

## Professor Geouffre de La Pradelle in America (1914-1917)

<http://expo-grande-guerre-biu-cujas.univ-paris1.fr/en/professor-geouffre-de-la-pradelle-in-america-1914-1917/>

The act of violation of the neutrality of Belgium and Luxembourg, committed by Germany in the first days of August 1914, has powerfully helped shape a representation of the conflict in which France and its allies might pose as virtuous champions of the law threatened by German barbarism. But it also had the paradoxical effect of placing neutral countries at the heart of a confrontation in which they refused to enter militarily. For Germany's offhand attitude towards two states benefiting from such status, recognized and protected by international treaties which it had itself ratified, and its contempt for those treaties, reduced to the rank of "scraps of paper" by Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, were not only a radical challenge to the emerging discipline that was then international law and, beyond it, to law as a whole. These actions and terms were still a huge political blunder, the impact of which was considerable on the public opinion of non-belligerent states. Thus, starting in the summer of 1914, in parallel with military operations, an intense propaganda fight against the neutrals was engaged by the various belligerents, Germany having ceaselessly wanted to justify the aggression committed against Belgium and Luxembourg when its opponents, for their part, worked hard to enclose it in the image of a nation governed by the sole intoxication of force, definitively unable to respect its commitments both legal and moral.

It was into this intellectual battle that the Parisian professor Albert Geouffre de La Pradelle was plunged in August 1914. He was in many ways highly qualified for the role he was called upon to play at short notice, but if he hit the road to Columbia University in New York in the early days of September 1914, he certainly also owed it to a combination of chance, opportunity and necessity. Having quickly administered proof of his ability to practice the delicate art of muted propaganda dear to the French ambassador Jean-Jules Jusserand, Professor de La Pradelle continued his work in the United States until the country entered the war.

### A hastily improvised mission

Still in infancy and tenuous on the eve of the great explosion, Franco-American academic relations, somewhat stimulated since 1895 by the creation of the France-America committee, had undergone a first development to which, on the French side, one was all the more attached since it was well known, for a long time, the attraction exerted by German universities both on the school clientele and on the American university elite. At the time of the creation of the France-America committee, Professor Furber had noted the presence of more than 200 American students enrolled at the University of Berlin, when the University of Paris could only claim about thirty. If the responsibility for American disaffection with French higher education was then readily attributed to a way too rigid French university regulation, there was no misunderstanding the consequences it entailed. Professor Furber had described them in terms that had greatly struck his French counterparts: "Les jeunes savants qui visitent l'Allemagne en nombre croissant influencent déjà l'opinion américaine. Berlin commence à être considérée comme La Mecque scientifique du monde... Il y a dans certains cercles, en Amérique, des manifestations de l'existence d'un culte pour la Germanie ; il y a un enthousiasme pour la pensée germanique où s'unit inconsciemment,

avec la haute estime justement professée pour l'éducation allemande, une sympathie pour les aspirations politiques de l'Allemagne. Ce sont des causes comme celles-là qui souvent produisent les sympathies et les antipathies nationales. Les Américains étudiant en Europe sont ceux qui formeront les générations qui grandissent, et les sympathies de la nation américaine seront guidées par ces étudiants. [Young scholars who visit Germany in increasing numbers are already influencing American opinion. Berlin is beginning to be considered the scientific Mecca of the world... There are in certain circles in America manifestations of the existence of a Germanic cult; there is an enthusiasm for Germanic thought in which there is unconsciously united, with the high esteem justly professed for German education, a sympathy for the political aspirations of Germany. Such causes often produce national sympathies and antipathies. Americans studying in Europe are the ones who will train the generations that grow up, and the sympathies of the American nation will be guided by these students]".

Even if, on the eve of the outbreak of the conflict, the University of Paris had made slight progress in the conquest of this very specific student public, since it then had 84 American students (72 for the faculty of humanities alone, but only 5 for the faculty of law), one can bet that in August 1914 the warning issued two decades earlier by their American colleague resounded again powerfully in the minds of French university officials.

Thus, when it appeared in early August 1914 that the mobilization of Professor of humanities Paul Hazard, would prevent him from occupying, as planned, the French chair of Columbia University in the first half of the academic year 1914-1915, it seemed absolutely imperative to find another Parisian teacher, capable of carrying the French word in this prestigious American institution. Ferdinand Larnaude, dean of the faculty of law, was very determined to make the institution in his charge play an active intellectual role in the conflict, and hastened to follow up on the idea suggested to him by his Romanist colleague, Gaston May. He therefore offered Rector Liard, who immediately accepted, an alternative solution particularly well adapted to the new international issues, in the person of Albert Geouffre de La Pradelle.

Albert Geouffre de La Pradelle, a former student of the Paris Faculty of Law, was granted tenure in 1897, and was appointed at the Grenoble Faculty of Law. He had returned to his training faculty in 1910. As an administrative necessity, he had been appointed in 1912 to a chair of administrative law (litigation and finance) which hardly corresponded to his real specialty: public and private international law which, following Antoine Pillet, he had taught in Grenoble for more than a decade and in the promotion of which he worked in many ways. As an associate member of the Institute of International Law, he had already had the opportunity to work within that framework on issues relating to the neutrality of States. Since 1909, he was also the director of the *Revue de droit international privé* founded by Darras. In 1913, thanks to the legal work relating to the Moroccan protectorate, Albert Geouffre de La Pradelle had also joined the group of experts of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Although well known to the Parisian diplomatic services, he was not as indispensable to them as his master, Louis Renault. Forty-three years old, with no mobilized children unlike his older colleagues, Antoine Pillet and André Weiss, and although he did not speak English at the time of his departure for the United States, he appeared to be the most appropriate candidate for this mission, especially since his teaching position could easily be carried out by Joseph Barthélemy, who was preparing to be installed at the beginning of the 1914 academic year as a tenured professor at the Paris Faculty of Law.

On September 5, 1914, fortunate beneficiary of a suspension of mobilization under the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, he boarded the boat that was to take him to New York with the official mission given by the University of Paris to deliver, in his capacity as *visiting professor* at Columbia, a teaching devoted to the law of armed conflicts. Of course, his unofficial mission was to discredit Germany as much as possible, by letting the Americans know how law was interpreted and practiced by the enemy. No one had any idea yet, but the teaching semester was going to be extended into a stay of almost three years.

Admittedly, by the fall of 1914, the illusions that might have been harbored as to the brevity of the war had been dispelled. As a result, the stagnation in an exhausting conflict, the end of which could not be easily predicted, now made the preservation of the benevolent neutrality of the world's leading economic power towards France and its allies even more crucial. On this depended, to a large extent, not only the continuation of the material war effort, since the United States supplied France with a jumble of raw materials, ammunition and financial credits, but also the success of a maritime blockade of Germany, which the United States, strongly attached to the freedom of the seas, appreciated only very moderately. However, France was undoubtedly the best asset of the Entente on the other side of the Atlantic: Russia, archaic and autocratic, was very much disliked on the other side of the Atlantic and England, the former colonial power, gave rise to ambivalent feelings that easily turned to exasperation.

This change of circumstances, however, does not alone explain the renewal of of Geouffre de La Pradelle's mission in the spring of 1915; a mission now placed under the aegis of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. If the Parisian scholar remained in the United States for so long, it was mainly because he had espoused subtle strategic views that the French ambassador, Jean-Jules Jusserand, stubbornly defended since the beginning of the conflict.

### **An Exemplary Auxiliary of the French Ambassador to the United States**

From the first weeks of the conflict, Jusserand had observed that American opinion, admittedly viscerally pacifist and which it was not to be hoped that it would soon fall into war, was for the most part spontaneously favorable to a France, to which it was bound by founding historical ties and a shared identity of republican and democratic political regime. He had concluded that it was absolutely necessary not to deploy an outrageous and aggressive propaganda of the type that Germany was engaged in and explained in all his reports sent to the Quai d'Orsay that they should not be too worried about the ten million American citizens of German origin, who were very unlikely to tip the sentimental balance in favor of their country of origin. Indeed, the noisy propaganda orchestrated at great expense by Germany – more precisely, by former Secretary of State for the Colonies Bernhard Dernburg, mandated by the Kaiser for this purpose – undermined their efforts more than it consolidated them. Admirably counterproductive, this aggressive propaganda upset the American interlocutors who were confronted with it and, by its very insistence, corroborated doubts about the validity of the German cause. Intimately convinced that the best propagandists of the French cause were none other than the Americans themselves, Jusserand's strategy was therefore simple, as well as economical of public funds: it was enough to let the Americans do as they willed. They could be given facts, but it was better to refrain from trying to direct the reading of them or convince them at all costs of the correctness of the French cause; they had to be thanked each time they gave their support to the hexagonal cause, but even more so one had to shine with restraint and discretion – the only attitudes compatible with the posture of neutrality defined by President Wilson – and finally, display great dignity in an adversity that there was no question of denying. However, this line of conduct had been precisely that observed by the Parisian professor, immersed since October 1914 in the complex atmosphere of a Columbia University where the intellectual

influence exerted by its former president, John W. Burgess, very much in favor of Germany, where he had received a large part of his academic education, remained heavily felt, although the professor had officially retired in 1913.

As he explained to Jusserand in a letter of 27 February 1915, Geouffre de La Pradelle had never abandoned an attitude of extreme prudence. He had hitherto used his capacity as a professor of international law to gain direct access to the academic and intellectual circles of New York in which, through lectures, either technical or accessible to the general public, and then in particular conversations, he had endeavored to destroy "avec une modération de forme absolue, mais une fermeté de fond très grande, les doutes, les objections, les préjugés, les équivoques nés spontanément dans les esprits, ou plus souvent provoqués contre la politique française par les adversaires de la France [with an absolute moderation of form, but a very great firmness of substance, the doubts, objections, prejudices, equivocations spontaneously born in the minds, or more often provoked against French politics by the opponents of France]". He had acquired considerable sympathies in the academic world, such as that of professor of international law E. C. Stowell, who, although at first sensitive to the arguments put forward by Dernburg, had ended up tipping into the francophile camp and was preparing to demonstrate this in a book devoted to the origins of the war, or that of historian Muzzey who had translated into English, under the title "War and Law", the lectures given by the French professor at Columbia during the past semester. He had also managed to establish fruitful contacts with American journalistic circles, so that some of his articles had already been published in *Scribner's Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and the *New York Times*. Moreover, he fulfilled the expectations of the French ambassador to the United States when he said he was convinced that the French press should relay, with praise of circumstances, the positions in favor of France taken by American academics and intellectuals. In the eyes of a diplomat convinced that "la meilleure propagande que nous puissions faire ici consiste à marquer chez nous le cas que nous faisons des preuves de sympathie que nous donnent les Américains. [the best propaganda we can do here is to show how deeply we at home appreciate the American displays of sympathy]", Geouffre de La Pradelle, "collaborateur de la *Revue Bleue*, de *La Revue Hebdomadaire*, de la *Revue de Paris*, de la *Revue des deux mondes*, de la *Revue politique et parlementaire*, sans compter *Le Temps*, le *Journal des débats* [contributor to the *Revue Bleue*, the *Revue Hebdomadaire*, the *Revue de Paris*, the *Revue des deux mondes*, the *Revue politique et parlementaire*, not to mention *Le Temps*, and the *Journal des débats*]", was an interesting transmittor between the United States and France. While he constantly feared that Paris would send him clumsy, unsubtle missionaries, Ambassador Jusserand gave the Parisian professor a rare *satisfecit* when he made it known that he did not intend to deprive himself of the services of an intelligent collaborator who was "réservé de manières, modéré de langage, fort expert en sa partie [reserved in his manners, moderate in his language, very much an expert in his field]", who had understood the need to conceal his political propaganda action under the screen of a peaceful and pacific academic activity, with all the appearances of scientific objectivity.

Jusserand was probably all the less anxious to deprive himself of the services of Albert de La Pradelle, since the latter was tied, even before the war, by a friendship probably formed within the framework of the Institute of International Law, with James Brown Scott. The former Columbia professor and former dean of the University of Illinois had been the founder of the University of California. His extensive contact book offered his French colleague the opportunity to penetrate further into the world of American university lawyers. In addition, very close to the circles of power, James Brown Scott was then president of the Board of Neutrality, and Jusserand noted that his friendship with Geouffre de La Pradelle made it possible to set up very French solutions to the various legal problems posed by the war. Brown Scott was

also a member of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and president of the American Institute of International Law. In these last two titles, he had, in early 1915, offered the French friend to take part in a tour of conferences throughout South America. Officially intended to encourage the creation of local societies of international law, essential for the development of the Institute, these conferences were intended above all to promote this ideal of peace through law, to which the two internationalists were very attached. During this extensive tour of conferences, Geouffre de La Pradelle was to intervene in his capacity as a Frenchman, representing not his country, but law in its international dimension. Although this opportunity to continue to work underhand in the defense of France's interests on an even larger spatial scale, greatly seduced the professor, it ground many teeth in France, both at the Ministry of Public Instruction and at the rectorate of the Academy of Paris. The Carnegie Endowment being known to be a deeply pacifist organization, the Parisian authorities considered it very unwise for a French law professor to come under its aegis and take the risk, in the midst of conflict, of appearing as a spokesman for peace. Thus, in June 1915, a few days before his departure, Geouffre de La Pradelle was ordered to abstain from participating in this enterprise which his government considered contrary to his primary concern: to win the war. He devoted his free time to a lecture tour, carried out within the framework of the French Alliance, as well as to the preparation of a small book: *War letters from France*. Composed of carefully chosen excerpts of letters from French people, civilians or military, addressed to their friends residing in America, the book reinforced that image of France which the willingly pro-French American journalists had already spontaneously conveyed for two years: the image of a courageous, calmly determined France, all imbued with the conviction that it was fighting, not selfishly for its own survival, but in the service of a far superior ideal, that of defending the rights and freedoms of nations...

Having finally managed to overcome the reluctance of his Parisian supervisory authorities, which his links with the Carnegie Endowment had given rise to in 1915, Geouffre de La Pradelle made in the fall of 1916 the trip canceled the previous year. His journey led him to Peru, Chile, Brazil and Argentina. At the request of the University of Paris and the Ministry of Public Education, he took advantage of the opportunity to explore the possibilities of university partnerships in this previously neglected part of the world.

After three years devoted to the delicate practice of quiet propaganda, the United States having finally entered the war in April 1917, Albert Geouffre de La Pradelle's mission logically came to an end. In addition to the awarding of the Légion d'Honneur, his services to the country earned him the natural succession of his master Louis Renault, who died in February 1918, not only within the Faculty of Law, but also with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, of which he became one of the appointed jurists in 1919, and to be appointed as expert of the French delegation to the Peace Conference.

At the end of the conflict, it was to a new work of intellectual propaganda that Geouffre de La Pradelle was to devote himself, without now risking the wrath of his government: that in favor of the League of Nations, a fragile institution supposed to give life to the ideal of international peace through law.

**Catherine Fillon, Professor of Legal History (Jean Moulin Lyon 3 University)**

---

## **Bibliography**

Guiou Jean-Michel, *Le rameau et le glaive : les militants français pour la Société des Nations*, Paris, France, Presses de Sciences Po, 2008.

Nouailhat Yves-Henri, *France et États-Unis : août 1914-avril 1917*, « Publications de la Sorbonne », Paris, France, Institut d'histoire des relations internationales contemporaines, 1979.

Rousseau Charles, « Albert Geouffre de La Pradelle », dans *Revue internationale de droit comparé*, vol. 7, n° 2, 1955, p. 383-384.

« Rapport Lavisse », Ministère de l'Instruction publique et des Beaux-Arts, Direction de l'Enseignement supérieur, Règlement des Universités, Paris, France, 1897, p. 56-64.

« Rapports des conseils des universités pour l'année scolaire 1910-1911 », Collection Enquêtes et documents relatifs à l'enseignement supérieur, Ministère de l'Instruction publique et des Beaux-Arts, Paris, France, 1912.

« PV du conseil de la faculté de droit de Paris », Archives nationales de France, AJ/16/1799, Paris, France.

« Mission Geouffre de La Pradelle », Centre des archives diplomatiques, 1 CPCOM511, La Courneuve, France.

---