alongside another biographical travel experience, which took place on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, as I discuss in the next section.

⁴⁸ Mechnikov, *Viaggio in Spagna*, p. 72.

⁴⁹ Peter Jud, *Léon Metchnikoff (Lev Il'ic Mecnikov), 1838-1888: ein russischer Geograph in der Schweiz* (Zürich: Oriole Verlag, 1995).

⁵⁰ GARF, F-6753, op. 1, d. 35. L. 21, ‘Quatre conférences de M. Léon Metchnikoff’.

⁵¹ Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Boundless Sea: Writing Mediterranean History* (London: Routledge, 2020).

⁵² Lev Ilich Mechnikov, *Memorie di un garibaldino russo: sulla spedizione dei Mille* (Firenze: Toscana Nuova 2, 2007).

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OCEANS, MEDITERRANEANS, AND HISTORICAL RIVERS

Global Travels of the Mediterranean Metaphor

The oceanic experience that further marked Metchnikoff's scholarly and political works was his sojourn in Japan from 1874 to 1876 to teach (in Japanese) in a Russian school. In the following years, Metchnikoff's skills in 'oriental languages' included, beyond Japanese, 'a bit of Chinese, of Korean, of Manchurian and of Mongolian', rendering him a precious collaborator of Reclus's *New Universal Geography* for approaching non-European cultures in empathetic ways through direct sources.⁵³ According to Sho Konishi, Metchnikoff's Japanese sojourn participated to the construction of a transnational and transcultural notion of 'cooperatist anarchist modernity ... beyond western modern constructs'.⁵⁴ Metchnikoff's oceanic experience was first biographical, then theoretical. Reclus recounted that his Russian friend, compelled to come back from Japan to Europe for health issues: 'Travelled by sea through the Sandwich Islands, San Francisco and New York, bringing with him his wonderful book *L'Empire japonais*'.⁵⁵ Thus, Metchnikoff's tour of the world took materially place on the Pacific Ocean. What is significant is that, once more, Metchnikoff conceptualised this biographical experience by extending the Mediterranean metaphor to the biggest of the Oceans, the Pacific. While later historical works considered the twentieth century as the 'Pacific century' due to the increasing centrality of that ocean in global geopolitical scenarios, Metchnikoff started to stress the Pacific's growing importance for these same scenarios in the 1870s.⁵⁶

For Metchnikoff, the most powerful European colonial empire of that time, that is British thalassocracy, was finding a new competitor in Japan. That is: 'A country of islands which, for the nature and configuration of its territory as well as for its origins, seemed to be destined to become

⁵³ Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département de Manuscrits Occidentaux, Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises, 16798, f 7, Reclus to Pelet, 11 January 1881; Ferretti, 'De l'empathie en géographie'.

⁵⁴ Sho Konishi, *Anarchist Modernity: Cooperatism and Japanese-Russian Intellectual Relations in Modern Japan* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 4.

⁵⁵ Reclus, 'Préface', p. x.

⁵⁶ Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (London: Watts, 1966).

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a sort of England of the Far East'.⁵⁷ The Russian geographer made comparisons that sounded quite irreverent in relation to ideas of European domination of the world, by defining for instance the Pacific as the 'Mediterranean of the future', in which Japan will be 'an indispensable naval station', and in which the geopolitical and economic roles of Europe would be provincialized.⁵⁸ In *Grands Fleuves*, Metchnikoff further clarified his definition of the Mediterranean metaphor by claiming that: 'Every ocean, especially the Atlantic, is nothing but a bigger Mediterranean; every internal sea is nothing but a diminutive of the ocean'.⁵⁹ While comparative methods were generally criticised for their Eurocentrism, early anarchist geographers' works provide examples of different uses of comparison that can still nourish current post/decolonial literature on this matter.⁶⁰

Metchnikoff's works appear original also in relation to the later, and better known, geographical elaborations of Ellen Churchill Semple (1863-1932), whose reception has been the object of historical-geographical scholarship.⁶¹ While Susan Gillman considers Semple one the Humboldt-inspired 'Mediterraneanizers' alongside Reclus, the American geographer used the Mediterranean metaphor in a very different way, some decades after Reclus's and Metchnikoff's works on these topics.⁶² Semple eventually alleged a feeling of sailing communities for familiar environments and styled the ancient Mediterranean, with some contempt, as a 'nursery' for substantially lazy peoples, while Reclus and Metchnikoff stressed instead humans' action in modifying environments.⁶³ Then, Semple understood the shift from the Humboldtian 'American Mediterranean' of the Gulf/Caribbean system to the Pacific Ocean as the geopolitical and imperial rising of USA's

⁵⁷ Léon Metchnikoff, *L'Empire japonais* (Geneva: Imprimerie Orientale de l'Atsume Gusa, 1881).

⁵⁸ Léon Metchnikoff, 'L'Empire des Ténos', *Revue de géographie* 2 (1877) 15-22, 81-98, 189-204 (p. 15).

⁵⁹ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 153.

⁶⁰ Tariq Jazeel, 'Singularity. A Manifesto for Incomparable Geographies', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 40 (2019) 5-21.

⁶¹ Innes M. Keighren, *Bringing Geography to Book: Ellen Semple and the Reception of Geographical Knowledge* (London: Tauris, 2010).

⁶² Gillman, *American Mediterraneans*, p. 50

⁶³ Ellen Churchill Semple, *Influences of Geographic Environment in the Basis of Ratzel's System or Anthropogeography* (New York: Holt & C., 1911), p. 301.

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‘Pacific Ocean power’, fostering an explicit civilisational suprematism that was quite the opposite of Reclus’s and Metchnikoff’s purposes.⁶⁴

Metchnikoff foresaw some potential critiques to these oceanic views including the future definition of ‘Pacific century’ by clarifying that: ‘I will not propose to call this last geographical subdivision of history “the period of the Pacific”, because I think that this would not express well the movements that were produced. The civilizational conquest of the Pacific did not dethrone the Atlantic ... Modern civilisation manifestly tends to assume the whole world as its theatre’.⁶⁵ That is, the problem was not to identify future (continental or oceanic) hegemonies, but to express a consistent idea of globalization, which eventually questioned and provincialized European centralities. ‘While it was said once that all the roads led to Rome, now all the roads lead everywhere. Even when you have to go to the other side of the world, you have the choice as for the most direct and sure route to follow’.⁶⁶ Echoed by Reclus in the *New Universal Geography* arguing that, on the globe’s surface, ‘what we call civilisation will have its centre everywhere and its circumference nowhere’, these ideas were likewise expressed in Metchnikoff’s posthumous and most famous book, *Grands Fleuves*.⁶⁷ In his preface to his friend’s work, Reclus expressed their shared idea of globalisation through mediterranean examples, drawing upon both the principle of coastal indentation and the relativity of environmental effects on history:

This rich coastal indentation ... to which Ritter attributed a so big importance and through which he did comparative analyses between different continents, was certainly an essential feature of the times in which the populations of Hellenic Asia tried early navigation towards the Aegean islands. Likewise, a big value for Attica and Peloponnese came when their sailors reached Sicily, Magna Graecia and Western Mediterranean. Coastal indentations and large estuaries were later the fortune of Great Britain. But what do these indentations matter now, while steamboats cover in few hours distances over which

⁶⁴ Ellen Churchill Semple, *American History and its Geographic Conditions* (Boston/New York: Mifflin, 1903), p. 428

⁶⁵ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 14.

⁶⁶ Metchnikoff, *L’Empire japonais*, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Elisée Reclus, *Nouvelle Géographie universelle, vol. I* (Paris: Hachette, 1876).

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Ulysses would have wandered years and years? ... Thus, the very environment does not exert a fatal and uniform influence.⁶⁸

Indeed, early anarchist geographers acknowledged the physical causes of historical phenomena without recognizing any kind of mechanic or necessary determinism, as they considered the interactions of so-called nature and humankind as part of a consubstantiality in which human and non-human agency are equally involved. In that, they followed the principles of German *Naturphilosophie*, which predated some of the current debates on non-dualistic thinking in geographical scholarship as discussed above.⁶⁹ Metchnikoff stressed how his thought was far from:

The geographical fatalism that is often reproached to the environmental determinist theory in history. It is not in the very environment, but in the relations between the environments and the attitudes of their inhabitants to bring voluntarily the share of cooperation and solidarity that nature imposes to everybody, that we should seek the reasons of the primordial institutions of a people and their successive transformations. Thus, the historical role of this or this other geographical milieu (even supposing that it is physically immutable) can and must vary depending on how inhabitants enact their aptitude to solidarity and voluntary cooperation.⁷⁰

When Metchnikoff was still living, Reclus submitted a draft version of *Grands Fleuves* to publisher Hachette, and geographer Franz Schrader was requested to supply a reading report.⁷¹ Significantly, in a letter to Metchnikoff, Reclus complained that Schrader, who was his cousin and collaborator, was not so generous with Metchnikoff's book as Reclus expected, although his advice for publication was favourable. This anecdote well exemplifies the importance that Reclus attached to Metchnikoff's work.⁷² Several later commentators of *Grands Fleuves* have noted how

⁶⁸ Reclus, 'Préface', p. xxi-xxii.

⁶⁹ Federico Ferretti, 'Géographicité, Material Agency and the Thickness of the Earth: Rediscovering Eric Dardel beyond 'Nature/Culture' Dualisms', *cultural geographies* (2024) early view: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740231215510>

⁷⁰ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 41.

⁷¹ GARF, Fondy 6753, op. 1, khr 9, Librairie Hachette to Reclus, 29 July 1887.

⁷² GARF, Fondy 6753, op. 1, khr 67, f. 2, Reclus to Metchnikoff, 29 July 1887.

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Metchnikoff's book predated works by Karl Wittfogel on *hydraulic societies* in associating the collective management of water to the need of having numerous and disciplined societies.⁷³ It was also an inspiration for Marxist theorist Georgi Plekhanov, who had been acquainted with Metchnikoff during his exile in Switzerland and dedicated a review to *Grands Fleuves* as well as an obituary to Metchnikoff.⁷⁴

However, beyond the fact that Wittfogel's theories are partially outdated and generally discredited for their degree of Eurocentrism, there were substantial differences between Wittfogel's idea that hydraulic societies could only be managed through *oriental* centralistic authoritarianism, and the anarchist geographers investigating the complex relations between environment and society. They namely stressed the matter of human (and societal) voluntaristic choice in managing waters and societies. As James White argued, in Metchnikoff's social conception: 'It is not the [mere] presence of the river, but the phenomenon of cooperation which creates the civilisation. The special problems in utilising the river create the need for cooperation'.⁷⁵ Metchnikoff explained this principle as for the ancient Nile, which also directly inspired the chapters of Reclus's *New Universal Geography* dealing with the history of Egypt.⁷⁶

The Nile ... flooded all the land at once and, before the surveyors mapped out the soil, it arguably made it common property; since the cultivation of the soil has gone beyond the zone of regularly flooded land, the irrigation canals, indispensable for cultivation, can only be dug and maintained by multitudes of labourers, working together. There are, therefore, only two alternatives to the cultivators: to be all associated, equal in law, or to be all slaves of a master, native or foreigner.⁷⁷

⁷³ James D. White, 'Despotism and Anarchy. The Sociological Thought of L. I. Mechnikov', *Slavonic and East European Review* 54 (1976) 395-411.

⁷⁴ Mark Bassin, 'Geographical Determinism in Fin-de-siècle Marxism: Georgii Plekhanov and the Environmental Basis of Russian History', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 82 (1992) 3-22; Breno Viotto Pedrosa, 'Léon Metchnikoff and the Building of a Geographical Evolutionary Model: the Great Historical Rivers', *Geografares*, 32 (2021) <http://journals.openedition.org/geografares/1180>

⁷⁵ White, 'Despotism', p. 405.

⁷⁶ Elisée Reclus, *Nouvelle Géographie universelle, vol. X* (Paris: Hachette, 1885).

⁷⁷ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 227.

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While the concrete historical choice of early Egyptian societies had manifestly not been the best one in this sense, Reclus and Metchnikoff anticipated there some of the theories that were recently developed by authors such as James C. Scott. Namely, they matched understandings that early states (with their bureaucratic, religious and military apparatuses) were not the cause, but the consequence of land claiming and technical ‘progress’.⁷⁸ The above allusion to ‘foreign or native’ masters was part of their critique to both capitalism and colonialism, as well as of their hypothesis that there were concrete political alternatives to despotism, hydraulic or otherwise, in dense and numerous societies where production needed a concentration of forces. These alternatives were based on the anarchist principle of mutual aid, which was mainly popularized by Peter Kropotkin but was indeed collectively elaborated by the network of anarchist geographers based in Switzerland, in which Metchnikoff took a prominent part.⁷⁹

In his own discussions of mutual aid, Metchnikoff also highlighted the contribution of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s mutualism in shaping that theory, by arguing that: ‘Social progress is inversely proportional to the coercion and hindrance by the authority, and directly proportional to the role of will, freedom, anarchy.’⁸⁰ In his paper ‘Revolution and Evolution’, Metchnikoff contended that the highest degree of social organisation, that should substitute political or economic ‘tyranny’, was the stage of ‘consensus, more and more conscious and voluntary... namely, anarchy, i.e. a large amount of cooperation of autonomous individuals as perfect as their biological organisation allows, and that amount of cooperation yielded not by any mechanical tie, nor by any subordination ... but plainly and completely by their own conscious and free will’.⁸¹ Rivers and ancient civilisations provided precious cases for developing these arguments, as I discuss in the next section.

⁷⁸ James C. Scott, *Against the Grain. A Deep history of Early States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

⁷⁹ Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid, a Factor in Evolution* (London: Heinemann, 1902); Federico Ferretti, ‘The Correspondence Between Élisée Reclus and Pëtr Kropotkin as a Source for the History of Geography’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 37 (2011) 216-222.

⁸⁰ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 28.

⁸¹ Léon Metchnikoff, ‘Revolution and Evolution’, *Contemporary Review* 50 (1886) 412-437 (p. 435).

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Rivers, Seas, and Historical Periodisation

Grands Fleuves addressed matters in what we would call today geo-history, following the definition launched by Fernand Braudel in 1949 of geo-history as the intersection of space, society and economy. In his book *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Braudel famously addressed the case of the Mediterranean in the early modern epoch to discuss the different temporalities through which the relations between humans and environments can be read over long periods.⁸² Some sixty years before Braudel's masterpiece, Metchnikoff addressed fluvial, Mediterranean and oceanic temporalities starting by the principle that:

The annals of humankind have recorded only the exceptional, the extraordinary, what vividly gripped the minds. The monuments which remain to us from past centuries are, with the exception of a few theatres and tombs, [only] palaces and temples, that is to say, edifices from which the multitude was strictly excluded, or to which access was given only on rare occasions.⁸³

Anticipating later critiques of histories that only included battles and records of what Reclus called 'the crimes of the Kings', which would be key for social and economic history as conceived by the *Annales* school, Metchnikoff criticised commonplace positivistic ideas of linear progress, recovering the aforementioned idea of ebbs and flows.⁸⁴ Metchnikoff opened *Grands Fleuves* by noting that: 'Unencumbered from the idea of progress, history does no longer appear as more than a continual ebb and flow of bizarre facts, poorly susceptible of being subordinated to a general conception. In all epochs, with all peoples and under all environments, craziness, hypocrisy and crimes are reproduced with a discouraging monotony.'⁸⁵

⁸² Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Colin, 1949).

⁸³ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 6.

⁸⁴ Elisée Reclus, *Nouvelle Géographie universelle, vol. IV* (Paris: Hachette, 1879), p. 520 ; Elisée Reclus, *L'Homme et la Terre, vol. VI* (Paris: Librairie universelle, 1908).

⁸⁵ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 1.

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On the one hand, Metchnikoff confirmed the explicit refusal of any finalistic philosophy of history that was repeatedly declared by his fellow anarchist geographers such as Kropotkin.⁸⁶ On the other, the alternative reading key that Metchnikoff proposed were the relations between history and materiality, which eventually led him to propose a new geo-historical periodisation of world history since the lectures on historical rivers that he gave at the University of Neuchâtel in 1885-86. Their results, prefiguring the arguments developed in *Grands Fleuves*, were published in the *Bulletin* of the local geographical society. For Metchnikoff, world history could be subdivided following the steps that he defined this way.

The ancient times can be subdivided as follows:

1. Epoch of the isolated peoples which, in the West, ended around the eighteenth-century BC [*and in which Metchnikoff included the early times of the four great fluvial civilisations: Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China*].
2. Epoch of the first contacts among historical peoples, since the earliest wars of Egypt and Assyria-Babylonia until the raising of Phoenician federations (around 800 BC) ... This epoch found its theatre in the region between the Persian Gulf and the eastern and south-eastern littorals of the Mediterranean.
- II. Intermediate times or Mediterranean period, which lasted around 25 centuries, since the foundation of Carthage to Charles V, and which can be subdivided as follows:
 1. Epoch of the Mediterranean, which includes the oligarchic republics: Phoenician, Greek, Carthaginian, Italian, as well as the Roman Empire until Constantine.
 2. Epoch of the Mediterraneans, which started with the foundation of Byzantium at the entrance of the Black Sea, and which embraced the entire Middle Ages.
- III. Modern times, which are characterised ... by the marked preponderance of oceanic states. This epoch can be further subdivided in:
 1. Atlantic epoch, which lasted since the ‘Gold Fever’ in California until the advances of English colonisation in Australia, the Russian conquest of the Amur shores and the opening of China and Japan.

⁸⁶ Peter Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchism* (Philadelphia: The Social Science Club of Philadelphia, 1903).

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2. Universal epoch, which is still at its beginnings.⁸⁷

Thus, Metchnikoff acknowledged the historical agency of water-land assemblages, for which hybrid geographical objects such as rivers, Mediterranean(s) and Oceans became the protagonists of the main phases of world history, that can be broadly summarised as fluvial, Mediterranean and Oceanic times, the latter being the premise to geographical understandings of globalization as discussed above.

Charles Knapp could consult Metchnikoff's plan for the second volume of this projected work—interrupted by Metchnikoff's premature death, which had to be dedicated to the Mediterranean and may have further made explicit the exceptionality of Metchnikoff's potential contribution to several themes that historiography only addressed some decades later, including geopolitical matters of imperial control on seaways.

La Méditerranée would have included eight chapters: Mediterranean environment; The Mediterranean basin; Geologic changes in the Mediterranean basin; Relief of the bottom of the Mediterranean; Historical role of the Mediterranean as determined by its geographical configuration in classical times and during the Middle Ages; Decadence of the Mediterranean following the discovery of America; Its recent rehabilitation by the Suez canal and the Alpine railways; Struggle of the big powers for the domination of the Mediterranean.⁸⁸

It is worth discussing more in detail Metchnikoff's analyses of fluvial early civilisations to better understand the role that the Mediterranean played in their histories and the related scholarly and political implications of land/sea assemblages. According to Metchnikoff: 'The four big civilisations of early antiquity grew up in fluvial regions. The Huang-He and Yangtze Rivers cross the primordial territory of Chinese civilisation; Vedic India never went too far from the basins of

⁸⁷ Léon Metchnikoff, 'Les grands fleuves historiques', *Bulletin de la Société Neuchâteloise de Géographie*, 3 (1887), 35-100 (p. 47).

⁸⁸ Charles Knapp, 'Bibliographie. La civilisation et les grands fleuves historiques', *Bulletin de la Société Neuchâteloise de Géographie* 5 (1890) 243-50 (p. 246-247).

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Indo and Ganges; the Assyrian-Babylonian kingdoms ruled on the large country whose vital arteries are the Tigris and the Euphrates; finally, as already Herodotus said, Egypt is a gift ... of the Nile'.⁸⁹ For Metchnikoff, this was only partially due to the natural advantages that these big rivers provided as for transportation and availability of water for agriculture: such histories were also the result of political choices.

For instance, Metchnikoff argued that early Egyptian governors feared the sea as the origin of possible invasions. Therefore: 'Despite being born close to the Mediterranean, one of the geographical milieus whose marvellous advantages Carl Ritter has first demonstrated, the Pharaohs' empire turned its back to the sea and went towards the Thebaid instead of engaging vigorously with sea trade'.⁹⁰ While Metchnikoff's debt for Ritter was acknowledged there, it is possible to notice a certain flexibility in the definition of what a hydrographic basin as regional unit can be under different historical conditions. For Metchnikoff, any waters situated between lands can be a *Mediterranean* basin. Reclus equally extended the Mediterranean metaphor to river basins and lakes, mentioning for instance an 'Amazonian Mediterranean' or the 'North-American Mediterranean' of the Great Lakes, just to give few examples.⁹¹

Metchnikoff also made the hypothesis that a fifth important fluvial civilisation might have existed among the basins of Amu-Darija and Sir-Darija, in the mythical region of Bactria, which was then identified as the starting point of so-called Indo-European migrations. Metchnikoff defined metaphorically this continental region as a 'true Mediterranean', anticipating again contemporary French scholarship inspired by Braudel that describes the Central Asia's 'Mediterraneans', further complicating the Mediterranean metaphor.⁹² Thus, the multiple extensions of this geographical metaphor to so different kinds of historical and physical 'Mediterraneans' resonate with

⁸⁹ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 135.

⁹⁰ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 137.

⁹¹ Federico Ferretti, *Il mondo senza la mappa. Elisée Reclus e i geografi anarchici* (Milan: Zero in Condotta, 2007).

⁹² Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 180 ; R. Bin Wong, 'Entre monde et nation: les régions braudeliennes en Asie', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 56 (2001) 5-40.

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contemporary notions of water/land assemblages and hybridity including the aforementioned notion of excess by Steinberg and Peters .

Metchnikoff only analysed the four *civilisations* on which he had documents, starting by comparing their relative degrees of isolation and/or connectedness. For Metchnikoff, Egypt was initially more isolated than Mesopotamia, and China was relatively more connected than India in ancient times, due to early communications routes through Central Asia. However, Metchnikoff considered the connecting role of the Mediterranean in defining two of these civilisations as *Occidental* (Egypt and Mesopotamia), mainly connected through the Mediterranean Sea and surrounding lands, and two *Oriental* ones (India and China) that would remain relatively isolated in relation to Mediterranean circuits for several centuries.

There, Metchnikoff matched Reclus's idea of East and West as two relative concepts, which could only be defined as two historical regions of pre-1492 (that is, pre-globalisation) Eurasia, separated by the deserts of Central Asia and by 'the powerful walls of Hindukush and Sulaiman-Dagh'.⁹³ In relation to later debates on Orientalism inaugurated by Edward Said, the originality of Reclus and Metchnikoff's definition of East and West clearly appears.⁹⁴ Considering cultures of regions such as North Africa, Arabia, Mesopotamia and Persia as mainly *Occidental* ones due to their historical links with the European world through the Mediterranean, they also stressed how Greek and Roman civilisations owed most of their early knowledges to Mediterranean connectivity.⁹⁵

Yet, for Metchnikoff, the beginnings of these four main civilisations, 'Egyptian, Assyrian, Hindu and Chinese', fell in the period of 'isolated peoples', being characterised by 'an unparalleled development of despotism, through the divinisation of coercive functions'.⁹⁶ As for the aforementioned Wittfogel's argument, their social organisation was generally structured around

⁹³ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 166.

⁹⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

⁹⁵ Reclus Elisée, 'East and West', *Contemporary Review* 66 (1894) 475-487.

⁹⁶ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 43.

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the hydraulic works necessary to make fluvial environments produce through systematic water/land management.⁹⁷

The specific environment constituted by these rivers could only be exploited through the strictly disciplined co-operation of workers' teams appointed among the generally heterogeneous downstream and upstream populations, differing in language, race, customs and appearance. The canals of the Kiang-nan and the dikes of the Huang-He probably represented the collective work, skilfully coordinated, of more generations than those that were needed to build the pyramids and temples of Egypt. In these exceptional environments, the slightest negligence in the digging of a ditch, in the maintenance of a levee, the mere laziness, the selfishness of a man or a group of men in the development of the common liquid wealth, became the cause of a public calamity, of an irreparable general disaster. Thus, on pain of death, the nourishing river imposes an intimate and timely solidarity.⁹⁸

Metchnikoff's work revealed his awareness of the cosmopolitanism of societies such as ancient Egypt, needing migrant workforce from Sub-Saharan Africa, which fully contributed to the development of this civilisation, as African historiography discussed since decolonisation.⁹⁹ As for Egypt and Mesopotamia, the Russian geographer argued that these civilisations were especially authoritarian when they were still disconnected from Mediterranean circuits. Then, the Mediterranean connectivity characterising the second phase of Metchnikoff's global history favoured the formation of different (still oppressive but less centralised) political institutions. 'In the Western world, the rising of Phoenician federations inaugurated the great epoch of cosmopolitan, connected and mediterranean civilisations, so different from the ancient isolated and fluvial civilisations'.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Karl August Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: a Comparative Study of Total Power* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

⁹⁸ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 144.

⁹⁹ Joseph Ki-Zerbo, *Histoire de l'Afrique noire: d'hier à demain* (Paris: Hatier, 1972).

¹⁰⁰ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 144.

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Yet, shifting his analyses of the four fluvial civilisations towards the East, Metchnikoff increasingly contributed to deconstruct colonial, racial and civilisational commonplaces of imperial Europe, as I discuss in the next section.

FLUVIAL (AND MARITIME) QUESTIONINGS OF RACISM AND COLONIALITY

Current decolonial literature contends that concepts such as civilisation, civil rights and socialism are far from being the monopoly of European or Euro-centred historical traditions.¹⁰¹ Metchnikoff already challenged this monopoly, stressing that what Europe pretended to spread worldwide as ‘civilisation’ was the result of knowledge that the Europeans learned from Egypt and Mesopotamia through Mediterranean connections. As for Mesopotamia, Metchnikoff argued that the long-lasting effects of this culture could be traced to the medieval period during which the Caliphate of Bagdad dominated the Mediterranean. For Metchnikoff, this showed the relativity of an alleged European hegemony on human history.

Addressing the early civilisations of the Indian peninsula, Metchnikoff considered India as one of the cases in which a complex history of migrations and miscegenation contradicted common expressions of his day such as *national genius* or *race's attitude*. Most interestingly, Metchnikoff contended that an early ‘communalist anarchy’ had existed in the Indian peninsula in the Vedic period, before the establishment of the caste system and of centralist laws, something that was also suggested by later anthropological studies by Harold Barclay.¹⁰² In that period, characterised by ‘religious freedom’ and ‘lack of permanent priestly or national organisation’:

In the ... valleys of the Upper Panjab, political life was concentrated exclusively in the autonomous commune ... which presents a remarkable analogy with the *djemaa* of the Kabyles, or even better with the Russian *mir*. According to the testimony of learned authors, the Vaisyas, that is the communers of

¹⁰¹ Edgardo Lander (ed.), *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 1993); Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (eds.) *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (London: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁰² Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 288; Harold Barclay, *People Without Government, an Anthropology of Anarchy* (London: Kahn and Averill, 1996).

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the upper Panjab, proceeded periodically to divide the lands among the rightful persons ... All family heads enjoyed the same rights in the communal assembly; all of them performed the functions of *deva* or priest and poet of religious hymns. In the hour of need, all took up arms: that is, they became Kshatriyas. Therefore, by all these rights and duties, all Aryas were necessarily equal.¹⁰³

Importantly, this meant that Europe could not even claim the monopoly of early socialistic and anarchist ideas. In the quotation above, this clearly appears in the explicit comparison that Metchnikoff made between the federalist system of some Punjabi peoples and that of the Kabyle communities settled in North-African mountains and studied by Reclus. According to early anarchist geographers, these peoples enjoyed some *freedom of the mountains*, a concept that was then evoked by Scott, and that the anarchist geographers applied first to the peoples settled in the mountains around the Mediterranean, a sea of mountaineers according to Braudel.¹⁰⁴ Metchnikoff defined the Kabyle as ‘one of the bravest peoples on earth, and also one of the most free’.¹⁰⁵ Significantly, for these non-European peoples, Metchnikoff used the laudatory definition of anarchy, which early anarchist geographers usually extended to so-called indigenous or primitive communities. There, he anticipated analyses of the alternative social organisations of several non-European and indigenous peoples that have been more recently developed by anarchist scholarship in fields such as history, anthropology or Latin American studies.¹⁰⁶ The Russian geographer conceptualised ideas of indigenous anarchy by noting that: ‘Free peoples are quite numerous in different regions of the globe. Yet, they belong rather to the domain of ethnography than to history’.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 296.

¹⁰⁴ James C. Scott, *The Art of not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)

¹⁰⁵ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁶ David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004); Stephen Hirsch and Lucien Van der Walt L (eds.), *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870-1940: the Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010); Geoffroy de Laforcade and Steven Hirsch, ‘Introduction: Indigeneity and Latin American Anarchism’, *Anarchist Studies* 28 (2020), 7-18.

¹⁰⁷ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 36.

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While stressing the relative freedom of people settled on mountainous regions, Metchnikoff noted how the authoritarian periods of fluvial civilisations were conversely associated with densely populated plains. In the Indian case: ‘The contrast between the idyllic anarchy of the Vedic times and the disappointing despotism of castes in the Braminic period corresponds rather strictly to the differences of the milieus where these phases were produced’.¹⁰⁸ In the Chinese case, for Metchnikoff, despotic models similar to the ‘rigorous and permanent discipline’ that was applied in Egypt at Pharaohs times, effectively existed only ‘in the region of Kiang-Nan and in the lower valley of Huang-He’.¹⁰⁹ It is worth noting once more that, for Metchnikoff, the application of these models did not imply ‘concluding to a sort of potamic fatalism’, given that these civilisations were ‘a living synthesis of the most disparate geographical conditions’.¹¹⁰ Importantly, Metchnikoff warned against all stereotypes, generalisations and essentialisations of Asian civilisations that were circulating in European science, noting the great historical and geographical richness and variety of these Asian cultures.

As for an example that Metchnikoff knew very well due to his linguistic skills, that is China, the Russian geographer stressed all the difficulties that European scholars encountered in understanding a country whose literature was informed to mindsets completely different from European ones. Metchnikoff derided certain European Sinologues, whom he defined ‘more Chinese than the Han-li academics’ for taking too literally traditional narrations that he considered to be more political propaganda than history.¹¹¹ Thus, these European orientalist stated the alleged immutability and traditionalism of Chinese institutions based on biased interpretations of concepts and expressions that ‘did no correspond at all to our European ideas’.¹¹² Against that, Metchnikoff claimed that Chinese histories were not less varied and complex than those of Europe and the Mediterranean. Namely, he argued that, between the most important periods of Chinese pre-

¹⁰⁸ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 302.

¹⁰⁹ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 354.

¹¹⁰ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 364.

¹¹¹ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 330.

¹¹² Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 331.

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Confucian and post-Confucian history, there were not less differences than ‘between the Egyptian or Assyrian monarchies and the Greek world, represented by its most beautiful democratic federations’.¹¹³

Therefore, according to Metchnikoff, the study of the Chinese world was far from confirming European stereotypes on the alleged immutability of so-called oriental civilisations. Against that, the Russian geographer noted there ‘a great evolution, which is interesting for its analogies as well as for its differences with the historical progress of the West’.¹¹⁴ Crucially, Metchnikoff alluded to conflicts based on claims that were substantially comparable with the concept of class struggle as it was known in Europe. Indeed, for Metchnikoff, radical ideas that completely questioned the established social and political organisation were expressed by Chinese philosophers well before a similar process occurred in Europe. ‘No longer satisfied with blaming the abuses of the supreme power, [philosophers] began to request the dissolution of the state and the abolition of private property and family’.¹¹⁵ Again, Metchnikoff’s studies on early Chinese socialism underpinned many of Reclus’s works, including the volume of the *New Universal Geography* in which the French geographer argued for the importance of non-European socialistic models showing that Western workers movements had also to learn from others, rather than only pretending to teach to everybody else in the world.¹¹⁶

Finally, Metchnikoff’s questionings of the alleged hierarchies between historical (European and non-European) civilisations also applied to the racial hierarchies that were then elaborated on allegedly scientific bases in Europe, including in France under the Third Republic.¹¹⁷ Metchnikoff lambasted these scientists with sarcastic tones, arguing that: ‘Listening to some of the most prestigious tenants of science, who use the same language as the slave drivers and the former

¹¹³ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 333-334.

¹¹⁴ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 334.

¹¹⁵ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 341.

¹¹⁶ Elisée Reclus, *Nouvelle Géographie universelle*, vol. VII (Paris: Hachette, 1882); Ferretti, ‘De l’empathie’.

¹¹⁷ Carole Reynaud-Paligot, *La république raciale: paradigme racial et idéologie républicaine, 1860-1930* (Paris: PUF, 2006).

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planters in slave-based American states, we repress our intimate feeling of revolt to ask to this science what differentiates the “blessed races” from the “cursed races””.¹¹⁸ Metchnikoff concluded that all the criteria that were then used by scientists, from physical (such as the skull’s shape) to cultural (such as the kind of spoken languages), fell short in defining a line between the allegedly *civilised* and *non-civilised* peoples—also considering the ambiguity of the term *race*, that was then commonly used to broadly define populations rather than to only address biological matters.

Thus: ‘People speak of Latin or Indo-Germanic race, of German, English, Slavic race as there was, in these epithets, something more than a political denomination, a fortuitous agglomeration of anthropological elements of different origin’.¹¹⁹ Also based on the complexity and variety of different historical civilisations that was discussed above, Metchnikoff questioned the most common assumptions on the prevailing role of the ‘white race’ in developing ‘civilisation’, noting that: ‘All great historical civilisations have been the product of complex mixings of the most disparate ethnic elements, in which the part that was played by the “Whites”, the “Yellows” or the “Blacks” seems to me very difficult to define, even approximately’.¹²⁰ Metchnikoff’s conclusion was that: ‘No one of the anthropologists has yet come to define what a human race is’.¹²¹ These notions were further discussed by Reclus who, while addressing the African continent in his *New Universal Geography*, claimed that it was time to stop with the idea of ‘so-called inferior races’.¹²² Concurrently, Knapp highlighted how: ‘Metchnikoff does not admit that there are blessed races and cursed ones’.¹²³ This concept had likewise Mediterranean origins given that Metchnikoff and Reclus were conscious that Mediterranean histories were not idyllic, being made of contrasts around ‘exchanges between worlds’ that differed, although in the antiquity there was enough ‘cultural homogeneity’ to limit what today we understand as racial or ethnic tensions.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 82.

¹¹⁹ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 84.

¹²⁰ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 91.

¹²¹ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 98.

¹²² Elisée Reclus, *Nouvelle Géographie universelle*, vol. XIII (Paris: Hachette, 1888), p. 554.

¹²³ Knapp, ‘Bibliographie’, p. 243.

¹²⁴ Horden and Purcell, *The Boundless Sea* p. 119, 124

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However, there was a not negligible issue for the collective fabric of the *New Universal Geography*, when it was the moment to analyse populations from Africa, Asia, Oceania or the Americas whose members were mostly described by sources that early anarchist geographers considered as strongly biased such as explorers, missionaries, military men and functionaries. Therefore, for Metchnikoff, it was necessary not to take for granted ‘the images that certain travellers, and mainly the cabinet ethnographers, give us of underprivileged peoples’.¹²⁵ In his writings on some populations of hunter-gatherers from Australia and South-West Africa that Metchnikoff published on the *Bulletin de la Société Neuchâteloise de Géographie*, the Russian geographer contributed to the critique that anarchist geographers, and especially scholars committed to what was then called ethnography or ethnology such as Elisée’s brother Elie Reclus, made of mainstream narrations. These scholars were wary of most White travellers who visited so-called primitive people, based both on moral blame for the cruelties that were committed against first peoples, and on scholarly awareness of the conceptual contradictions of most claims for the numerous alleged vices of so-called *savages*.¹²⁶

To give just an example, Metchnikoff was indignant on how explorers and colonisers of South-West Africa treated the peoples who are today known as Khoisan (and were called *Bushmen* and *Hottentots* at that time), considered as: ‘The game-man, whom the co-religionaries of this apostle of Christian faith track with fusils for greed of extermination’, people who were subject to racial and even moral blame by those whom Metchnikoff defined their ‘perfect massacrers’.¹²⁷ Against that, Metchnikoff noted that:

Aware of the very specific difficulties of this subject, the rare impartial observers who studied these populations mostly refrained from generalising the results of some fortuitous meetings and did not

¹²⁵ Metchnikoff, *La civilisation*, p. 75.

¹²⁶ Elie Reclus, *Les primitifs* (Paris: Chamerot, 1885).

¹²⁷ Léon Metchnikoff, ‘Bushmen et Hottentots’, *Bulletin de la Société Neuchâteloise de Géographie* 5 (1889-90) 53-100 (p. 79).

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express any judgement in the one or in the other sense. The fact is that Bushmen intelligence is deployed in a so different sphere than ours, that it is for us almost impossible to find a certain criterion to judge it.¹²⁸

This importantly confirmed the oft-expressed idea of early anarchist geographers on the need for empathy and for relativising any judgement on the different adaptation of different communities to different environments, for which, according to Elie Reclus, so-called primitive people could well teach the bases of mutual aid to capitalist societies.¹²⁹ Thus, one can understand the specific anarchist version of the Mediterranean metaphor referred to universal kinship, famously expressed at the end of Reclus's *Histoire d'un Ruisseau*.

Peoples merge with peoples as streams do with streams, rivers with rivers. Sooner or later, they will become one nation, just as all the waters of the same basin will merge into one river. The time has not yet come for all these human currents to meet: the various races and tribes, still attached to the native glebe, have not recognised each other as sisters; but they are getting closer and closer. Every day they love each other more and, together, they begin to look towards a common ideal of justice and freedom. Having become intelligent, peoples will certainly learn to associate themselves in a free federation: divided hitherto into distinct streams, humanity will be but one river, and, united in this one stream, we shall descend together towards the great sea where all lives will be lost and renewed.¹³⁰

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that Metchnikoff, a scholar and activists whose impact on the early networks of anarchist geographers has been only recently rediscovered in international literature, authored works that can still provide original insights for thinking geographical objects characterised by liquid/solid and human/nonhuman interactions such as river basins, (Mediterranean) seas and finally oceans. Starting from his biographic experience of Mediterranean connectiveness,

¹²⁸ Metchnikoff, 'Bushmen', p. 79.

¹²⁹ Reclus, *Les primitifs*.

¹³⁰ Elisée Reclus, *Histoire d'un ruisseau* (Paris: Hetzel, 1869), p. 316-317.

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Metchnikoff elaborated a grid in world-history periodisation that anticipated further historiography on Mediterraneity, materiality and globality.

Most importantly, Metchnikoff's and Reclus's analyses of rivers, (Mediterranean) seas and oceans as hybrid assemblages can enrich the genealogies of current relational readings of seas and lands in wet and more-than-wet ontologies. Mobilising notions such as mediterranean metaphor and coastal indentation, these analyses allow considering geographical objects such as the hydrographic basin or Valley Section, and historical cases such as ancient fluvial and Mediterranean civilisations, as ways to define a geo-historical field for applying these theories.

Finally, reflecting on dynamic, variable and contextualised interactions between spaces and societies, early anarchist geographers managed to use geographical conceptual tools to undermine pretensions of civilisational essentialism and scientific racism. This led them to foster early anti-colonial, anti-racist and internationalist discourses advocating for relativising and provincializing Europe, toward plural and empathic mutual understandings between different cultures that are needed today, more than ever.

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